

Volume
3

Author
Nora Kohigashi

Illustrator
Wasabi

I Could Never Be a Succubus!



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***"Thou shalt
become mine."***

Kuon proclaimed
with a smile.

I Could
Never Be a
Succubus!

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*"What is
the meaning
of this?!"*

Liz loudly protested.

Sylphie was wearing a
maid outfit, and they
suited her strangely well.





*"How I've
waited for
you, heroes..."*

The individual let off
an aura of foreboding.
The **demon lord**, the
most powerful being
in the castle, boldly
sat on their throne.



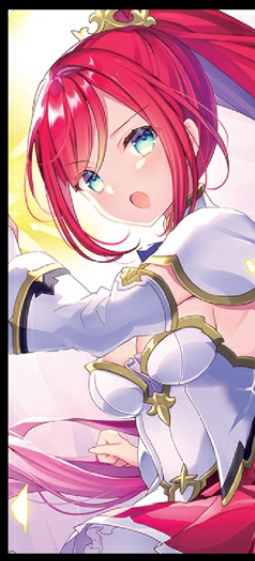
**"It's about time we
moved forward."**

And suddenly, he pushed **Liz** down.
Her small body sunk into the folds
of the soft bed.

**"I've been holding
myself back a lot,
you know."**

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. She's actually a succubus, she has lost her memories and powers.



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, she's the anointed Saint of the Russel-Bell Sect.



Rachel

A mighty hammer-toting warrior and a member of the hero's party. Confident and strong-willed.



Kuon

A new transfer student who speaks in an antiquated fashion. Intensely belligerent.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 29: Now—Baptism by Fire](#)

[Chapter 30: Then—The Demon Instructor’s Hellish Training](#)

[Chapter 31: Now—The Transfer Student and the Academy’s Strongest](#)

[Chapter 32: Now—The Maid with the Highest Status in the World](#)

[Chapter 33: Then—The Princess and the Orc](#)

[Chapter 34: Now—The Adventurers’ Guild’s Secret Facility](#)

[Chapter 35: Now—The First Obstacle: Mad Dog Cerberus!](#)

[Chapter 36: Now—The Second Obstacle: Orc Emperor!](#)

[Chapter 37: Then—Eromanga and the New Editor](#)

[Chapter 38: Now—The Darkest Lord](#)

[Chapter 39: Now—Current Demon Affairs](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Prologue

A sinister mana filled the air, causing plants to wither and turning the sky a stagnant black, darker than night. Pale lightning fell from on high, releasing thunderous booms like the cries of ravenous monsters.

This was the land of the demons.

Amid a vast expanse, where not even a single blade of grass dared grow, towered a massive, magnificent castle. Its stone walls were carved with intricate detail, so elegant and sublime the building's very presence was almost suffocating.

Despite the hustle and bustle of the town surrounding it, the castle exuded a solemn air—an almighty king ruling over a desolate land.

Inside the palace, in the innermost parts of the topmost floor, lay the throne room. There, a number of the castle's authorities had gathered.

The throne room was spacious, with a gaudy red carpet stretching from the entrance to the throne. Several chandeliers hung from the high ceiling, but even they weren't enough to fully illuminate the space. The entire room was shrouded in a dismal dimness.

The sinister miasma in the sky above occluded the heavens. Not a beam of light entered through the windows. Creatures that took on all manner of forms had gathered in one place, their gazes serious. Their fiery eyes all seemed to hold a single wholehearted desire.

They were focused on a crystal ball. The creatures surrounded it, gazing fixedly at the images projected upon the surface.

The ball showed a large academy in the heart of human lands, with numerous students happily going about their daily lives. It was the historic and traditional Forst Academy in the Kingdom of Bahelgarn. The peaceful town that surrounded the academy was simply called Academy Town.

The demonic monsters gathered in the throne room gazed at the crystal's

projection with deadly seriousness. Suddenly, one of the creatures made a move, slowly and calmly approaching the throne. There, it lowered itself to one knee and lowered its head in reverence. The creature softly opened its mouth, and said, “Milord, the spell is complete. Finally, our spatial link can connect to the academy where the heroes are recovering.”

The monster addressed the one sitting on the throne as its lord. The massive chair dominated the vast room with its presence. It was a tall, extravagant seat adorned with magnificent decorative carvings—a treasure that could be called the very symbol of the nation.

And the one who sat atop it was the demon lord.

The demon lord closed its eyes and silently nodded at its vassal’s report. A nervous tension raced through the gathered demons.

The preparations were ready. This castle could now be linked to Academy Town. Large-scale magic had been used to join the town to this castle, bisecting space itself.

Everyone swallowed their breath. A massive battle was about to begin.

The crystal projected a peaceful town, completely unaware of what was to come. The citizens basked in their peaceful lives. They laughed. They studied and trained, striving towards a radiant future.

Surely not a single soul could have imagined that this town would be linked to the land of demons. And though one side was blissfully unaware, the other side, the monstrous creatures, were seething. Their blood boiled as their bloodlust reared for the battle ahead.

The demons—the sworn foes of all humans. A supreme threat that had waged war with all of humanity for twenty years now.

They boasted stalwart bodies overflowing with powerful mana. Humans lived in fear of these foes; against the demons, they had faced countless defeats. Although humanity had made somewhat of a comeback ever since the hero made his appearance, they were still the greatest threat to mankind’s continued existence.

Of course, the battle wasn’t going to happen immediately. There were still a

few necessary preparations. However, the grotesque creatures were already trembling with excitement as they imagined the battle they'd fight in the not-so-distant future.

Suddenly, the demon lord cocked its head, turning its eyes to the window.

A bolt of fading lightning fell with an ear-shattering boom. An aura of death rose from the sinister sky and desolate land, the scene as though a harbinger of the fierce battle to come.

In the castle's innermost room, atop a massive throne, the demon lord let out a laugh.

Chapter 29: Now—Baptism by Fire

“All right, let’s start our regular training!”

“Okaaay!”

School had just barely ended, and the sun was still blinding. We were at the academy’s training grounds.

At the center of the spacious facility, the members of the hero’s party had gathered. Sylphie proudly gave the order, and training began.

This was the time slot our noble heroes would always use for their independent training. They all silently began warming up.

As you might imagine, the academy’s practical classes weren’t nearly enough for Cain and his party members. There was a massive skill difference between the academy’s students and the members of the hero’s party, and their skills wouldn’t improve at all if they didn’t train on their own time.

The hero’s party consisted of the strongest warriors in the world—all respectable men and women who would throw themselves through the gauntlet every day without anyone telling them to do so. They imposed upon themselves training so harsh the average person couldn’t even begin to imagine it, and this strict discipline was what made them humanity’s strongest.

Thus, such after-school training was an everyday occurrence for them.

I paused. I was about to witness the training regimen of the world’s strongest party. My body trembled nervously as I imagined just how harsh and unforgiving it would be.

“Do we have to do this?”

“C’mon, Cain. Sylphie will get angry if you skip out on the warm-up. Hngaaah...”

“Hey, you’re yawnin’ too, Rachel.”

Or maybe not.

The heroes sluggishly began doing warm-up exercises.

This wasn't exactly what I had in mind. They all seemed to be a little out of it, and Cain and Rachel were even yawning.

Even Sylphie, who'd enthusiastically kicked off the exercises, didn't seem too serious—it was like the training itself was her source of entertainment, and she seemed to lack any sense of urgency. Melvy—who'd been the only person to respond to Sylphie's call—was quiet, peaceful, and a little too relaxed.

Yes, everyone was quite laid-back. So much so that it was hard to imagine this was training time for the world's strongest.

Well, perhaps that was only natural. To them, training really was nothing more than a facet of their everyday lives.

The reason they were able to claim the title of humanity's strongest was no doubt because their lives had become nothing but a cycle of combat and training. Yes, as casually as brushing their teeth, they would pull off training several dozen times harsher than the average person could ever manage.

Probably.

Well, that was all well and good. That, I could understand and agree with. But there was one teeny tiny issue. Mixed in among these carefree, relaxed members was a single, incredibly nervous individual.

"P-P-P-Please go easy on me..."

And that individual just so happened to be me—Liz.

It was my first day joining the heroes for their training. A mysterious power had awakened within me just the other day, and I'd managed to defeat a general from the demon lord's army. That's what had kicked it off.

The heroes decided they would help me fully awaken the power within me. In short, I needed to be strong enough to stably and reliably bring out that power myself. Thus, I was added to their training session.

The world's strongest humans were going to help me train. I couldn't have been more grateful. Yes, I was grateful, *very* grateful, but...

"Umm, err, umm-err-umm..."

These were the same heroes that were admired by people all across the world. I was feeling incredibly stressed out.

“What, you nervous, Liz?” Cain called over to me.

“I-I-I-I’ll do my best not to drag you down...”

“No, seriously. What are you so nervous about? It’s just training.”

“C-Cut me some slack...”

I was going to be training together with the world’s strongest heroes. My admiration and anxiety crashed down on me like a wave. How was I supposed to keep calm?

“T-T-T-T-Today’s a very special day for me.”

“You’re acting like you’re a fresh recruit.”

“It’s not an act. I really am new to this!”

As soon as I said that, I could see it on their faces. *Huh? Liz is a newbie? What sort of joke is this? I’ve never seen anyone less suited to be a new recruit.* It was written all over them.

It was like telepathy. I could tell exactly what they were thinking.

But why?! This really is my first day, so why are the veterans acting like I’m doing a comedy sketch when I tell them I’m a newbie?! I’m shaking in my boots here!

“With that warm-up out of the way, how about we get to the main event?” Sylphie started out.

“Y-Yes! I’ll do my best!”

“But before that, there’s something I want to test. Do you have a moment?”

“Hmm?”

It seemed there was something we had to do before we began. Though nervous, I was also eager to get started. *Something to test? What could it be?* I wondered.

Sylphie rummaged through her pockets and pulled something out.

“Liz, try taking this.”

“Okay...?”

Whatever it was, I accepted it from Sylphie. It was a rolled-up piece of cloth, not particularly large, just large enough to fit comfortably in one hand. Going off of its coarse texture, the fabric didn’t seem too high in quality.

What’s this?

I spread it out—and gasped.

They were underpants. Men’s underpants.

“Wha...?! What’s this supposed to be?!”

A jolt raced through my body. Princess Sylphie had just handed me underpants.

“For starters, try giving them a sniff.”

“A...a sniff?!”

And suddenly, she came out with an outlandish proposal.

“Wh-Wh-What are you talking about?! What does that even mean, Sylphie?!”

*Why?! Why was I just handed underwear?! And she wants me to sniff them?!
F-F-For what purpose?!*

“Hmm? Hey, those are mine.”

“I borrowed them.”

“These are Sir Cain’s underpants?!”

I grew even more nervous than before.

Indeed, I’d just unfurled the underpants of the man I admired, and I’d done it right in front of him. I still had it clutched tightly in my hands. In fact, I was putting in so much strength I feared I might leave permanent wrinkles.

“Y-Y-You have it all wrong! Sir Cain! It isn’t what it looks like! I’m not a pervert who’d find joy in squeezing someone else’s undergarments! That’s not it at all...!”

The others said nothing.

“No, I’m being serious!” It really *wasn’t* my fault this time. “What are you trying to accomplish, Sylphie?!”

“Yeah, she’s right. You should at least do a bit of explaining, Sylphie.”

“Very well. It’s simple. I thought Liz’s powers might awaken if she smelled your underpants. Plain and simple. So, I borrowed them.”

“There’s no way that would ever happen!”

My powers will awaken from smelling underpants?! That’s far too idiotic. Seriously, I don’t get her.

“Hmm... Well, if that’s what you’re going for, I guess that makes sense...”

“Why do you look so convinced, Cain?!”

For some reason, Cain begrudgingly approved of Sylphie’s actions. *I see no reason for you to permit someone to steal your underwear!*

Lalo joined in. “Now, now, Liz. Don’t knock it till you try it, as they say. Now try taking a whiff of Cain’s undergarments.”

“That’s right, Pervmaster,” added Melvy. “You have everything to gain and nothing to lose. For starters, why don’t you try sniffing those underpants?”

“No! I don’t want to! That sounds like something a pervert would do! Also, please don’t call me Pervmaster!”

I never did anything to earn that name. So why?!

“Yeah, yeah, just smell them already, Liz. Not like you’re gonna lose anything.”

“Even you, Rachel?! No! Never! I’ve got everything to lose!”

Yes, I’ll lose all my dignity!

“Yeah, don’t worry about it. Don’t worry about it. It’s just a small sniff. Aren’t you used to it already?”

“You heard her, Pervmaster. Just a bit. Just a little bit, okay?”

“Just the tip. You can just smell the tip.”

“I. Don’t. Want. To!”

Everyone continued to insist, and I continued to rebuff. I wasn't going to smell them. Not now, not ever. Why would I ever sniff underpants? I was not a lewd girl, nor was I a pervert!

"Hmm, I guess it's not gonna work."

"You're surprisingly stubborn."

Everyone finally gave up.

I was out of breath, panting by then. I shook off their mysterious coercion and somehow managed to maintain my dignity.

I was tired. The training hadn't even begun, and I was already on my last legs.

"I see. So she doesn't turn to degeneracy if she's not in a heightened state of emotion."

"It looks like she won't awaken without something to trigger it."

The people around me seemed to come to terms with something. What were they coming to terms with? I couldn't understand it at all. For starters, I wasn't a degenerate. I simply wasn't that sort of human being.

"Well, we've figured out that there's no shortcut to awakening. Let's start by just raising Liz's strength through training!"

"Yeah!"

"I'm sorry—I'm already worn out..."

My spirit was falling to pieces from everyone's mysterious attacks.

From there, we got into normal training. We were in a special training area. Though we were out in the open, there was a barrier erected around us, preventing any outsiders from seeing the contents of these training exercises.

This was a countermeasure against spies. It was the training regimen of the world's champions, so perhaps some secrets couldn't be made public—at least, the academy seemed to think not. They had modified the training area specifically for them.

"They didn't have to. It's not like we ever hid our training before."

"Yeah, we're always training, no matter where we are. The fields, the

mountains, the seas. Yeah, even when we were in that volcano, and that monster-filled cavern...”

“Training inside a barrier actually feels a bit novel.”

From the perspective of those concerned, this consideration was apparently pointless. They had a bit of a wild side to them. I didn’t mean that in a charming way; I meant they knew how to make it in the wilderness.

“H-How are you all...able to talk normally...*hff, hff*...while doing...*hff*...this...?”

One of our members was already about to keel over. Unsurprisingly, it was me.

“What’s wrong, Liz? You’re falling apart.”

“You’re all...*hff*...insane...*hah*...”

I was gasping for breath. I felt like I could collapse at any moment.

Running, sprints, muscle training. It was all what you’d expect from normal training, but each had a not-so-normal element added to it.

For the entire duration, I had to cast a weight spell on myself continuously.

It was apparently a training spell, and by using it, I was able to place a burden on every muscle in my body using my mana. Normal running became a hundred times more difficult. Since I was burdening myself with my own magic, the load was far greater than if I was training with normal weights. Indeed, an average person would have been lying on the floor immobile before they could take a single step.

And with that said, the heroes pulled off this training like it was nothing. Even more amazing was that they trained while constantly regulating the spell. Since they needed to perform minute magical calculations with each passing moment, they tempered both their physical and magical abilities all at once.

I was training under half the weight of the others, and yet I couldn’t keep up at all. Everyone else looked like they weren’t even fazed, yet I was already at death’s door.

“Today’s your first day, Liz. Just take it easy. As long as you can keep it up, you’re doing a good job. It doesn’t matter how slowly you’re going.”

“Th-Thank you, Sylphie...”

Sylphie spoke to me kindly. *All right, I'll give it one last spurt. I have my pride. Let's get fired up and follow along with Sylphie's training.*

“All right! Next, we're doing one hundred push-ups!”

“All right!”

She immediately put forth a difficult exercise, but I'd already done my share of complaining. Now was the time for action. I lined up next to Sylphie and started doing push-ups.

“Fifty-five, fifty-six, fifty-seven...”

Sweat oozed from my body. It was truly rough, truly painful. One hundred push-ups were already difficult enough, and in addition to that, I was bearing the burden of the training spell. This was far beyond the academy's regular training.

“Eighty-one, eighty-two, eighty-three...”

Still, I did my best.

I'm not going to give up that easily!

“Ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred...! Phew!”

I barely managed to reach the quota. By then, I was soaked. My shoulders heaved each time I took a breath; I was just barely holding on, but I managed to do it.

I felt a sense of accomplishment burning within me.

“Good! I'm feeling it now! Let's add another hundred!”

“Huh?!”

That was when Sylphie suggested something outrageous. Just like that, she'd tacked on a hellish addition. She was already doing push-ups again, and I hurriedly got into stance to follow along.

My arms were killing me. I'd long since surpassed my limit, and my speed had dropped considerably. However, Sylphie was going just as fast as she had been at the start. By the time I'd finished thirty, she'd already finished her hundred.

“Good, good! It’s starting to get fun! Let’s add two hundred more!”

“What?!”

Sylphie began doing push-ups at a blinding pace, leaving me in the dust.

My body was in tatters. I was trembling more than a newborn fawn.

But Sylphie didn’t look like she was hurting at all as she finished up her additional two hundred.

“That’s it! That’s what I need! Another three hundred!”

“S-S-Sylphie...?”

She was beaming. She smiled from ear to ear as she did her push-ups.

To me, it looked like sheer madness.

“Oh, err, Liz... There’s something you should know,” Melvy weighed in. She seemed to pick up on my confusion.

“Y-Yes?”

“Sylphie, you see. She gets off on strength training.”

“A...a what?”

“The more she pushes herself, the more fired up she gets. And that makes her push herself even harder. It’s an endless cycle. She just loves training, Sylphie does.” I looked to the side, dumbfounded.

Sylphie was exactly where I’d left her, completing push-ups at a breakneck pace. Despite the massive burden placed on her—no, even without the burden—I couldn’t imagine anyone else could ever do so many push-ups. That just wasn’t normal.

“More! More! I’m feeling it now!”

I could hear her exuberant mumbling from beside me.

She was sopping wet with sweat, yet it didn’t look like she was in any pain at all. Her cheeks were flushed red, and she had a smile on her face like she was living a completely fulfilled life, as she single-mindedly devoted her entire being to push-ups.



I stared in a daze.

“Is Sylphie, err, a perv—I mean, not completely normal...?”

“Umm, well, you could say that. Honestly, Liz, I was wondering why you chose to tag along with Sylphie’s training. Her, of all people. ‘Oh, I knew it. You must be a masochist,’ I thought. I’m sorry, I forgot to tell you...”

Apparently, I’d done something that was considered illogical, even within the hero’s party. *Why do I need to be suspected of being a masochist? And what do you mean by “I knew it”?*

“Hah! Hrah! Hyah!”

Next to me, Sylphie was still doing push-ups at a tremendous pace. A while ago, she’d mentioned three hundred, but she’d surely long since surpassed that. Even so, she imposed a harsher and harsher regimen onto herself.

With a red face and a satisfied look—as though she was screaming that this was the limit she’d always been seeking—she tormented her body.

One of the greatest warriors in the world. Her training defied common sense—no, it was more than that. I could only describe her as a pervert; nothing more, nothing less.

“...”

I came to terms with it. I reached an understanding.

This person’s...not human.

There was no possible way I—a mere human—could keep up with her training.

“Gweh.”

Unable to bear it any longer, I let out a sound like a frog being crushed to death.

And so, I wound up using up all of my strength on push-ups. I had to take a break far before anyone else. It was so pathetic I wanted to cry.

The others all casually continued their training. Seeing as they were the strongest heroes, I thought their training would be something flashier, but

reinforcing the basics was a mark of their earnestness and discipline.

Perhaps this was why they were the world's strongest party. Sylphie had just completed so very *many* push-ups, but she was full of life, already onto another grueling exercise—all while smiling from ear to ear.

I let out a sigh.

I'd psyched myself up so much for my first day of training, yet here I was, sitting it out with a drink in hand...which I couldn't even drink because I couldn't raise my arms.

"Phew, break time, break time."

"Ah, good work, everyone."

I continued watching the others in a daze. Eventually, they returned. If only I could have at least prepared drinks for them like a team manager would, but unfortunately, my arms were not working. I couldn't do a thing.

Yes, my arms hurt. That was my only impression.

"How was your first day of training?"

"Honestly, terrible..."

"Ha ha ha!"

Seeing my pout, Cain laughed from the bottom of his heart. He really was a mean-spirited man.

"Well, it's impressive you managed to do that much. You're doing far better than Mitter was on his first day. He was flat on the ground the moment the weight was cast on him. I didn't even know what to do with him back then."

"Can you please stop using me as a comparison whenever we get a new comrade?!"

Cain tried to console me, and he ended up hurting Mitter in the process. This was the joke he usually defaulted to, evidently.

"That aside, Liz. As far as your training plan's concerned, today's on the easier side."

"Huh? That was...easy?"

“Yeah, I’m not enthusiastic about it... But our party has this thing called the *initiation rite*...”

The initiation rite? The name alone made me shudder a bit.

“Give me a second.”

Cain went off to where he’d left his bag, and after a bit of rummaging, he pulled something out and brought it back to me.

“This is the training uniform. For starters, put it on.”

“O-Okay.”

He handed me a brown paper bag containing clothes. I entered the building adjoining the training area, headed to the changing room, and changed into the uniform I’d been given.

Once changed, I headed back to Cain and the others. Enraged, with a wide, heavy stride, and a face red as an apple, I returned.

“What is the meaning of this?!” I loudly protested. “Wh-Wh-Why?! Why is the training uniform a bunny girl costume?!”

Indeed, I’d been handed a quintessential bunny girl outfit. The black fabric bodice exposed quite a bit of chest, and it had a round white rabbit tail attached at the rear. There was a headband with rabbit ears included, which gave off a sense of foreboding. Rounding out the ensemble was a pair of stockings.

A classic bunny girl. I believe this goes without saying, but it was a very provocative outfit.

Why is this the uniform?! This is clearly strange! Am I being swindled here?!

“No, err, how to put this. Umm... Sorry...”

The members of the hero’s party all awkwardly averted their eyes from me.

“Wait, have I possibly been tricked?! Are you teasing me by making me wear this embarrassing getup?! Is this your way of bullying the newbie?!”

“N-No, that’s not it, Liz. As sad as I am to admit it, there’s a reason for all this.”

“Since I’m too tired to lift my arms, I had the lady at the desk help me change, you know! And then, this is what came out of the bag... I was so embarrassed, I thought I was going to die!”

“Th-That’s unfortunate...”

Even Rachel was pitying me. I just wanted to disappear. Seriously.

“Umm, err, Liz. That armor set you’re wearing is called the ‘Bad Bunny.’”

“Th-The ‘Bad Bunny’?”

A rather dubious name came up.

Melvy explained, “Yes, that bunny girl outfit, you see. It has a few quirks. Dizziness, poison, and stat decreases, among other battle ailments. It has been bestowed with crests for all sorts of negative effects.”

“Huh?”

Negative effects?

“If you train while wearing it, you can gain resistance to a plethora of status effects. It’s quite an extraordinary bit of training gear.”

“That sounds pretty harsh!”

If there was one thing I learned today, it was that the hero’s party thought nothing of pushing someone to their absolute limit.

“Oh, now that you mention it, I’m feeling a bit...”

“Until you gain all of the necessary resistances, you’re obligated to wear it during training sessions.”

“Training in this state seems very...”

A wave of dizziness had me teetering on my feet, and my body felt so sluggish I didn’t know what to do with myself. Usually, I would have lain in bed, resting and recuperating, if I felt like this—no, I’d have rushed to the hospital before anything else.

I’m supposed to train like this...?

“Do your best.”

“I knew it! This party is ridiculous!”

I wanted to cry.

“Incidentally, the strength of the negative effects can be increased incrementally. The tail’s the switch, and if you turn it like this...”

“Nghah?!”

Sylphie circled around behind me and gave the round tail a few clicks; all of a sudden, the discomfort I was feeling rocketed. Poison circulated all throughout my body, and I was overtaken by a numbing sensation.

“I’m dying! I’m going to die...!”

“Don’t worry, I’ll cast recovery magic on you if you’re about to die,” said Sylphie. “For now, I think Level 1’s a good place to start.”

“Hff, hff...”

Sylphie turned the switch back to where it had been before. She’d toyed with me, leaving me crawling on the ground. This was already the second time I’d collapsed today. *So, I see. The hero has a party of monsters.*

“May I ask a question?” I asked.

“What?”

Even after I heard the explanation, there was a question that still lingered in my mind.

“From what I’ve heard so far, I can’t see any reason why these clothes have to be bunny girl-themed.”

“That’s...due to the tastes of its creator...”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

The most important point was the least logical one.

“Wait, what?! So you’re telling me that all this embarrassment I’m going through right now is solely due to the inclinations of some complete stranger?! That I have to wear this highly exposing... This absurd costume for all my training sessions from now on?!”

“Sorry. I’m really sorry, Liz. Calm down.”

“How am I supposed to calm down?!”

The hero’s party represented the hope of people all across the globe. It had been such an honor to me—you couldn’t imagine how much I was looking forward to training alongside them.

But here it was: the disappointing reality. Why did I have to take part in some incomprehensible lesson in humiliation?!

“But this is definitely self-inflicted, right?”

“It’s poetic justice.”

“We seriously had nothing to do with this.”

“What are you all whispering about now?”

“Nothing?”

Everyone started whispering about something or another, but I couldn’t hear it.

“You sound pretty mad, Liz. But I’m just gonna come out and tell you, you’re way better off than some of us.”

“Wh-What do you mean by that...?”

Cain approached me.

Better off? How is this better off...?

“I told you, didn’t I? This is our initiation rite.”

“Umm...”

Initiation rite. Naturally, everyone had a time when they were a newcomer. Back when they first joined the party, everyone had been in that position. This meant almost everyone in the party had worn these clothes, and...

“I’m tryna tell you that Mitter and Lalo had to wear ’em too.”

“...”

My eyes instinctively shot to the two of them. Their faces had turned a visible pale as they recalled a time when it had been their turn. Mr. Lalo was an elderly

man; he was the one least suited for a bunny girl costume.

“It was hell...” Mr. Lalo muttered, keeping it short and simple.

Once I heard that, I could no longer say anything. Certainly, my situation was like heaven compared to what he had to go through.

“That one was painful to watch.”

“Yeah, just looking at him made me feel like I was the one being inflicted with statuses...”

“Well, Mitter actually kinda pulled it off.”

“That’s frustrating in its own way.”

They muttered among themselves in solemn voices.

I see. I get it now.

These clothes truly were a rite, a sinister trial that every newcomer had to overcome.

It was then, just as I was shuddering at this mad custom. “Pardon me. Do you have a moment?” came a new voice.

“Huh?”

“I heard that the party of Cain the Hero was training here...”

“Y-Yes, that’s right...” I stammered.

The man who suddenly appeared had me a little bewildered. He was a stranger to me. Since a barrier had been erected for the heroes, outsiders were generally barred from entering. I didn’t know if I was supposed to drive him away or not.

I stared at him quietly. He had a very sturdy build. He towered at almost two meters, and his muscles were so pronounced I could clearly make them out even through his clothing.

It wasn’t just me, though; everyone seemed a little wary of the mysterious man.

I could see it on their faces. Thoughts like “Huh? Who was he again? I think

I've seen him somewhere before..." were flashing through their heads.

"My apologies, but who are you...?"

"Ah, yes. I forgot to introduce myself. I'm—" At that point, the large man seemed to notice something. "Wait, there you are, Cain."

"Am I that hard to spot?"

"You were in the shadows."

The man amicably walked up to Cain.

Unlike his comrades, Cain seemed to recognize him well. He lightly waved at him and greeted him without a hint of tension.

"Right, let me introduce you to Liz...no, reintroduce you to everyone. This guy's name is Wolfe. You know, you've all met him before. He's that Darkbringer we fought nearly two years ago."

"Oh, Darkbringer."

"From the demon lord's army."

His party members shared some understanding nods.

The demon lord's army...?

"My name is Wolfe. The last time we met, we were enemies, but I would like nothing more than for us to get along. It is a pleasure to meet you."

Wolfe stiffly introduced himself in a naturally low voice, earning him some soft applause.

"Umm, err...Mr. Darkbringer...?"

Although the others seemed to have a grasp of the situation, I had no idea what was going on. I turned my eyes to Cain and Wolfe, seeking some sort of explanation.

"Where to start... Around two years ago, he was a battalion commander in the demon lord's army—a foe who stood in our way. Back then, he was going by the name Darkbringer."

"B-Battalion commander...?!"

Just by the sound of it, he had certainly been high up in the demon lord's army. So what was that person doing here now? *Are we under attack?!*

"No, calm down. Calm down, Liz. He's not with them anymore."

"I-I see..."

I could tell from everyone's reactions that he wasn't an enemy, but then what had he come here for? I cocked my head.

"Explanations. Right. Well, you know how General Andy infiltrated the academy the other day? He even prepared a diversion to draw us away from town before he attacked."

"Yes, that was awful."

"I know, right? But we'll still have to head out on expeditions if someone seeks our help, and we might be away for a while to explore the guild's special dungeon too. From now on, I've decided to leave at least one skilled person in town whenever we're away. And so, I called him to help out. Unfortunately, Melvy and Lalo aren't at full strength yet."

As Cain patted Wolfe on the back, Wolfe furrowed his brow. *What's this? These guys look a bit too friendly to be former enemies.*

"All right, I understand the situation," said Melvy. "We're going to put the general's attack to good use."

"Yeah. He might have been a battalion commander, but he's an old friend from the village I grew up in. On my honor, I guarantee he won't get up to any funny business."

"Huh? A friend from your village?! You mean you're childhood friends?!"

I was startled. Out of all the information that had been suddenly dropped on me, that tidbit drew my interest more than anything else.

"You could call us that," Wolfe said, "But due to his family's circumstances, he was always holed up in the dungeon. The memories we share aren't as deep as what you'd generally think of for childhood friends."

"Still, our village was as country as country gets. There was hardly anyone out there, and there's only about two people I remember playing with as a kid,"

Cain said as he stuck a cigar in his mouth and lit it.

The smoke rose into the air.

“B-But you still know about what Sir Cain was like as a child, right? Would you mind telling me a few stories?”

“Ah, I’m interested in that too.”

“Umm, err, m-me too...”

I, along with Cain’s two fiancées, showed immediate interest.

“Let’s see... You mean like how he used to be a coward and a crybaby? You’d never think it, looking at him now.”

“Huh?! Was he really?!”

“Hey. Stupid. Bastard. *Stop*. Don’t say anything unnecessary.”

Wolfe’s tattling sent Cain into a rare panic.

“If you’re gonna be like that, I’ve got things to say too. *This* guy accidentally fell into the cesspit one time. You know, the place where they pile up shit. Stink Wolfe they called him—the name reached the younger kids too, and they still call him that to this day.”

“Erk... Let’s not forget how you ran back from the woods screaming, ‘The wolves are here! The wolves are here!’ and caused a huge ruckus. In the end, we found out you mistook sheep for wolves. Even now, they still jokingly call their sheep ‘big ol’ wolves’ back home, you know. They’re still laughing at you.”

“Quit it, enough. Just shut up.”

There was no need for further prompting. They were both trying to drag the other down.

“Let’s stop... We’re just hurting each other...”

“R-Right...”

“Aww...”

Unfortunately, the conversation ended there. *And I was having so much fun...*

Suddenly, Wolfe’s eyes met with mine.

Come to think of it, I haven't introduced myself yet.

"Err, it's a pleasure to meet you, Sir Wolfe. I am Lisalinde, daughter of Marquis Lafort. I'm currently participating in this training to learn from the heroes. It is a pleasure."

"My name is Wolfe, and the pleasure is all mine."

I exchanged a handshake with Wolfe. His hand was rugged and firm. He had to be quite well trained. Did he have the nature of a military man, perhaps? The air he exuded was bold but somewhat stiff. He seemed like a polite and punctual person. Although he served the unruly demon lord's army, he *had* been a battalion commander, so perhaps he had a stern, rigid side to him. It was only when he spoke to Cain that he dropped his ceremonious tone and spoke casually. He let his guard down around the hero.

"But this isn't our first meeting, is it?" Wolfe whispered as we shook hands, a slight smile on his face.

"Huh...?"

"Hey, Wolfe. Don't run your mouth."

"Ha ha ha, it's nothing. Nothing at all."

"Huh?"

Not the first time? Have I met him somewhere before?

Hmm... No, it's hopeless. I don't remember him. Not even a little.

Letting go of my hand, Wolfe looked me in the eye and said, "Incidentally... May I ask a question of my own?"

"Yes?"

What is it?

"Why are you wearing a bunny girl outfit?"

"Geh."

Come to think of it...

I was still wearing the rather lewd bunny girl outfit.

This was someone's first impression of me. I'd introduced myself dressed like this.

In an instant, my embarrassment boiled up, and suddenly my face was feeling hot. Even my exposed shoulders and chest were tinted red.

"N-No! This is, umm...! It's not what you think! Cain dressed me up like this! This really isn't my fault...!"

"Ah."

"Come to think of it, the initiation rite..."

"Hmm?"

I desperately tried to spew excuses, yet Cain and his party members seemed to notice something a little different. Their eyes all simultaneously fell on Wolfe.

Everyone stared at him, their eyes vacant.

"Wh-What...?"

A bead of sweat trickled down Wolfe's brow.

"All right, let's resume our training!" Sylphie gave the signal that brought our break time to an end.

A lot had happened over the course of the break. Wolfe was taken in as a new comrade, and he was to endeavor alongside us in our training.

Yes, Wolfe was now a part of the team. He was, as it were, a new recruit.

Right next to me stood a man with bulging muscles clad in a skimpy bunny girl outfit.

It didn't suit him at all. He couldn't have been any more unsuited to it. He wasn't exuding a hint of a bunny girl's cuteness. Instead of bringing attention to soft, swaying breasts, the neckline highlighted his magnificently firm pectoral muscles. The large, adorable rabbit ears only emphasized the man's dread. From the rippling muscles of his severely exposed back, I could feel fierceness, sadness, and woe.

Wolfe in the Bad Bunny was a sight to behold.

“Unfathomable.”

He muttered but a single word as he undertook the initiation ritual.

Chapter 30: Then—The Demon Instructor's Hellish Training

“Did you get that?! You will do as the instructor says! A half-baked half-wit like you has no right to object! If you understand, let me hear it!”

“Sir, yes sir!”

“Too quiet!”

“Sir! Yes! Sir!”

A peculiar voice echoed at the foot of a mountain.

It was an ordinary early afternoon, a normal training day just like any other. Cain left the inn and headed to where he and the others would usually gather for training.

He let out a sluggish yawn as he trudged along and reached the training point. But there he found Liz, a little different from usual.

Everyone apart from her stood in file, holding their backs straight and still.

Most of them weren't wearing their usual clothes either. Their clothes were plain and uniform, like what military officers might wear.

And standing before them was Liz.

She arrogantly stuck out her chest; her face was stern, and she wore a militaryesque uniform that gave her the look of a commissioned officer. She stood like a commander before her troops.



“You have the brains of maggots! Now say ‘sir’ before anything enters those empty heads! Do you hear me, maggots?!”

“Sir, yes sir!”

They continued to scream oddly.

“What are they doing?”

Cain frowned as he gazed at the incomprehensible sight.

“Oh, Cain,” Liz said as she noticed him. Everyone’s eyes gathered upon Cain.

Crap, I should’ve run for the hills before I got roped into this nonsense, Cain thought as he walked up to them.

“So...what are you people doing?”

“Why, Cain! I’m holding the *Exhilarating Fiendish Commander’s Severe Strengthening Program! Role Reversal A-Okay! ≡*”

“The hell is that?”

They’re getting up to something stupid again, Cain thought as he posed the question. The answer only confirmed his suspicions.

“We’ve decided to make today a special training day. Today, I, Liz, shall play the part of the demon instructor, and drill everyone even harsher than usual.”

“So you’re pretty much playing around.”

“Oh, don’t be like that. In a sense, this is Mitter’s request, you know. He said he was still far too inexperienced, so he wanted me to formulate a harsher training regimen. I put together today’s crash course for him.”

“Hmm.”

For the honor of his house and country, Mitter had been added to the party even though his abilities fell short of the other members. Lately, his daily efforts had begun to bear fruit, and his skills were definitely on the rise. Even so, he still saw himself as nothing compared to the others and prayed that harsher training would bring him to the next level.

“No, err, I just consulted her on my normal training. I didn’t—”

“Don’t talk back! Do you want to be mincemeat?!”

“I’m sorry!”

The demon instructor’s ruling by fear had swiftly taken effect.

“Now, Cain, I did properly invite you to join this program. But the moment I got as far as ‘Exhilarating Fiendish Commander,’ you said, ‘Hell no.’”

“Oh, I replied on reflex.”

Cain had declined before hearing any of the details. He had a gut feeling it would be some pointless nonsense and pulled out in an instant—an instinct acquired from all his experience with Liz.

“Well, I’ll be satisfied as long as you become my fiendish commander in bed.
≡”

“Shut it.”

Liz spewed whatever drivel she wanted before turning to the others.

“You limp-dick virgins who can’t win against a single dog! How many women have you turned off with that pent-up disappointing attitude?! But worry not! I will turn you into robust soldiers who can charm any dolled-up bitch you set your eyes on! Be grateful!”

“Sir, yes sir!”

“Language.”

“Oh c’mon, Cain. Isn’t this how a demon instructor should be? In fact, I’m reining it in a bit.”

“You sure you’re not reading too many of those books?”

Liz intended to maintain the tone for the entire day.

“What’s your name?!”

“Sir! My name is Mitter! I come from a noble house, sir!”

Liz stood before Mitter, her face uncomfortably close to his as she screamed, “What’s with that getup, huh?! Are you making fun of me?!”

“Huh?!”

Mitter was wearing the Bad Bunny. The full set with the rabbit ears and round tail. It was a rather peculiar outfit for a man to be wearing, but Mitter had an androgynous face, and the look suited him somewhat.

“Th-This is what you told me to wear, Instructor!”

“No excuses! Excuses won’t save you from the battlefield, or from women!”

“Harsh!”

All party members were obligated to wear the Bad Bunny until they had acquired all abnormal stat resistances. Rachel and Lalo, who had both joined the party after Mitter, had already graduated from the outfit, but unfortunately, he had yet to reach that point.

“Th-Then can I take it off?”

“Of course not!”

“This is unreasonable!”

“As punishment for that messed-up outfit, you’re all running an extra ten kilometers! Answer with ‘sir’!”

“Sir, yes sir!”

“Your only lover is the weapon in your hand! Don’t think you’ll have the chance to touch a real woman while you’re training with me! You will trust only in your weapon, love only your weapon, and use that weapon to slay the enemy! When you lie in bed, you will jerk off thinking only of your weapon! Do you understand?!”

“Sir, yes sir!”

“Good! Now let the training commence!”

The soldiers took off. Everyone had already been infected by the abnormal atmosphere.

“I’m just going to train normally.”

A safe distance away, Cain began his usual training.

The training continued. The faux demon instructor drove her trainees hard, a whip in hand.

“You are dogs!” she yelled. “You are less than dogs! I’ll break you in until you’re barking the right tune! Prepare yourselves!”

“Sir, yes sir!”

She continued to spit insults as she imposed a strict training routine on her soldiers. However, the routine itself was superb.

“Sylphie! You tend to panic when the situation changes—you get sloppy! You must always maintain your calm; you must always think before every action! Do you understand?!”

“Sir, yes sir!”

“I have the perfect exercise for a brainless worm like you! I’ll randomly launch a wide array of attacks on you as you train! The situation will be ever-changing! Think quickly, and react immediately!”

“Sir, yes sir!”

She had prepared different regimens that addressed the specific needs of each of her victims; her programs worked on everyone’s weak points while enhancing their strengths.

As he watched, Cain found himself impressed. Liz couldn’t have put this program together if she hadn’t observed and thought about her comrades on a daily basis.

“Demon Instructor! Harsher... Please give me a harsher program...! I’m getting excited now!”

“Not enough, you greedy pervert?! More, then! Even more! There’s a special hell for obscene pigs like you! Prepare yourself!”

“Sir, yes sir!”

But her words still had an edge to them.

“Gaaah!”

In the midst of the training, Mitter finally found himself unable to bear it. He collapsed.

“What’s wrong?!” the demon instructor demanded while storming up to him.

“Giving out so soon?! Who was the crazy bastard who said they wanted to take their training to the next level?!”

“Guhhh!”

Mitter desperately tried to get up; he couldn't seem to muster the strength. The demon instructor lorded over him, showering him with insults.

“What?! Do you call yourself a man?! Do you even have any balls?! You sure you didn't lose them in your mommy's belly?!”

“No... No, sir!”

“Then show some guts! If you don't want everyone to know you're still a baby sucking on mommy's teats, then get to it!”

“Sir!”

In his desperate attempt to deliver, Mitter put in even more strength than his body should have been capable of.

“You are laughably bad at using mana! Enhance yourself! Concentrate! You should have mana seeping into every muscle fiber! Don't just do it loosely! Do it delicately! Intricately! Focus on the flow of mana!”

“Urgh... Uraaaaaah!!!”

Mitter raised a battle cry as he dragged himself to his feet, spurred on by both the demon instructor's incisive advice and his own fiery willpower.

“Good! Well done, soldier! With that, you've graduated from shit to garbage! Rejoice!”

“Sir, yes sir!”

Through the harsh training, Mitter managed to overcome yet another wall. Despite his complete lack of talent, he devoted his all to growing stronger, little by little.

The sun set, the sky turning to yellows and reds. The day's training concluded with the soldiers standing in file, dripping in sweat and covered in mud.

“Since you lot were lower than dogs, I made sure to train you like animals. But

I am not yet satisfied with what we did today! I want to work you even harder! Unfortunately, the sun is setting, so that's where it ends!"

Though everyone else was on their last legs, the demon instructor was still cockily jeering at them.

"From now on, I'll train you every day! Be grateful! Forget any words besides yes! Heed the orders of your superior! I will make you into brave soldiers charging headlong at the enemy!"

The others were too tired to respond.

"Do not see yourselves as humans! You low-intelligence creatures will become soldiers who oink like pigs! Do you understand?!" She walked before the unflinching line of soldiers as she continued to raise her voice.

"I can't hear you!"

The demon instructor raised her voice threateningly. And yet, the soldiers didn't reply. The air grew silent as their submissive obedience faded away.

"Instructor...sir, we're at the end of our ropes."

"Oh?"

Soldier Sylphie quietly spoke without a single shift in her expression. Though she remained stationary, the space around her quickly shifted. Rachel circled around behind the demon instructor and pinned her.

"Wh-What are you doing?!"

The demon instructor panicked and resisted, but the beautifully executed full nelson had her completely locked in place. The soldiers all took a step forward.

"Instructor. This is a mutiny. It is time for you to get a taste of the hell you put us through."

"Wh-What...?"

Sylphie stood before the demon instructor, a sinister, sadistic smile on her face. A bead of sweat trickled down the instructor's brow. The counterattack of the beaten, abused soldiers was underway.

"The hell are they doing?" Cain frowned from a safe distance. But

immediately, he recalled a certain detail. The name of the training course was the *Exhilarating Fiendish Commander's Severe Strengthening Program! Role Reversal A-Okay*≡. This part had to be the *Role Reversal A-Okay*≡ portion.

...Meaning it was all going according to the script.

"How does it feel, Instructor? To be dominated by the subordinates you deemed as lower than dogs?"

"All this pent-up frustration...! We'll take it out on your body!"

"We'll break you in as our bitch!"

"Stop... Nooo...!"

The women tied Instructor Liz up and dragged her into the tall grass. Soon, they were out of sight. This was such an intense "training" it had to be kept from prying eyes.

"Huh? You're not going?"

Cain called out to Mitter and Lalo who had remained behind.

"From here on is a 'sabbath just for girls,' she said."

"It's a touchy subject, so we shall not take part."

"Those girls really get along, huh."

From the grass, he heard the demon instructor panting like a dog. He couldn't see her, but he knew that she was getting her comeuppance.

"We should get going."

"Right, I want to take a bath."

The men returned to the inn to wash away the dirt and sweat and relax, leaving the women behind.

The sun had fully set, yet the training of the demon instructor continued. The persistent soldiers would continue working her until her body and heart gave in. The severe instructions she gave to strengthen the army would be the same instructions that dragged her to hell. The demon instructor barked and howled. And yet, why was it she sounded like she was having the time of her life?

Chapter 31: Now—The Transfer Student and the Academy's Strongest

The dazzling sunlight streamed in through the window. A gust of wind passed through the classroom, causing the curtains to sway airily.

It was lunch break at the academy. Liberated from their lessons, everyone in the bright classroom spent their free time as they pleased.

Yet amid all the cheer, I was alone in the corner, deep in my thoughts.

“Will it be all right? I hope nothing happens...”

A touch of unease crossed my mind. Propping my head up with a hand, I gazed absently out the window; my eyes drifted through the emptiness of the sky.

“What’s wrong, Liz? Did something happen?”

“Oh, Sir Cain...”

Rudely usurping the seat next to me, Cain reached out. I just knew I had a troubled, conflicted look on my face.

“No, well, today is the day that Sir Wolfe transfers to the academy...”

“What? Are you worried about him?”

Today marked the day that Wolfe would enter the academy. He was Cain’s childhood friend, and he’d come to Academy Town to assist the heroes.

They weren’t childhood friends for nothing, and it seemed that Cain trusted him a good deal. He opened up to the man, and I’d heard they’d been spotted hanging out together in the shopping district just the other day.

But...with that said...

“Wolfe was a battalion commander in the demon lord’s army, right...?”

“Well, yeah.”

“I’m worried he might cause trouble at the academy if he meets someone he doesn’t get along with.”

“Oh.”

Wolfe had a history of standing in Cain’s way as an enemy of humanity. I wasn’t familiar with why he’d ended up joining the demon lord’s army, or why he left it. So, I couldn’t say much on the matter, and if Cain trusted him, I figured there wouldn’t be an issue.

But I couldn’t erase my concern.

Not everyone attending the academy was a kind, honest soul.

“He won’t conclude, ‘I knew it, humans are filthy...humans must be exterminated...’ and cause trouble, will he...?”

“What image do you have of Wolfe, exactly?”

Of course, I’d met him and talked to him. I knew he wasn’t that sort of person. He had the demeanor of a military man, and he gave off a sincere vibe. Though he came off as a little stiff, he was polite and dependable. But the fact that he had been a member of the demon lord’s army still left me feeling anxious, a fact I couldn’t do anything to change.

“Are you that worried?”

“No, you said it would be all right, Cain. It’s okay—I trust him. But there is still just a little...”

“Well, it is what it is.”

Wolfe had transferred into a different class, and I didn’t know how he was faring. The academy was a globally renowned institution, attracting foreign exchange students from all over the land. Due to differing circumstances, transfer students often entered at odd times of the year. Thus, the arrival of one or two transfer students wasn’t really cause for alarm. It didn’t even spark a rumor, and word of Wolfe didn’t reach my ears.

Well, the fact I’m not hearing anything means that nothing bad has happened yet. I suppose I can rest easy...

“Liz! Boss! Big trouble!”

“Hm?”

At that very moment, the classroom door flew open and someone called my name.

“A-Aina? What’s wrong?”

In rushed Aina, her pink pigtails swaying, a hint of sweat on her brow.

“A kid who transferred in today caused an incident! It’s terrible!”

“Huuuh?!”

Trouble had come looking for me. Evidently, I wouldn’t be getting the peaceful day I was praying for.

With Aina leading the way, Cain and I hurried to the scene of the debacle.

“Huh? Where are we going?” I asked.

I’d heard that Wolfe had transferred to the class three doors down. But that wasn’t where Aina was going.

“The commotion happened in a third-year class! The transfer student is a second-year, but it seems they caused an issue with the third-years!”

“Why?”

We rushed over to the row of third-year classrooms. We arrived to find that a crowd had already formed, and that crowd was in an uproar. The gathering of onlookers had the classroom completely surrounded. We had to stand on our tiptoes to observe the scene from behind them.

A voice boomed from within. “I heard that thou art the most esteemed in this academy.”

“And if I am?”

“Then ’tis no exaggeration to proclaim that vanquishing thee shalt grant me domain over this realm. Ho ho ho, how simple.”

Two students were facing off, glaring sharply at one another. One of them was a senior: a well-known face in the academy. Apart from the hero’s party, he was known as the strongest person in the school. His name was Bardengard.

Meanwhile, the one challenging our senior was a girl with long black hair. She had a peculiar way of speaking, her lips in a playful curl as she stared at Bardengard with wide, impudent eyes. She was an unfamiliar girl. *Is this the problematic transfer student?*

“Wait... It’s not Wolfe?”

This female student was clearly the center of the commotion, not Wolfe. Cain and I were both taken aback by this revelation.

“Apparently, her name is Kuon. She just entered the academy today.”

“H-Hmm...” I stammered in confusion.

“What’s wrong, boss?” Aina asked.

“Well... I was expecting someone else.”

It seemed that two separate people had transferred to the academy today.

“What troubles thee? Why dost thou refuse the challenge? Doth the academy’s greatest possess not a trace of valor?”

“...”

“Come now, set forth. Let thy ire rise. Thou art without spine, a pitiable wretch. Wilt thou permit thy junior to deride thee without reprisal? If thou art a true man, then strike back.”

Kuon, the transfer student, was mercilessly taunting Bardengard. She nudged him, trying to incite him. But Bardengard remained unmoved. He was quiet and calm as he watched the transfer student’s every motion, refusing to engage with her provocations.

“Dammit, that girl’s getting impertinent with Sir Bardengard...”

“Don’t disrespect our academy’s number one! It’s as good as deriding the entire academy!”

In fact, everyone else seemed far more irritated than he was.

“Cain and Ms. Lisalinde.”

“Hmm?”

Someone called out, so we turned. A man parted the crowds to approach us.

“Well, if it ain’t Wolfe.”

’Twas Wolfe in the flesh.

“Hey, Wolfe. What’s going on here?”

“That’s what I want to know. I heard a transfer student was causing problems, and I got worried, thinking I might have unknowingly done something.”

I guess he came to check on the situation out of concern.

In other words, Wolfe had absolutely nothing to do with this.

“Do you know him, boss?” Aina asked, lightly tugging on my sleeve.

“Oh yes, Lady Aina. Let me introduce you. This man is Wolfe, and also transferred to the academy today. He is an old acquaintance of Sir Cain’s.”

“Oh, so you’re the other transfer student I heard about. I didn’t know you were a friend of Sir Cain’s, though.”

As expected of Aina. Her information-gathering skills were outstanding, even within the academy. No doubt she had her own special sources.

“Boss. I’m sure you can guess from the situation, but this issue started when the transfer student named Kuon charged at our academy’s top-ranked student Bardengard. She’s been provoking him, claiming she’ll take control of the academy and whatnot. Her attitude has pretty much fired up everyone besides Bardengard himself,” Aina summarized the situation for us.

“Top-ranked, you say? Does this academy rank its students?” Wolfe asked.

His tone was very courteous whenever he wasn’t talking to Cain.

“I guess that’s the first thing that would be curious to a transfer student... It’s not like I’m explaining it for your sake, but very well.”

“Thank you for your understanding.”

“This academy ranks each individual student by strength. The rankings change based on the sparring matches and training sessions held in class, as well as by duels held on an individual level. Naturally, having a higher rank gives you a higher status at the academy and comes with various privileges,” Aina provided

a concise explanation.

“I see... Is Cain not the top student?”

“The hero’s party is exempt. They’ve voluntarily decided not to participate in the rankings.”

“Makes sense, right?” said Cain. “Wolfe, you stay out of it too. You’re on a completely different level. It’d just be bullying at that point.”

“Indeed.”

Cain and Wolf shared a nod. For Cain, defeating the academy’s students was like stealing candy from a baby. That was just how great their power gap was. Wolfe, who had served as a battalion commander, was similarly strong. Due to their good sense, the academy’s rankings remained stable.

“And if I may add one more crucial detail! Boss Liz, despite being a second-year, holds the impressive rank of fourth in the academy! Once the current third-years graduate, she’s certain to take the top spot!”

“Aina, Aina, you’re embarrassing me...”

The conversation had veered off track.

“Anyways, since Kuon is a transfer student, she naturally ranks at the very bottom. And yet, she’s challenging the number one. But there’s an issue with that...”

“An issue?” Wolfe cocked his head slightly.

And then, as though he was taking over Aina’s explanation, Bardengard coincidentally began to speak to Kuon.

“Now look here, little lady. You can’t challenge me at your rank. In personal duels, you can only face off against people who are close to your own rank. If you want to duel me, then you’ll have to be within the top five. Only then can I accept a challenge from you.”

That was the system. Officially, Bardengard couldn’t accept Kuon’s challenge even if he wanted to. Not that this little tidbit was enough for Kuon to back down.

“Such an obstinate bunch thou art. Why must I restrain myself from challenging one so evidently beneath my station? Verily, ’tis manifest that I hold the greater strength. Might not the quandary lie within the very system itself?” Kuon asked, insisting on the unreasonable.

“Th-That transfer student! Such disrespect...!”

“She’s besmirching the entire academy! If only we could teach her a lesson, show her how strong Sir Bardengard really is!”

The onlookers were reacting far more passionately than Bardengard.

How should I resolve this issue...? I pondered the matter.

Kuon continued to provoke with a grin, clearly enjoying the situation. Bardengard could only continue to decline her. They were both quite composed—it was everyone else who was getting heated. The situation would only continue to escalate.

“But regardless of how we should handle this, that transfer student is being too reckless. Challenging Bardengard, our academy’s number one and president of the Furyhall Council,” I muttered.

Wolfe responded, “Furyhall?” He probably didn’t know about it since he’d only just entered the academy.

“You again? Can you stop derailing the conversation over every little thing?”

“I apologize, Ms. Aina.”

“Well, whatever. I’ll explain. There are four associations that hold massive power within the academy. They serve as the core of the academy, and their powers are not contained to this school building. They have a great influence over Academy Town as well.”

“Four associations...”

“That’s right. Collectively, they’re known as the Four Heavenly Clubs. That’s essential information. You’d better remember it.”

Despite her evident annoyance, Aina explained anyway.

Is she actually a very caring person?

“First, you have the very heart of the academy, the student council. It functions similarly to a normal student council you’d find in other schools, but this is the largest school in the country so its authority is immense. The student council evaluates and approves all activities that go on within the academy.”

“I see...” Wolfe nodded lightly.

“Next, the Furyhall Council that Boss mentioned—the one Bardengard is part of. They’re a group that mainly focuses on dungeon exploration through the adventurers’ guild. They throw themselves into fierce combat day after day, tempering themselves and competing with the adventurers that come from abroad. Combat-wise, they’re the strongest in the academy. Naturally, most of our academy’s top rankers are in the association.”

Aina continued. “And next is the Treasureton Council. This is an organization primarily formed from the academy’s nobles; they support the academy with the power of their families. The strength of their personal connections is simply overwhelming, and their voices can reach the core of this nation. Boss Liz and I both belong to this organization.”

“They all seem quite powerful. I’m sure they’re very popular too.”

“Do you understand now?”

Wolfe seemed to accept Aina’s explanation and had now come to terms with the roles of the Four Heavenly Clubs within the academy.

“And the last one...”

“The last one...” He faintly swallowed his breath.

Aina spoke the name. “The rugby club.”

“The rugby club...?!” He reeled back. “No... The rugby club?! Why?”

“What’s your problem?”

“Isn’t there something strange about that last one?!”

Wolfe seemed confused. He didn’t seem to accept it.

“I don’t get you...”

“No, I mean... Isn’t the rugby club the only one that stands out?! It’s way too

ordinary compared to the other three... It's just a normal club, right?!"

"But it's actually very powerful. What of it?"

"Huh?"

Wolfe seemed perplexed.

I decided it was my time to speak up. "No, no, Wolfe. You can't underestimate this academy's rugby club. They're the top contender for the national championship every year, and their scrum is said to be the strongest in all of history. With all the members united as one, it is said they can even knock down a dragon just to score."

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

He couldn't hide his unrest. Well, I understood where he was coming from. It was something that everyone was startled by when they transferred to the academy. Everyone else was used to it.

Ignoring Wolfe, who still didn't seem convinced, Aina changed the topic.

"Incidentally, the reason I sought your help, boss, is because our Treasureton president demanded that I bring an end to this commotion. Unreasonable, right? I wouldn't stick my head into something so troublesome otherwise."

"You have it rough, Aina..."

So that's why she seemed so desperate when she came to me for help. I couldn't see any reason why she'd be bothered by this incident, but it made sense if it was an absurd demand from the president.

"Oh...?"

"Hm?"

As she explained, the center of the commotion began to shift. Kuon turned her gaze, her eyes meeting with Cain's.

"Interesting..." she muttered with a grin.

Her interest had shifted, and now her fiery eyes were focused on Cain and Cain alone.

"Well, well, well... An intriguing figure indeed," Kuon muttered as she left

Bardengard and approached us.

The crowd parted for her. Kuon was now standing face-to-face with Cain.

“Prithee, art thou Cain, the Hero?”

“What if I am?”

“Indeed, a far more intriguing diversion than this academy’s *number one*.” Kuon gave a fearless smile. “I would garner greater renown by vanquishing a world-famed hero than by overcoming a mere scholar, dost thou not agree?”

“I see, you’re pretty cocky. Conceited too.”

“Fear not, I shall sway thy opinion soon enough.”

Cain took her gaze head-on.

The air between them grew tense.

What is this feeling? They’re just staring at one another, but I’m shaking like a leaf. I could hear several others swallow their breath.

Perhaps Kuon really was a worthy adversary.

“N-Now you’re looking down on the hero too...! The nerve!”

“The hero’s the strongest in the world! Know your place...!”

“Who do you think’s keeping the peace in this world?!”

Boos and jeers burst from the crowd, but Kuon didn’t care. Her focus was solely on Cain; to her, the rest of the mob might as well not have existed.

“I shall venture a prediction,” Kuon said as she pointed her finger at Cain. “Thou shalt become mine. Upon my triumph, thou shalt grovel upon the earth and beg to be my loyal slave.”

“You serious?”

“The day of our fateful clash draws nigh. Very soon indeed...” Kuon said with a laugh. Her smile was playful, yet fierce. I felt a sense of dread from this smile. Maybe...just maybe, Cain would actually be defeated. Maybe he really would become hers. I began to suspect she truly did have the strength to wrap a collar around Cain’s neck.

My heart began to pound.

Perhaps she truly was a force not to be trifled with.

Why was it? There was something so mysterious about the aura she exuded. Mysterious enough to make me think so.

At that moment...

“There she is! She’s the troublemaker!”

“Hm?”

“Huh?”

Suddenly, a gruff, booming voice echoed through the air. With a start, everyone shifted their attention to the source of the voice.

It came from one among a group—a group of robust and muscular men. They wore the muscles they had gained through intense and rigorous training as though they were suits of armor. They all donned the same uniform and gave off a strong sense of unity.

“I-It’s the rugby club...!”

The rugby club had arrived.

“Foolish transfer student! You dare disrespect the pride of our academy and disturb the peace?! Unforgivable!”

“Who are these folks...?”

Kuon seemed utterly baffled by the rugby club.

“Let’s go! Everyone!”

“On it!”

“Scrum!”

The rugby club members began forming a scrum. The hallway was packed tight with their imposing presence. I, along with everyone else, spontaneously evacuated into the adjacent classroom.

“What? What befalls me...?!”

Kuon was the only one who missed her chance to get away. She was the only

one who had yet to learn the terror of the rugby club.

“Go!”

“Gaaaaaahhhhhh!”

The rugby club charged forward, and Kuon, helpless against their scrum, was sent flying. She burst through the window glass, her body thrown outside. She fell like a rag doll until she planted a kiss on the ground.

That looked painful...

As expected of the rugby club, one of the Four Heavenly Clubs with the greatest authority in the academy. They easily crushed the insolent transfer student in one blow.

“They won...”

“It’s over...”

The disturbance came to an abrupt end. The commotion was quelled in an instant.

Kuon—the center of the problem—lay silent and unmoving. She seemed to be unconscious.

The members of the rugby club dispersed after a job well done. The issue was resolved, and the onlookers scattered with smiles.

“What the hell was wrong with that transfer student?” Cain muttered, left alone.

She’d picked a fight with him, and he couldn’t help but feel perplexed by the sudden turn of events.

Chapter 32: Now—The Maid with the Highest Status in the World

With each new day, the sunlight grew brighter and stronger. On a day when the early summer breeze was refreshing and the sky was crystal clear, I dropped by Sylphie's room at the behest of our teacher.

The members of the hero's party were all busy with their various endeavors. A wide variety of jobs could spring up on them at any time. Because of this, they frequently took off from school.

Today, Sylphie had taken off, and I'd come to deliver some class materials, handouts, and general information. She was renting a room in a high-class hotel managed by the adventurers' guild. I made my way through the lobby, stated my business at the front desk, and climbed the stairs.

The corridor was quiet and subdued, as one might expect of a luxury hotel. Finally, I was standing in front of her door. I lightly lifted a clenched fist to give the door a good knock—but then...

"Good grief! Can't you do anything right?! You call yourself a maid?!"

"M-My apologies, Master."

"You really are a useless maid! Someone ought to punish you!"

"Aah! I-I'm sorry, Master!"

I heard voices from the room.

"Huh?"

I froze on my feet. From the room were coming words of abuse; words of someone scolding and punishing their attendant.

Sylphie is picking on her maid?! I was astonished. Sylphie was a gentle lady, dignified and noble. Certainly not the sort who would unjustly wound others. She was supposed to be a caring, open-minded princess who knew how to be

considerate. But what now? What were these angry yells I was hearing?

Is Sylphie perhaps...the sort of person who's cruel to those beneath her?!

My mouth was agape as I hesitated to raise my hand any further. I was flustered and dumbfounded to learn about this surprising side of the nation's princess. I even considered not entering at all.

For a while I stood, staring and silent. I had to deliver the class material. I had to knock on the door. And besides... I had no right to say anything about what Sylphie did with her maid. There were plenty of situations where someone might have to reprimand their subordinates. I recontextualized it to myself and took a deep breath.

Tap. Tap. I knocked on the door before me.

"H-Hello... It's Liz. I-I came to deliver some handouts from the academy..." I said, my voice quavering. I was shaking.

"Hmm...? Oh, Liz? I appreciate it. Come on in."

"U-Umm, pardon me, then..."

Now that I had my reply, I turned the doorknob. With all the screaming, the gentle image I had of Sylphie was on the verge of collapse. I suppressed my fear, took another breath, and stepped in.

"G-Good day, Syl...phie...?"

I froze. I had to.

"Huh...?"

A rather strange scene unfurled before my eyes.

There were two women in the room. A maid was on her elbows and knees, and another woman in a beautiful dress had rested her behind upon her back, using the maid as a makeshift chair.

Yes, the woman was sitting atop the maid.

This certainly *did* look like a master humiliating a lowborn servant—a master kicked back arrogantly from her high perch.

"Umm?"

But there were a number of strange points. For starters, the “maid” playing part of the chair was Sylphie. It was...indeed Sylphie. She was the one being degraded. And the woman sitting on her...I’d seen her before. She was Sylphie’s personal attendant.

In other words, Sylphie had personally donned the maid outfit and become a chair so her maid could sit on her.

It was backward. It was all backward.

“Hey! Maid! If you’re a chair, then act like it! Don’t curl your back!” scolded the maid who wasn’t dressed as one.

“I-I’m sorry, Master!” apologized Sylphie, the supposed princess.

“Apologizing won’t solve anything! Good grief! What a dull maid you are!”

“I’m sorry, Master! Please give me the punishment I deserve!”

“Yes, it certainly seems like you need it! You useless servant! I’ll give you a spanking!”

“Aaah...! Master! I’m so sorry for being a poor excuse for a maid!”

“What are you people doing?!” I screamed.

“Oh right, Liz. You brought some papers from the academy, right? Thanks, I truly appreciate it.”

“Lady Lisalinde, thank you for going to such trouble for the princess. Allow me to brew some tea.”

“What are you people doing?!” I screamed again.

Sylphie and her maid spoke to me as if it were nothing, but I did not have the grit to just ignore what I saw. My mind was in a frenzy.

“Wh-What— What is going on here?! Why are you dressed as a maid...and being sat on by your attendant?! I-Is it a mutiny?! Has your role been usurped?!”

“Well, wait. Just calm down, Liz.”

“How am I supposed to calm down?!”

The maid was still perched atop Sylphie, showing no intention of getting off. I felt as if I stood on the edges of hell as I witnessed the scene.

“Liz, please calm down and listen. There’s a deep and profound reason for this, you see.”

“A profound reason...?”

“Yeah. It’s about my past... About the circumstances of my birth as a princess.”

“Your...birth?”

“Yeah...”

A profound reason? Her birth as a princess? What could it all mean?

I gulped.

Sylphie gazed out into the distance, perhaps retreading her steps in her mind. Slowly, she went into the story. “As I’m sure you’re aware, I was born as the princess of this country. From the moment I was born, a great value was attached to my life, and everyone respected me in turn.”

I waited quietly for her to continue.

“Yes, from the moment I entered this world, I shouldered the rights, the duties, and the responsibilities of a princess. I learned kingcraft from a young age and mastered the art of leading people. Eventually, I would be in charge of many others. It was expected of me, and I learned everything there was to know about battle.”

Sylphie told a tale of how royalty was meant to live. Even as a little girl, she must have carried heavy responsibilities I couldn’t even fathom.

“For better or worse, I was blessed with great talent when it came to combat. Everyone had high hopes for me. Even before I became the hero’s companion, I led many armies against the demon lord’s forces. I commanded a great number, moving crowds with just the sound of my voice. Each success would be met with great acclaim...”

I swallowed my breath as I listened to her tale. An underage girl had no choice but to bear such responsibility on her shoulders. It must have been a

tumultuous childhood.

“But...to me, it felt like something was off.”

“Off?”

“Yes. The more people I used, the higher the position I climbed to, the more I felt a hole opening in my chest. Winning a battle brought praise. Everyone moved as I willed it... But why, then? Why did my heart feel emptier the longer it dragged on? I was tormented by the feeling that something was lacking.”

Sylphie’s eyes carried a hint of melancholy.

“But then, I hit a turning point.” Sylphie glanced at me. “I became the hero’s companion. With Cain and his other comrades, I saw the world and traveled on my own two feet. It brought a great change upon me.”

She paused as though she was hoping for some input, but I didn’t know what to say.

Eventually, she went on, “During our journey, we came across a dangerous organization. There were suspicions that a military force working under a certain regional noble was colluding with the demon lord’s army.”

“C-Colluding?”

“That’s right. To gather evidence, we assumed false identities and infiltrated the army.”

I was growing invested.

“The army’s discipline was abysmal. Corruption was rampant, and the money would dry up before the lower ranks could receive a fair wage. Soldiers’ lives were seen as disposable, and they were all led by an inept noble who didn’t know the first thing about battle. One failed strategy after the next... It was truly pitiful for the soldiers fighting on the front lines.”

She paused, and continued, “We infiltrated as new recruits, you see. It was tough. We had to follow the unreasonable orders of our superiors. However, that didn’t mean we could just watch as the innocent soldiers were sent to die. Keeping our identities a secret, we assisted them while following along with the commander’s repeated recklessness... It truly was tough.”

Sylphie let out a slight sigh. Just what trials had the heroes faced on their adventure? I felt a tightness in my chest just thinking about it. It wasn't just about defeating the enemy. They endured various hardships to save whoever they could, unknown and unseen. It was a humbling realization.

"That's when I noticed something."

"Did you find evidence of the collusion?"

"No..." Sylphie shook her head. "I realized that I quite enjoy serving others while being worked to the bone."

"Err...what?"

"Rather than issuing orders from a high position, I realized that I enjoy being ordered around at the bottom rung!"

"Huh?"

"Working as a lowly grunt, my body scraped away by a grueling environment—I realized that I love every part of it!"

"Hold on... Hold on..."

I thought I was following the story, but now I was completely lost. And like she was trying to kick me when I was down, Sylphie continued.

"The more I devoted myself to others, the more my insides filled with happiness. I go through hell, I abuse myself, I work for the sake of others, and the more I do it, the more it makes my heart feel fulfilled!"

Well, that's probably a good thing, but...

My lips twitched.

"I came to know that obeying orders was my life's calling. It was a sublime feeling I never experienced in my position as a princess. I will say this as a fact. Rather than using people, I absolutely, one-hundred-percent prefer to be used!"

"Umm?"

"To summarize: despite being a princess, I feel happiness from being beneath people and serving them!" Sylphie screamed with pride.

“Err...”

I was at a loss.

So, umm. In short... What?

“In short, I’m a masochist.”

“The princess just came out and said it...”

I couldn’t help but hold my head at this confession from the princess—someone who held one of our country’s highest positions. *What’s with this...?*

“The infiltration was very tough. But it was the most fulfilling job I ever had... By completing grueling orders, I could protect people and soldiers. I truly felt what it was like to work myself to the bone—to grind my body to dust for the sake of my people. The superior officers were mostly hopeless, but occasionally, you’d come across a proud officer doing their best to support a tattered army. When I completed the orders of such a person, I would feel so moved it would cause my body to tremble.”

“Right...”

Sylphie sounded genuinely happy as she reflected on those times. She truly felt fulfilled—I could feel it emanating from her entire body.

“Wait, so what happened with the infiltration mission?”

“We found evidence and defeated the bad guy. Same old.”

She threw out the conclusion like it meant nothing. For her, the essential point of this story wasn’t the result, but the process of getting there.

“My calling is to serve someone. The best job for me is one where moment to moment I feel like I’m benefiting someone else. And the more challenging it is, the happier I am.”

“Err...?”

“In other words, my calling is to be a maid!”

So the princess knight enthusiastically declared. My head was starting to ache. Seriously. Currently, Sylphie was wearing a maid outfit. Initially, I found it to be a highly questionable choice of clothing, but now the pieces had finally

come together.

...Or have they? Have they, really?

There didn't seem to be a profound meaning after all.

"For the time being, could you please stop acting as a chair while we're having this conversation?"

Throughout the entirety of her lengthy story, Sylphie had remained a chair. The maid also remained sitting on top of her. It was very surreal.

"Well... Liz, you know how it is..."

Sylphie seemed reluctant.

I don't know how it is... What are you trying to get at, huh?

"Hurry up," I insisted a bit harshly.

"Yes, ma'am..."

Sylphie finally stood and adopted a somewhat humanlike posture. She seemed a bit discontent, yet oddly happy too. It seemed my harsh tone had done it for her.

What exactly am I supposed to do with this person?

"Hmm."

I carefully observed Sylphie, now that she was standing. She was wearing maid clothes, and they suited her strangely well. Her black-and-white apron dress with ankle-length skirt lent her an air of calm serenity. Her tall and slender figure complimented the ensemble quite well, and there was even a sense of dignity in her posture. Although she usually tied her long red hair into a ponytail, she had instead opted for only a headband, letting her long hair cascade down.

Truly a maid. A splendid maid from every angle—she had mastered the look.

"As you can see, I often take over the maid duties around here. My comrades taught me various household tasks over the journey. Despite how I look, I'm quite skilled, you know."

"Umm...does Cain know about this?"

“Of course he does. He was a bit bewildered, at first, but he’s completely used to it now.”

“Hmmm.”

I could clearly picture the sight of Cain being dragged around by her antics, a troubled look on his face.

“Incidentally, this well-dressed madam...would be the professional maid, right?” I said, glancing over at the woman who had been sitting on Sylphie’s back only moments before.

“Hmm? Did I forget to introduce her? She is my personal maid, Katerina. I hope you two get along.”

“I work as a maid in service to the royal family. My name is Katerina. Lady Lisalinde, it is a pleasure to meet you.”

“Y-Yes, the pleasure is all mine...Ms. Katerina.”

The girl pinched the hem of her skirt and offered an elegant curtsy. As expected of a maid employed by royalty, her elegance shined through in even the slightest gestures.

It’s...hard to believe she was the person who was just sitting on her master’s back.

I exchanged a handshake with her.

“Umm...so, about that... Using her as a chair...?”

I was a little scared, but I decided to ask her directly.

“Ahem,” Katerina lightly cleared her throat. “It is for the princess’s amusement. Honestly, I would rather not do it, but it was all on Princess Sylphie’s orders. I am doing my best to play the role of an arrogant mistress.”

“Hmm.”

Well...yeah. That makes sense.

Sylphie was the princess of a massive nation. She held overwhelming authority. If she said she wanted to play such games, then her attendant had no right to turn her down. It was understandable. Logical. Straightforward, even.

But...

“You seemed very into it.”

Silence.

More silence.

Even more silence.

“Come now, Maid Sylphie! What are you slacking off for?! Hurry and get moving! You must serve some tea to our guest!”

“I’m sorry, Master!”

“So you really *are* into it!”

She looked very enthusiastic.

Maid Sylphie, in her maid outfit, brewed us some tea. *Why do I have to drink tea brewed reverently by a princess?*

It was probably the most suffocating cup of tea in the world. *Oh, but it’s delicious...*

“Incidentally, Liz.”

“Yes?”

Just as she’d faded into the background with a tray in hand, Sylphie spoke up. It was rather bizarre having the princess stand while her maid and I sat on the sofa.

“Err, how should I put this... I just thought I should ask...”

I looked at her curiously.

Sylphie was bashfully fidgeting. She held her tray tightly, a faint red tint to her cheeks.

What could it be?

“Umm... Liz, are you interested in playing the role of master? If possible in a harsh, commanding way?”

“Definitely not!” I was so startled I spilled a bit of tea. “No way! No way! I don’t want to! I’m serious!”

I vigorously shook my head as I vehemently refused. There was no way any normal person could let the princess take on the role of a maid. And harsh and commanding? Based on common sense alone, that would be one quick way to see my head removed cleanly from my shoulders.

“Can’t we work something out?”

“Not on my life! It’s not happening!”

“It’s been so long! I want a taste of Liz’s well-refined bullying!”

“What incomprehensible nonsense are you on about?!”

I’d never bullied Sylphie before, and taking that a step further, I’d never bullied anyone in my life. *What even is well-refined bullying?*

“In the first place, I don’t know how to torment people! Say hypothetically I did take on the role, I highly doubt I’ll be able to satisfy you!”

“What are you talking about, Sadoking? Don’t humble yourself!” Sylphie pleaded.

“Anything is possible for the legendary Sadoking,” Katerina insisted.

“Wh-Who’s Sadoking...?!”

A word I didn’t know had entered the conversation. What’s more, even Katerina was chiming in.

How bothersome.

“Come on, Liz! Please! Please be my master! Show me the wickedness of a sadistic heiress who delights in tormenting her maid!”

“Lady Lisalinde. For future reference, would you be so kind as to show me your first-rate torment? Princess Sylphie is making an earnest plea.”

“Ah, umm, err...”

The two of them were closing in on me. The pressure was intense. I reflexively backed away, but each step I pulled back was echoed by another menacing approach. I edged farther and farther, and before I knew it, I had driven myself into a corner of the room.

“Now, Liz! Madame Liz! Please instruct this inexperienced maid however you

see fit!”

“Lady Lisalinde, please show me your true power! The ultimate torment only spoken of in rumors!”

“E-Eeeep...”

Their eyes were glowing something fierce. Their heated enthusiasm was overpowering. Their faces were incredibly close. There was nowhere to run.

What is this? What is going on...?

It was strange enough that I was being asked to torment someone, but why was I—the would-be tormentor—the one backed into a corner?

“Umm, err, umm, err, uh...”

I trembled like a fawn in the corner as a maid and a villainess closed in almost like they were trying to shake me down.

What am I supposed to do in this situation...?! I mean, even if you want me to torment someone, I don't know how...!

“Hmm...?”

That was when I noticed. There was a window right next to me. My eyes locked onto it.

What is this feeling...? I wondered. When I looked at the window, it felt like an idea was oozing from the depths of my mind.

“H-Hey... Take a look at this!”

I crept my finger along the windowsill and showed the tip to the two of them.

“Y-You left two whole specks of dust untouched! Wh-What are you doing, you useless maid?! Can you really say you've cleaned anything when you've left it like this?!” I cried out in desperation.

“Wh-What?!”

Sylphie's and Katerina's expressions froze in shock.

“D-Dust on the window?!”

“And a mere two specks!”

Their eyes widened.

“A trifling thing that has absolutely no impact on our lives! What a complete and total nitpick!”

“And to reprimand her for that... What a sadist!”

They were astounded. No, they were moved to tears.

Why?

“Your scolding is even pettier than a mean-spirited mother-in-law! Well done, Liz...! This is even more than I asked for!”

“So this is well-refined sadism...! You’re a natural-born villainess!”

They both began to tremble, and Sylphie’s face was turning red. Was she excited...? Gradually, a heated breath began to escape her lips.

“I-I apologize, truly! Forgive me, Master! I-I’ll redo all the cleaning at once!” she said as she gleefully got to work.

She wrung out her dust cloth so eagerly it was like she had just found her true purpose in life. Her very being exuded a feeling of fulfillment and purpose.

Are you really at the top of this country?!

“S-So this is the rumored power of Lady Lisalinde...! I-I’m amazed! That’s the Sadoking for you...!”

“Seriously, who is this Sadoking?!”

Even Katerina offered me a reverent bow. I hadn’t done anything deserving of respect...

“Madame Liz! Anything else?! Are there any other points where I’m lacking?!”

“Lady Lisalinde! Please show me more of your sadistic power!”

“For crying out loud, what is all this?!” I shouted.

In the high-class hotel room of a princess, I found myself tossed around by her perverted tastes and preferences. My bewildered protests echoed fruitlessly.

Chapter 33: Then—The Princess and the Orc

“Dammit! Why aren’t they back yet?!”

The sound of crackling firewood echoed from the inn’s fireplace. The world outside was cloaked in darkness with stars shimmering in the sky, and the crisp, chill air was creeping its way into the room.

The flickering flames gradually provided some much-needed warmth as Cain let out a frustrated growl. He clenched his fist and pounded it against the table.

An uneasy atmosphere loomed over the hero’s party. It wasn’t that Cain and his comrades were frustrated at Liz and Sylphie; rather, they were concerned that they had yet to return, long after when they promised to be back.

Had something happened to them?

This was the anxiety that weighed heavily on the hearts of all their comrades.

It all started with a plea for help from a village. A horde of orcs had settled in a nearby cave. Any normal village would be done for the moment a handful of orcs went on the attack.

Cain and his comrades decided to accept the mission—they would personally take care of this den of orcs. However, the testimonies of the villagers proved insufficient, and the state of the surrounding area was mostly a mystery. As their first move, they sent out Liz and Sylphie as scouts. But the hours went by. Liz and Sylphie showed no signs of returning. Their comrades restlessly prayed for their safety.

“I doubt some orcs could get the better of those two...”

Fueled by his impatience, Cain was going through his cigars far faster than usual, filling the room with a thick smoke. He couldn’t hide his worry and frustration.

“That’s it... I’ve had it. We’re charging in.”

“On it!”

Fully armed, Cain and his comrades resolved to infiltrate the orc cave.

The cave lay deep in the mountains near the village. With the utmost caution—yet with boldness to spare—they ventured in. The craggy rock face gave off a musty smell, and the silence was punctuated by the sounds of small creatures creeping about. Undeterred, they pressed on. But, something felt a little off.

They weren't running into this supposed horde of orcs. There were no lookouts, no sign of any enemies. They advanced farther and farther, the quiet calm lending more unease than reassurance.

Their wariness rose the farther they went. And inside the cave, they came across a chamber.

“Ah...!”

“Sylphie?!”

There was Sylphie.

“Gweh heh heh heh! How wretched you are—oink. A princess? *You?!?*”

“Kh...! I-I will never fold to your ilk! Enough of this humiliation! Just kill me already!”

Sylphie had been captured by the orcs. A great number of orcs surrounded her with whips in their hands and vulgar smiles on their faces. Everything the princess had been wearing was torn away, leaving only scraps of brown, tattered cloth wrapped around her chest and waist. It was miserable to look at.

Her wrists were bound together with chains while her ankles were fastened with iron weights. Her bondage forced her to her knees with her behind thrust out, and it was hard to imagine she would be able to run away in that posture.

She had been thoroughly apprehended.



“Kh...?!”

The heroes swallowed their breath. To ensure they weren't spotted, they had hidden in the shadows while peeking into the room, but the horrid sight caused their bodies to seize up. They'd found their comrade, but it was hard to say she was safe.

“Gweh heh heh heh! What did you expect after all the trouble you gave us! Oink! We're going to get our fill of fun from your body! Oink!”

“No! S-Stop...! Please...!”

Sylphie let out a pained cry.

The being before her was no mere orc—it was a higher-level variant known as an orc king. Not only was its body far larger than the norm, it also boasted overwhelming strength to match. This was an unforeseen threat; a monster that should never be found in such a remote region.

“Those bastards...!”

A vein bulged on Rachel's temple, her face colored with rage as her loose grip on her hammer's hilt turned to a stranglehold. Every pore on her body exuded her readiness to battle. It was like she would burst at any moment.

But...

“Wait, Rachel... Something's off.” Cain stopped her.

“Cain...?”

Cain carefully observed the room.

The layout. The orcs. Sylphie. He took in various bits and pieces of information, pondering them with a serious look on his face. His comrades watched over him, awaiting his orders.

“You're shitting me.”

His conclusion hit him like a brick. Cain stood and started to move.

“Huh?”

His comrades were all a little taken aback.

With calm, composed steps, Cain boldly entered the room filled with orcs. He did not launch a surprise attack, nor did he even come prepared to fight. He straight-up revealed himself to the enemy.

“Ah.”

“Sir Cain.”

Sylphie and the orc king called out upon noticing Cain. But there was something strange about that. Cain’s comrades blinked in disbelief.

The words “Sir Cain” had come from the orc king’s mouth.

“Ahem...” Cain scratched at the back of his head as he addressed the horde of orcs. “One quick question... You’re all Liz, aren’t you?”

“Yes, it’s me. It’s Liz. I’m surprised you noticed, Cain!” An orc claiming to be Liz rejoiced at the fact in a low orcish voice. The truth was revealed. “I’m using transformation magic to take on an orc’s form. Every single orc here is me, you know. I duplicated myself with cloning magic and had them all turn into orcs.”

Silence.

Liz’s explanation left Cain at a loss for words.

To summarize, every single orc was a transformed Liz, and she was the one surrounding Sylphie. Evidently, there wasn’t a single genuine orc present.

The members of the hero’s party all trudged out of the shadows.

“Oh, you’re all here? What’s wrong? What brings you all the way out here?” Sylphie asked in a casual tone, still bound in chains. She was still in the same deplorable state, but her miserable act had completely disappeared.

“What sort of question is that?”

“Hmm...” Cain lit his cigar. “The hell are you people doing?”

“We’re doing princess-knight-and-orc role-play.”

“Huh?”

“Gweh heh heh heh! You miserable wretch! Oink! How does it feel?! A noble princess like you being violated by savage orcs—oink?! ”

“Gah...! You just want to play with my body! If you’re going to humiliate me like this...just kill me...!”

“Oink! Oink! You’re going to be our toy for the rest of your life!”

Snap! The orc king swung his whip.

“Gwaaaaaah... ≡”

The whip mercilessly struck Sylphie’s body, causing her to cry out in pain. But on closer inspection, her cheeks were flushed. She was having the time of her life.

“And that’s the game. Do you get it?”

“Wait, hold on.” Cain was starting to get a headache. “Now I have even more questions.”

“Yes, go ahead.”

“I shall answer them all.”

“First, what happened to the orcs? The real ones that were originally in this cave?”

“We defeated them all,” Liz replied.

“It was an easy task,” Sylphie added.

Cain furrowed his brow. “Well...whatever. That’s all well and good. It was up to your discretion. But why were you out past the meeting time? If you had time to play around, then you coulda made it back in time. Right?”

“Hmm?”

“Meeting time?”

Sylphie exchanged a blank look with the orcs.

“Cain? Weren’t we supposed to meet tomorrow?”

“Huh?”

There seemed to be some sort of misunderstanding.

“Oh, I think I get where this is coming from. We put together the schedule around midnight, so I think we had a different understanding of what *tomorrow*

meant. I thought for sure you meant the day after today, seeing as it was already today when we finalized things.”

“Point taken... This is definitely something we’ll have to work on.”

“Gyo ho ho ho ho...! Your comrades are watching your unsightly display! Oink! Now! Let’s show them more! Let them see what a pathetic princess looks like when she’s been broken down!”

“Kh...! No, don’t look at me! Don’t watch them defile me!”

“Hey, quit playing around.”

Cain was already starting to hate being there.

“So, what are you even doing?”

“As I said, it’s princess-knight-and-orc role-play.”

“And I’m asking what that is.”

“Do you want to join us, Sir Cain?”

“Hell no.”

He didn’t know what was what, but he did know he didn’t want any part in it.

“I see... So this is that trope that’s been making the rounds...”

“You know about it, Melvy?”

“It’s a trope that’s garnered some recent popularity in the world of erotic manga. A being that holds both the dignity of a princess and the valor of a knight—that is the princess knight. But such a noble woman is made a mess of by vile savages; she is made to submit both in body and mind. Watching this downfall invokes a peculiar sense of carnal lust and dark delight... That is the basic outline of the trope.”

“Sounds stupid,” Cain plainly stated.

Manga was a recent form of entertainment that had begun to spread through the world with the advancement of printing technology. The advance of manga naturally gave way to erotic manga, containing vivid depictions of sexual scenarios.

The graphic contents caused it to spread like wildfire.

“Normally, you see,” said Sylphie, “princess knights only exist in the realm of imagination.”

“I know, right? There’s no way the princess of a nation would take on such a dangerous occupation,” Liz replied. “It’s all backward.”

“Yes, yes. So princess knights and the like are essentially fiction. You can only truly enjoy the princess knight experience through role-play like this.”

“Hey, don’t deny your own existence.”

Sylphie was a genuine princess knight.

“It’s all because I was blessed with too much talent for combat. That’s where it all started to go downhill. If everything went my way, I would have been a maid rather than a princess,” Sylphie calmly analyzed herself from her bondage.

“And right now, I’m no normal orc king—I’m Sado-orc-king! Oink!”

“Shut it.”

“Incidentally, Sir Cain, how did you notice that this horde of orcs was me?”

“Simple. Orcs don’t lust after humans.”

“Oh... Simple indeed. I’ve been poisoned by too many fictional works.”

Orcs only directed their lust at other orcs. They did not hold any carnal desire towards the human species.

Lately, there had been numerous erotic publications where orcs sexually assaulted human women. Thus, the misunderstanding that orcs lusted for human women was spreading through the world, but that was purely fictional. In reality, most orcs did not have a thing for humiliation either.

“Also, even the talking orcs don’t add ‘oink’ to their sentences...”

“That’s... Yes, I was trying too hard to establish an easy-to-understand character.”

There were two forms of orcs—those who could speak, and those who couldn’t. Most of them couldn’t speak. They possessed low intelligence and lived on instinct like animals. These individuals were classified as *monsters*. The

talking ones, meanwhile, boasted far higher intelligence and were classified as *demons* instead. These orcs had their own social structure and could make and use tools.

When a monster's intellect was high enough, it was like their primal monstrous element was stripped away. They were de-monstered *demons* so to speak. And these demons stood head and shoulders above normal monsters.

"All right, let's get going, then. We've got no business here anymore."

"Huh?"

"Aww."

If the orc den had been taken care of, then they had already fulfilled their objective. It was only natural they left, but the two girls who'd been playing around looked at him with discontent.

"Hey c'mon, Cain, let's do some princess-knight-and-orc role-play together. You rarely come across a chance to do orc play in a real orc den."

"Indeed, the realism is something else. Why not join us, Sir Cain?"

"Definitely not. What do you mean 'realism'?"

"Gweh heh heh heh!!! Let's give the foolish princess knight something hot, white, and sticky! Oink! Take this! Some nice and hot candle wax!"

"Grah! S-So hot...! But I'm not going to fold! I have my pride as a princess, as a knight! My heart will never give in!"

Wax dripped from the burning candle the orc held up, trickling down onto Sylphie's skin.

"Hah, hah. ≡ H-Hot... I can't get enough of this... ≡"

"You're already folding, goddammit."

Princess Knight Sylphonia seemed to be having fun.

"You're merely a slave now—oink! Pitiful princess, you will serve us to the day you die!"

"Kh?! I have to serve these savage beasts?! Someone save me!"

“Oh, right, Sylphie. I want to try the princess knight role too. Can we swap out after a bit?”

“Yeah, fine by me.”

“What flimsy oppression.”

What a peculiar scene it was, for the orc to be requesting to take the princess’s place.

“Oink! Oink! Oink! ♪ Big and strong are we! ♪ Death to all our enemies! ♪ The lewd festival has begun! ♪ Oink! ♪”

“Shut it.”

“How about some princess knight play, Sir Cain?”

“Not doing it.”

“You could be on the orc side if you want. You’re a sadist, after all.”

“I ain’t doing it. Lay off me.”

Cain obstinately shook his head.

“Then what about you, Melvy? Do you want to join us?”

“Huh?!” Melvy began to panic as the conversation was suddenly turned to her.

An orc drew closer, and Melvy shied back.

“U-Umm... Well, err...”

“Hey now, don’t drag Melvy into it.”

Melvy seemed flustered as she stood before the orc king’s hulking form. Her body curled up; she was nervous, losing her cool over the nonsensical sabbath taking part in the room.

But her cheeks were red.

“Th-Then, umm, err... I’ll take the beginner’s course...”

“Yes, I hear you loud and clear!”

Melvy shook her head. She couldn’t win against her curiosity towards a game

she'd never played before. She was, after all, an advanced student.

"What about you, Rachel?"

"H-Huh?!"

The arrow then turned to Rachel.

Unlike Melvy, Rachel seemed genuinely flustered.

"I-I'm not doing it! Never! Who the hell would want to put up with this nonsense...!"

"Aww, let's do it together, Rachel. It'll be a lot of fun."

"She's right, Rachel. It's a blast."

"N-No! Definitely, definitely, *definitely* not! You're going to toy with me again! Just like in those erotic manga! Right, like in those erotic manga!"

Rachel desperately shook her head, her purple pigtails swinging in a frenzy.

"Is that so..."

"Hmm?"

The orcs all slumped down. "That's a shame... I thought it would be so very fun if you could play with us, Rachel..."

"Huh? No, err..."

The orcs' shoulders slumped, and they were visibly depressed. Their eyes drooped along with the corners of their mouths. They looked disappointed from the depths of their hearts. The sense that they really, truly just wanted to have fun with their comrades exuded from their hulking bodies.

"I wanted to be with you too, Rachel," Sylphie added. "But... It's bad to force you. I thought it would be fun if everyone was together, but... There's not much I can do..."

"E-Even you, Sylphie..."

"Rachel... If you're that against it, then... My apologies... I simply, purely wanted to have fun with all of my comrades... It is very unfortunate, but I will endure it."

“M-Melvy...? U-Umm, well...”

Rachel was taken aback seeing the three women so despondent.

“W-Well, fine. If you really insist!” She scoffed with a red face. “I could graciously go along with your nonsense, just for a little bit! Just a little, you hear! Just a tiny, little bit...!”

“Too easy.”

“Too easy.”

“Too easy.”

“Too easy.”

Four people said the same words one after another.

“Did you guys just say something?”

“No?”

Everyone present played dumb.

“Well then, now that I have everyone’s permission... Gweh heh heh heh! We’ve captured another two princess knights! Oink! We’ll have a feast tonight!”

“WAAAAAAAAAARGGGH...!” all the orcs in the room gleefully roared as they pinned down Rachel and Melvy.

“Wah! Umm, noo!”

“Kyah...!”

“Oh, what do you want to do about the setting? You’re a real Saint, Melvy, so do you want to go with that? Or do you want to role-play as a princess knight?”

“Princess knight, please.”

“Okay. ≡”

Today, Melvy felt like becoming someone else.

“Now, men, please evacuate. Since Rachel’s taking part, I can’t let you watch either, Sir Cain!”

“We’re leaving town the day after tomorrow... You better be back by then.”

“Got it.”

A laid-back reply came from the girls. Cain felt like a stressed mother looking after problem children.

“Gweh heh heh heh...! Fine women, the lot of them! Oink! I can’t wait to see the moment their faces twist in despair!”

“W-Wow...she’s surprisingly menacing...”

“Th-This might be a little scary...?”

The two newcomers gulped as the horde of massive orcs surrounded them.

“S-Stop...! Don’t lay a hand on my comrades! You don’t need to torture anyone but me...!”

“Silence, woman...! I’ll play with you all together, so prepare yourself—oink!”

“Mmmmmmmmm... ≡”

The whip snapped, and Sylphie let out an enraptured moan.

“Let’s go...”

The men turned their backs and trudged their way out of the orc den. And just like that, a village cowering in fear from orc attacks regained its peace, thanks to the valiant efforts of the heroes.

Chapter 34: Now—The Adventurers' Guild's Secret Facility

It was night, and I could see a sky full of glistening stars through the gaps between the tall buildings. The soles of my shoes let out faint clacking sounds as I slowly walked down the well-kept pavement.

These faint noises created a subtle symphony that echoed through the quiet town. We walked while enjoying the meager lights and sounds.

"Come now, Sir Cain. Can't you tell me where we're going yet?"

"Hold on, Liz. I can't spill it until we get there."

Cain was beside me. He had been the one to invite me on this nighttime walk.

Earlier in the day, he'd asked, "Can you meet me later tonight? There's someplace I want to take you." And of course, I gave the okay.

I'd excitedly waited for night to come. After school, I'd rushed straight to the salon to tidy up my hair. I had more than enough enthusiasm for the occasion.

What's more, he wouldn't tell me where we were going. It was, apparently, a surprise. I couldn't help but feel a sense of anticipation as I waded through the darkness of the night.

"Oh, how mysterious. I guess I'll look forward to it, then."

"I'm...sorry to burst your bubble, but this ain't that sort of gig. Like, I'm not trying to get your hopes up for something fancy. This is necessary, work-related stuff. Don't expect too much."

"Huh? Oh... Umm, I see. So that's what it is."

I immediately deflated the moment I heard the word *work*. I had expected perhaps a surprise or a trendy restaurant, but it seemed that wasn't the case. Yes, I even dared to think that this had possibly been an invitation to a date, at which my heart had leaped for joy. But that ship swiftly sank.

That's a bit disappointing.

"Looks like I gave you the wrong idea. My bad."

"No, it's fine. Really..."

The brilliance of the stars seemed to dim somewhat.

"This is the place."

We arrived as I was lost in my thoughts. Cain stopped in front of a certain establishment.

"Is this...a bar?"

It was a compact little shop, and the building bore the scars and dirt of many years gone by. The peeling paint on the door made it seem as if the place were intentionally repelling people, despite being a business.

A small sign hung on the door: *Members-Only Bar Fragarach*.

Impolite as it was, I could feel a furrow forming on my brow. I was getting a terrible first impression, and this hardly seemed like the place to escort a lady. Perhaps the interior was stylish, but I didn't feel a hint of it from the exterior. Instead of being chic with a touch of age, it was genuinely shabby. Being brought here on a date would have been genuinely disappointing. Yes, I realized this wasn't a date...

Cain entered without hesitation.

"Welcome," the somber voice of an older man greeted us from within. "This bar is for members only. Are you... Oh, it's you, Cain."

"Pardon us."

Apparently, Cain was a familiar face to the staff. He took out a membership card, but it was barely checked before he was welcomed in. Unfortunately, the interior wasn't doing much for the shop either. It was just as worn and dirty as the outside. Frankly, I didn't see any reason to go as far as becoming a member to visit this place.

"Who's the lady behind you? Your girlfriend?"

"Huh?! Umm, well, I...!"

“Shut it, just let her through.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

I was the only one getting embarrassed. *No, we’re just school friends*, I reminded myself. Cain didn’t seem fazed at all; he remained calm and composed. Was he used to having people ask him that?

“Wait...huh?”

It was at that moment I found myself slightly perplexed.

I assumed we’d take a seat and order some drinks, but Cain’s behavior suggested otherwise. Instead of sitting down, he and the man—the bartender—proceeded to the back of the bar.

There were no customers inside. We could have sat anywhere nearby, but they continued farther and farther in. *What exactly are we looking for?* I wondered as I hurriedly followed behind.

“This way, please.”

The bartender opened a worn-out door in the back. The door gave off a very inconspicuous impression. It looked more like it was meant for employees, with its thin layer of grime and complete lack of upkeep. Yet, its lack of presence made it hard to imagine this door was for customers.

What’s more, it was locked.

Are we really supposed to go through there? I wondered as the bartender urged us on.

Without a hint of hesitation, Cain walked in.

I followed, solely so I wouldn’t be left behind.

“Huh?”

And I was astonished.

“Wh-What is this place...?”

Behind the door was a stairway leading down—a dimly lit staircase that stretched so far I couldn’t see where it ended. The faint reddish light of lanterns dotted the darkness, guiding the way into the abyss.

What on earth is this? Wasn't this supposed to be a bar?

"Take your time..."

"Huh? Wait!"

With that, the bartender shut the door behind us. For some reason, he wasn't going to go with us. He even went as far as to courteously lock the door. Cain and I were left stranded on the stairs.

"Wh-Wh-What's going on, Cain?! Is this not a bar?!"

"Just come along for now. You'll know as soon as we reach the end of the stairs."

Cain started climbing down as though it was the natural thing to do. I tagged along in haste.

My surroundings were dim. The lantern light was unreliable, making each step an uncertain shot in the dark. I took great care not to slip as I descended.

The stairs are rugged stone. Where exactly am I being taken? I feel like a prisoner being carted off to some eerie underground jail cell.

With a gulp, I followed Cain.

"We're here," Cain muttered as we reached the last step.

Before us stood a large door. A large weathered door. But unlike the bar, this one had some character. The years had given it dignity rather than dirt. There was a heavy, grating sound as Cain pushed it open.

"Welcome!"

"Huh?"

There was a vast area beyond the stairwell. Rows of dazzling lights brightened up the space. There were loads of people, and lines upon lines of tables and chairs, where everyone was drinking, their faces tinted red.

I could see a bar counter at the back of the room. The shelf was lined with all sorts of bottles, and the scent of good food wafted through the air.

This was a pub. That much was clear. The floor was wood; the walls were stone. The pub's vibe spoke volumes.

This had to have been a place that had been around for many long years. Just like the door we'd passed through, the stains and the scars that had seeped in over many years created a tasteful atmosphere.

I didn't know there was a place like this beneath Academy Town...

I could do little more than stare around, wide-eyed.

"Oh, welcome, Caine-boy."

"Huh...?"

But there was something in the shop that made my eyes widen even further.

The employee who called out to us boasted a rather striking look—a flashy floral dress exposing the chest and shoulders. You could say it was rather revealing.

But that was fine. I didn't have a problem with that.

The issue was that the employee was a man.

He had a very brawny body despite wearing a woman's dress. His exposed chest and back were both adorned with large muscles. Though his bosom was bulging, it didn't take more than a glance to realize it was padded.

There was a thin, blue goatee around his mouth. And yet he wore heavy and flashy female makeup. His lips were painted so exaggeratedly with crimson lipstick that the light sparkled off of them.

This is...what exactly? What is this?

The employee coquettishly gave me my answer.

"Welcome to the local drag bar!"

"Huh... What?!"

Today, Cain had brought me to quite the place.

The employee guided me to sit beside Cain. My body was shaking. I was completely losing my nerve. The man, meanwhile, sat beside me and poured me some alcohol.

"My! What a cutie! I could just eat you right up!"

“Eep!”

Every single one of his motions startled me. Perhaps it was incredibly rude of me, but I simply had absolutely no experience with such circles, and my body stiffened up on its own.

“Go easy on her. This is the first time Liz’s been to this sorta place.”

“Oh, what a sweet, innocent little thing! I suppose that’s no surprise. Bars like these are considerably rare. Everyone’s like you at first.”

“If I’m recalling correctly, you’re treated like criminals in most other countries, right? People with your inclinations, I mean,” Cain said, speaking past me. His tone was very casual, given the subject.

“Unfortunately. Worst case, they burn us at the stake, saying we’re possessed by evil spirits. This is a good country. Praises be to the citizenry. It’s always important to be grateful.”

It was just as the pair said. Drag culture itself was very rare to find, and I’d only ever heard of it in stories. It hadn’t been very long since such people had even been accepted into society.

With that said, there were indeed many cross-dressing men in the shop. Though busy, the drag employees seemed to be enjoying themselves as they spoke and shared laughs with the clientele. *I never thought one of those rumored drag bars would be in Academy Town...*

I felt both surprised and a little moved.

“First, I better introduce myself, since it’s your first time dropping by. You can call me Happy! I’m the manager of this here establishment! Believe me when I say it’s a pleasure!”

“Oh, yes... I’m Lisalinde. A second-year at the academy. A pleasure to meet you...”

I timidly shook Happy’s hand. *Her* hand was very large and rough.

“No worries, I know all about you, Lisalinde. You’re a beauty of some renown at the academy.”

“Huh?”

“This is a place where all sorts of information gathers naturally. I know almost everything that goes on in the academy. Well, the info doesn’t just come here on its own. We’re the ones gathering it!”

“Hmm?”

Happy winked at me—a wink so powerful and striking I could almost hear the sound of a camera shutter.

“Do you want me to explain the system we have here? Oh, what to do? Should I just go ahead? Should I?”

“U-Umm...”

“Just get to it already.”

“Oh, Cain! So impatient! So scary!”

Cain gulped down his alcohol. Happy poured him another cup with an experienced hand.

“Well, you see, little Lizzy. This place isn’t your average, everyday drag bar. It’s a drag bar that hides a very crucial secret.”

“I-I don’t think a drag bar is an average, everyday place to begin with...”

“Oh, you! Such a cute face, and she’s got a mouth on her too! But you know, well, that’s not what I’m getting at here! We really do have a very special role!”

Happy let out a hearty laugh while patting me on the back. She really was strong. Presumably, she was holding back, but I could feel the jolt piercing my entire body.

“This bar is managed by the adventurers’ guild.”

“Huh? The guild?”

“That’s right—this town’s great big guild. Just so you know, this drag bar is where we handle the guild’s secret quests!”

“S-Secret quests?!”

Suddenly an important institution, which had absolutely nothing to do with the offerings of a drag bar, had entered the conversation. I was a little taken aback.

“Yes, you see. This is where we specialize in super hard quests, with a difficulty level of S-Rank and above,” Happy explained. “We’re a proud part of the guild.”

“Huh? S-Rank...”

“Yes, those fiendish missions that unskilled people couldn’t even consider taking. They’re handled through this secret quest station. Only those who’ve been approved can enter.”

I see. Now I know why this underground bar exists.

The reason the bar aboveground was members only was certainly to ensure that only adventurers of S-Rank and above could enter. Yes, that really explained a lot.

“And when it comes to those *super hard* quests, a lot of them are the sorts that can’t even be made public. Unskilled people aren’t allowed to even know they exist. Like when the client is a large organization or even the leaders of a nation. Our hidden little oasis was set up to deal with those quests with high confidentiality.”

“That means...the customers here are all adventurers of S-Rank or higher?”

“Right you are! Nothing but big shots here! I can barely keep from pissing myself!” Happy cackled.

Ignoring that last statement, I looked around and gulped. Nearly every single person here was the cream of the crop, someone whose strength put them at least at S-Rank. Once I looked at them with that knowledge, it did indeed feel like each and every one of them exuded a powerful sense of presence.

So this is the aura of the strong... No, the ones with the strongest presence are still the drag queens.

“So, Lizzy, you’re currently here on Cainey’s introduction. We know each other now, but you still won’t be able to enter unless you’re with someone who has a membership card. Keep that in mind!”

“Yes, understood.”

“Liz’s pretty much on our team as a trainee. I suspect she’ll have more

opportunities to use your services from here on out. Look after her, okay?”

“You got it! Looks like everyone loves you, Lizzy!”

“Ha ha ha...”

I’m loved, huh? The thought made me a bit bashful. I scratched awkwardly at my cheek.

“By the way, could I ask a question?”

“Go ahead! Ask me anything!”

As I listened to all the details, a thought had crossed my mind. I decided to just be upfront with it.

“I think I understand why this bar is underground, and what sort of role it has... But I still don’t see the necessity of it being a drag bar...”

“That’s...” Happy closed her eyes and shut her mouth. For a moment, a somber mood filled the air.

H-Huh? Did I just ask something I shouldn’t have...?

“That’s...” she said again.

“That’s...?”

“That’s...”

Happy raised her face. “...solely thanks to the preferences of the owner—me!” she happily replied. She gave a peace sign with both hands and winked again.

I silently smacked her on the shoulder.

“Oww! That hurts, Lisalinde...!”

I was a little irritated. As it turned out, there was no deeper meaning to it at all.

“L-Lizzy, my, aren’t you adapting to our bar rather quickly! It usually takes a lot longer to get used to this place!” Happy asked while clapping her shoulder in an exaggerated way.

“Hmm?” I thought over it for a moment.

Sure enough, I'd been quite nervous the moment I entered the bar, but I'd mostly calmed down by now. I'd gotten used to the vibe of the store too.

"Right, well, I've gotten rather accustomed to your appearance already, Happy. Though I'd admit I was a little nervous at first." I bowed my head apologetically.

"Wh-What a girl... For one so unaccustomed to the world of drag... It usually takes the bravest warriors at least a week to acclimate to our 'heretical' existences..." Happy shivered a bit, apparently impressed.

Hmm...? Is it really that strange? It really just stopped bothering me after a little bit.

"Liz is a monster when it comes to adaptability."

"I-Is she really, Caine-boy?"

"Yeah. Leave it to Liz, and she'll immediately absorb any unusual inclinations you throw at her, and make them her own. That isn't the least of it—she's a monster who personally gives birth to brand-new fetishes, she is."

"W-Wow..." Happy shuddered even more.

"Hey! Cain! Please don't lie! I am not that sort of perverted human being! I am a perfectly normal student!"

"N-Normal?"

"Normal?"

I protested, yet for some reason, they both looked at me doubtfully. *Why?! You'd be hard-pressed to find anyone living a school life as modest and pure as mine!*

"Well, that's the sort of girl Liz is. I think she'll be a regular soon, so look out for her."

"G-Got it. I shouldn't underestimate her, I guess. Can't wait to work with you, Lizzy."

"You have it all wrong! I'm a normal student!"

Why was she so surprised just because I'd gotten used to the atmosphere of

her own bar?!

Putting that aside, I exchanged another handshake with Happy.

“Aight... Now that I’ve gotten you two acquainted, it’s time we get to the main topic,” said Cain.

“Main topic?”

Cain’s expression turned serious as he stared at Happy. Her face grew stern too.

“I came here today because I got a summons. Someone’s put in a quest request for us, right? Getting Liz acquainted with the place was secondary.”

“I-I see...”

So I’m secondary to this... And here I was getting all excited, thinking it was a date. No, it would have been equally surprising if he’d brought me to a drag bar on a date.

“Got it. I’ll give you all the details. Follow me to the back room.”

Happy stood and we trailed behind. We entered one of the many rooms in the bar’s spacious lounge. Even though we were already deep underground, we were still going farther and farther into the depths.

We went down a narrow corridor, into a private room so far away there was absolutely no possibility of any sound reaching the bar. All the raucous noise of the drag bar no longer reached us either.

“Sit wherever you like.”

It was a bare room with only a table, some chairs, and a small shelf. I could even sense some magical soundproofing. No one would be able to eavesdrop, either physically or magically.

Just what sorts of secrets had been exchanged in this room before?

I could only imagine the grave matters of national security that must have been discussed here. It was the very reason this underground room had existed over many long years. A secret place that only men and women of absolute strength could enter. All sorts of factors came together to give the room a sense

of importance. I could feel my back stiffening.

Cain took a seat, and I sat beside him. Finally, Happy took the seat across from us and began to tell us about the secret job.

“To start with, the clients this time are the lord of Academy Town, the guild master of the adventurers’ guild, and the headmaster of Forst Academy. The three of them—at least, for now.”

“Hey now, that’s all the top authorities in town. What, is it that big of a crisis? Is this whole town about to be wiped off the map?”

“It could be even worse than that. Perhaps it’s not just the town. This could spell the end of the country—no, the world.”

Cain pursed his lips.

Just going off the list of clients, it certainly wasn’t a trifle. Had even one of those three been the client, it would have been a job that no one in their right mind could turn down. And all three had signed on, just to make triply sure.

It was a request that couldn’t be turned down—a request that they made with the sincerest plea that the heroes would take it up.

“For now, we’ve sent a messenger to the royal castle with the report. Once we get our reply, the king might be added to the list of clients too. But we can’t just wait for him to hop on board. I’d like to go ahead and discuss it with you.”

“Enough with the preface. Just tell me what this is all about.”

“Got it...” Happy let out a slight sigh. “It all started a few days ago, in a plot of land on the outskirts of Academy Town. We detected a large distortion in space.”

“A distortion?”

“That’s right. The lord sent his knights, and the guild their adventurers. They immediately rushed in to conduct an investigation, and they found the distortion in no time. Unfortunately, they couldn’t tell exactly what it was. They knew it seemed to connect to some location far, far away, but they had no idea where. All they could tell was that it had been intentionally made using highly advanced magic. The spell was so complicated that the guild’s magicians were

unable to make heads or tails of it,” said Happy. “They couldn’t venture to where the distortion connected, nor could they peer into it. This is just my speculation, but I think you’d need the permission of the spell’s practitioner.”

So, a distortion in space had suddenly appeared one day.

Magic to bypass space wasn’t anything new. However, connecting two distant points in space required careful preparations to be done at both locations. It was the sort of magic that took a lot of time and effort to invoke.

But this seemed to be different. The connection had forcefully been made from just one of the two sides. There were no preparations, no magic circle laid out at the destination point. Whoever it was, they had forcefully twisted space to their whims and forged a connection.

That was what had caused the distortion.

To intentionally make such a thing went beyond normal sensibilities. Just how many magicians were there in the world capable of such a feat?

“So, what? You want me to go investigate the distortion?”

“Not exactly. At this point, we have already determined who created the distortion.”

“Hmm?”

“From within the distortion emerged an envoy.”

“An envoy...?”

Happy’s eyes let off a sharp glint. “A demon claiming to be an emissary of the demon lord.”

“The—!”

“Hmm...”

Though I was startled, Cain gave a smug grin.

“The demon lord’s envoy spoke to the investigators who had gathered there. According to their words, the distortion leads to the demon lord’s castle, and there, they wait for the heroes to come.”

“The demon lord’s castle? Are you sure?”

“The demon lord has only one demand: ‘Hero, let us have a duel.’ Apparently.”

We were silent. Before I knew it, my body was trembling.

The greatest enemy of humanity—the demon lord.

Such an immense entity had made contact with Academy Town, just like that. At the end of a distortion at the edge of town... It was no exaggeration to say that the demon lord’s castle had essentially been repositioned right under our noses. The nightmare of all mankind had sneaked up on us without anyone being the wiser. The demon lord that was supposed to be the final objective of the heroes’ trial was peering at us right from our back door.

I couldn’t stop the sweat from oozing down my brow.

“Sounds good to me. It’s finally getting interesting.”

Cain alone seemed to take the news with glee.

“What are you going to do, Caine-boy? I’m pretty sure it’s a trap...”

Cain folded his arms and thought for a moment. But he quickly came to a conclusion.

“We go on the attack. The situation is too bizarre for a trap. With traps, you gotta lay them with care. So careful and thorough your foe won’t even know what hit ’em.”

“Right.”

“I’m guessing this has to do with some circumstances on their end. Something happened that forced their hand. There’s got to be some sort of reason that the demon lord’s got to hurry and settle the score with me. That’s why they set up this absurd situation.”

“That was the guild’s take on this too.”

“Of course, we’ll prepare for a trap. We’re heading into enemy territory. We know what to expect, to some degree, and we’ll take countermeasures. Don’t worry.”

With those words, Cain lit a cigar. The narrow room immediately became

smoggy.

“This’ll be our second time facing that blasted demon lord. This time, we’ll end him for sure.”

The hero’s party had fought the demon lord roughly a year ago. At the time, all of humanity had tossed their hats in the air in celebration of the news that the heroes had managed to deal a severe blow to the demon lord.

Since the hero’s team hadn’t suffered any significant losses, it was deemed a complete and utter victory for the heroes. Yet I’d also heard rumors that the heroes would go silent when the topic was broached. They’d refuse to say a word when asked about the battle.

Had the heroes suffered a great wound of their own? A massive wound that couldn’t be told to the world at large?

Such were the rumors in every corner of the world.

I gazed quietly at the side of Cain’s face.

His eyes burned ferociously, the desire to fight—to cut down the demon lord—oozing from his body. His fists were clenched so tightly I could make out the blood vessels on the back of his hand, his skin reddening. What rage. It was almost like he was an avenger out to even the score.

“But isn’t the demon lord’s castle sealed away by a powerful barrier? Is it going to be all right?” I asked earnestly.

The seal protected the demon lord’s castle from any external attacks. That was why Cain and his comrades had been unable to take that final step. But the artifact to undo the seal was said to rest beneath Academy Town, at the bottom of an extremely dangerous SSS+-Rank dungeon.

Cain and his comrades would periodically venture into the dungeon to make gradual progress towards its end. That was one of the reasons that they had transferred to the academy in the first place.

But now, could they enter the castle even without the artifact?

“Hey, they’re the ones inviting us. I doubt that seal’s going to get in our way.”

“That’s, well... I guess so?”

“I’d reckon they turned it off.”

I got a rather lax answer. Yet Cain had a crease on his brow and a frown on his lips as if to express that he wasn’t completely convinced himself.

“Oh, you know about the seal, Lizzy? I know all about that SSS+ dungeon too, so you don’t need to dance around the subject with me.”

“Oh, really?”

Information on the SSS+ dungeon wasn’t made public. Cain told me not to say anything unnecessary, but if Happy knew about it, then there was no need to worry.

“In that sense too, this is our chance,” said Cain. “By my estimate, it’ll take another two years to clear the dungeon. We could be put at a disadvantage if we waste too much time. I want to settle things now.”

“You really, really must be careful, Cain.”

“Got it. Hey, Happy?”

“What is it?”

Cain stood. He looked over at Happy and me and said, “I accept the mission to take down the demon lord’s castle.”

He had a vicious smile on his face. The battle for the fate of the world was about to kick off.

And two days went by. Cain and the rest of his party members used those two days to prepare for their conquest of the castle. They anticipated all manner of dangers in store for them and prepared countermeasures for every single trap they could think of. They had a complete checklist of tools and items for battle too.

No surprise from a seasoned band of heroes. Even after living a peaceful life in Academy Town, they still kept a full stock of supplies at all times. They were prepared to fight, no matter when or where the battle might break out. Indeed, their resolve and readiness for battle were simply on another level.

Though I wanted to help, I could only do a few errands for them at most.

Five members of their party would rise to the challenge: Cain, Sylphie, Rachel, Mitter, and Wolfe.

Owing to their injuries, Melvy and Lalo weren't completely at peak condition, and so would stay behind. They took on the role of protecting Academy Town if this all turned out to be some grand diversion, and Wolfe joined the team in their stead.

Me? Of course, I was going to stay behind. I was just a trainee. Naturally, I had no part in this climactic battle.

With all their preparations in place, it was finally time to set off to conquer the castle.

"We'll be off, then."

"You really must be careful, Cain..."

"Yeah, I know."

On the outskirts of Academy Town, outside of the high outer walls, in an open field where I could see far and wide. There were tall mountains towering in the distance, across which the wind blew down upon us, strong but comforting.

"Splendid! What a perfect day for a duel," Sylphie said.

Is that how it works?

Today, the heroes were wearing their combat gear. They weren't in the school uniforms I'd gotten used to seeing them in. These were the clothes they had worn on their travels: light, sturdy, and flexible—practical clothing well suited for battle.

It was a bit novel, seeing them outfitted as—well, as the heroes they were. But when I said that, for some reason, it got me a few wry smiles.

Why?

The knights of the local lord stood around the distortion as lookouts. Though rudimentary, they had put up some simple fortifications so no one would mistakenly approach the passage to the demon lord's palace. There would be no interlopers in this battle.

“All right, let’s go!”

“Onward!”

They raised spirited cries.

Then Cain and his comrades disappeared beyond the rift.

We started on the way back. I returned to Academy Town with Melvy and Lalo, who’d also gone to see them off. There wasn’t anything for us to do. We could only pray for their safe return.

For the time being, I opted to return to my dorm room. Along the way, I parted with Melvy and Lalo, who were headed to the hotel instead.

Slowly, I walked through the Academy Town streets.

It was peaceful here. The air was filled with the voices of lively students, so many souls rejoicing in an unchanging everyday existence. No one could have even dreamed that the heroes were currently fighting a battle that could decide the fate of the world. The sky—no different from normal—hung above us, a refreshing blue.

“Hmm?”

Within that peaceful scene, I chanced upon a certain individual—Kuon.

She was a student who’d transferred in only recently, causing a ruckus on the very same day she transferred in.

Kuon was standing right down my path.

What is she doing? I wondered. She was standing stock-still right in the middle of the sidewalk. It was as if she was trying to block me.

Well, I doubt it...

Her body was turned towards me. Was she looking at me? But Kuon and I had no point of connection. I one-sidedly knew about her, but we’d never even spoken before.

Though it looked like she was waiting for me, I couldn’t think of any reason why she would be. I didn’t know what she was doing, but I concluded it had

nothing to do with me.

We're all students here. Should I at least say hello?

And just as the thought crossed my mind—

“Thou art Lisalinde, yes?”

“Hmm?”

Kuon called out to me first. It was clear she was talking to me. I stopped, a little startled.

Umm, err... What am I supposed to reply?

As I hesitated, Kuon took action. She raised her arm, directing her palm towards me. Based on the mana gathering in her hand, she seemed to be invoking a spell of sorts.

In my moment of hesitation, she opened her mouth. “Thou, too, wert invited,” she said with a grin.

“Huh...?”

Her spell went off before I could finish my question.

Space itself started to bend around her hand. I felt a sense very similar to what I'd picked up from the distortion on the outskirts of town.



I was caught up in the vortex with no way of resisting it.

“Wh-Why?!” I cried out, but there was nothing I could do.

My body twisted and bent. No, it was the ground, the buildings, the sky—everything around me began to warp out of shape. This was extremely high-level spatial magic. That was all I could comprehend. But it had happened so suddenly that I’d sunk into the rift before I could do a thing.

“Ms. Kuon?! Who are you...?!”

I could see her within the twisted sights. There she was, a ferocious smile on her face. And that was when everything around me faded into complete darkness.

“Oh?”

When I came to, I was plopped on my behind in an unfamiliar place.

The sights and sounds were completely different from Academy Town. The sky was a swelling mass of sinister darkness, and it was hard to imagine it was even part of the world I knew. I could see barren land in the distance, showered with bizarre lightning bolts of faded hues.

This couldn’t be a land inhabited by humans. *Demonland*. The word crossed my mind.

The doors of a massive castle towered before me, large doors over ten meters high. Just looking at this small portion told me just how unfathomably large the entire castle would have to be.

“H-Hey? What...?”

I heard a panicked voice from behind me.

I twisted my body, turning my head towards the voice—and there I saw Cain and his party members, who had just gone off to conquer the demon lord’s castle.

“Liz! What the hell are you doing here?!”

“...Huh?”

No one understood the situation—me included. We were all cocking our heads in confusion together.

Yes, we could all only commiserate in our bewilderment. But there was one thing I could say for sure.

I—weak and immature as I was—had just been pulled into an outrageous battle to topple the demon lord's castle.

Chapter 35: Now—The First Obstacle: Mad Dog Cerberus!

“Where was I? Oh, right! And then, Lady Kuon cast a spell, the space around me distorted, and by the time I realized it, I was here!”

Standing before the entrance to the demon lord’s castle, I explained my predicament to Cain and his comrades. Everyone crossed their arms or put their hands to their chins as they pondered this unexpected turn of events. An unforeseen piece called Kuon had been placed on the board, leaving everyone a little bewildered.

“Wolfe. You have any recollection of that Kuon girl from before?” Cain asked.

And Wolfe weakly shook his head. “No, I never saw her while serving as battalion commander.”

Wolfe had previously been part of the demon lord’s army, yet he seemed entirely unfamiliar with Kuon.

Who exactly is she?

The mysterious transfer student turned out to be far more mysterious than I could imagine.

“Anyway, what do we do about Liz?” Cain got the conversation back on track. “I’ll just put it out there, but we do have a means of countering space-warping traps. It’s an item that’ll forcefully teleport the whole party to a designated point regardless of where all our members are. If we use that, you’ll be safely returned to Academy Town.”

“Oh!”

Cain produced a spherical crystal—a magic item called an orb—from his bag. A forced teleport orb. I thought I was now embroiled in something outrageous, but it seemed I would be able to return safely.

“Then I just have to use this?”

“Unfortunately, it’s a one-and-done deal. It’s our ultimate trump card to get us out of any enemy traps. If we use it up, we’ll have to put this mission on a temporary hold. Since it’s a rare item, we don’t have any spares.”

“Huh?”

The conversation took a questionable turn. *That means I won’t be able to get back, right?*

“I examined the distortion at the entrance, but that’s a one-way passage. We can’t get back to Academy Town from this side.”

“Umm, err...?”

“In other words, our best course of action would be...” Making it clear he had absolutely no intention of using his emergency item, Cain stuffed it back into the bag. “Why don’t we go as far as we can?”

“Huh...?”

I stood there, dumbfounded. *Eh? What? Am I really going to participate in the assault on the demon lord’s castle?*

“No objections.”

“I’m good with that.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“I don’t really know Lisalinde very well yet, but if everyone says so, then it’s probably for the best.”

“H-Huuuuuuuh?! ” I cried out, startled by the unexpected decision to include me in this. “N-No, come now! Wait a minute! Why is no one objecting to this?! This is insane, isn’t it?!”

“Well, what else are we supposed to do?”

“No, not happening! Absolutely not! I’m definitely going to die!” I vigorously shook my head in protest.

I can only see myself dying! I only foresee a future of me dragging everyone down!

“Nah, I’m sure you’ll manage, somehow or another.”

“Yeah, you’ll be fine, Liz.”

“Why are you all so optimistic?!”

For some reason, no one seemed to regard this as much of an issue.

Why?! I’m the greatest factor that could lead to our defeat here! The weakest link!

“I’m just a perfectly ordinary academy student, you know! There’s no way I can keep up with you in the conquest of the demon lord’s capital—the hardest battle in the world!”

“A perfectly ordinary student? LOL.”

“Someone want to refresh me on the definition of ‘ordinary’?”

“Don’t be silly.”

“Why are you all laughing?!” I protested, only for those protests to be casually dismissed.

“Now, let’s do this thing!”

“Yeah!”

“Waaah! Wait for meee!”

I let out a deflated voice as everyone completely ignored my opinion and pressed on.

Why?! Why did it come to this...?!

I’d lost any option save for following behind, wailing as I chased their shrinking backs.

The massive doors to the demon lord’s castle opened inwards. Entering through them, we found ourselves in the first-floor lobby. It was a vast open space with a high ceiling supported by a number of thick pillars. The red flame of the torches danced around the weathered stone structure.

At the back of the lobby, I could see a stairway leading to a higher floor. The demon lord was presumably far, far above us. We would need to climb those stairs if we wanted to get closer to him.

I stared silently. It wasn't going to be that easy. A colossal monster loomed, blocking the path to those stairs.

"We've been waiting for you, human hero!"

"Brave you are. Yet foolish, if you think you can beat us!"

"We'll tear you to pieces!"

The monster cried out with many mouths.

It wasn't that there were three monsters. It was a lone monster sporting three heads, each of which glowered to intimidate us.

"C-Cerberus...!"

Yes, it was a grotesque monster with one body and three heads. The guard dog of hell that guarded the entrance to the demon lord's castle—Cerberus.

Its body was immense. Even on all fours, it still towered at ten meters, at the very least. Its torso was even longer than that. I couldn't even envision a scene of this monster falling in defeat.

Moreover, its mouths were so large they seemed capable of swallowing five to ten people of my—admittedly petite—size in one gulp.

This truly was the demon lord's castle. We'd only just entered the front door, and we were already facing off such a monstrous creature—a triple threat of intimidating might.

But the heroes hadn't gained all their combat experience for nothing.

"Hey now. We don't got the time to play with small fries. Bring out your lord already," Cain declared as he stepped forward, locking his eyes on the fearsome Cerberus.

Truly a hero who had traversed hundreds of battlefields. He remained completely unmoved in the face of the guard dog from hell.

"Wah ha ha! What an audacious hero! Woof!"

"Small fries, are we?! Know your place! Rarf!"

"You'll soon know who's on top! Bowwow!"

Cerberus opened its three mouths wide and laughed.

Interesting. Each head seems to have a different sort of bark. Wait, who cares about that?

“Allow us to explain, woof.”

“Our almighty demon lord awaits you in the throne room on the top floor, rarf. To reach him, you will need to defeat the three warriors handpicked by the demon lord, rarf.”

“If you can’t manage that, then you’d need to train for ten more lifetimes before you face the demon lord, bowwow.”

Three demon warriors would stand on our path to the throne. Our final objective would be barred unless we defeated them. The mighty Cerberus standing before us was but the first trial.

“Hah! Nice and simple! Just the way I like it!”

“Long and short is we just have to smash through them, right?”

Cain and Rachel readied their weapons, their thirst for battle simmering. As it infected the rest of the team, they all prepared themselves for a fight.

“This is where your story ends, woof!”

“You will fall here and now, rarf! You will never reach the demon lord!”

But the same could be said for our foe. Cerberus exuded a powerful aggression. Everyone braced themselves to the best of their abilities. They steadied their breath and concentrated so as not to let a single one of the enemy’s motions slip by. The air was stretched so thin, the slightest spark would cause the flames of battle to erupt any moment. The world’s strongest warriors were as fired up as could be.

And Cerberus cried out, “We’ll defeat you heroes, and have the demon lord introduce us to a bunch of girls!”

“Hm?”

The mood shifted in an instant. Two of Cerberus’s heads shifted doubtfully, glancing at the one who’d just screamed.

“Hold on, rarf. Let me stop you right there, Spot. If he’s introducing us to anyone, shouldn’t it be some nice, mature, older ladies, rarf?”

“Huh?! You just don’t get it, Rover! Woof! This is why you’ll always be a cougar-chasing pervert!”

“Hey! Don’t screw with me, rarf! That all-encompassing maternal warmth is the ultimate comfort, rarf! Do you still not understand that?! This is why you’ll be chasing little girls’ skirts forever, rarf!”

“Say that again, I dare you!”

We stared.

They kinda just...started fighting themselves.

Cerberus smashed its heads together and began to quarrel. *Thud. Thud.* The heads crashed into one another. From our perspective, it just looked like he was beating himself up.

We were a bit dumbfounded.

“Spot! Rover! Each and every time! Why do you always have to take the extreme sides of every issue?! We can just have him introduce us to nice, normal grown women, can’t we?! It’s always like this with you two, bowwow!”

“Doggy, do you even have a personality? Where’s the fun in living like that, woof?”

“You’re the one with the least sense, Doggy. You literally have no taste at all, rarf.”

“Y-You little...!”

Woof. Woof. Rarf. Rarf. Bowwow. Bowwow. What a fierce battle it was.

For a long while, those heads continued headbutting one another. And honestly... I had no idea what this was supposed to be. It was like that strained atmosphere from just before had been a dream. The weapons the heroes had once brandished with gusto now dangled limply by their sides.

“Wait a second... Hold on, you lot,” Cain called out to Cerberus.

He covered his face with a hand, a crease on his brow, making no attempt to

hide his frustration. And, as if only then realizing the hero was there, Cerberus's heads came to a stop. Six eyes turned towards the hero.

"The hell are you doing?" Cain hammered in a sincere question.

"Hero! Stay out of this! This is between us, woof!"

"No, I mean, err... Seriously. What is this?"

"We have one body and three heads, rarf. However, or perhaps because of that, each head has its own tastes, and our tastes don't match at all, rarf!"

"I...see?"

"We're always fighting because of it, bowwow!"

The three-headed Cerberus was inflicted with a rather challenging circumstance.

Cain wore a vacant expression. I could understand how the hero felt, completely. We all shared that very same feeling.

"Spot is a borderline pedophile! Why can't he just get arrested already?!"

"Huh?! I don't want to hear it from a hag-loving freak, woof! My tastes are shared by a wide demographic, but you go for the women who are really, *really* up there. It's an extreme niche! You're the one who should get arrested, woof!"

"Well too bad for you! Liking older women isn't a crime, rarf!"

"Why don't you put yourself in my shoes, having to deal with two perverts every day, bowwow?"

"And someone here doesn't even have a preference, woof. Are you really a dog at all? I worry for you, Doggy."

"Doggy's still a little puppy, rarf."

"Bastards! You're the mad dogs here!"

Although it really didn't matter, what would happen if one of Cerberus's heads broke the law? They all shared one body, so they'd probably all be taken in together, but was that really the right thing to do?

"Hey, what about fighting?!" Cain asked the obligatory question.

They'd arbitrarily begun to fight among themselves, so I didn't see anything wrong with getting in a surprise attack. But Cain was fundamentally an earnest person, and he couldn't bring himself to resort to such tactics.

"Oh, that's right, that's *right*, bowwow."

"Almost forgot our duty, woof."

Cerberus took a fighting stance, facing Cain once more. The battle hadn't even begun, and yet the guard dog's heads were already beaten and battered.

"We can fight about this later, woof."

"Yeah, let's do that, rarf."

"Let's start by beating the hero, bowwow!"

Its large, sharp eyes glared at Cain and his comrades. Once more, the flames of battle crackled in the air. The shift was so sudden it left a few of the heroes understandably confused. But they were professionals. They readied their weapons once more and concentrated on the enemy.

Finally, a critical battle for the fate of the world was about to begin. *Again.*

"Incidentally...what are your thoughts on breast size?"

"Flat, absolutely flat. Flat or bust—wait, no bust, woof!"

"Are you stupid, rarf?! The bigger, the better! Big jugs! Big jugs are the best, rarf!"

"You lot just don't get it, bow! Breasts aren't about size, bow! There's shape and aesthetic! A beautiful breast is the pinnacle of creation! Isn't that obvious, bowwow?!"

Suddenly their civil war raged on again.

"Hey...Liz. The hell are you doing?"

"S-S-Sorry! It just kinda slipped out! Y-Yes, what am I even talking about?!"

Yes, unbelievably, the person who asked about chest sizes was...me.

Wh-Why did I do that? I would never ask something so indecent... It was like my interest was suddenly piqued, and by the time I knew it, the words escaped

my lips.

This is all wrong! I'm not usually a woman who would ask something so perverted!

“Rover, your preferred breasts go beyond the realm of breasts, woof! Those aren't just big—they're unfeasible! How could anyone get worked up by those illustrations, woof?!”

“Isn't it about time you admit you're a super minority, Rover?!”

“Oh, shuuut up! Rarf! Spot's flat-loving brain is rotten too, rarf! That ain't no chest I've ever heard of! It's just a board, rarf! What sets it apart from a man's chest?!”

“Bastard! Rover! You just made an enemy of every woman who worries about their flat chest, woof!”

“In the first place, what is a beautiful breast, rarf?! Doggy?! You haven't defined any of the standards! You're a bland guy without any preferences just randomly throwing out words to seem cultured!”

“Huuuuuuuh?! Rover, I never thought you were this unenlightened, bow! Even among breasts of the same size, there are ones that are beautiful and ones that aren't! You don't even know that, bowwow?!”

“What sort of flat chest is beautiful, woof?”

“Spot, I'm...sorry, bowwow. There aren't any flat chests I've considered beautiful... There's no chest to even consider to begin with...”

“Huuuuuuuh?! You little woof! Doggy! How could you!”

The unsightly feud escalated. Smashing heads together was no longer enough. Now, they were biting one another. As for the shared body—it writhed and flailed as though it was receiving contradictory, mixed messages.

With just one statement from me, a massive bomb had burst.

On and on the creature went, and this breast debate showed no sign of ending. The three heads were locked in an endless, uncompromising battle.

It looks like I just threw some...incredible fuel into the fire.

“We should go.”

“Right.”

We shared a nod.

Cain and his comrades no longer even registered to Cerberus. All that filled those three heads were thoughts of their own tastes. And thoughts of destroying the tastes of others. We passed right beside the warring dogs and climbed the castle stairs.

We made forth with all due haste. Along the way, I glanced back, but I still couldn't see any signs of the fight coming to an end.

Our harrowing first battle was over. But our war was not. There were still another two warriors—warriors equal to Cerberus—standing between us and the demon lord.

Yes, our trials had only just begun!

“What even was that? Back there?”

“I don't get it either.”

And just like that, we overcame the first obstacle.

Chapter 36: Now—The Second Obstacle: Orc Emperor!

The bewilderment the previous battle had left us with still hadn't dissipated as we climbed higher and higher.

With no one standing in our way, we climbed to the fifth floor and the sixth without conflict. By the look of things, we wouldn't have to fight anyone save for those three guards that Cerberus mentioned.

Their battle formation consisted of only the cream of the crop, the greatest forces picked out from the castle's elites. Presumably, they realized it was meaningless to send any half-baked forces at the hero. It would only lead to needless loss. Only the greatest of foes awaited us. Awaiting the final fight.

Not that Cerberus had fought us at all.

"On your guard. Something's here," Cain cautioned us halfway up the stairs. "I sense a strong aggression."

"Just what I wanted to hear," said Rachel.

It seemed the next enemy awaited us on the next floor. It was so powerful, I could feel its aura even from the floor below.

Two guards to go.

Cain took the lead, vigilant as he cleared the stairs.

We were in an open space again. I could feel a terrifying degree of bloodlust emanating from the back of this spacious hall. It rocked my senses, making me hallucinate the air around me crackling and trembling beneath it.

The second guard wasn't as large as Cerberus. At most, it stood at three or four meters high. As a matter of fact, it looked puny within the vastness of the demon lord's castle. But the air it exuded was incredible.

Sweat naturally spread across my brow as I faced this monstrous entity, its

mere presence terrifying me to my core.

“Orc Emperor...”

The being ahead was the apex of orckind. The strongest orc. A peerless orc.

Atop his head boldly rested a diadem that glimmered with gold. There was confidence and dignity in his stance. I felt thoroughly overwhelmed just seeing him standing there. I feared I might kneel down on the spot if I wasn't careful.

The Orc Emperor awaited us.

“WAAAAAARRRGH!”

As we entered his line of sight, the Orc Emperor let out a roar that seemed to shake the very foundations of space. It was nothing but a loud voice, and I was nearly blown off of my feet.

Cain and his comrades readied their weapons without a moment's hesitation.

“Unforgivable... Heroes, I shall never forgive... I shall never forgive you!”

The Orc Emperor unleashed a maelstrom of hatred and anger. The flames of his fury burned bright in his eyes, and we could feel the full brunt of his ire.

Any ordinary person would have frozen in their tracks, immobilized by fear.

“Accursed heroes! I will never forgive you! I will tear you to shreds, no matter what it takes!”

Cain took his anger head-on. “Hah! I suppose to you demons, we must look like harbingers of death and destruction. I've sliced through thousands of orcs to get here. I understand why you'd hold a grudge,” he replied to the Orc Emperor.

War was a cycle of hatred breeding more hatred.

Demons were beings of intelligence. They were more than mere monsters. The demons possessed societies; they possessed families and emotions just like humans.

The hero and his party members were the champions of humankind—which is to say, they had murdered more demons than anyone else in the world. Surely this was the source of the Orc Emperor's wrath.

Still, Cain stood tall. He puffed out his chest and said, "But we humans have also been killed by your kind. Day after day, I wish that war would just vanish from the world. But still, I fight. Or else, my precious people will be killed, and I won't be able to do a damn thing about it."

His companions nodded strongly in agreement.

"What about you, Orc Emperor?" Cain asked. "Are you going to continue to cry out in rage, playing the victim? Are you going to go on a rampage, thinking you're the most pitiful soul around?"

Silence.

"For now, we have no choice but to fight. But with that in mind, we can think and think, and consider the perspective of the other side... And perhaps someday, a new path might open up for us."

More silence.

The Orc Emperor continued to glare at Cain. Yet Cain did not back down a single step. His courage and kindness seemed to seep into our very souls.

"Orc Emperor! I'll accept all of your hatred! But I refuse to lose to someone with such a narrow view! Come at me!"

"Wrong! That's not what I'm talking about!"

"H-Huh?"

I thought Cain had said something quite poignant, but his words were met with complete refusal.

Why...? What is he refuting?

"I am not angry about the war or whatever! Indeed, I sympathize with your outlook! No, this is a completely different issue!"

"Oh, well..."

For the first time, Cain seemed rattled. All of a sudden, I could no longer see where this was going.

"You've left the honor of all orcs in tatters! You'll pay for that! I'll make sure of it!"

“Uh...*huh?*”

“I will never forget this humiliation.”

What was the Orc Emperor so angry about? I could not even surmise, and my comrades had begun cocking their heads questioningly too.

“What exactly did you do to the orcs, Cain?!”

“*Me?* Did we ever sully the honor of orcs? I mean, outside of the war...? Umm...”

I was a new recruit. I had no way of knowing what they could have done. That was why I posed the question, but Cain didn’t seem to know the answer.

“Don’t play dumb, hero!”

“Huh? G-Give me a second...”

Cain seriously thought it over. He was seriously baffled.

He crossed his arms and pondered it with a frown, but still, the answer eluded him.

“Have we...met somewhere before? On a personal level?”

“Wrong!”

“Mm, err...”

Cain thought with sweat oozing down his brow but to no avail. It was like he was a gentleman whose girlfriend had asked him, “Do you know why I’m angry?” I was starting to pity the hero a bit.

“Do you seriously not know?! Then I’ll tell you! After all—I know everything!”

Finally, the Orc Emperor began to confess. He let out an angry yell as he stuck out his pointer finger.

“That woman...!”

“*Huh?*”

At the end of that finger was me. His eyes were locked onto me too. I tried glancing behind me, but there was no one there.

He’s...pointing at me?

“It’s you! Who else could it be?!”

“M-Me...?”

“That’s right! You!”

When I pointed at myself, the Orc Emperor responded with a powerful, resolute nod. Everyone’s eyes gathered on me. I was breaking into a cold sweat.

M-Me...? Huh? Why me? I’m the newcomer here...

“The erotic manga you drew established an stereotype of orcs as a vile race that do pervy things to humans! What are you going to do about this?!”

“Huh...? HUUUUUUH?!”

Orcs did *not* lust after other species. But in manga—a comics culture that had developed in the past few years—and more specifically erotic manga, there was a popular genre that featured orcs violating humans. Because of this, there was an increasingly prevalent misconception that orcs went after human women.

Wait, why am I so knowledgeable about that? I’ve never even read erotic manga before.

“Don’t think I don’t know. The one who created the orc-assault genre and popularized it was none other than you! Give it up! You must know the pain of us orcs!”

“No, no, no! You’re wrong! This is a complete misunderstanding! I’ve never—not once in my life—read or drawn any erotic manga!”

I now knew what the Orc Emperor was so mad about. But paradoxically, I couldn’t comprehend a single word of what he was saying. He was under some incomprehensible misconception. *Why does he think I drew something so obscene...?!*

“Don’t play dumb! I’ve already done my research, and I know you’re that detestable EroArtKingX...!”

“Nope! I’ve never heard of them!”

Why am I being mistaken for someone with that nonsensical pen name?! Why, they live in a completely different world from someone as serious and

wholesome as me! There is absolutely no way I ever drew that manga!

“Mr. Orc Emperor! You’re misunderstanding something! C’mon, Cain! Please deny it too. Tell him there’s no way I would ever do that!”

“No... Umm, err...yeah...”

“Why won’t you say anything?!”

For some reason, Cain and the others wouldn’t explicitly defend me. They were averting their eyes.

Please, someone! Anyone! Step up and deny it!

“If you had just owned up to it and apologized, I might have considered forgiving you! But trying to worm your way out after all you’ve done! This is unforgivable!”

“I really, really, really, *really* didn’t do it! Why won’t you believe me?!”

“All because of the manga you drew, my demon comrades won’t stop teasing me. It’s all ‘Get a load of that guy. He lusts for human women (LOL)’ and ‘Huh? He’s got terrible taste (LOL)’! What are you going to do about this?”

“I’m telling you, you’ve got the wrong girl!”

In human terms, was it like someone feeling sexual attraction to the orc race? If I met someone like that, I’d definitely be a little put off... No, honestly, I personally wouldn’t. I understood that everyone has their own tastes, but it was certainly quite removed from standard sensibilities.

But still!

I’ll say it again and again!

I would never draw such a manga!

“Damn you, EroArtKingX! You’re toast! Feel the pain we orcs felt as our honor was dragged through the mud!”

“Why did it come to this?!”

Amid my utter confusion, the battle began.

The Orc Emperor charged straight at me. He wielded a massive axe, and he

closed in with terrifying pressure.

I don't understand why I'm the target!

"N-Not on my watch!"

However, Cain quickly stepped in between us. He defended me, his holy sword biting into the Orc Emperor's axe.

"I won't forgive you! You will know our anger, our pain!"

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry about our idiot!"

"Cain?! Why are you apologizing?!"

For some reason, Cain seemed incredibly apologetic as he fought the Orc Emperor. *If you apologize, you make it seem like I really did it! You should be giving a cut-and-dried denial here! So why?!*

"Take this!"

"Grah!"

To support Cain, I cast a spell called Phantom Pain on the Orc Emperor. I doubted it would be too effective, given our difference in strength, but any slight opening I could create would prove advantageous to Cain and the others.

"L-Let's go!"

"Y-Yeah..."

The true battle now commenced. All of our party members rushed out and began stacking blows on the Orc Emperor. Their movements were all incredibly refined, as befit the hero's party, and they all understood their roles perfectly. Their tactics were sound and effective.

Sylphie became my guardian. She constantly positioned herself between the Orc Emperor and me, and whenever she saw a chance, she would launch a long-range attack from her magic sword.

Indeed, the strength of humanity's strongest armed group wasn't just for show.

"WAAARRRGGGHHH...! Unforgivable! Truly...unforgivable! How can I rid myself of this rage?!"

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry...”

But for some reason, everyone seemed a little reluctant. It was almost like they were fighting with regret.

“Please listen to me, everyone! You have it all wrong! It’s really not me!”

“I’m sorry. Honestly, I’m really sorry about our friend...”

Only Wolfe seemed confused, unaware of whatever the others seemed to know. The rest of the hero’s party shared this sentiment, however, their movements dulled by emotion.

Why is everyone so apologetic?!

“Graaaaaah...! Let me smack her! May my fist reach that accursed woman!”

“I’m really sorry! I’ll give that idiot a good talking to, so could you let her off a little easy?! If you hit her in her current state, she’ll die!”

“Cain! I really didn’t do it!”

“Liz! Could you pipe down for a bit?!”

Why?! I’ve said nothing but the truth!

“GRAAAAAAH...!”

“Hraaaaaah...!”

The battlefield descended into chaos.

The fierce battle raged on. Yet, as was the nature of battle, it eventually had to reach its end.

“Urgh... I leave nothing...but regret...”

The massive form of the Orc Emperor slumped slowly to the ground. The heroes had achieved victory against the menacing foe known as the Orc Emperor.

Yet there was no joy in their victory. No triumphant roars. They stared down at the fallen Orc Emperor with pity in their eyes.

“Khh... I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. Men and women of my motherland... Our

humiliation...persists... I leave regret. Nothing but...regret..."

The Orc Emperor mourned his loss in a voice so hoarse we could scarcely hear it.

"Everyone... I'm sorry..."

"..."

"Regret...regret..."

And with those words, the Orc Emperor fell unconscious.

Silence.

More silence.

The silence continued.

"I feel ridiculously guilty right now."

"Yeah..."

Cain's admission was met with grave nods from the others.

The atmosphere had become too heavy for me to say anything. Even though I had truly done nothing wrong, there was a cold, guilty sweat dribbling down my brow.

"We need to move on..."

"Yeah..."

Dragging their heavy feet, everyone began to move towards the next floor.

What is this? Though when all was said and done, I *still* didn't understand it, but we'd somehow stumbled our way through a hollow victory.

"Liz, you're getting a lecture once we get back."

"But why?!"

To me, it just seemed unreasonable.

Chapter 37: Then—Eromanga and the New Editor

With the advancement of printing technology, a cultural phenomenon known as “manga” had spread across the world. It was a visual medium where stories were expressed with both words and pictures—and once it was possible to print them for cheap, these works immediately charmed the people of the world. As some works gained a prominent following, many others began drawing their own as well.

Of course a larger reader base meant the introduction of a few *other* aspects. Namely: sexual content.

The demand existed, and so a great many masterpieces of erotic manga were put to pen. Most bookstores would hide these publications away in unassuming corners or back rooms, but that certainly did not mean they lacked in fan bases. Many of the world’s men would stealthily purchase these books when no one was looking.

Within the growing erotic manga industry, there was much interest in a young, up-and-coming author, EroArtKingX.

“Just to be clear, you’ll be taking over today as her editor. I leave her in your capable hands.”

“Y-Yes! Of course, sir!”

Two editors from a certain publishing house chatted as they walked down the street. They belonged to a division that periodically published erotic manga anthologies. The older one was Dominics, while the younger one was Yulia. Dominics had quite a few years over Yulia in the business.

A certain creator was going to be changing editors, and today was the day that senior management handed over the reins to the younger generation. The two headed to the creator’s workstation to meet her face-to-face.

“Let me reiterate this, Yulia. The artist you’re going to be managing is quite an oddball. Be on your toes.”

“Wh-Why are you being so ominous?”

Yulia was a little on edge. She was still a newbie to the business, having only taken the job recently. But she steeled herself.

“Right, I’m an editor too! I’ve met a number of manga artists already, and I’ve come to appreciate their eccentricities. I’m ready for anything!”

There were many strange people among manga artists. She wasn’t going to back down just because her new charge was a weirdo. Yulia made her resolve.

“I hope it’s going to be all right...”

But Dominics still looked as concerned as ever. Soon, they were at the door.

“It’s Dominics,” he announced. “I’m here for a meeting.”

“Coming!”

As he knocked on the door, a woman’s voice came from within. Yulia had already been told that the artist was a woman, but it was rare to come across women who drew erotic manga so she’d still had her doubts. *So it’s true, then*, Yulia thought to herself.

Eventually, the door opened with a clack.

“Good to see you, Mr. Dominics.”

“Likewise.”

The woman who emerged from within was gorgeous, a fact that took Yulia by surprise. Her long blonde hair was practically glowing, the tips ending in a fluffy wave. Her features were also refined—pure and sweet. Age-wise, she seemed to be quite young.

It feels rude to even think it, but she hardly looks like a woman who would draw erotic manga, Yulia thought to herself.

“This is Yulia, one of our newer hires. The one I told you about before. I hope you two get along.”

“I-It’s a pleasure!” Nervous, Yulia bowed her head so low it was comical.

“Heh heh, well, aren’t you darling?”

“Yulia... This is EroArtKingX, also known as Ms. Lisalinde. I’m counting on you to maintain a good relationship with her.”

“Y-Yes!”

The up-and-rising artist EroArtKingX’s real name was apparently Lisalinde.

“Now, there’s no need to stand around talking in the doorway. Come on in.”

“Very well.”

“P-Pardon us...”

They entered the house. Walking down the corridor, they proceeded straight to the workroom.

“Eep...!”

And there, Yulia came across quite an outrageous scene.

“Numbers Five through Eight, take care of the backgrounds for page 15 onward. Twelve to Seventeen, once you’re done with the roughs for pages 4 through 11, start inking.”

“Gooot it.”

“Hey, Number Two, inking on page 3 is done. Ah wait, I’m Number Four.”

“Good work, Four. Please start applying tones to page 1.”

“Gooot it.”

Some unfamiliar terms were being bandied about. Number Five? Number Eight? Number Two? Why were these people being addressed by numbers instead of names?

It made sense as soon as Yulia got a look inside. Within the vast workspace, there were lines upon lines of women with the exact same face. Around twenty people, all identical to the EroArtKingX she’d met in the doorway, were hard at work.

What is this? Why do they all look the same?

A bead of sweat dripped down Yulia’s brow.

“EroArtKingX uses cloning magic to do her work,” Dominics explained.

“Wh-What...?”

“The madam herself is incredibly busy so her real body isn’t here. The manga is entirely managed by her clones.”

“Huuuuuuuh...?!”



Cloning magic was an intensely hard spell to master.

It required a high-level of technique, and the clones it produced usually only lasted for a brief instant. But what was this? Twenty clones were doing intricate penwork when the main body was nowhere to be seen? What's more, they were being maintained for an extended period of time.

Just what sort of high-level technique was required to achieve this? Yulia couldn't even imagine it.

EroArtKingX was handling multiple serializations at the same time. It was usually hard enough for a manga artist to keep up with a single serialization. They were forced to suffer and work themselves to the bone while mired down by deadlines.

However, EroArtKingX was undertaking several times that workload.

How did she do it?

Just how fast was her pen?

It had always been a mystery to Yulia, but she had never even dreamed that it would be pulled off like this—with cloning magic.

"U-Umm, Dominics... Is EroArtKingX...a researcher at a world-famous magic institute or something...?"

Without that level of skill—no, without an even greater skill level than that—this would surely be impossible.

"Yulia, if you want to work here, there is one thing you should take to heart."

"Wh-What is it?"

"When it comes to EroArtKingX's true identity, even if you happen to notice something, remain oblivious."

"Huh...?" Yulia blinked, startled by the words of her senior editor. "Why?"

"If you notice something, no you didn't. You saw nothing. And spreading the word to anyone else is out of the question. You got that?"

Yulia's expression was stiff. *What exactly have I gotten myself caught up in?* she wondered. Before, she had been nervous about a new beginning, but now

that feeling had been overtaken by her anxiety.

“Wait, hold on. What number was I today?”

“What are you working on right now?”

“The background for page 13.”

“Then you’re Number Ten.”

“Gooot it.”

She overheard a conversation, one step away from madness. Before they came here, her senior had told her that the artist was a strange one. But this went far beyond strange. Yulia couldn’t help but curse to herself.

“Hm?”

But in the midst of her conclusion, she noticed something else. The vast workplace wasn’t only occupied by clones of EroArtKingX. There were a handful of other people too.

“Ah... Liz, who’s overseeing today?”

“Me, me. Number Two. So, what can I do for you, Sylphie?”

“I have a question. I’m not really sure how I should be portraying this background character...”

“I see, I see...”

A woman with lustrous red hair tied back in a ponytail was seeking instruction from one of EroArtKingX’s clones. She had a crisp, tidy appearance, and a dauntless aura to her. As she analyzed the other assistants, a question rose in Yulia’s head. *Haven’t I seen these people somewhere before...?*

“Liz, umm, err, I have a question too...”

“Yes, what is it, Melvy?”

Next came a younger girl with long white hair. She was petite and cute, giving off a kind and gentle air. The red-haired girl and white-haired girl seemed to be using cloning magic too, as there were three of them each, making six assistants in total.

Yulia noticed. She wished she hadn't.

The names Sylphie and Melvy. Their unmistakable features.

They were both individuals of worldwide acclaim, called the hope of humanity...

"Yulia," Dominics called out her name, interrupting her thoughts, "what did I just tell you? You haven't noticed anything. You are none the wiser. Do you read me?"

"M-Meep..."

She was doing a perfectly normal job, and yet she suddenly felt like she had been caught in the grips of an extremely confidential matter of international importance.

After leading them to a meeting room, EroArtKingX personally brewed some tea for the editor duo and said, "I thought up a good idea for our next book."

She brewed it with a master's hand, a soft, comforting scent filling wafting off the cups and enveloping the room. After taking a sip, Yulia smacked her lips at the wonderful flavor. *She must have undergone a fair bit of education as a noble lady to be able to brew tea this well*, she thought. The flavor alone was great enough to give her that impression. So why was she drawing erotic manga? This mystery was only growing deeper.

"I'm thinking of doing a work featuring an orc and a princess knight!"

"A-A what?"

EroArtKingX proudly spoke of the concept of her next work, but the two editors simply cocked their heads.

"It's going to be quite hardcore this time. I've put a lot of thought into it. A noble and lofty personage—the princess knight. Now who would be the most effective partner for such an individual? The answer I finally came up with is an *orc*!"

"O-Orc?"

"By orc, you mean the type of monster?"

“Yes, if I want to depict the disconnect of a high and mighty individual being dragged to rock bottom, her partner really should be someone with a status far beneath her. A bandit or ruffian would work... But why not aim big and go for a monstrous orc?! Yes, it has to be an orc!”

EroArtKingX passionately continued.

“Of course, it goes without saying that orcs have both monster and demon variations. They’re someone no human would want to be violated by. From a human’s sensibilities, an orc’s body is rotund, and their faces are considered ugly. The readers will definitely be possessed by vile, carnal passions as they see a beautiful princess knight assaulted by such a beast!”

The editors’ eyes widened as the artist triumphantly laid out her thoughts.

“B-But orcs don’t feel any sexual desire towards human women.”

“That’s, well, yes. It is a fictional setting, after all,” EroArtKingX forcefully plowed past the issue. “Personally, I’m a little worried it might turn the orcs against me, though.”

“You worry about the strangest things, madam. It’s quite all right. Orcs don’t read our manga, and in the first place, how often would you be speaking with orcs anyway?”

“Are you sure about that?”

Unfortunately, this groundbreaking work would come to have an influence over demonland too, but at the time, the two editors had no way of knowing that.

Yulia’s palms were slick with sweat.

She was still a rookie editor, and this peculiar artist’s passion was overwhelming. EroArtKingX’s eyes were alight. Clearly, there wasn’t a doubt in her mind—she knew that her idea was perfection and that it would fly off the shelves if it was released into the world.

Yulia’s body froze in the face of the artist’s madness. She even felt a tinge of fear.

And so, the only thing she could do was to loudly announce, “Let’s do it!”

Letting her momentum carry her, she stood and said again, “Let’s do it! *The Orc and the Princess Knight*! I think I see where you’re coming from, so let’s do it!”

It was a step that took courage. EroArtKingX was evidently an abnormal individual. If she wanted to keep up with her, then Yulia would need to play by her rules. She made her resolve. She decided she had to change, and she had to change now.

Her senior editor, Dominics, looked at her with concern. “Hey now, are you sure about this?”

Yulia remained undeterred. “We’ll be fine!”

Her fiery eyes fell upon EroArtKingX. The artist smiled back.

“I’ll be in your care, Ms. Yulia.”

“Very good!”

Their new partnership was christened with a firm handshake.

And so, a new legend began. The two of them produced various masterpieces, striving together for a single goal. There were some hurdles along the way, but Yulia desperately overcame them, never folding.

From that point onward, time and time again, she found herself subject to the unreasonable whims of the artist. But by overcoming these, she grew from a newbie editor into a veteran.

And so, in this way, the two of them ushered in a new era.

“I mean, the royalties from our manga are partially funding our journey.”

“What?”

Cain’s face stiffened as he heard that. He had never imagined himself as a beneficiary of that book’s blessings.

Timidly, he asked, “I-Incidentally, how much are you raking in?”

“Well, about this much.”

Liz produced a financial statement from her bag.

“Wha?!”

The document listed out a ridiculously exorbitant sum.

“H-Hey! That’s worth even more than those treasures we found in the dungeon!”

“Ha ha.”

His hands trembled as he clutched the papers, and beside him, the girls proudly stuck out their chests.

The hero party’s journey was only viable thanks to the support of various organizations. They additionally earned some money by selling the valuables they found in dungeons along the way. Yet even with all that, the erotic manga earnings had contributed such a large amount that it was impossible to say it was inconsequential to the journey.

Cain could simply stand there, aghast.

“You’re telling me our journey was funded by porn...”

He crumbled at the knees. The man just couldn’t conceal his shock.

“Ha ha!”

The three girls beside him all laughed as they triumphantly puffed out their chests.

The shining stars of the world were on their way to defeat the demon lord, their pockets lined with dirty money.

Much later, an important incident came to pass.

Liz was injured by the demon lord and lost her memories. Naturally, she could no longer operate as EroArtKingX either.

Thus, it was announced that EroArtKingX was taking a long break due to illness, and all of the prolific author’s publications were put on hiatus.

“Waaaaaaaaah!”

“My reason for living!”

Young men all across the world wept that day. The artist's works had imparted these young men with hopes, dreams, and passions. No matter how long they waited, there seemed to be no signs of their magnificent muse making a comeback. Sorrow and despair fell across the world.

"Please, come baaaaaack...!"

"EroArtKingX! Rest well and get better soon!"

They screamed and cried, but not a single line was put from pen to page.

The hopes slowly petered. The dream slowly died.

Chapter 38: Now—The Darkest Lord

The heroes pressed on. They raced up the stairs, making a beeline through the demon lord's castle towards the throne room where their fated foe awaited them. Glancing out the window, they could see the castle town beneath them, tiny and distant.

Now, they had nearly climbed to the castle's summit. They were but a stone's throw from the throne room. They could feel it in their bones.

"But we haven't run into any traps..." Liz said.

And Cain nodded. "Yeah. Kinda a letdown."

Having been invited to the castle by the demon lord's envoy, Cain and his comrades had readied themselves for traps above all else. They'd expected to deal with all manner of contraptions as they infiltrated the heart of enemy territory. Thus, the heroes had prepared almost an absurd number of countermeasures.

Yet after all of their planning, thus far, they had yet to spring a single trap. Their only resistance had come in the form of the elite guard that stood in their way.

"What's the deal with this castle...?" Liz hazarded the question.

"Well, whatever," said Cain. "For the time being, let's concentrate on the enemies before us... C'mon. We're about to face a tough one."

He pointed. The conversation came to a close as everyone shifted their attention ahead.

They could feel a strong pressure exuding from the floor above—a portent of the final roadblock. The floor where the third guard awaited them was right ahead.

Silence fell as they reached the top, clearing the stairs and confronting their foe. Just beyond their adversary stood a massive, majestic door—presumably

with the throne room and the demon lord just beyond it. Cain and his comrades sensed it. And in front of that door was the castle's last line of defense. The final challenge prepared to protect the demon lord.

The last warrior stood in a great, spacious hall, perfectly fit for a duel. They positioned themselves to block the path, a fierce aura emanating from them.

"You've done well to make it here, heroes," the final warrior muttered.

"Wh-What is this...?"

"How in the...?"

Cain and his friends were suddenly overwhelmed. Merely glimpsing this final warrior caused their bodies to tense up, and sweat to burst from their brows.

The warrior bore an uncanny appearance.

"Wh-What in the world is this thing?"

Their body possessed no flesh. Instead, it seemed to be a sack made of cloth or leather inflated with magical air, moving as though it was a living body. It seemed to be something similar to a golem.

Golems were not proper life-forms of course. They were monsters shaped from dirt or stone and embedded with magic that allowed them to move autonomously. Though the creature before them was much more like a balloon, given that they were inorganic matter without life in the traditional sense, they would certainly be classified as a golem. That much was clear.

Yet even with that understanding, the members of the hero's party couldn't hide their bewilderment. This foe's form was simply too bizarre to comprehend.

It mimicked a human shape: two arms, two legs, one head. But...

Cain and his comrades were dumbfounded, unable to move a muscle.

"Allow me to introduce myself!" their foe bellowed as if to snap them out of their daze. "My name is Dutchwife Golem! I am this castle's last warrior—its final defender!"

"The hell?!"

"I am a loyal servant of the demon lord! I cannot allow you to proceed any

further!”

“Seriously, what?!”

Their enemy bore a striking resemblance to a blow-up doll—or Dutch wife doll. These were adult toys modeled after human women and used for sexual purposes.

This one seemed to be made of cheap material. Its body was crudely fashioned, the air within pressing against a balloon-like skin, making for a flabby body and limbs with no finer detail.

The face has also been quite haphazardly slapped on, resembling something an elementary schooler might have drawn.

A Dutch wife doll had been dressed in clothing and presented to them as a golem.

“Why...?!” Liz cried out. “Why is a blow-up doll operating as a golem?!”

Silence.

Her cry fell, not unheard but unanswered After all, everyone present shared the very same question.

Dutchwife Golem raised its voice again. “You won’t lay a finger on the demon lord! Prepare yourself, heroes!”

“Wait, wait, wait, wait...!”

As Dutchwife Golem sallied forth with determination, Cain tried to bring it all to a stop.

“Hold on a second! What exactly are you?!”

“My name is Dutchwife Golem!”

“What does that even mean?!”

“Here I come! Prepare yourself, heroes!”

The hero was doing his best to calmly process the situation, but the enemy would offer no explanations.

“I am the castle’s last line of defense! Dutchwife Golem! Now, heroes! Let us

fight!”

The life-and-death battle against Dutchwife Golem began—without any explanation.

And then the battle with Dutchwife Golem came to an end.

“Splendid...heroes...”

Dutchwife Golem was the one who fell in the end.

The heroes had achieved victory.

“How frustrating, but I am utterly defeated... As a warrior, I concede the path...” A moment of silence passed. “But be warned, heroes... My power pales in comparison to my master, the demon lord...”

With those final words, Dutchwife Golem simply stopped moving.

Its expression hadn’t changed once from the moment they met it. Perhaps the spell that kept it going simply didn’t have the function to display actual expressions. But now its crudely drawn eyes seemed to fade, losing any semblance of light as they took on the uniform darkness of the night.

“Dutchwife Golem... What a formidable foe...”

“What was the deal with this thing?” Cain had had his head cocked quizzically from the start of the fight to the end.

Still, this spelled the end of the last elite warrior. Now, the heroes stood before the massive door to the throne room. The demon lord was just a breath away.

Liz spoke with bated breath. “It’s time for the final showdown. It really gets your heart racing, doesn’t it?”

“No, this whole thing’s been ridiculous. I can’t get into my groove,” Cain replied with a frown.

Cerberus didn’t fight. The Orc Emperor flew into a rage because of erotic manga. And now, Dutchwife Golem...

There hadn’t been a single normal enemy.

“But we still have to press on, don’t we...” Mitter reminded him.

“Yeah, that’s the sad part...” Cain shrugged. They had to press on. They had no other option. “Let’s go,” Cain said with a hint of resignation.

Everyone steeled their resolve and focused their minds.

They pushed open the doors.

Inside was a vast hall with a high ceiling, a dim, suffocating room that left everyone pressed for breath. Though a dazzling chandelier hung from the ceiling, it didn’t provide nearly enough light to illuminate the room in its entirety. There were rows of tall pillars with excessive, extravagant ornamentation, which alone was enough to intimidate all who entered the room.

But the most notable feature was the throne at the far end of the hall, an imposing structure with intricate detailing and a high back.

The individual sitting in it let off an aura of foreboding.

The demon lord, the most powerful being in the castle, boldly sat on their throne.

“How I’ve waited for you, heroes...” The demon lord spoke, cockily kicking back. Their black eyes let off a cold glint as they appraised their visitors. “I bid you welcome. Now draw near. Kneel, and show your submission. Do so, and perchance, I might spare your lives.”

The demon lord demanded submission. They demanded for the heroes to become loyal minions.

The heroes’ companions all kept their mouths shut, unable to utter a single word. They were frozen, not knowing what they were supposed to do and unable to hide their confusion.

“Demon lord,” Cain softly muttered as he slowly walked forth.

He slowly trod down the red carpet, each step taking him closer and closer to his fated foe. There was sweat on his brow and befuddlement on his face as he proceeded to the throne.

Cain stood before the demon lord. Then, he locked eyes and said, “The hell

are you doing here?!”

“Owwwww! Thou hast struck me!”

Cain lowered a fist on the demon lord’s skull. The demon lord clutched her head, teary-eyed.

“What in blazes art thou doing, hero?! That smarts!”

“I mean, you... You’re that transfer student Kuon, right? What are you doing here?”

Though the demon lord was the one who’d been smacked in the head, Cain’s head was hurting for different reasons entirely. This was the key reason the heroes had all been so perplexed.

And naturally so—the demon lord before them was a face they’d gotten to know quite recently.

Sitting on the throne was the transfer student who’d caused issues the moment she stepped into the academy. Kuon.

“Fwah ha ha! Did that catch you unawares, heroes?! The enigmatic and comely transfer student’s true form was naught but the rightful and noble sovereign of all demonkind! Behold, the demon lord!”

Kuon descended from the throne, a cape flaring behind her as she declared this with gusto. Her beautiful, lustrous hair, blacker than darkness, swayed. It was undoubtedly her—it was hard to mistake this characteristic feature after seeing it at the academy. Unlike the girl they knew from the academy, the demon lord had two horns growing from her head. But this was a trivial difference. The girl standing before them was quite clearly Kuon, the transfer student.

“What sayest thee?! Art thou surprised?! Dost thou marvel that unbeknownst to thee, the great demon lord hath already infiltrated your daily lives?!”

Cain stared at her silently.

“Wh-What? Speak! I beseech thee! Art thou too shocked to even muster thy voice?!”

In contrast to Kuon’s enthusiasm, the heroes all looked quite let down. They

heaved deep sighs before shutting their mouths again. The heavy air looming over them seemed to express their shared sentiment: *It looks like we missed the mark on this one.*

“Wh-What? Why dost thou appear so downtrodden?”

“Now look here, Kuon...” Cain spoke, his words dripping with palpable disappointment. “We already know you’re a fake.”

“...Pardon?”

The hero went on with a hung head. “We’ve fought the real demon lord before. I don’t know why you set up all this convoluted nonsense, but if you really want to get a rise out of someone, could you go tease someone else? We don’t got the time to play along with your games.”

Cain patted Kuon on the shoulder. He—and all his comrades—had seen the true demon lord before. They’d fought him only a year ago. He had a hulking build, with three eyes on his face. And if nothing else, he had been male, and bore absolutely no resistance to this self-proclaimed demon lord before them. None whatsoever.

It was blatantly obvious that Kuon was not the demon lord from back then.

“I never saw anyone like her when I was working with the demon lord’s army.”

“Right?”

“As I suspected.”

This was compounded with the former battalion commander Wolfe’s testimony. The heroes all came together unanimously to judge Kuon as an imposter.

“Huh... HUUUUUUH...?!” Kuon responded, startled and offended. “Thou! Thou doubttest me?! Thou art mistaken! Truly mistaken...! ’Twas the imposter you fought! I am the veritable, rightful demon lord!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Grrrr! What’s with that haphazard retort?! Thou art mistaken! There’s no conceivable way that base fool could be the genuine demon lord! Only one as

noble as myself could rightfully claim the title of true, authentic, honest-to-goodness demon lord!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Kuon began hammering her fists into Cain’s body. But Cain paid it no mind. He dealt with her like he was soothing a child throwing a fit.

“This explains a lot, actually. There was something wrong with everyone in the castle who stood in our way. Not a single decent enemy. I knew something was up, but to think it was all some big prank...”

“N-Nay, they are all exceptional vassals who have faithfully served me for many a year...”

“If that’s true, that might be even worse,” Cain said with a frown.

By this point, he’d gotten the impression that this “demon lord” only had soldiers overflowing with “personality.”

“Aight. Let’s go home.”

“Right.”

“No point in sticking around.”

“Waaaaaaait! I beseech you, wait!” Cain and his comrades turned as if to say they no longer had any business with the castle. But the self-proclaimed demon lord raised her voice in a desperate bid to stop them. “Ye cannot just leave like it’s nothing! Ye impudent louts! I am the *true* demon lord! There’s a reason the one you did face before laid claim to the title!”

“What reason?”

“That doth be somewhat... ’Tis a bit difficult to explain right now...”

“Aight, let’s go.”

“Waaait! I beseech you, wait!”

The heroes promptly turned again as soon as she stumbled over her words, but Kuon swiftly moved, repositioning herself in front of the door.

“Ye shan’t leave this place! I shall not permit it! Don’t think you’ll be able to escape that easily!” Kuon looked to be on the verge of tears as she blocked

them. “There are but two reasons for which I summoned you to mine castle!”

She shouted as loud as she could.

“Firstly, I shall overcome the might of the heroes. Force them to submit, and render them my subordinates!”

“Hey, is she forcefully trying to advance this conversation?”

“Did she give up on trying to convince us?”

“Silence! And secondly, I shall seize the power of the magician ye are concealing!”

“Hmm?”

Kuon stuck her finger straight out at the heroes. Her statement finally caused a stir. The lax air that lingered around them had suddenly been pulled taut.

“Don’t think I am unaware. Among your party exists a magician who uses the powers of a demon. And ye have concealed their existence to an extraordinary degree. Am I mistaken?”

Her question was met with silence.

“Mwah ha ha ha hah! Serious at last? You fools!”

Kuon laughed amusedly, seeing the stern expressions on the heroes’ faces. She spoke true, and that was precisely why they were forced to take her seriously.

Kuon went on, “And perchance you humans noticed not, but the power of the demon that dwelleth within your magician is of a unique nature among all of demonkind. Your magician hath inherited the power of a demon forebearer through atavism, and her forebearer was quite special.”

“What?”

“The name of your magician’s ancestor was Lilith! The primordial succubus! Your magician is the rightful heir of the archdevil Lilith!”

The heroes couldn’t hide their surprise at her words. They’d been comrades for so long, yet this was the first time they were hearing this. Presumably, even the girl herself didn’t know.

Their faces stiffened.

“I covet her power. I shall absorb that magician’s might, and make archdevil Lilith’s power my own.”

“Absorb...?”

“But ye heroes have been relentless in obscuring every trace of her. The bards utter not a word, and the world knows her not. Ye have desperately hid thy trump card, praying that none ever learned of her existence. Indeed, I am certain ye have worked hard to manipulate the information.”

She offered a theatrical shrug. Then, she gave an exaggerated sigh and shook her head as though she was recalling how difficult and troublesome it was to investigate.

“But I finally found it...”

She raised her head and grinned. Kuon’s finger pointed at a woman—at Liz.

“The secret magician is none other than the schoolgirl standing before me, Lisalinde! Isn’t that right?!”

“Urgh!”

“Fwa ha ha ha hah! I have found it! I finally unearthed the trump card the heroes were so desperate to conceal...!”

Cain and his comrades met Kuon’s overbearing laugh with bitter scowls. When they thought back, it had been Kuon who had forcibly brought Liz to the castle. She had been targeting Liz’s demon powers from the very start.

Whether Kuon was the real demon lord or not didn’t matter anymore. Their secret had been exposed, and now they had to defeat the enemy who stood before them.

“Now, prepare yourselves, heroes! I shall absorb that magician’s powers and bolster my rank as a demon!”

“Do you really think we’ll let you?”

The heroes readied their weapons and braced for battle. Retreat was not an option. They were determined to defeat this foe, no matter the cost.

Kuon's mana surged in response. Both sides were ready for battle.

"We'll crush you," spat Cain.

"Oh, the wailing of a loser."

Their killing intents clashed, sending sparks flying. The drive of both sides was so intense, it seemed like a battle could break out at any instant.

"U-Umm..."

"Hmm?"

But amid all of that, Liz timidly raised her hand.

"Err, Lady Kuon... You're mistaken."

"Hmmm?"

"I am most certainly not the magician you speak of."

With everyone else resolute and psyched up, Liz was the only one with a confused look on her face.

"I met Cain and the others only recently, so I'm pretty sure that the magician you're talking about is someone else entirely."

"What...?"

"I don't possess any demon powers, and more importantly, I only recently joined the party as a temporary member. I don't think I meet any of the conditions you laid out..."

"Umm...?"

Liz spoke with genuine confusion, casting a shadow of doubt over Kuon's expression.

"Thou art their comrade, are you not? For a long time, thou hast journeyed and battled alongside them, yes?"

"No, I have never journeyed with Cain's party. I only met them for the first time the day they transferred to the academy. That alone should tell you that your theory is completely wrong, shouldn't it?"

"Umm, err...?"

“From where I stand, it’s more bewildering that you’d have such a misunderstanding in the first place.”

They both cocked their heads curiously as they spoke. There was a proverbial question mark hanging over their heads.

“H-Huh...? Is that so? It seems thou speakest with conviction...”

Kuon looked perplexed. Judging by her demeanor, she seemed genuinely troubled by Liz’s response. Meanwhile, Liz gave off the impression that she was being completely truthful.

“Perchance have I...misunderstood something? Have I erred in mine information?”

“Probably. I think this is an honest case of mistaken identity... I could never be a succubus, after all...”

Kuon folded her arms and groaned. Her observation of Liz told her that the girl was thoroughly bewildered. She wasn’t trying to hide her unrest. She wasn’t putting on a poker face—or at least, Kuon couldn’t see any signs of such acting.

Perchance, am I truly mistaken...? Kuon was flustered.

Liz, meanwhile, merely assumed that Cain’s impatience and demeanor had all been a bluff, a ploy to throw off the enemy. *They’re all such good actors*, she thought to herself.

“I-I understand. Maybe it is so. Maybe I did err. For now, let us set that matter aside...”

“Yes, I think that’s a good idea.”

“...”

“.....”

Neither seemed completely convinced, but the discussion on the matter came to a close.

“Hey, she really bought it.”

“That didn’t take much convincing.”

“Too easy.”

“Hmm...? What are you whispering about?”

“Nothing.”

Cain and his comrades mocked Kuon in hushed whispers.

“A-Anyways, let us set that matter aside! But that still leaves mine other objective! As I mentioned, I shall make the heroes submit to me! Yes, let’s move on to that one!”

Kuon puffed out her chest and raised her voice to collect herself.

“I’m not feeling it. Can we just go home?” Cain sluggishly asked, but Kuon was still standing in front of the door.

“You shall not!” she asserted.

It didn’t look like she was going to drop it. The heroes looked rather disappointed.

“Have at you, heroes! ’Tis time for your bout with the demon lord!”

“I’m really not motivated...”

“Then *get* motivated!”

Cain let out a yawn.

“Can we do it next week, or next month maybe?”

“Nay! If we allow it to pass like so, we shall end up putting it off for an eternity!”

“Well, I’m getting kinda sleepy, see.”

“Art thou truly so opposed?!”

Cain continued pouring out complaints. It had been nothing but strange enemies and strange occurrences ever since he set foot into the demon lord’s castle, and the hero’s drive had already dropped to zero.

“For crying out loud! No more discussion! If thou art not starting, then I shall! Ready yourselves, heroes!”

“Tsk.”

Seeing as she wasn’t getting anywhere, Kuon launched the first attack. Cain

pouted lazily as he parried it. There wasn't the slightest sense of seriousness about him.

"Hraaaaaah...!"

"Hup!"

Kuon shot several spears forged of dark magic at Cain, but he deflected them easily with his holy sword. Once that was finished, Cain went on the offense. He immediately closed in on Kuon with the overwhelming power in his legs and slashed at imperceivable speeds.

"Egads!"

But Kuon evaded just as effortlessly as Cain had done before. With a flap of the dark wings that erupted from her back, she took to the sky to distance herself from Cain.

"Looks like you're not all talk," the hero muttered as he looked up at her.

From that brief volley alone, he could tell she was considerably skilled.

"C'mon, people. The battle's begun. Sure, the mood's still dicey, but be on your guard."

"I know!"

The hero's comrades got into battle formation too. They tightened their grip on their weapons and circulated mana through their bodies, each ready to fulfill their respective roles. With Kuon zipping around high above them, the members of the hero's party created footholds with mana, leaping through the air to give chase.

"Hmph!"

"Tsk!"

Yet none of their attacks landed. She floated gracefully in the air while deftly evading every attack thrust at her. "Allow me to return the favor!"

Kuon deployed a large-scale spell. Countless orbs of darkness manifested all around and fired off in every which direction. While each individual orb wasn't particularly massive, they overwhelmed the heroes with their sheer numbers,

and it felt like the vast hall had been completely buried in dark matter.

“How annoying!”

However, the heroes managed to withstand it. They blocked, dodged, and sliced through the erratic onslaught.

“Liz! Stay behind me!”

“Th-Thank you, Sylphie!”

Sylphie protected Liz, brandishing her magic blade to cover the only member unable to defend herself from Kuon’s attack.

“You’ll do just fine, Liz. Support however you can. Use illusions, buffs, and debuffs.”

“R-Right...!”

Liz fell significantly short of all the other members, but she didn’t lose heart. She did her best to be useful in any way she could.

“Huh, you ain’t half bad, Kuon. But what if I do *this*?”

Cain—who’d been bounding around in the air—descended to the floor and swung his holy sword. The blade left a trail of light in its wake; a trail that shot forth, cleaving through the air straight at Kuon.

“Hee hee, ’tis futile. Futile, I say.”

She easily dodged.



Kuon fluttered around, a mocking smile on her face as if to say such a simple attack could never strike her.

“Hm?”

But something strange happened right after. The slash that Cain had unleashed abruptly changed direction midair to fly at Kuon again.

“Whoa there!”

Though surprised, Kuon barely managed to dodge it. Then, the slash changed course again to attack her yet again.

“Wh-What sorcery is this...?!” Kuon began flitting around frantically in a panic. But each time she repositioned herself, the blast from the holy sword would twist like a snake and correct its path. Kuon dodged and dodged, but still, the slash chased after. “What be this persistent trickery?!” Kuon cried out in desperation.

While many swordsmen could send their slashes flying over long distances, there were very few who could manipulate their direction and speed after release. The slashes would normally fly straight once shot. However, Cain’s slashes could move freely through space.

This was one of the abilities of his holy blade. He carefully controlled the holy sword’s slash, attacking Kuon in quick succession. It was so quick, so persistent—he wasn’t even giving her the time to breathe!

“Hyah!”

“Hrah!”

“Whuh?!”

And at the instant that Kuon forced herself into a position too awkward to dodge from, Mitter, Rachel, and Wolfe matched their breaths and attacked all at once.

It was an attack with immaculate timing. Any ordinary foe would have been left with no means to defend themselves. They’d be forced to take the attack.

“What?!”

“Dammit!”

But with a powerful flap of her wings, Kuon propelled herself out of the way. Three weapons sliced through the empty air.

Yet, this was where the hero’s attack *truly* began.

“Well done, everyone,” Cain softly muttered as he poured his strength into the holy sword.

The slash he’d previously fired split into ten, assailing Kuon with greater numbers.

“Whaaaaaat?!” Kuon cried out in shock, now faced with even more obstinate slashes to deal with.

“It’s over...”

The ten slashes danced around her, surrounding her, ensuring there was no escape. And they came at her all at once. It would be impossible to avoid. Especially when the attack from his party members had already thrown Kuon off-balance.

There wasn’t a foe in the world who could avoid his attack in this situation. He was certain of it.

Yet, Kuon dodged.

“Wha?!”

“How in the...!”

Everyone’s eyes widened, their bodies shaking.

Kuon had splendidly dodged a serious attack from Cain. She had nimbly slipped through the gaps between the slashes—a godly feat akin to threading a needle in the dark. The slashes had been stationed in a complex array with seemingly no place to dodge whatsoever, but Kuon had made it through the near-imperceivable gaps that no one else had even noticed before.

Cain’s comrades stared in disbelief.

“Art thou seeking to end me?! Take this! Black Cannon!”

Having narrowly escaped the attack, Kuon unleashed a powerful wave of dark

magic from both hands. The thick waves of darkness shot out like an artillery bombardment, swallowing up the ten slashes and annihilating them.

Once she'd disposed of the troublesome slashes, Kuon let out a sigh of relief.

"Heh heh heh... Bwa ha ha ha hah! Did ye bear witness to mine prowess?! Ye have grossly underestimated me! Now, you shall have no pardon even should you beg for forgiveness!"

Kuon gave a triumphant laugh, her cheeks flushed. She seemed very, very proud of her accomplishment.

By contrast, the heroes wore stern faces with furrowed brows.

"What's wrong? Are you quaking in your boots? Too terrified to utter a single word? Fwa ha ha! Splendid! Absolutely splendid!"

Kuon felt a surge of joy in her chest as she took in everyone's reactions. She continued to cackle away and provoke them, her grin irritatingly smug.

Cain, however, did not fall for it. He stared and thought.

"There was clearly something strange with the way she dodged," he muttered, folding his arms as he released his stance.

"Sir Cain?"

"She didn't have a full perception of all the slashes after they split up. She didn't seem to detect the attacks from her blind spot, and she'd been so startled she'd completely stopped moving for a moment. Point being, even though she didn't even perceive my attacks, she dodged them like she had a full grasp of everything..."

"What does that mean...?"

"Right... It's like she didn't understand the attack itself. She only knew how to avoid it."

"Pfft..."

Cain continued thinking aloud: "Is she reading my mind? No, then she wouldn't have been so surprised. And she reacted incredibly quickly, even though she was startled. It's a causality-based ability that skips the entire

process and only discerns the answer. It would be appropriate to think of it as a unique and sensitive magic perception.”

“Heh heh heh... Ha ha ha ha ha hah...!”

Kuon began to laugh loudly at Cain’s deductions.

“Precisely! That’s the mark of a true hero! To glean so much from so little! Thou art humanity’s strongest man indeed! Thy deduction is not so far from the truth!”

Kuon spread her arms wide and explained, “Listen well and tremble! My power is called Forestep! How ought I move to perfectly counter an enemy attack?! I’ve distilled precognition down to its bare essence, enabling me to know the answer at any given moment! ’Tis the ultimate defense!”

“Fore...step...?”

“Indeed!”

She proudly puffed out her chest as she soared through the air above.

“I cannot know what attack the enemy will use,” she went on to explain. “But for what does it matter?! So long as I move exactly how I foresee myself moving, I can evade any attack, regardless! I conceded I perceived not the trajectory of thy slashes! Yet, I knew full well how to maneuver myself to emerge unscathed!”

Everyone’s eyes were wide with amazement.

“How do you like that?! Are you terrified?!”

“It’s strong. Plain and simple.”

“Right?”

She was becoming boastful.

Forestep. It was clear to everyone present just how powerful the spell was. She had a clear guideline on how to dodge every attack. Presumably, this was how she had avoided the ten slashes, the three-way assault, and the slash before that. It had all been rendered useless by her ability. The unbelievable fact that she stood unscathed before an assault from the hero’s party spoke

volumes.

“But...what’s she doing, divulging her own ability like that?”

“Is she stupid?”

“She seems to enjoy bragging about it, but this clearly just puts her at a disadvantage.”

“Hey! I heard you this time! Ye are mocking me, are ye?!”

Cain and his party members conversed in hushed whispers, but their voices ultimately reached Kuon’s ears.

“Grrr! Unforgivable! Evidently, you have not comprehended my greatness! Very well, you shall experience firsthand the terror I can unleash!”

Kuon attacked in a rage. Dark bullets filled with immense mana triggered numerous explosions all across the room, which the heroes were hard-pressed to deal with. Mitter stood ahead of everyone, using his large shield to deflect a great number of these bombs.

“Sylphie!”

“Got it!”

Cain called out Sylphie’s name, and Sylphie immediately got to work. It was like she didn’t even need his prompting. With her right hand, she swung her sword to deflect the enemy’s attacks, while she began stockpiling mana in her left. Clearly, she was preparing for some sort of spell. And, upon perceiving this, Kuon grew wary.

“Go!”

With a powerful shout, Sylphie released the stored mana. The wave of magic spread in all directions, her mana blanketing the entire throne room in no time at all, and even spreading beyond the walls of the castle.

“Hmm...?”

But Kuon cocked her head.

The spell didn’t seem to connect to any kind of attack. Sylphie’s mana did not convert itself into fire or thunder. Her actions hadn’t inflicted any damage to

Kuon at all. She'd done nothing but unleash a wave of harmless mana. Indeed, the wave had passed through like the wind, having done seemingly nothing in the process.

"What... What hast thou done?" Kuon couldn't understand the point.

She wasn't injured, nor had she been harmed in any other way.

"Next! Take this!"

And as Kuon remained spaced out, Sylphie fired off her next attack.

This time, it wasn't an incomprehensible spell like before. She swung her sword, letting loose a slash imbued with wind-attribute magic, which flew straight at Kuon.

"You understand nothing..." Kuon stared at the blast with cold eyes. "All attacks are rendered meaningless before Forestep."

It didn't matter how fast or how powerful—no attack would be able to harm Kuon. So long as she moved based on her precognition, she simply wouldn't be hit.

What's more, Sylphie's attack was just a slash—straightforward to a foolish degree. Avoiding would be simple enough. And indeed, Kuon easily dodged.

And yet...a slash lightly grazed her on the cheek.

"What?!"

"All right!"

Kuon was taken aback. The attack had grazed her on the cheek, a trail of blood now trickling down it. Even though she'd moved exactly as her Forestep told her to, an attack had still reached her skin.

What's more, Sylphie's slash hadn't been anything special. It was a standard attack from what should have been a perfectly average magic sword.

"Wh-Wh-Why?! How hath thy attack struck true?!"

"Why in the hell would she tell you?!" Cain provoked her. "We're not as stupid as you!!!"

"Curses!" Kuon exclaimed as she aimed a punch at him.

The two launched into a close-quarters scuffle.

“Wh-What did you do to her, Sylphie...?” Liz asked, startled, from behind Sylphie’s protection.

It seemed that everyone on the hero’s team understood what she’d done, but Liz alone was still in the dark.

“Yeah, I ought to tell you, Liz. But keep your voice down. It seems this Kuon girl has sharp ears.”

Sylphie leaned in close to Liz’s ear and explained, “The wave of mana I unleashed before the slash—that was a Mental Corruption spell.”

“Mental Corruption...?” Liz blinked.

“That’s right. It’s a subtle and nasty spell that throws off the workings of the mind to obstruct movement and spells. This time around, I interfered with Kuon’s mind to mess with her Forestep magic,” Sylphie explained. “In general, precognition is a complicated, delicate magic. Even the slightest error can cause it to completely break down. Mental Corruption is weak, but if I can inflict just a little madness and mess with her spell just a little bit, her precognition will collapse... Just like this!”

With that, Sylphie let loose another burst of Mental Corruption. Just as before, a wave of mana immediately spread out and covered the entire space.

“Gah! I understand not the intricacies, but ’tis this sorcery! This sorcery is messing with me!”

“Pretty sharp. Good job, Kuon!”

“Thou art mocking me, scoundrel!”

Kuon and Cain were still locked in an intense battle. It was nothing but shallow blows, but Cain’s attacks were slowly starting to reach Kuon.

“S-Still, you came up with that solution quite quickly, Sylphie. That’s amazing.”

“We’ve fought a precognition user before. It’s all about experience. This tactic is quite effective against enemies who use complex spells. It’s worth remembering.”

“Hmm.” Liz was impressed.

“Do you want to help me out, Liz? Mental Corruption is more complex than it looks. I can’t create enough of an effect on my own.”

“Huh?! But I’ve never used Mental Corruption before! They never taught it in school...”

“Now, now, I’m sure it’ll work out. Why don’t you just give it a go, Liz?”

“No, no, no! I’m sorry, but I can’t! I can’t just imitate a spell I’ve only seen twice!”

“It’s fine—just try it, okay? You’ll be just fine, Liz.”

“I can’t do it! I can’t!” Liz vehemently shook her head... “I did it!”

As soon as she tried it out, she managed to pull it off. A wave of Mental Corruption spread across the room.

“Huh?! How did I do that?! Why...?!”

“That’s our Liz.”

“No, seriously why?!”

She pulled it off like it was nothing, and even Liz was starting to question who she really was.

“Ngaaaaaah!”

Obstructed by layers upon layers of spells, Kuon cried out in frustration. She forcefully parried Cain’s blow and took some distance from him.

“Woof... Not half bad, heroes...”

“I’m surprised too,” said Cain. “I never thought I’d be duking it out this seriously with you.”

Everyone in the room was a little short of breath. Their abilities were evenly matched, making for a heated battle indeed.

“I’m being real here. I thought you were just a hack...”

“Will ye not be satisfied lest ye insult me with every breath?”

Kuon was enraged, but the members of the hero’s party were all genuinely

impressed. When they'd previously fought a precognition user, they'd been able to break through their predictions immediately with Mental Corruption magic.

But this new foe wasn't going down so easily. Even with the Mental Corruption in effect, they were unable to completely obstruct her Forestep, so both sides were still evenly matched. She seemed to boast an incredibly high resistance to magic itself.

She was a self-proclaimed demon lord, but even if she hadn't falsified her title, she was a truly powerful foe, and the heroes recognized it.

"Hee hee hee. Never did I think I'd have such fun facing mere humans. You have earned my praise. Consider it an honor."

"Well, thanks for that."

"But, 'tis about time I got serious..."

"What?"

Cain's brow twitched. The air around him and his comrades grew tense.

"What I present is my mightiest weapon. A legendary weapon wrought of the concentrated darkness of the deepest, darkest depths of the land of demons. Mine ultimate treasure."

"Guh...!"

Kuon's words were no exaggeration. The heroes were sure of it the moment they picked up on the massive swathes of mana gathering in her palm. She was gearing up to unveil a weapon deemed legendary even in all of the lengthy history of demonkind. The heroes tensed up as they sensed the manifestation of the supreme.

"Emerge!" Kuon cried out. "My strongest weapon! The Darkest King!"

"Whuh?! Whooooaaa...!"

There was a jolt like the entire world was shaking. The darkness that had gathered in her hand took shape and gained substance. Kuon grinned.

Carrying herself as boldly as if the whole world were in her hands, she

brandished the darkness high. Waves of powerful mana erupted from her body.

“Why...?”

“Th-That’s...?”

The heroes were all frozen in shock as they stood before it. They stared in disbelief, as Kuon held it high as though to show it off, a fearless smile on her face as she held the strongest weapon of demonland.

Her fingers were wrapped around the handle of a massive squeaky toy hammer.

“Wait, why?!” Cain retorted.

“Wh-What’s your problem?” stammered Kuon.

“The hell’s that weapon?! It’s a goddamn squeaky toy!”

Yes, there was no other way to put it. Kuon was clearly holding a massive squeaky hammer. The weapon that was supposedly legendary had taken on the shape of a child’s toy.

“Wha...?! N-Nay, thou art mistaken! ’Tis not a toy...! This is the mightiest weapon, tried-and-true!”

“If you’re just playing around, we’re leaving!”

“’Tis true! ’Tis indeed a weapon of legend! ’Tis truly strong!” Kuon pleaded, teary-eyed as she brandished the squeaky hammer.

“Dammit! Just when I thought I could finally have a serious battle, this is what I get?! Don’t bring out a damn toy!”

“Believe me! I am entirely earnest when I say the Darkest King really is the best weapon I have!”

“And don’t give it an unnecessarily cool name!” Cain seemed livid. Just as he was finally getting fired up, it was like someone had dumped a bucket of water all over his enthusiasm. “This whole castle’s been messed up from start to finish! The hell’s with this place?! What’s a Dutchwife Golem supposed to be?! That one was the stupidest one of all!”

“D-Dutchwife Golem was the inflatable companion father cherished since his

days of virgin innocence. It took a near five hundred years of devotion before she was blessed with a soul! She remains a loyal vassal who hath served the royal family for countless years!”

“I didn’t want to know that!” Cain lamented as he heard the backstory of the formidable foe he had just bested. The castle was filled with utter nonsense. “Can you just bring out a proper weapon for now? It can be a sword, a spear, anything!”

“How many times must I repeat? The Darkest King is truly my strongest weapon! Now heed these words! This hammer absorbs the enemy’s power proportional to the damage dealt! I can utilize this power to restore myself, or strengthen myself further! Furthermore, it not only inflicts physical harm; it also inflicts direct damage to the mana within my foe’s body! The more I damage my foe, the stronger I become!”

“It does sound strong from what I’m hearing, but...!”

The squeaky hammer’s ability was absorption. Any damage inflicted to the foe would be converted into strength for its wielder. Even Cain had to concede that this was a powerful ability.

“Dost thou understand now?!”

“Can’t you do something about its appearance?!”

“Don’t mock my Darkest King!”

“Please do something about those delusions...!”

The hero had a whole laundry list of demands.

Meanwhile, his comrades had begun whispering among themselves.

“But now we’ve got even more intel on the enemy’s abilities. Isn’t this lucky for us?” asked Sylphie.

Rachel sighed. “Not that we can take credit. She’s just spelling it out on her own. She’s just an idiot.”

“No, in that situation, I think I’d talk too...” said Mitter.

“You’re whispering again! Are you mocking me?!”

“Not at all?”

It was difficult to say whether Cain had successfully drawn the information out of her, or whether Kuon had divulged it all without his assistance.

“Grrr! Now I’m mad! No more discussion! Thou shalt learn the might of mine hammer firsthand! Take this!”

“Dammit...!”

Kuon launched an attack, forcefully cutting off her foe’s endless stream of complaints. Cain intercepted her blow with his holy sword.

“Raaagh!”

“Dammit all!”

Ping! Ping!

Thus ensued a rather surreal scene of the holy sword clashing with a child’s squeaky toy. Each time their weapons met, the hammer would let off a cute little pinging sound.

“I’m having trouble focusing here!”

“Well, deal with it!”

In close quarters, Cain and Kuon were roughly evenly matched, even if constantly having an enemy demanding he put up with her antics made for a strange battle.

“For crying out loud! The fact that this stupid weapon is a match for my holy sword is just depressing!”

“As a fellow hammer user, I’m feeling defeated too...” lamented Rachel, a proud hammer user.

The greatest duel the world had seen was resulting in nothing but sadness.

“Will thy mockery never cease?! Eat this!”

“Whoa!”

Kuon swung wide with her hammer and smacked it into the floor. Just as before, the impact produced a cute and weak-sounding *ping*. But it came with a

tremendous shock wave completely unsuited to the sound; this massive energy spread out in a circle from the point of impact.

“Surround Shield!”

Mitter, the knight, produced countless shields with his mana, positioning them all around the shock wave to contain the impact. His shields were unfortunately shattered by the force, but he managed to significantly shave away at the power of Kuon’s attack.

“Hah!”

Cain swung his sword and unleashed a slash that he could manipulate at will. There was no trickery this time—he set up ten slashes from the very start.

“Grr...!”

With Cain masterfully steering them, the flying slashes twisted and turned, and quickly entangled Kuon’s squeaky hammer.

Cain felt his first priority should be to contain her weapon. By wrapping ten powerful slashes of light around it, he hoped he could take it out of the equation.

“Enough!”

But Kuon forcefully yanked it free. With a hefty swing of the hammer, she shook off the influence of the holy sword.

“Mental Corruption!”

“Huh?”

However, swinging with such might had left her unguarded. Without missing a beat, Liz and Sylphie immediately unleashed waves of Mental Corruption.

“Black Spear!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa...!”

Wolfe hurled a spear clad in jet-black energy. Its sinister might tore through the air, heading straight for Kuon.

“’Twas close!”

But Kuon managed to narrowly evade it. She shot upwards, escaping with a flap of her wings.

“Tsk...”

Wolfe’s spear had only grazed her. The thrown weapon automatically returned to his hand.

“Grr...! Crafty little...! Very well, I’ll vanquish you all away in one fell swoop!”

Soaring through the air above, Kuon poured massive amounts of mana into her weapon. She was preparing for a big attack. She had all her foes in her line of sight. With a powerful strike, she planned to take out all the heroes at once. The heroes braced themselves.

“Considering that squeaky toy’s abilities, we’ll be at a disadvantage if this drags out too long! Let’s settle things here!”

“On it!”

“Instead of a ‘squeaky toy,’ couldst thou not call it the Darkest King?”

“Shut it!”

They were going to breach Kuon’s technique head-on. Everyone mustered strength in their weapons. The tension was palpable, so much so the air was quivering. They’d only spent a brief instant storing power. But they were all concentrating so hard that this instant felt like an eternity.

Kuon’s eyes opened wide. “Here I come! Dark King’s Grand Star!”

Her attack came in the form of a great swing of her hammer. Then, from the hammer burst clumps of mana in the shape of stars. There were roughly ten of these massive stars in total, descending upon the heroes from above, poised to crush them flat.

The heroes intercepted.

“Holy sword! Unleash your might!”

“Magic sword, max output!”

“My proud hammer...!”

“Haaaaaah...!” Swinging their weapons with all their might, they unleashed

their most powerful ultimate techniques, brimming with immense mana. Full force met full force, causing a violent shock wave to surge across the entire throne room.

“Wh-Whoa?! W-Wah...!”

“Graaaaaah?!”

“Kyaaaaaaaaah!!!”

So many ultimate attacks collided with one another. The shock that ensued was greater than anything anyone could have anticipated. Techniques clashed with techniques in every corner of the massive space, creating powerful impacts in every which direction. This shook all the inhabitants of the room, left and right, back and forth.

The whole room—no, the entire demon lord’s castle—was trembling.

Unable to stand any longer, everyone was soon blown off their feet and deposited onto the floor. Even Kuon, who’d been airborne, couldn’t stay in place. She was sent flying, crashing into a wall.

“Eep...”

Her eyes spun as she slid her way to the ground.

“Urgh...”

“Owowow...”

Everyone groaned where they lay. And eventually, the tremors died down.

The vibrations of the castle ceased, and silence began to take control. The dust and grime slowly settled until they had a clear field of view once more.

“D-Damn...”

Whipping his aching body back into action, Cain sat up. It had been an absurdly powerful shock wave, but he could hear everyone’s voices and was relieved to know that no one had died. For the time being, he let out a sigh.

“Hmm...?”

It was at that point that he felt something...off. He felt a strange feeling on his lower body. It felt like something was pressing against him, preventing him

from moving his legs freely. He felt a bit...itchy.

Is the rubble pinning my legs down? he wondered. He worked his aching, dizzy head, shifting his eyes to his lower half.

“Wait... What are you doing, Liz?!”

“Mm...”

What was pressing down on him was none other than Liz’s body.

The shock wave had thrown her towards Cain. She’d collided with gusto, resulting in the two of them being entangled. And their positions were rather unthinkable.

Liz’s head was shoved right between his thighs. He was sitting on his behind with his legs spread wide and with Liz’s upper body nestled between them. In other words, Liz’s face was buried in his crotch.

“Wh-What’s with this position...?! ”

It was an instance of a trope known as *lucky pervert*. Indeed, he had been reverse *lucky perverted*.

“You little...! Liz! What are you doing, taking advantage of the chaos?! This is no time to fool around!” Cain bellowed. He forcefully lifted her up, peeling her away from his nether regions.

“Mm...”

“Hmm?”

But then, he noticed something. Liz was only semiconscious. She’d essentially been knocked out by the shock wave. This reverse *lucky pervert* situation hadn’t been anything intentional on her part; it was a genuine coincidence. Cain couldn’t stay angry at her even if he wanted to.

He suppressed his urge to complain, lifted Liz’s body, and brought her up to his chest. Without trying to wake her, he let her sleep with her head somewhere a bit more presentable.

“Is everyone okay?”

“Oof... I’m okay, Sir Cain,” Sylphie piped up.

“I’m good too,” said Rachel. “Owww, that stings.”

By then, the others had gotten up and gathered near him. Though they were injured here and there, they were all still able to fight.

“What about Kuon?”

“She’s cursing to herself by that wall. I think she’ll be on her feet soon.”

“I see.”

The enemy was also in one piece.

The battle hadn’t ended yet.

“I hate to admit it, but that squeaky hammer’s powerful. Mitter, you come to the front with me. We’ll focus entirely on defense. Rachel, Wolfe, keep your distance, and attack when you see a chance.”

“Got it.”

“Understood.”

In a short time, their strategy had been reformed.

“Mental Corruption is still effective. Sylphie, I’m counting on you.”

“Yes, leave it to me.”

“Also, it seems like Forestep isn’t perfect. The accuracy of her predictions seems to decrease when she’s attacking. I guess it’s hard to dodge and attack at the same time. Let’s try to aim for counters.”

“Understood!”

“All right, just a little more! Brace yourselves!”

The briefing was over. They rallied their spirits to fight again.

“Hmm...?”

There, they noticed.

Liz’s head was beginning to slither its way down. Only moments before, she’d been unconscious, with her face buried in Cain’s chest. And yet, why was it? Her head was almost sliding down his body.

“L-Liz?”

She was still down for the count. Indeed, while only half conscious, she was moving like her head was being pulled by something.

“...”

And once more, her face was buried in Cain’s crotch.

“*SNFF SNFF SNFF SNORT PANT PANT PANT SNFF! SNFF! SNFFFF! SNFF SNFF SNFF! Pah... SNFF SNFF SNFFFFF! Phweeew... SNFF SNFF SNFF SNFF SNFFFFF SNFFFFF SNFF SNFF! Pah, SNFFFF...!*”

“Ah! You little...!”

All of a sudden, Liz was huffing up a storm.

“*SNFF SNFF SNFFFF SNFFF! Pah... SNFF SNFF SNFFFF SNFFFFF! SNFF SNFF SNFFFF SNFFF...! Pheeeew...! SNFF SNFF SNFFFF!*”

“C’mon! This time’s definitely on purpose! Get off me!”

“*SNFFFFFFFFFFFFFF!*”

Cain forcefully yanked Liz’s body away. But it was already too late. She took on a face of unparalleled delight, of joy and satisfaction. In that short span of time, Liz had awakened.

“Wh-What...?” Kuon stammered, dumbfounded by the scene she found as she approached.

Cain and his comrades knew Liz well, and were used to her. But Kuon—who had no advance warning—couldn’t conceal her surprise. She was doubting her own eyes, wondering, *Did I just see things wrong?* Wolfe, who also wasn’t used to Liz, was petrified.

“Phew...”

Liz slowly exhaled, parted from Cain, and stood. She was completely conscious now, facing Kuon head-on.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Lady Kuon.”

The two were facing off for the first time. Her demeanor was somewhat different from before. The nature and quantity of mana flowing through her

body seemed completely different as well.

What just happened?

Kuon was unnerved.

“My name is Lisalinde. I do hope we get along.”

“Wh-Who art thou?”

Liz offered a reverent curtsy, immaculate and composed. To Kuon, this courteousness came off as uncanny. She was immediately put on guard, taking a combat stance.

But Liz’s next words came as a surprise to everyone gathered.

“I surrender,” Liz declared, lightly lifting her hands in the air.

“Hmm?”

“Huh...?”

Everyone stared at her blankly.

“I surrender. Any further battle is pointless. At this rate, your injuries will only grow worse. Perhaps someone might die. In that case, it would be far better for me—for one person to sacrifice their power if that resolves it.”

“Wh-What art thou speaking of?”

“I’m saying I will give you my power.”

Liz chuckled, showing her will to submit. Kuon blinked a few times in her confusion.

“You can fulfill your original objective, Lady Kuon. You can absorb my power. I think that’s more than enough leverage for you to permit my comrades to escape.”

“B-But thou art not the magician who inherited the power of the archdevil. Thou didst say so thyself...”

“Ah ha ha. Yes, how should I put this... My previous self only thought that was so due to a case of amnesia.”

Kuon was baffled. But there was something a little persuasive about Liz’s

words. It did feel like something about her sense of being had changed.

Before, she had appeared as a complete amateur, a student in training. Now, she exuded the air of a warrior who had crossed a thousand battlefields. And more than anything, the quality of mana circulating through her body was completely different.

Just maybe...

Kuon swallowed her breath.

“Hey, Liz! Listen to me, dumbass! Don’t go surrendering on your own!” Cain howled from right beside her.

His eyes were ablaze, screaming that he still had a lot of fight left in him. As a matter of fact, the fight was only half over, and there was no saying which side would come out on top. It was far too early to declare defeat.

However...

“Huh...?”

Liz turned to him ever so slightly, with her index finger over her lips.

She gave a tacit wink as though to say, “Don’t worry. Just stay quiet for a bit.” Seeing the smile of a mischievous child cross her face, Cain and his comrades held their tongues.

Kuon spoke up, continuing the conversation where it’d left off. “Very well, I understand. In return for absorbing thy power, I’ll set the heroes free. Yet if I see that thou hast deceived me, that thou dost not hold the power of the archdevil Lilith, I shall have no mercy...”

“I am aware. Don’t worry.”

Kuon glared at Liz menacingly. Despite her cute face, she had a sort of intensity to her. A force that reminded the heroes that she truly was a formidable foe. But Liz was no slouch either. Even with Kuon threatening her, she remained prim and poised.

“Also, if I could make one request...”

“Hm?”

“Umm...it would be quite embarrassing for me to have my powers drained when everyone’s watching... Could we move to a private room?” asked Liz.

“Hmm?”

“A private room with a bed where I can relax. Just the two of us...”

Suddenly, Liz started to fidget. Her cheeks reddened, and her body stiffened in embarrassment.

Kuon cocked her head. “Um... I am merely absorbing thy powers. There is naught to be ashamed of.”

“Please! I don’t want my comrades to see as my powers are taken away...! I’m, umm... I’m so embarrassed...!”

“H-Hmm...?”

Liz made a strong plea. She took both of Kuon’s hands, pleading to her with teary, upturned eyes. Overpowered by Liz’s persistence, Kuon found herself nodding.

“I-I have a chamber right beside this hall. Shall I absorb thy power there?”

“Thank you!”

Kuon swallowed Liz’s demands and gave a befuddled nod.

“...”

But her confusion quickly died down. Gradually, the realization of her victory was setting in, causing a smug grin to spread across her face.

“Mwah ha ha...! ’Twas a tad anticlimactic, but in the end, victory is mine!”

“R-Right...”

“Fwa ha ha! Now ye losers behave as losers should. Remain and wait. Any trickery, and she shall meet her maker! Do ye understand?!”

“Y-Yeah...”

Kuon turned to the heroes with a triumphant, mocking smile, as if in some attempt to rile them up. But the heroes didn’t seem particularly bothered. In fact, they seemed to be concerned about something else entirely.

“Good. Now onward, Lisalinde!”

“Very well, Lady Kuon.”

They moved to the room adjacent to the throne room. Kuon strutted with her chest puffed out, while Liz reservedly followed behind. The heroes frowned as they watched her back. Kuon and Liz passed through the doorway. The door shut with a click, and they were gone.

A few seconds later...

“...Eep?! Huh? Wh-What?! Where art thou touching...? Ahn?!” A strange voice came from beyond the door. “Yipe...! Wh-What art thou doing?! Why dost thou touch my body... Ah-Ahn?! N-Nay...!”

“...”

“Wh-What are you?! What is this...?! Truly, what... Ahn?! Not there...!”

“...”

They could hear Kuon’s confused voice. The hunter had just become the hunted—if it hadn’t been that way from the start. Kuon had committed a grave mistake. She’d invited someone into her room—someone who should have never been invited.

Cain and his comrades sorrowfully turned their eyes away from the door.

“Mm...mwah... A-A kiss? Why a kiss...? Mm! Mmwah, mwah...”

“...”

“P-Pwah... N-Nay, no more... Mine mind is... Mmmmmmwah...”

“...”

“Aaaahhhn!”

Kuon’s bewitching moans echoed. A futile banquet was being held in the room right beside the throne room. And time passed. Eventually, the door swung open, and everyone finally turned towards it.

“We’re done here.”

“...”

Liz was the only one who came out. Kuon was nowhere to be seen. For some reason, Liz's face was especially glossy. There was a red tint to her skin and a satisfied look on her face. She was smiling from ear to ear. She presented her comrades with a thumbs-up.

"How strange. I ended up absorbing her power instead!"

"You definitely enjoyed yourself!" Cain yelled.

Liz was overflowing with strength. She had used her succubus powers. In the room next door, she had drained Kuon of her vitality.

Kuon was probably in the room, sprawled out in ecstasy. However, no one had the courage to make sure. They felt quite embarrassed that a heated battle had reached such a conclusion.

"Hee hee hee..."

Liz licked her lips. She'd brought down the curtain just like that. A succubus had sunk her venomous fangs into Demon Lord Kuon, the last hurdle in the demon lord's castle. The demon lord had been devoured, tricked by a heinous succubus.

And with that, their trials came to a close.

Chapter 39: Now—Current Demon Affairs

Kuon, now defeated, was wrapped up tightly in ropes.

The castle's throne room was marred by deep gashes, the impressive hall now left in tatters—the result of the battle between the hero and the demon lord. The floor had been gouged out, and there were countless holes punched through the walls. A room that once held an air of solemn majesty was now a most pitiful sight.

“Grrr... To think one as noble as I might suffer this indignity... How shameful...” Kuon gritted her teeth.

“Give it up. You lost. This is what happens.”

Even tangled in the ropes, Kuon wailed and thrashed. “I have *not* lost! What sorcery was that?! 'Tis as though I have succumbed to some foul deception! How am I to accept this?!”



After Liz thoroughly had her way with Kuon, Sylphie had bound her unconscious body. In battle, Kuon had been able to fight on even terms with the heroes, but she'd been apprehended while she was unable to resist and now was utterly defeated as a result.

"Oh my. Then would you care to have another bout with me?" Liz asked with a sweet smile.

Kuon shuddered, her face flushed. "Eep...! H-Hold now! Let us gather our wits! My mind is yet grappling with what hath been done... A-Anyway, hold!"

"She's been through enough. Give her a break," Cain said, prodding.

At that point, a certain individual called out to the hero. "All things aside, you have my heartfelt thanks, Sir Cain, for not killing our lord. As a representative of all her vassals, allow me to express my gratitude."

"R-Right..."

The individual reverently bowing their head to Cain was none other than the Orc Emperor, the second guardian that Cain and his party members had fought.

In fact, all three of the guardians had gathered: Cerberus, Orc Emperor, and Dutchwife Golem. They'd gathered to take part in the discussion.

"Are you sure you're understanding this right? We went and crushed your lord. Shouldn't you hate us?"

"Ha ha ha, I bear no hatred. And it is our helpless lord who will be in danger if any of us act out of turn. We would never do something so reckless. Fret not, I no longer have the will to fight."

"Well, I get *that* part, but..."

The Orc Emperor let out a composed cackle. To be honest, Cain was a little put off by the demon he'd just fought taking on such an affable attitude. "But *you*, Lisalinde. I will get back at you someday." The Orc Emperor had not forgotten his anger towards Liz. He glared at her sharply, sending sweat dribbling down the succubus's brow.

"A-Ah ha ha... You do have my apologies for that unfortunate business. I'll come back with a box of cakes to show my sincerity."

“For starters, why don’t we talk about your current situation? There’s a whole heap of things I don’t understand,” Cain said with a shrug.

To him, this situation was still completely incomprehensible. The demon lord he’d encountered before was a completely different person. So why was Kuon proclaiming herself as lord? Why did she go as far as to form a spatial connection with Academy Town in order to challenge the heroes?

“So be it. I shall give thee thy answer. This affair concerns the entirety of demonkind...” Kuon responded. “First and foremost, I am indeed the lord of all demons, the demon lord. I am the rightful heir of a royal lineage that spans over four thousand years.”

Cain pursed his lips and listened.

“’Twas not so long ago that the demonland knew peace. I governed for a hundred years and more without warfare. The conflicts among the various races were quelled, and all did pass their days in peaceful tranquility. We tilled fields, partook in lively trade, and reveled in joy to our hearts’ content.”

“...”

“So many of my kin lived absent-minded, carefree, laid-back, leisurely lives.”

“Hmm?”

“And I was among them. Day in and day out, I basked in supreme bliss beneath my kotatsu. Yes, we all reveled in our peaceful, carefree existence.”

“Isn’t that a bit *too* leisurely?” Cain retorted.

Carefree, leisurely—it was hard to imagine such words coming from the mouth of a policymaker.

“I mean, canst thou seriously blame me?! ’Twas peaceful as could be! I had nothing pressing to attend to!”

“Don’t get me wrong. Peace is a good thing...”

“I was an exemplary ruler when the situation called for it! Truly, there was naught that demanded my attention! And ’tis not like I was notably lazy! Father conducted himself in much the same way!” Kuon wailed with tears in her eyes.

Yet Cain couldn't help himself. The demon situation just sounded far too lax, and it was hard to believe he was hearing it from the demon lord herself.

Dutchwife Golem courteously provided an explanation. "Hero. If I may provide some context. There are many demon races with lifespans greatly exceeding those of humankind. If you live long enough, you naturally mellow out. Lady Kuon's era really was a time of peace. I believe this is a matter of human sensibilities versus demon sensibilities."

"I-I see. Thanks, Dutchwife Golem..."

"Much obliged."

The hero's party was slowly getting used to her appearance.

"Anyway, peace hath held sway for a very long time. That is all ye must know. Yet in the midst of such tranquil days, an incident came to pass."

"..."

"The extremists did stage a coup..." A vein rose on her temple as she spoke. "The current administration is one of indolence—a cabinet of slackers and simpletons,' those impudent fools did prattle as they revolted...!"

"Ah, so there really were some who saw it that way," Cain muttered to himself.

"Those fools! 'We demons are a noble, sublime existence! With our power unmatched, we should proclaim our magnificence across the realms!' They said whatever drivel suited them as they booted me from mine own castle! Blithering buffoons...!"

"Yeah, sounds like extremists to me."

"I had no recourse but to seek refuge in this villa with tears in my eyes... How vexing. How vexing indeed..."

"Oh, so this is a villa? It's not the actual demon lord's castle, then."

"A castle is a castle! And if 'tis the castle the demon lord occupies, then 'tis the demon lord's castle!"

Cain and his party finally had some accurate information as to where they

were.

“Anyway, the fool who spearheaded the coup is the same fool who now proclaims himself the demon lord.”

“So *that’s* the demon lord we fought a year ago.”

“I will never recognize him as lord! If ye must refer to him, call him the rebel leader! Speak not of any other *demon lords*! Do you comprehend?!” Kuon wailed from her bindings.

And the hero party responded with a lackadaisical “Yeah, yeah.”

“With all said, the fool did bring something peculiar when he assailed mine *main* castle. His curious weapon forced me to enact a tactical retreat.”

“A weapon?”

“The devil sword.”

That statement had the heroes swallow their breath.

“Have ye caught on? I know nothing of it, but indeed, it is likely the counterpart of the holy sword in thy hands. That sword would make him a most formidable foe, especially to the bearer of the holy sword.”

“Devil sword...”

“The esteemed house of the demon lord, with all its history, bears no record of that devil sword ever gracing anyone’s hand. ’Twas thought to dwell only in legend. Whence did that rebel fool obtain it...?”

Cain and his comrades thought back. A year ago, the demon lord had fought them with a black sword, a curious blade wreathed in black flames. Those flames had been able to burn even iron and stone to ash. The flames had burned through any magic they attempted, and even through holy power.

It was this power that had them so hard-pressed in that fight.

Was that the power of the devil sword? They clenched their fists.

“The revolutionary army is naught but a despicable mob, yet still, the sword doth be a threat. How did he come by the devil sword? ’Tis the question that vexes me most... Perchance there lies a special reason I know not of.”

Kuon stared straight into Cain's eyes. Her gaze was serious. By the look in them, he knew—what they were dealing with was not simply a matter of chance. It was not an issue to make light of.

Kuon let out a soft sigh. "The revolutionary army soon turned their gaze to humanland. They waged war upon the humans to broaden their domain. 'Dost thou not think beings of such greatness deserve the greater land?' they declared. That took place...around twenty years ago, perhaps."

"Yeah, the demon invasion started twenty years ago."

"Everything that follows, well, ye are likely well-versed in. Before then, demonland and humanland did not entangle themselves in the affairs of the other. We were at peace."

Humans occupied around eighty percent of the world's habitable land, while demons were relegated to the remaining twenty percent. Although at first glance there seemed to be some bias in territory size, demons were not nearly as numerous as humans, and the population density of both regions was roughly equal. Over many moons and many years, an equilibrium had been reached between humanland and demonland.

But then, the war broke out. The revolutionary army lit the spark.

The humans boasted an overwhelming numerical advantage, but there were many races among demonkind whose members were stronger individually, and who lived for far longer. Humanity found itself under siege until the hero entered the scene.

"I didn't know there was a coup on the demon side."

"I would not doubt it. Their revolution was done in secret. Even now, 'tis not public knowledge that the royal house was ousted. The common folk know nothing of the coup. To their understanding, the reigning regime suddenly developed a penchant for war."

Cain and his comrades had trodden through demon territory several times to fight the demon lord's army. Yet even then, they'd never heard anything about the coup.

"Even when manipulated, my subjects remain my subjects..."

There was a vague sorrow on Kuon's face. The heroes remained silent.

"So, I have tarried within this auxiliary castle awaiting the opportunity to strike back. I've lurked unseen, hoping for the opportune moment to destroy those detestable fools. And lo and behold, a golden opportunity presented itself unto me."

"An opportunity?"

"Need I speak it aloud? I speak of the advent of the hero!" Kuon's lips curled into a smirk. "Those rebellious fools find themselves in turmoil. They falter before the legendary might of the holy sword. Witnessing them panic after all their unceasing triumphs hath brought me great joy! Nyah ha ha ha hah!"

"You're a real piece of work yourself."

"And I gave it some thought. Instead of acting forthwith, I chose to remain a spectator as the heroes and the rebels tore each other asunder. And in the end, I'd rush in to snatch up all the spoils. 'Tis the finest strategy requiring the least amount of effort!"

"Get bent." Cain spat, but despite his indifference on the surface, he was barely keeping himself from breaking into a cold sweat. Completely unbeknownst to Cain and his comrades, a third party was scheming to snatch all the benefits of their efforts. Had they unknowingly continued with their fight, perhaps it would have all gone according to her plan.

They'd actually been in quite a dangerous situation.

"Yet, the circumstances did change. The battle reached an impasse. The rebel leader was wounded, and the heroes required time to recover. The situation hath come to a standstill. At this rate, my plan cannot proceed."

"..."

"So, I devised a fresh scheme! I would force a spatial link with Academy Town and defeat the heroes! Then, with them as my underlings, I could swing the situation in whichever way I desired!"

Kuon spoke with heated enthusiasm, but Cain just furrowed his brow.

"With the heroes under my dominion, my army would reign supreme! I would

graciously let him swing his holy sword to aid the true demon lord's army and vanquish that accursed devil sword, all while I leisurely indulge in all the sweet fruits of victory!"

"You just lost to us, though."

"Indeed, that's the crux of it! Why did it have to unfold like this?!" After laying it on so smugly, Kuon suddenly broke into tears. Seeing a demon lord tied to their own throne was the height of comedy.

"So that's how we got here, huh?"

"Indeed."

Kuon sank into a slump. She had failed. She lost a battle she couldn't afford to lose, and all her efforts had come to naught.

"Grrrrrr... Regret. Naught but regret..."

But... Cain thought over it. Her plan, at least as she described it, was an effective one. His own interests aligned with the interests of the demon royal lineage. The revolutionary army was a common enemy of both the human race and the true demon lord, and he wanted to get rid of them however he could. Even if it meant forming a strange alliance between human and demon.

"If you're okay with an alliance... We might be able to work this out."

"Hm?!" Kuon's face suddenly shot up. "Truly?!"

"Something like that."

Despite her difficult personality, the demon lord before him seemed to be a moderate. And as a matter of fact, there had been no wars between humans and demons in the time of her reign. From the perspective of humanity, the girl before him was definitely the more desirable ruler of all demons.

Yes, rather than a rebel leader who sought to seize human land through war, they'd obviously choose a moderate who lazed around doing nothing at all. That went without saying. Humankind would join hands with the moderate demon faction to fight the revolutionary army. It seemed like a feasible alliance.

"I did see it the moment mine eyes first fell upon thee! Cain! Thou art a most promising human indeed!"

“You just love to get carried away, don’t you?”

A creaking, grating sound filled the air as Kuon gleefully rocked the throne back and forth, beaming. The hero’s party managed some bitter smiles of their own.

“More importantly, I can’t stand the smug looks these guys are giving me. It’s like they’re saying they could see this coming from a mile away. Like they knew everything,” Cain said, sending a harsh glare.

“Ha ha ha, if you’ll forgive us. We had enough information to work off of.”

His eyes fell upon the Orc Emperor and Dutchwife Golem, who were watching from the sidelines. Both vassals had foreseen the idea of an alliance from the start. They understood how profitable such an agreement would be, both to the demon royal family and to humanity. They knew the heroes would never turn it down. And so, even when their lord was restrained, they weren’t the least bit panicked.

“Hm?”

“Huh?”

Kuon and Cerberus were the only ones who had failed to anticipate this turn of events.

“An alliance it shall be! Mine forces shall ally with thy hero party! Can we shake on it?!”

“No, hold on.”

“Hmm...?”

Kuon started to get giddy at these talks of an alliance, but Cain lightly held out his palm in objection.

“Before we talk about alliances and whatnot, there’s a little issue we’ve gotta settle. Am I wrong?”

“A-An issue...?”

Cain took a step forward.

“Now if I’m remembering right, we’re the victims here. You guys picked a fight

and we won. Is that correct?”

“Urgh...”

Kuon twitched, feeling threatened by the hero. Though she was tied down and unable to move, she seemed to be trying to shrink back. Cain approached the throne, looming over her menacingly.

“If someone attacks you, you’ve gotta get back at ’em, right? Otherwise, it wouldn’t even out.”

“Umm, ah, err, umm... N-No... What art thou going to do to me...?”

“Yes, what *should* I do with you?”

“Y-You canst not be thinking of doing pervy deeds to me in the name of punishment, canst you?! Just like in thy erotic manga! Yes, like thy erotic manga...!”

“Hell no,” Cain answered with a completely straight face. “I ain’t laying a hand on you. But, right...”

He grinned. His smile was filled with ill intent—an expression that didn’t suit the face of a righteous hero at all. And with that mean smirk, he opened his mouth.

“Starting today, this castle is mine.”

“Huh...?”

“I’m the lord of the castle now. You got that?”

“Huh? What?”

Kuon was taken aback.

For a moment, she couldn’t comprehend what Cain was saying.

“Wh-What dost thou mean...?”

“I meant what I fucking said. I’m the winner; you’re the losers. Snatching the loser’s castle is the winner’s natural right.”

“N-No, hold. This is the castle of the *demon lord*. And thou, a hero, art intending to take it?”

“That’s what I said, isn’t it?”

Kuon was clearly confused, so Cain said it again. He thrust out his chest, and proudly declared, “This demon lord’s castle has been claimed by the hero! That makes the new demon lord *yours truly!*”

“*H-Huuuuuuuuuh?!?*”

Former Demon Lord Kuon’s dumbfounded voice echoed through the hall.

Cain, the hero of humankind, had thus become the ruler of the demon lord’s castle.

Epilogue

The dining hall within the demon lord's villa was bustling with activity. The various dishes on offer billowed with steam, filling the air with enticing aromas. Long tables and chairs had been set up all around the spacious first-floor hall, and a veritable legion of demons had gathered to partake in the feast.

Unlike the solemn majesty of the throne room on the top floor, the dining hall was simple and rustic. It was one of the facilities open to even soldiers and general staff members.

Alcohol was provided with the meals to reward the diners for a good day's work, and plenty of demons were more than happy to indulge.

The smell of grilled meat and fried fish wafted from the kitchen among a plethora of other scents. Just lingering nearby was enough to entice one to salivate.

And it was in the midst of this lively dining hall that Cain and his comrades found themselves enjoying a meal.

"Hmm, surprisingly good..."

"Thankfully, demon cuisine suits human tastes too."

"That's good to know. Please, help yourselves. Eat. The food here is incredibly cheap, after all."

With the battle behind them, the heroes all savored demon cuisine. Their eyes widened in pleasant surprise at just how delicious the food meant for the demon masses turned out to be. Here and there, they'd come across unfamiliar and peculiar ingredients and dishes drenched in sauces of curious colors, but the culture shock was mild. Once the food was in their mouths, they found it quite pleasant.

"Come to think of it, I'm the lord of this place now. Shouldn't I be eating something pricier?" Cain mused.

“Ha ha ha! Very true. Looks like our new lord’s a humble man. You can feast all you like here, and it won’t even put a dent in our treasury.”

“Shut it.”

Sitting across from them was the Orc Emperor, who had taken on the role of their guide around the castle.

“Getting back on track, is this really all right, Sir Cain? Becoming the demon lord, I mean?”

Liz daintily wiped her mouth as she posed the question.

“Hmm?”

Earlier, Cain had demanded of the demon lord Kuon—a privilege afforded to the victor—that the castle be transferred to him. Having lost the fight, Kuon had no right to decline, and now the castle nominally belonged to Cain, the hero.

The situation was odd, to say the least.

“Personally, I’d say he’s being too soft.”

“Rachel?”

“Have a look around, why don’t you? The place is still teeming with demons. Practically nothing’s changed with Cain as the lord.”

As was usually the case, the villa was filled with demons. Cain had become the lord of the castle, but it was still being staffed by the very same demons as before. It had only been a few hours since ownership shifted from demon lord to hero. Far too little time to enact any changes. But with that said, the mood of the castle remained completely unchanged, and Cain didn’t seem keen on doing anything about that.

“Look, I’m not saying I hate demons and you have to drive them out. I’m just wondering if we really accomplished anything. Sure, the name on the deed changed, but it’s still fundamentally the same.”

Cain nodded. “That’s how it should be, Rachel.”

“Oh?”

According to him, this was precisely what he was aiming for.

“What we want is an alliance with the demon lord’s family. Not to rule over them. I never had any interest in owning the castle to begin with. We’ll let the demons handle the work here just as before. We can be at the top in name alone.”

“Then why’d you ask for the castle, then?”

“I wanted to send a clear message. We won and Kuon lost. As long as that message gets out, I don’t need anything else. If we ever manage to get some negotiations going, this power relation will give us an advantage.”

Cain slurped up a forkful of a pasta-like dish before continuing, “On the contrary, it’d be a poor move to demand anything more from the demon lord. Taking more than necessary will just breed discord. We’ll make a poor impression on the people living in the surrounding town too. I want to make the message clear, but I won’t take anything. I won’t change anything. I won’t rule over anything. That sounds about right for me.”

“Aren’t you being way too considerate?”

“Of course I am. As far as I can tell, we’ll be signing a peace treaty with the demon royal house after we defeat that revolutionary army. Say we win the war, and we’re on terrible terms with our new ally. Then what, we go to war with *them* next? What’s the point?” Cain explained with a shrug. There was pasta sauce stuck to his lips.

“Hmm, so you put some thought into it.”

“Damn straight.”

Rachel seemed impressed. Politicking was not her strong suit.

“The irritating part is how this old man seems to have seen through all of it. It pisses me off, makes me feel like I’m dancing around like a puppet. Right?” Cain disrespectfully pointed the prongs of his fork at the Orc Emperor.

“Ha ha ha, have some mercy. As the one who planned this scheme, it is only natural that I could see the overall picture.”

The Orc Emperor, alongside a few others who worked at the capital, had foreseen the battle’s outcome and aftermath. And so, when the hero brought

up the alliance, and when he proclaimed he would be the nominal ruler of the castle, the Orc Emperor didn't panic in the slightest. He silently got to work, making those demands a reality.

"Lord Hero Cain, we are deeply grateful for your generous treatment of the demon royal family."

"Hmph. Spare me. You know I have no choice in the matter. And I'm sure you had a few things prepared just in case we lost."

"Indeed. In that case, we would do our best to keep our lord on track—knowing she would surely grow arrogant in her victory—and proceed with our negotiations. The only difference being that we would maintain an advantage. We would have our alliance one way or another."

Incidentally, Kuon had no part in it. This incident had been orchestrated by her close aides, rather than the demon lord herself.

"Give me a break..." Cain heaved a deep sigh. "But I did get to see something amusing, so we'll call it even."

"Amusing?"

The hero's ill humor took a sudden turn as a bemused smile crossed his face. He turned around to get an eyeful of a particular woman whose face had been turned a bright red.

"A-A-A-Apologies for the delay, M-Master... I bring thy dessert—one big parfait..."

"Yeah, nicely done, Ms. Maid."

"Grrr...!"

Cain's parfait was brought in by the former demon lord, Kuon. For some reason or another, she was dressed in a maid uniform, working as a waitress. Her frilled, black-and-white apron dress perfectly complemented her long black hair. Simply put, she looked adorable. What's more, she retained none of her regal dignity. Her entire body was shaking in embarrassment, and every inch of her skin had flushed red.

"Grr...! Why must I endure such humiliation?! Why must I dress myself as a

servant and bring parfaits to thee...?!”

“Isn’t it obvious? It’s a little penalty for the loser.”

“Do not toy with my dignity for such a petty reason!”

Having lost the battle, Kuon was put to work as a maid. Naturally, she had never worn such clothing before—not from the moment she was born.

“You’re looking cute, Kuon.”

“Curse thee, hero! Cease thy mockery!”

“What a laugh.”

“Silence, purple-hair!”

“Oh, but it really is adorable. How about it? Do you want to have a nice, long chat with me in my bed tonight?!”

“Eep?! Scary! Thou yet terrify me! Approach not!” Kuon was flustered. “Ye heroes art all true scoundrels!”

The truth had begun to dawn on the demon lord.

“Ye shan’t make it out unscathed! My beloved subjects shall not stay silent after such vile deeds! Mark my words! There shall be an uprising! A revolt! The people shall unite to tear you to pieces!” Kuon wailed with tears in her eyes. “Right?!” she went on. “My subjects, you would never sit back and bear this humiliation!”

“Rock on, Demon Lord!”

“Lady Kuon! I’ve always been a fan!”

“Please stay like that forever!”

“Our lord is the best!”

“Foolish knaves!”

Cheers erupted in the dining hall. The demon lord’s maid uniform was earning wide acclaim.

“See that? That’s how you exercise the victor’s privilege without accumulating the hate of the people,” said Cain.

“I see. I’m learning a lot.” The Orc Emperor nodded.

“Ye...! Ye fools...! I shall remember this...!”

Kuon could do nothing but cry out like a sore loser.

“Come now, new maid. Don’t lose heart. Why don’t you try to find some enjoyment in your current situation?”

“Wh-What?! Art thou not...?!”

A senior maid patted Kuon on the shoulder to console her.

It was Sylphie. She’d donned a maid uniform to carry trays of food to the guests in the dining hall. No one had ordered her to do maid work, however; Sylphie had done so of her own volition.

“There’s a unique appeal to being a maid. The joy of serving a master you admire, the fulfillment of being useful to someone. Why don’t you relish in it to your heart’s content?!”

“What ails thee?! Why art thou dressed like that when thou art not even under penalty?!”

It was simply her hobby, that’s all. Sylphie briskly and efficiently pulled off her work waiting on the table. For some reason, the princess of a nation was very accustomed to this sort of work.

“Now, Demon Lord Kuon! Let’s master the path of a maid together!”

“Nay! I refuse! Unhand me!”

She was growing completely overwhelmed, subject to the whims of everyone around her. For Kuon, former demon lord, it was the most disastrous day imaginable.

Time seemed to fly right by, and before anyone knew it, night was upon them.

A thick miasma clouded the skies of demonland, making for dim lighting even in the middle of the day. It was like the world was denying the territory of even light, a sinister darkness rumbling and swirling over the entire region. It was a nightmarish scene, and the night would cloak the world in an even thicker

darkness. Indeed, the night was ruled by a blackness so dark, some might even consider it beautiful.

“This is a surprisingly nice room...” Cain muttered. He’d found himself staying the night in the demon lord’s villa. Although it was more than just a “stay,” as strictly speaking he was now the lord of the castle.

He’d asked for a few guest rooms to be readied and made them into private rooms for his party members. They’d probably visit the castle many more times after this. With each member getting their own room, he planned to make the villa into their base in demon territory. Everyone was to use the remaining night hours to decorate their rooms to their liking. They’d make private spaces to make their future stays a more pleasant experience.

“Phew...”

Having finished up work, Cain found his eyes drifting to the window. There were no stars to be seen. The dark miasma rolled through the sky, swallowing up their light.

What an empty sky. At least Cain saw it that way, but apparently this, too, was a matter of culture. When the Orc Emperor said, “The miasma is so refreshing today,” the members of the hero’s party had all stared at him blankly.

“I never thought I’d end up here...” Cain muttered, his elbow planted against the windowsill.

What a weird day, he thought to himself. He’d psyched himself up for a decisive battle with the demon lord, yet by the end of it, he had dressed that demon lord in a maid uniform and became the lord of her villa.

It was completely nonsensical. If, that morning, someone told him how it would all pan out, he would have furrowed his brow and asked, “Are you high?”

“Are we even getting anywhere? Good grief.”

Staring at the sky, he lit the end of his cigar. An alliance with the demon lord was a great accomplishment. Their situation had become so advantageous, it would completely turn the war on its head.

However, there was still a point of concern: the devil sword that the demon lord was so blatantly fearful of. How had the rebel army obtained a legendary blade? Kuon insinuated that there must have been something behind this.

The mystery had only grown.

“...”

But the day had been so nonsensical that he was hardly even feeling the weight of these grim revelations. He didn't remember fighting properly, not once. His foes had all been powerful—there hadn't been a single easy mark—but their idiotic hijinks were all that stuck with him.

“Man...”

The hell am I doing? Cain wondered as he let out a deep sigh. The cigar smoke rose high into the pitch-black sky and dissipated.

“Sir Cain... Sir Cain, might I have a moment?”

“Hmm?”

It was then that he heard a knocking at the door. The voice belonged to Liz. She was paying his room a visit.

“Come in.”

“Pardon me.”

Slowly, the door swung open and the girl politely stepped in. There was grace in each and every minute movement. *She really is a proper lady*, Cain was reminded.

“Milord...” she said. “Could I have a moment...?”

“Hmm?”

“Milord! I just couldn't bear it anymore! I couldn't stop myself from coming to your room! Please forgive me!”

“Huh? ‘Milord’?”

Yet the words pouring from the elegant girl's mouth were completely incomprehensible. Cain squinted, struggling to keep up.

“I know... I know I’m just troubling you, visiting your room so late at night... But! But I...! I can’t hold it in any longer...!”

“What are you on about, Liz?”

“You’re one of this nation’s most prominent aristocrats...! And meanwhile, I’m nothing more than a simple country girl... I know that there’s no way we could ever be together. But I...! I can’t hold back these feelings!”

“Huh?”

Nothing Liz was saying made sense. For starters, he wasn’t Liz’s lord, and she’d never called him that before. He wasn’t even a noble—in fact, Liz was the noble here and he was the country boy.

Cain cocked his head. Yes, no matter how many times he thought it over, she wasn’t making sense.

“Milord... I love you!”

Liz leaped into Cain’s chest. He conceded to catching her for now.

“Hey, Liz. Hold on. What is this?”

“Yes, I know we can’t be doing this! But I can’t stay away from you anymore, milord! I’m sorry! Please rebuke me for being the failure I am!”

“First, you gotta explain!” Cain indeed rebuked her.

Liz lifted her face, staring at him with upturned eyes from within his embrace. “Why, of course, it’s the ‘forbidden sex between star-crossed student lovers who could never be together due to a difference in status’ role-play.”

“Beg pardon?”

Liz said it as though it was perfectly obvious.

“I’m sure that I said this the last time I got my memories back. I told you that the next time I was conscious, I wanted to role-play forbidden sex between star-crossed student lovers who could never be together due to a difference in status. Remember?”

“Now that you mention it!”

Cain finally remembered. Back when a demon general had infiltrated the

academy, and Liz had regained her memories to fight him off, she had in fact said something to that effect.

“Okay? There’s a difference in status so... I guess I’m the high noble, and you’re the country girl...?”

“Ah! Please don’t make me love you even more! I’m going to go crazy!”

“You need to at least provide the bare minimum explanation! And also, I never actually agreed to playing along with you!”

Cain peeled Liz away as she tried to coil herself around him.

“And before all these games, there’s something we gotta address, right? Liz, how’s your body holding up?”

“My body?”

Cain stepped away from the window and took a seat on the edge of the bed. He patted the spot next to him, urging Liz to sit too. And so, she obliged. They both sank into the soft mattress.

“You have your memories back, right? You’ve been regaining them and losing them out of nowhere. Is that bad for you or anything?”

“It’s all right. I’m in perfect condition. But it seems like it won’t last for long, and I’ll be back to my other self by morning.”

“Really? You took some power from Kuon, didn’t you? Can’t you use that to make it last longer?”

“Ah ha ha, power from an outside source doesn’t seem to sustain me...”

“I see.”

Liz had absorbed Kuon’s strength. She’d obtained a massive amount of energy, but it seemed that she couldn’t maintain her condition with power that wasn’t hers. By morning, she’d lose her memories and her powers again.

“I’m like a balloon with a hole in it. You can puff it up with as much air as you want, but the issue is with the balloon itself. It will shrivel in no time.”

“So we’ve got to take our time restoring your body, huh.”

“I’m sorry for worrying you. My absorption only lets me take mana and

nothing else... Apparently, Kuon can extract the very nature of her foe's strength, but that is beyond me."

"Nah, don't worry about it. There's no need to hurry."

Although Liz had sucked the strength from Kuon, she hadn't snatched the core of her power. In a few days' time, Kuon would naturally recover.

Cain gently placed a hand on her head and softly stroked her hair. Liz's eyes fell contentedly closed.

"Is there something troubling you?" asked Cain.

"Hmm, yes, it seems to be rather difficult for me to gather up succubus energy while I don't have my memories."

"Makes sense. Without your memories, you don't go out of your way to do degenerate stuff."

"Cain, would you be so kind as to deposit your freshly worn undergarments in my room every day? That might just speed up my recovery. ≡"

"Rejected. Wouldn't your amnesiac self be terrified, finding men's underwear in your room every day?"

"Tsk." Liz pouted.

"Anything else?"

"Well, those villainous noble ladies at school are bullying me. 'There's no way a prominent noble like Sir Cain would ever go out with you! Get lost! Go suck on some dirty turnips in the countryside where you belong!' they yell at me. Each and every day is a struggle..."

"Wait, you're mixing your fun and games in with your report. Don't complicate things."

"Honestly, I regained my powers twice in such a short span of time, so I think I'm doing quite well. I never once regained my memories in the year before that."

"Right. Let's take it nice and slow, then."

"Wah!"

Cain wrapped an arm around Liz's shoulder and held her in a tight embrace. Her face was pressed up against his chest.

"Y-You can't...! Not when you already have a fiancée whose status better befits you!"

"When does this end?"

It didn't seem like it was going to end anytime soon.

"Milord, you have to treasure your fiancée...! The two of you promised to marry when you were children, only for you to reunite with her ten years later at the academy. And when she was about to fall to illness, you stood by her side the whole time and overcame the disease alongside her. How could you be with me when you have a fiancée who you share such a strong bond with...?!"

"Huh? I've got a fated lover like that, and I'm still embracing you? Well shit, I'm scum."

"I...I'm just a nuisance...!"

"That's right, you sure are. Now graciously accept your defeat."

The more he heard of the setting Liz had drafted out, the more she seemed like a nuisance through and through. Yet even as he said that, Cain continued to hold her tight.

"We shouldn't. Not when your fiancée is already carrying your baby..."

"Wow, I'm growing scummier by the second..."

"So this is where you were! You vile home-wrecker!"

"Whoa! Sylphie?!"

"Ah!"

It happened just like that. All of a sudden, Sylphie barged into the room.

The door was violently slammed open. Her sudden entrance really did take Cain by surprise, prompting him to reflexively back off from Liz.

"Here you are again, trying to steal away my betrothed...! You shameless whore!"

“L-Lady Sylphie! I-I never intended to...”

“Silence! I know you’re the one who seduced Cain! You country rube!”

“Huh? What? She got you in on this too, Sylphie?”

For someone who’d just suddenly barged in, her story was strangely consistent, and Cain was the only one who seemed confused.

“We’re professionals. We planned it perfectly.”

“Right?”

Sylphie and Liz shared a smile and a nod.

“No, you’re just stupid,” Cain wearily muttered.

Once again, Sylphie’s expression turned stern. “I won’t hand Cain to anyone! Especially not a sewer rat like you! Don’t touch him with those filthy hands of yours!”

“Y-You have it all wrong, Lady Sylphie! We truly love each other...!”

“Silence! Love?! Don’t get in over your head, girly! You’re mistaking Cain’s kindness as something more!”

“You’re needlessly invested in this,” muttered Cain.

“Cain! Between me and this sewer rat, who will you choose?!”

“Huh?”

The conversation was suddenly turned to Cain. Their eyes both shifted and locked onto him.

“Naturally, you’ll choose me, your fiancée, right?!”

“M-Milord... I don’t want to leave you...”

“H-Huh...?”

They both sidled up to him.

This was supposed to be just a game, yet he felt a strange sense of tension. Sweat dripped down his brow.

“U-Umm... Can I just choose you both...?”

There was a moment of silence.

“Hmm, that’s a failing response, if I’ve ever heard one.”

“You should try being more manly when you say it.”

“Yeah, I realize that was pathetic, but how about you put yourself in my shoes? I was shoved into this out of nowhere.”

The dubious reactions from the girls seemed just a little bit unreasonable to Cain.

“Heed my words, Lisalinde! I won’t give Cain away—not to you, not to anyone! You will rue the day you crossed me!” Howling these parting words, Sylphie took off from the room.

“L-Listen to me! Lady Sylphie!” Liz pleaded.

But, she was gone.

For a long while, there was silence. A rival in love had been vanquished.

“Hey, she just left.”

“I hired her just for the moment.”

“You guys sure have a lot of free time on your hands.”

Liz seemed fulfilled, and Cain knew that Sylphie was smiling from ear to ear just outside the room. He could imagine the satisfaction on her face. His comrades were always getting up to this nonsense. It was more of the same.

Cain let out a deep sigh.

“Sylphie did a good job setting the scene. Her wonderful efforts have helped add some much-needed realism to our role-play,” Liz remarked.

“You guys need to settle down a bit.”

“If Melvy were here, we could have drawn up an even more convoluted and muddled web of relationships... Rachel turned me down, unfortunately.”

“It’s rare for you to have your memories back. Don’t waste it on this ridiculousness.”

It was Liz’s first opportunity to have a nice and long talk with her comrades,

with her memories intact. This should have been a heartfelt reunion for the girls. Yet instead, they'd used this valuable time to get their stories straight for some absurd role-play.

"It doesn't really feel like a reunion, though. Lately, it feels like I've been playing with everyone, just like the good old times."

"Is that how it works out? I guess I'll take your word on it."

Even without memories, Liz had reunited with all her comrades and got along with them well. Whether she had her memories or not was a trivial detail.

"But for me, today's not just like any other day," said Cain.

"How so?"

"It's about time we moved forward."

"Eep!"

And suddenly, he pushed Liz down. Her small body sank into the folds of the soft bed.

"Cain..."

"I've been holding myself back a lot, you know."

Cain's body loomed over Liz. He planted his hands to the sides of her face, and kept his elbows straight, his body raised over hers. Their bodies weren't adjoined yet. Supported up by his arms and his knees, Cain had left a distance of a few dozen centimeters between them.

His shadow fell over Liz's body.

"..."

Liz broke into a sweet and willowy smile. She wasn't flustered in the slightest. They were lovers, well acquainted with these interactions. Her cheeks turned a faint red. A wordless agreement was exchanged between them.

"..."

On the contrary, Cain was a little nervous. It had been so long since he last spent a night with Liz. He hadn't even seen her for a year following her grievous injury, and even after transferring to the academy, he'd held back from

touching her.

Right now, her memories had returned. This was a moment when a lover could hold her as a lover should. For once after a long time, he pushed her onto the bed and swallowed his breath.

The hint of blush spread across her glossy skin, which seemed to glow atop the pure white sheets. He was entranced by the sight of her—just as beautiful as ever.

A bedroom at night. The warm light of a lamp illuminated the both of them.

“Ah, that’s right.”

“Hmm?”

Liz suddenly seemed to recall something.

“Y-You can’t! Milord! With my lowly status, we could never be together! Ours is a forbidden love...!”

Liz lamented yet again—evidently having the time of her life. Cain shot her a troubled look.

“Hey.”

“It cannot be! You have a precious fiancée...!”

“Liz...”

“Mm...”

Cain kissed her. He lowered himself, his body pressed against hers. Strongly, he pushed their lips together, not even allowing his lover to breathe. By the time his lips parted, their faces were both a bright red.

“I’m a no-good lord, right?”

She stared longingly at him.

And Cain whispered in her ear, “If I love you, I’m gonna hold you tight.”

With that, a vile smile spread across his face.

“Ah ha ha... Now that’s a bother...” A fiery breath escaped Liz’s lips. “It doesn’t look like I can turn you down...”

Their bodies drew near. They passed a sweet night together under the veil of darkness.

Night gave way to morning.

In demonland, there were no little birds to chirp out their morning melodies. Instead, a rather mysterious beast of some stripe cried out with the timbre of a foghorn. The sky was still dim and filled with a sinister mana. Lightning of faded hues fell from on high, each bolt echoed by a fearsome thunderclap.

“Hmm...”

Liz opened her eyes. With her head still half in a daze, she sat up and drowsily took in her surroundings.

“Huh...?”

This room was completely unfamiliar to her—the current her. She was in her own room within the demon lord’s villa, but without her memories, she had no idea where she was or why she was there.

“Ummm...”

A nervous look around told her she was the only one there. There was no one to explain her situation, and she could only stare in a confused daze.

After her tryst with Cain, Liz had fallen soundly asleep, after which Cain had carried her to her room. He was pretty sure she’d lose her memories by morning, so he couldn’t just leave her sleeping in his bed.

Liz herself had made a proposition for a rather advanced form of entertainment: “I want to experience the rare confusion of waking up next to you without any idea of what’s going on.” Naturally, Cain turned her down.

Once Liz had fallen asleep from exhaustion, he’d wiped her down, dressed her, and deposited her in her bed. And, not knowing any of these circumstances, Liz was bewildered.

After getting her appearance in order, she timidly made her way outside the room. Her last memory was a scene from the battle with the demon lord. Powerful moves from both sides had clashed, and she remembered a strong

shock wave sending her body flying—and that was where her memories cut out.

I must have fallen unconscious there, thought Liz. She didn't know how the battle went from there.

"What? Lisalinde? Thou art awake?"

"Eep...?!"

As she walked down an unfamiliar corridor, a voice suddenly called to her from behind. Liz jumped.

"Wh-What? There is no need for such outcry... I merely called out."

"K-Kuon..."

The one who called out to her was Kuon.

Now that Liz had lost her memories, she didn't even know if she was in enemy territory or not. And in that situation, even the slightest spook was enough to make her fear for her life. She turned, her heart hammering away in her chest.

"K-Kuon...?"

"Hmm? What?"

"U-Umm... Why are you dressed like a maid?"

She had a whole laundry list of questions, but that was the one Liz started with.

"Grrrrrr! I did not wear it out of choice! Cease thy mockery!"

"N-No, I'm not trying to..."

Liz honestly didn't know why the enemy leader was wearing maid clothes.

"Thy comrades ventured to the dining hall on the first floor! Hurry and join them!"

"Oh, okay!"

The self-proclaimed demon lord directed her towards the dining hall.

It doesn't seem like she's hostile for now, thought Liz. With a slight, curious tilt to her head, she headed off to the floor below.

As she arrived at the dining hall, Liz spotted Cain, who was eating breakfast.
“Ah, Sir Cain. Good morning.”

“Hmm? Oh, Liz. Morning.”

She took the seat across from him.

“How do you feel? Did you get a good night’s sleep?” he asked.

“Oh, yes... I did, but... How should I put this...?”

“What’s up?”

Liz seemed to be stumbling over her words, and Cain looked at her with some concern. “Before I knew it, I was asleep in that room. What happened?”

“Oh...”

Realizing she was suffering a lapse in memory, Cain set down his fork. “It’s a bit of a long story, but, well, just hear me out...”

Cain went into the events of the previous day. He told her about how they’d managed to defeat Kuon, despite a few hiccups along the way; of how they learned of the revolution that had taken place in demonland; and of how he’d formed an alliance with the demon royal family. To cap it all off, he explained that he had become the lord of the castle.

“Hmm... It seems like all sorts of things happened while I was unconscious...”
Liz sighed, wide-eyed.

“You weren’t unconscious. Your powers awakened.”

“Huh? They did? Umm, so I was in that rumored awakened state?”

“Yes, that’s the one.”

“I-I see...”

It was something that she had done, so it felt a bit strange that she’d only heard about it in rumors. But she lacked any memory of when it happened, so that was the only way she could put it.

A bead of sweat dripped down Liz’s brow. “Umm... I’m strong when I’m in my

awakened state, right? Was I able to be of any use to your party?"

"..."

"Huh? Wh-Why are you staying silent...? You're scaring me here..."

Cain hung his head and held his tongue, and this had Liz trembling in fear.

"Don't tell me... I was completely useless..."

"No, that's not it. You were useful. Honest. I'm not exaggerating when I say you pretty much decided the fight."

"Th-Then..."

"But I don't want to explain exactly what you did."

"Wh-Why not?! What's up with that?! You're only making me even more afraid...!"

What exactly did I do?

Seeing Cain clam up, Liz shuddered at the thought of the person she had become in the time her memory failed her.

Meanwhile, Cain wasn't about to flat-out tell her, "You went and did some lewd stuff with Kuon to drain her power away." Sometimes ignorance was bliss.

"Huh...?"

"Hmm?"

But as they chatted about it, Liz noticed something.

"Cain... You're in a better mood than usual."

"What?"

Liz herself didn't seem to understand why she could tell. It was just a vague feeling.

"Well, how should I put this... It could just be my imagination, but you look a little relieved..."

Cain's mouth hung open in amazement. He was relieved; indeed he was. And he had a very good idea as to why he felt that way. It went without saying that it was because of the very woman who was talking to him.

“It’s like you’re a little tired, but like a weight has been lifted off your shoulders. Something to that effect. Did something happen?”

“You can tell?”

“Hmm...?”

Liz tilted her head. She didn’t really get it.

The key reason why he felt that way was looking at him with a completely innocent face.

“Well... After everything that happened last night.”

“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Aaah, shut up! Sorry, just forget about it! It’s nothing! Don’t worry! Stupid!”

Cain embarrassedly turned the other way. His cheeks were red and slightly puffed out as he forcibly brought the conversation to a close.

“H-Huh? Why? If we cut it off here, I’m just going to be even more curious.”

“Shut it, shut it, just eat some breakfast! I don’t got nothing to talk about!”

“Huh? Did I say anything strange...?”

“You’ve said nothing but strange things, dummy!”

“Aww...”

They continued to chat and quarrel across the table, both sides enjoying such harmless squabbles.

Liz had forgotten everything. Never in her wildest dreams could she have imagined she had spent a heated night with the hero she admired. And Cain wouldn’t say a word. Without a word exchanged, their relationship remained completely unchanged.

It was like nothing had happened. Everything was forgotten, and they had returned to their original relationship. Liz and Cain enjoyed their breakfast in the demon lord’s castle as two classmates—two friends.

“Oh, Cain, and Liz...”

“Hmm?”

That was when someone called out to the two of them.

“Morning, Cain, Liz.”

“Oh, morning, you two.”

Sylphie and Rachel appeared. They arrived at the table with plates of portioned-out breakfast in hand and approached the duo who were already seated.

“Good morning, Sylphie, Rachel,” said Liz.

“Did you sleep well?” Cain asked.

“Yes, I guess you can’t underestimate demon beds,” Rachel offered. “I slept surprisingly well.”

Cain and Liz both pulled out the chairs next to them for the others to sit.

“Oh, come now, that’s what we should be asking you two. How did the night treat you, Cain, Liz?”

“Huh? I slept normally...”

What was she talking about? For a moment, Cain stared at her doubtfully.

Sylphie and Rachel both grinned smugly.

“You had a good night, huh?”

“You had a good night, huh?”

“Huh...?!”

Cain’s expression was frozen in place. The girls continued pestering him with mean-spirited smiles on their faces.

“So, you had a good night, huh?”

“The first *good night* in a long time, huh?”

“H-Hey, stupid, quit it... Don’t tease me...” Cain winced as he lodged a complaint.

But they weren’t going to relent. Again and again, they repeated the same teasing words.

Only Liz was left in the dark. She watched from the sidelines, curiously.



“You had a good night, huh?”

“You had a *good night*, huh?”

“This was the heart of enemy territory up until yesterday, but you still had a *good night*, huh.”

“Hey! Stop! No! What the hell is this?! What sort of harassment?!”

Cain began to panic. He raised his voice, but all that did was attract more attention.

“Cain, what’s wrong?”

“It sure is rowdy today...”

“Oh, Mitter! Wolfe! You came at just the right time!” Cain yelled. “Go give those two fools a good scolding!”

“Oh, I see. You had a good night, did you?”

“You too?! God dammit!”

Appearing just when they were needed, Mitter and Wolfe immediately picked up on the situation and promptly got to teasing Cain.

“You had a good night, huh?”

“You have quite the relieved look on your face. You had a very good night, huh?”

“Can’t you hear me telling you to stop?! What are you, middle schoolers or something?!”

Cain couldn’t conceal his unrest as he took a concentrated barrage of teasing from all sides. The strongest warriors in the world exchanged banter just like any other kids their age would.

“Cain, what’s gotten into everyone?” asked Liz.

And Cain replied, “Don’t ask me!”

She was the only pure and innocent soul there, and thus the only one who hadn’t a clue what it was. The fact that she didn’t remember anything that had happened the day before only added to her confusion.

“You had a good night, huh?”

“You had a *good night*, huh?”

“You had a—*pffft!*—good night, huh?”

“Ah, for crying out loud! Quit messing with me...!”

A vortex of vile miasma lingered in the sky. Around them stretched a sooty wasteland from which sprouted not a single blade of grass. This harsh region was known as demonland. Home of humanity’s sworn foe.

From a key stronghold that housed the lord of all demons, Cain’s miserable cry echoed far, far into the distance. It crossed the plains and crossed the sky, and petered out, having fallen upon nothing but deaf ears.



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I Could Never Be a Succubus! Volume 3

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私はサキュバスじゃありません 3

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