

# I Could Never Be a Succubus!

Volume **5**

Author  
**Nora Kohigashi**

Illustrator  
**Wasabi**





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Dia was  
writhing  
again.

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5

"Nyaaaaaaaaaaaaahn!"



"A ninja..."

It was **Lisalinde**.  
Her unmistakable long,  
blonde hair cascaded over  
her kunoichi costume.





A slight grin spread across Cain's face as his holy sword let off its own radiance.

***"Try not to die, okay?"***







*"C'mon  
Sylphie, Melvy.  
To the bed."*

*"The sight of these two  
is making my elephant  
go brrr too."*

The elephant trunk  
on Liz's panties stood  
proud and tall.





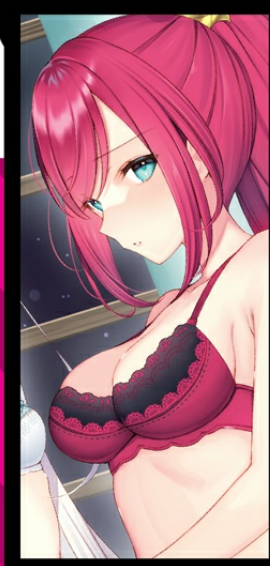
"Cain... ♡  
Cain... ♡"

Dammit...  
Calm down, Altina!



# Characters

## OVERVIEW



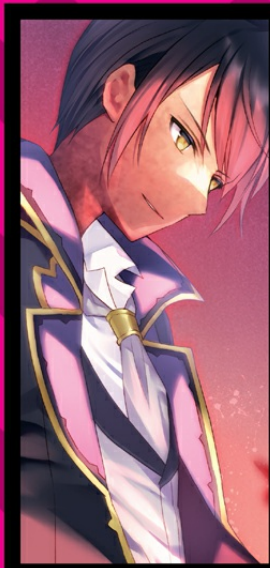
### Sylphonia

The proud Princess Knight of Bahelgarn and a member of the hero's party. Though she is a princess, Liz taught her the joy of serving others.



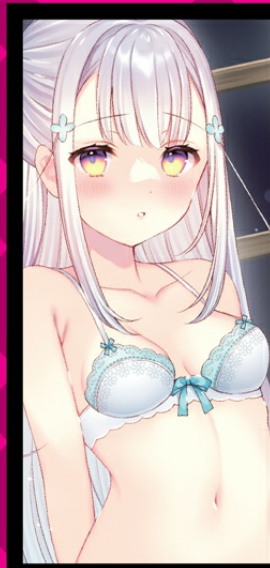
### Lisalinde

A pure and well-mannered girl. Although she's actually a succubus, she has lost her memories and powers.



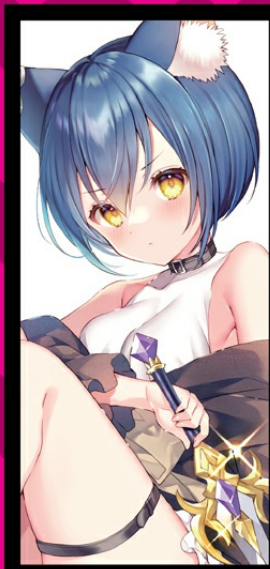
### Cain

The hero chosen by the holy sword. The admiration of all the academy girls. Though rough around the edges, he is sincere and cares strongly about his comrades.



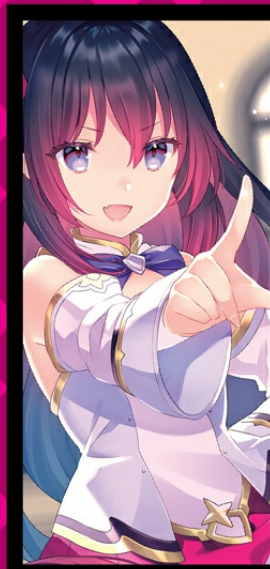
### Melvy

A white mage and a member of the hero's party, she's the anointed Saint of the Russel-Bell Sect. She was once innocent—then Liz trained her.



### Dia

An 18-year-old half-beast. Opposes Cain as the wielder of the true holy sword. Though she usually puts on a cool, collected face, she can be a little out of it.



### Kuon

A transfer student and former demon lord. Though she fought the hero's party once, she is now on friendly terms with them. She has a belligerent personality.



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# Prologue

The silver, shining blade flashed as it arced swiftly and brilliantly through the air, leaving a trail of white behind it as. The blade was curious and magnificently ornamented, with an overwhelming sense of allure. Though slender, it was unbendable, unbreakable, and unshatterable—the mere sight of it was enough to convince anyone that these were qualities it somehow possessed. It seemed to exist on a level above any ordinary blade.

“The holy sword.”

These words instinctively crossed the minds of everyone present the moment they laid eyes on it.

“God damn?!”

“Hraaaaaaaaah!”

Now, a mysterious individual in a reddish-brown coat pounced on Cain, swinging this holy sword. The figure wore a long, tattered, hooded coat and an ominous white mask to hide their face. They had a clearly suspicious air about them, but the silver sword they wielded was divine and beautiful.

The new hero.

Already, the heroes found themselves face-to-face with the enigmatic figure that had just recently been the topic of conversation. And the figure was clearly hostile, at that. As the sun deepened to red in its evening hours, the new hero had launched an ambush.

“Grgh!”

Fresh blood burst from Cain’s shoulder.

The new hero had bided their time, waiting atop the roof of one of the buildings lining Academy Town’s main street, their presence concealed. Once the time was right, they’d leaped from on high and taken Cain by surprise.

But Cain’s astounding, animalistic instinct had allowed him to sense the attack



at the last moment; he had narrowly managed to twist his body out of the way. However, he had failed to completely avoid it. This unanticipated assault left him severely wounded.

His body trembled with pain.

The battle between heroes new and old had suddenly begun.

“Wha?!”

“Cain?!”

Cain’s comrades cried out, unable to process what had just happened. And taking advantage of the chaos, the new hero immediately and silently launched a follow-up attack. The white light enveloping their holy sword broke off into holy bullets—a dozen or so in total—each firing off at Cain’s allies.

“Ugh!”

There was immense power behind the new hero’s light beams. The attack had Sylphie and the others grimacing, but they swiftly drew their weapons to fend them off. These girls were among the world’s strongest fighters. They’d been caught off guard, but it wasn’t long at all before they had shifted into combat mode and blocked the following attacks.

“Eeeep!”

“Liz!”

However, there was one member who had been unable to defend herself: Liz.

She was on the hero’s team as a trainee, her lack of combat experience working against her. A direct hit from a bolt of light sent her flying wildly through the air.

She hit the ground rolling, isolated from the rest of the group. The new hero silently prepared for another attack. They channeled mana into their holy sword, which let out a bright light in response. They were clearly winding up for something powerful.

“Grr...” Sylphie groaned.

They’d been put on the defensive. Though they’d managed to defend against



the spell earlier, this had forced them into defensive postures. The surprise attack had compromised their stances, preventing them from blocking the new hero's next attack.

Surely another powerful attack would strike them in the next instant. The new hero's mana was building, and the girls hadn't the leisure to stop it.

However, there was one person who could strike back.

"Hey."

"...?!"

Cain reacted with a sharp swing of his sword. The new hero hastily aborted their attack, barely dodging his horizontal slash.

The new hero tensed up. It had only been a handful of seconds since Cain had received the severe shoulder wound. Yet he had already regained his combat stance and even mounted a counterattack.

"Don't underestimate me!"

"...!"

Cain burst into a relentless barrage of attacks. The new hero, while fending them off, seemed astonished by his condition. Cain's shoulder was still pouring blood. He had done nothing to treat the wound. But ignoring the blood he shed, he focused on offense and nothing more. Blocking out the pain, abandoning defense, he swung with reckless abandon.

It was a desperate counter; there was no time to linger on gashes or blood loss.

"Hrah!"

"...!"

And it worked out in his favor.

By staying on the offensive, no matter the cost, he had managed to earn some precious moments. The new hero had no choice but to defend. If everyone attacked together, the new hero would be the one at a disadvantage. To the new hero, their greatest setback had been their failure to take out their



target with their initial surprise attack.

“Ah, hold up!”

Not wanting to be surrounded by Cain and his comrades, the new hero immediately fell back. They escaped with the deftness of a cat. They’d swiftly and decisively chosen to flee.

“Like hell you’re getting away!”

The heroes ran after them, but the new hero’s goal wasn’t a mindless retreat.

“Hm?”

“Ah.”

Seeing what lay at the end of their opponent’s escape route, Cain and his comrades frowned.

“Owww... Huh?”

It was Liz.

Liz, having been flung by the previous attack, was still on her behind a good distance from her allies. Her head was spinning from the pain, and she failed to notice the lone shadow approaching her at a breakneck pace.

The new hero had set Liz as their target.

“What?! What are you— Yipe!”

They swiftly circled around behind her and restrained her. Unfortunately, the difference in skill between Liz and the new hero was insurmountable, and there was nothing she could do.

*Is he trying to take Liz as a hostage?* Cain and his comrades all thought as they drew closer. But that wasn’t exactly what the figure was going for.

The new hero produced a certain something from their pocket. A spherical crystal known as a magic orb. These orbs were imbued with magic and could be used to cast a spell with no cost or delay—albeit only once. They were a convenient magic item in a pinch.

“Mm?”



Cain and his comrades felt a sense of foreboding as they eyed that orb. They'd seen one quite like it, and recently too. The color, the size, the shape—it was all the same. And so, it could be presumed that the magic it contained was the same as well. It was a rare orb that was difficult to obtain. Back when the heroes had set off to conquer the demon lord's villa, they had taken it with them as a last resort.

“A forced teleportation orb?!”

Not a moment after Cain had reached his conclusion, the new hero activated the orb.

It was a spatial magic that forcefully teleported anyone nearby to a predetermined location. Spatial magic was a very difficult art to master, and it typically required much time and preparation. The fact that they could cast such a spell in an instant was what made teleportation magic orbs so powerful and valuable.

“Wha...?!”

“Dammit!”

A blinding light enveloped Liz along with the new hero. Space distorted, their figures warping before disappearing. It was over the moment the spell was invoked. By that time, there was nothing that anyone could do.

“Liz!” Cain called out her name, but to no avail. As the light died down, there was nothing but empty space where she'd once been. Cain and his comrades had been left behind.

“Damn it all!” Cain cursed and clenched his fist.

Thus began the battle between two heroes.



## Chapter 50: Now—Dia, the New Hero

“Mmm...”

When I woke up, I found myself lying on a soft sofa. I rubbed my unfocused eyes and blinked a few times to get my bearings. The cool leather of the sofa felt nice and comfortable against my cheek.

I, Liz, slowly sat up.

“This is...”

I shook my hazy head and fretfully looked around.

It was an enclosed, brick room. Perhaps a basement, as there were no windows, and no sunlight streaming in. Several lanterns placed around the room illuminated the space in a reddish light.

The room was somewhat spacious with a good bit of free floor space despite the large sofa and table. There was a large bookshelf at the far end, packed tight with old, dusty books.

They didn't seem to be novels for entertainment, but rather academic and historic texts.

The temperature in the room was low. I could hear no sound from the outside.

And naturally, I had no recollection of this place.

*That's right...*

I'd been caught up in the battle with the new hero and captured. That magic orb the new hero had taken out at the end had likely been a forced teleportation orb.

*So I was brought here by force.*

I checked, just to be sure, but my body had not been bound with rope or chains. It seemed I had simply been tucked into bed on the sofa. It was a very

soft sofa, and I didn't feel any stiffness after sleeping on it.

In fact, it felt divine.

In any other circumstance, I would have loved to sleep more.

I didn't know if I could leave this room, but nothing was preventing me from ransacking the room itself if I wanted to. For a kidnapping victim, I felt rather comfortable.

The new hero's intentions were unknown.

"Hmm?"

As I thought over this and that, the door to the room creaked open.

I stood.

"Oh, you're awake?"

"New...hero?"

The one who entered was the new hero who'd fought with Cain and his party. They wore a tattered, reddish-brown coat, and a beautiful saintly sword hung at their hip. This was undoubtedly the same individual from before.

"How are you feeling? Do you feel unwell? If anything's wrong, don't hesitate to tell me."

But there was a significant difference from before. This new hero wasn't wearing a mask. Their face was fully exposed to the world.

"A woman..." I muttered.

The new hero was a woman.

She had removed the white mask and the hood that had covered her head and face. Her previously hidden form had been revealed.

She was a very pretty person with short, dark-blue hair and a dignified look in her eyes. Her stance was commanding, exuding the strength and presence of a hero. I'd convinced myself that the new hero would be a man, so she'd somewhat startled me.

The coat she wore was too big for her and hung baggily from her shoulders.



Thus, the lines of her body did little to elucidate her gender.

“My name is Dia. It’s a pleasure to meet you. And you’re Lisalinde, right?”

The new hero introduced herself. Dia, apparently. She already knew my name—meaning she’d done her research. As I feared, the new hero hadn’t made a mistake. She’d attacked Cain with clear malicious intent.

With that said, beyond her being a woman, there was another thing about her that took me by surprise.

“A half-beast...”

Cat ears were sticking out of her head. Covered in fur the same color as her hair, the cat ears atop her head twitched in response to my voice.

“Yeah, that’s right. I’m a half-beast.”





A half-beast—a race carrying the mixed blood of humans and beastfolk.

To explain, the beastfolk were a race possessing the characteristics of both humans and animals. Their appearance veered more toward animal than human more often than not, with many of them being entirely covered in fur or having the heads of beasts. They were considered to be closer to demons than humans.

Meanwhile, half-beasts were the ones who appeared more human. In most cases, their only animal traits were their ears and tails, and they were generally human-shaped. Other than enhanced hearing and a sharp sense of smell, they were just like humans.

The ones who existed in between humans and beastfolk—those were the half-beasts.

If I had to take a guess, Dia probably had a cat tail growing from her behind as well. She was a half-cat, after all.

“Do you have anything against half-beasts?”

“No...not exactly...”

She flashed a fearless smile.

Really, whether or not she was half-beast wasn't the issue; the woman before me had launched an attack on the hero. What's more, she'd even managed to injure him.

She was more than deserving of my caution.

“What do you intend to do with me?”

“No need to be on guard; I won't do you harm. I know you've got a lot of questions, but there's something I ought to tell you first,” Dia said as she pulled a chair and sat across from me. “For starters, why don't you have a seat?”

With her encouragement, I sat back down on the sofa I'd been sleeping on.

“I've got some delicious scones. How about it?”

“No... I'm fine.”

“That's a shame.”

Dia plucked up a bite-sized scone from the table and tossed it into her mouth. She didn't seem to be in much of a hurry, her motions supple and catlike. The scones did indeed look delicious.

I'd have taken one if I wasn't in enemy territory.

*Curses.*

"All right, now that thing I needed to tell you about? I took the liberty of casting a spell on you. You are unable to disclose any information about me."

"Huh?"

I blinked, startled.

"Anything you see here, anything you hear from me. You won't be able to pass on any information so long as it pertains to me. Keep that in mind, okay?"

"That's, um... Is it information suppression magic?"

"Yep, that's the one."

A spell that restricted a person's actions. It was just as she'd spelled it out—I would be physically incapable of telling anyone anything about Dia. That was the sort of magic it was.

Even if someone burst into the room and saved me at this very instant, I'd be unable to explain anything that had happened to me. What a pain it was.

"Here, have a look at your throat."

Dia passed over a hand mirror which let me get a good look at my neck. On it was a seal imbued with mana. Nothing about her could ever pass through my throat. I could tell that the mark had that power.

Even writing it down would be impossible.

I could see my furrowed brow reflected in the mirror. I'd been arbitrarily placed under a strange spell. It didn't feel too pleasant.

"Who are you?"

For starters, I asked the fundamental question. The information suppression magic prevented me from conveying any information I obtained here, but I still wanted to find out as much as I could.



“The true hero. Not a fake, but the real one.”

Dia answered my question. She drew the sword from her hip and showed it to me.

“This is Holy Sword Ikryl. I’m the true hero chosen by this holy sword.”

“Holy sword...”

Before my eyes was a beautiful, slender blade. The sword itself let off a silver glow, and the ornamentation of the cross guard was indescribably beautiful. This was certainly the sword she’d used in battle; the same one that had fired off powerful bullets of white light.

She had the qualifications to use the holy sword, and that made her the hero. That was simply logic that anyone could follow.

“It’s completely different from Sir Cain’s holy sword.”

It was clearly different from the sword he wielded. The size of the blade, the shape of the hilt, they seemed to bear little to no resemblance to one another apart from both being swords. Even their names were different. Cain’s sword was Holy Sword Andros, and Dia had just proclaimed hers to be Holy Sword Ikryl.

*There are two holy swords in the world? That’s the first I’m hearing about it.*

“My sword is the real holy sword. The one he wields is just a sham. You feel it, right?”

I stared at her questioningly.

“So, the long and short of the matter. I want that fake hero to step down.”

*Hey, now. Did she just declare Cain a fake?*

She casually came out with a claim that would have made the public swoon. What a reckless and fearsome person.

“We don’t need two heroes. I’m enough,” Dia said, taking a sip of tea.

*I see. I’m starting to understand her aim.*

The point was that Dia wanted to make it clear who the real hero was.

To crawl out of the woodwork proclaiming herself to be the true hero after all the work Cain had already done—it was a little brazen from my perspective. But Dia seemed to wholeheartedly believe that the sword in her hands was the true holy sword.

*Maybe there's something more to it.*

“Can’t you just work together? You’re both heroes, right?”

“No can do. I can’t trust the current hero’s holy sword.”

“Hmm?”

*She can't trust the...sword? There was something off about the way she put it.*

“Lisalinde, you are bait to lure the current hero here.”

“Bait?”

Dia pointed her index finger at me. “As long as you—the hero’s comrade—remain here, the current hero will most certainly storm this base to rescue you. That is the reason you were kidnapped.”

“That’s...”

“I brought you here using a forced teleportation orb. But spatial magic, you see. It leaves a mana trace behind.”

“A trace?”

“That’s right. If he follows the trace, he’ll be able to pin down the teleportation coordinates. It’s not easy, no siree. But I’m sure the hero’s comrades can do it.”

“Um...”

I put together what I’d just heard.

Following the mana traces of the teleportation, they’d be able to figure out where I’d been warped to. Meaning the heroes had a way of knowing the location of Dia’s base. And according to Dia, I was bait to lure them out.

“Oh, so you purposely leaked your location so you can intercept them here?”

“That’s the ticket. And that’s why I need you to take it easy.”



Dia, the new hero, wanted to settle the score with the current hero, Cain. I was just a good pretext to force his hand.

“By the way, this hideout is pretty far away. It’s more than ten days by horse from Academy Town. Sure, they’re going to storm this place eventually, but we’ve got some time to kill until then. And I don’t want you causing any unnecessary trouble.”

“Over ten days...”

“Granted, those heroes run faster than horses. They’ll be here in four days, three at the soonest. But whichever it is, there’s nothing to do until then.”

I had no idea what to say.

“So eat some sweets and take a load off.”

With that, Dia tossed another scone into her mouth.

*Curses. I want to eat one too. But they might be poisoned, so I can’t. Curses.*

I tried thinking about it calmly. Even though Dia said she didn’t want me to cause trouble, there seemed to be nothing I could actually do. There was quite a significant difference in our abilities.

Sure, she had the element of surprise, but still, Dia had managed to land a blow on Cain. Admittedly, it was for a short span of time, but she’d taken on the hero’s party alone and succeeded in kidnapping me. It wasn’t hard to imagine how difficult that was.

I probably wouldn’t stand a chance against her.

I wasn’t tied up. I was afforded the freedom to relax and eat sweets. But that was proof of her confidence. It didn’t matter what actions I took. She knew she could easily subdue me.

“When Cain gets here, are you going to use me as a hostage to threaten him?”

“Hmm?”

I voiced my fears in as strong a tone as I could muster.

I was bait to lure the heroes out, and also a hostage. It was possible for Dia to

use me as a shield while holding a knife to me. If it really came down to it, I trusted Cain to take decisive action, even if it meant leaving me to the wayside, but that was my concern.

Judging by Dia's reaction, though, that wasn't what she had in mind.

"Oh! That! You don't have to worry about that, Lisalinde! I have no intention of using you as a hostage!"

"Huh?"

"I'm a hero. I wouldn't resort to such underhanded tactics. You think up some nasty things, Lisalinde."

"Um..."

Dia chuckled away. There was no malice in her laughter; her smile was genuine to no end.

"Don't worry. So long as I call myself a hero, I don't intend to do anything cowardly. Besides, the plan this time around isn't to settle things with him."

"What?"

"I just need to lure the heroes here, and that will be enough. Battle is not my objective this time. It is no exaggeration to say that I've essentially succeeded already."

Dia casually said it while picking up another scone.

I couldn't quite grasp what she meant. Luring the heroes to her hideout was enough? Battle wasn't the objective?

*Then what exactly is she after?*

"What's that supposed to...?"

"You'll understand eventually."

She put an end to that topic just like that. I got the feeling she wouldn't explain even if I asked her to.

I decided to try a different question. "Incidentally, what's your relationship with Brian, captain of the royal guard?"

“Who’s that?”

For the first time since I met her, Dia looked genuinely puzzled. Going off her blank stare, I had to conclude, *Ah, she really doesn’t know the guy. So he really has nothing to do with her?*

Brian had prattled on about making a comrade of the new hero, but Dia wasn’t even aware that he existed.

“Well, you know how it is. You’ll be spending the next three to four days here. I’m sure I don’t have to spell it out, but resistance is futile. You can’t beat me with your abilities.” Dia drove the point home.

“Yeah, I know.”

“I’m sure it’ll get boring, so why not pick up a book? That bookshelf over there... Oh, yeah, there are no novels on that one. Unfortunate. Anyway, the scones and tea really aren’t poisoned, so enjoy them. If you need someone to talk to, well, I’ll be right here. I’m not the most interesting person, but I’ll do my best.”

“Thank you for your consideration.”

I gave a slight bow, and she returned a slight nod.

“Take it easy.”

And there, the conversation ended. At least, for now.

Dia put on the white mask she’d been wearing earlier. She draped the hood over her head, returning to the same appearance as when she’d attacked Cain. With her face out of sight, she was back to where it was hard to even make out her gender.

She stepped away from me and began to read a book. She’d pulled quite a difficult-looking one from the shelf, scrutinizing it with a serious glint in her eyes.

It didn’t look like she was reading to kill time. It was more like she had something she needed to do—like she was researching something crucial.

With the conversation over, there was nothing but a long silence. I let the strength drain from my body as I entrusted my weight to the sofa.



*How should I put it? The new hero is a little surprising.*

She was no ordinary foe. She'd landed a hit on Cain and managed to kidnap me while going against the hero's party. That wasn't normal.

I felt an unsettling sense of mystery about her. Though she claimed her holy sword was the real one and that she needed to defeat the imposter Cain, it was hard to discern how much of that was true. I got the sense she wasn't telling the whole truth. I had yet to grasp her true nature.

But what was it?

For some reason, she didn't seem like a villain.

I tried to think about why I felt that way. Why didn't I consider her a bad guy?

It probably came down to the information suppression magic.

It was presumably necessary on her part. She'd cast magic on me to ensure nothing I heard or saw here ever got out. Even if I was saved from this base, I'd be unable to tell the heroes about my conversation with Dia.

But even without casting a spell like that, there was a quicker and more reliable way to achieve that same thing. She just had to kill me.

Capturing me gave Cain a clear reason to find the hideout—I understood that part. But she'd succeed in that goal even if she killed me here. Cain and the others didn't know if I was dead or alive.

If there was even the slightest chance that their comrade was alive, those heroes would put everything they had toward rescuing them. That was the sort of people they were.

So if she killed me here and now, she'd protect all her information, she'd eliminate the troublesome chance of her captive making a mess of the situation, and she'd still lure Cain to her hideout. There was plenty in it for her.

But Dia didn't even consider it.

She wouldn't kill me, wouldn't use me as a hostage, and instead went at it in a roundabout way by casting information suppression magic. Looking at it the other way, the information suppression magic was essentially her way of saying she expected me to escape her hideout alive.

She was being very considerate. She was being very thoughtful while going forward with her plan.

After thinking over it for a bit, I placed one of Dia's scones in my mouth. The crispy texture was perfect to bite through, and the sweetness was just right.

As she'd said, it wasn't poisoned.

It was like I was seeing a glimpse of who she really was.

"Hmmm..."

*Now, considering all of this, I need to think about what actions I should take next.*

As Dia said, perhaps there was nothing I could do. With the difference in our abilities, any resistance I put up would be quickly suppressed. But if I wanted to be in any way useful to my comrades, I needed to do it nonetheless.

I wouldn't forgive myself if I gave up from the start and spent the next handful of days spacing out. I needed to search for a possibility.

"Hmm..."

I needed to assess what was and wasn't possible. It was tough to take action as a captive.

But there was no need to rush. According to Dia, it would take Cain and his party at least three days to arrive. I just needed to think up a brilliant idea by then.

I still had plenty of time.

Through our conversations over the next three days, perhaps I'd glean more about her disposition, personality, and past. Talking to her, getting to know her... That was all I could do right now.

And somehow, I had a feeling that dialogue was the most important thing. I intuitively felt that getting to know her and understanding her circumstances was absolutely essential to solving this problem.

I decided to talk at every opportunity I got. To gather information and figure out what I could do before time ran out.

*Yes, this is going to be a long, quiet battle of wits over the next three to four days.*

I bit into a scone as I resolved myself to the task.

“Hmm...”

*Then what sort of conversations should we have? What should I say to her? What information should I try to probe for?*

It happened just as the thought crossed my mind.

“Hm?”

“Huh?”

All of a sudden, space distorted. A mass of highly dense mana coalesced behind Dia. The space there was dark and stagnant, and viscous, and twisted. A spiral of mana that seemed to spring up from nothing.

It was so sudden that Dia and I were both late to react.

“Ah...”

I recognized this mana from somewhere.

Yes, it was from when the heroes had tried to conquer the demon lord’s villa. I’d been apprehended by Kuon and warped to the villa with the heroes. At the time, I’d been caught in a swirl of black mana. Spatial distortion magic. A super difficult and drastic move that Kuon was capable of using.

And now, the same phenomenon was unraveling before my eyes.

Surely there couldn’t be too many people capable of using such a difficult spell.

The ones who burst from the distortion were the very people I’d been expecting.

“Hrah!”

“Take this!”

From the black vortex emerged Cain and Kuon.

Dia was clearly flustered. I couldn’t see her expression through the white



mask, but her body perked up, her muscles contracting.

Completely ignoring the three-day journey, Cain and Kuon had immediately appeared.

“Raaaaaah!”



“Hrah!”

Sir Cain came in swinging, making a wide sweep with his holy sword the moment he appeared from the spatial distortion behind Dia, who had yet to even turn around. She was caught completely off guard—the perfect surprise attack.

“Guh!!!”

Cain’s blade traced a long gash down Dia’s back. Her blood splattered through the air.

She had expected it to take more than three days for the hero and his comrades to arrive. Presumably, she hadn’t considered the possibility of there being anyone capable of using spatial magic. Kuon was a former demon lord, but her existence had yet to be officially disclosed to the public. To Dia, Kuon was the dark horse; a complete unknown.

“Hraaah!”

“Kuh!”

Cain quickly followed with another swing, but by then Dia had drawn her own holy sword, narrowly managing to parry his strike. Even with the grievous wound on her back, she managed to defend herself just in the nick of time.

“Liz, are you okay?!”

“Y-Yes! I’m fine!”

“I see!”

My voice trembled as I responded to his question.

“Bwah ha ha ha hah! Dark Thunder!”

“Dammit!”

Kuon unleashed a dark, crackling bolt of lightning, which spread across the room, leaving no escape. Dia was forced onto the defensive, holding her holy sword up to block the magic.

This was practically the complete opposite of what had happened in Academy Town. Cain and Kuon had launched the ambush this time, and they were the



ones setting the pace.

“Rah!”

“Guh!”

Cain sent out a kick, slamming Dia’s body against the wall.

“We’re here! Is Liz safe?!”

“Are you okay, Liz?”

“Sylphie! Melvy!”

As Cain and Dia fought, more and more figures emerged from the spatial vortex. Sylphie, Melvy, Rachel, Mitter, Lalo—the members of the hero’s party appeared one after the next.

“Tch!”

At this point, it seemed Dia had been driven into a corner. It was looking more and more like she would not be able to escape this...or so I thought, but Dia moved swiftly. Realizing she was at a disadvantage, she immediately changed gears to focus. She moved to what seemed like a completely unremarkable wall and smacked the brick.

This seemed like a meaningless action, yet soon, the wall changed. What had looked like an ordinary wall swung open like a door, revealing a passage beyond.

“What?!”

“A hidden door!”

She’d thrown open a hidden door in the room.

And silently, she raced off down the narrow passageway to whatever lay beyond, her back still dripping with fresh blood.

“Wait!”

Naturally, Cain chased after her. But it wasn’t long before he stopped in his tracks.

“What’s wrong, Cain?!” demanded Lalo. “Why do you halt?!”

“Traps.”

Instead of pursuing Dia, Cain observed the dim passage with a sharp glint in his eyes.

“The whole place is rigged to high heaven. They’re probably set up to not react to that guy. But they won’t be so forgiving for us.”

Cain called the new hero a “guy.” Dia had been wearing a mask and a hood, so Cain was still not aware of her true identity.

“Hmm, he’s going to get away at this rate. We’ll set off the traps if we don’t proceed with caution, but if we take our time, we’ll never catch up.”

“He’s well prepared.”

Even as they spoke, Dia continued her mad dash down through the passage and quickly disappeared from sight.

Cain scratched his head in embarrassment. We’d let the new hero get away.

“You sure you’re okay, Liz?”

“Y-Yes! Thank you all for coming to my rescue! I’m sorry for all the trouble I caused!”

“Then it’s fine.”

As if to say they’d at least achieved the bare minimum of what they’d set out to do, Cain let the tension drain from his body as he sheathed his weapon away. Seeing their leader relax, our comrades let out deep sighs as well.

The battle was finished. The fight that had so abruptly broken out between the new hero and the current one was over in an instant.

“So...Liz, what happened here?”

“About that...”

“Hmm?”

He asked me what had happened to me, yet I found I couldn’t open my mouth. I was currently under the effects of information suppression magic. I couldn’t speak about anything relating to Dia.

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh, um, Liz, are you perhaps under an information suppression spell?”  
Noticing my distress, Melvy brought her face close to my throat. The magical marking engraved there was what prevented me from speaking. Melvy observed it carefully, then nodded. “As I thought,” she said to the others. “It seems that the new hero has cast information suppression magic on her.”

“So in short, she can’t talk about anything that happened here?”

“That’s correct.”

*They immediately realized the nature of my predicament. Leave it to the hero’s party. That saves me a lot of explaining.*

“Melvy, can you do anything about it?”

“Um...it seems to be pretty sturdily constructed. I imagine it will take around three weeks to lift it.”

“Three weeks, even for you...”

Melvy was a saint by title, so it went without saying that she was very well-versed in magic. She was a master of her craft, capable of instantly removing all sorts of curses and status abnormalities; she’d never failed to dispel anything magic-related before.

Yet even for her, it would take three weeks to lift the spell cast on me. It was a sign of just how adept a spellcaster Dia was.

“Looks like that bastard’s got some tricks up his sleeves. This isn’t gonna be easy.”

“Indeed.”

“Well, that sucks.” Cain plopped himself down on the sofa in the room, lying back and kicking up his legs languidly.

“He’s got a nice place here, now that I’m looking at it. Wish we had a secret base this nice,” Cain said, scanning the room. “I’m guessing we’re underground? Seems about right. Havin’ a secret underground bunker sounds pretty amazing.”



“Is this one of those ‘guy things,’ Mitter?”

“Maybe we should make a secret base too...”

This underground hideout seemed to get Cain’s and Mitter’s blood pumping. *I suppose this is a man’s idea of an adventure*, I thought to myself. They were both staring enviously at the hidden door Dia had escaped through.

“The scones were delicious. They weren’t poisoned either.”

“Oh?”

Everyone helped themselves to the scones on the table.

The fierce attack from just moments ago seemed like nothing more than a dream as we relaxed in someone else’s hideout.

“Now then, we’ve shown the new hero a bit of pain, and we’ve achieved our primary objective.”

“Which didn’t take long at all.”

“Once again, everyone, thank you so much for rescuing me. Truly.”

“Don’t mention it,” Cain said before offering his concluding remarks.

“Anyways, the mission’s complete, so we’ll return to Academy Town. Let’s occupy this hideout, dispatch the army, and have them conduct a thorough investigation of the place. We might figure something out.”

“Yes, I’ll tell my brother to send the knights.”

“A’ight, I’ll leave it up to you, Sylphie. We all need to work out some countermeasures for this new hero. He’s proven to be more formidable than I anticipated. It was staggering how fast he closed in on us. For the time being, try to be conscious of the bastard whenever you’re out in the open. You got that?”

“Yes!”

Cain was clearly wary of Dia. He acknowledged her as a genuine threat—not something to be trifled with. He evidently recognized her strength.

“Now then, it’s about time to head back,” Cain called out to Lalo. “How about it, Lalo? Anything catch your eye?”

Mr. Lalo was rummaging through the bookshelves. As Dia had previously mentioned, there didn't seem to be any novels for entertainment; no light reading. The spines looked old, the titles difficult and matter-of-fact. They were likely research documents and historical records related to the heroes.

What resources had this new hero collected, and what information did they contain? Lalo had quickly gotten to looking into it.

With that said, it hadn't been long since we'd first arrived in the room. There was no way he could pick up on any important clues that quickly.

"I found something rather interesting, in fact."

"Oh? That was fast."

But leave it to Lalo—he already had his leads. We gathered around him.

"What sort of info?"

"A record of *two* holy swords."

Cain's brow twitched. "What?"

Two holy swords. This information was game-changing.

Thinking back, Dia *had* emphasized the significance of the holy sword. She'd claimed her holy sword was the real one while Cain's was a fake. We all held our breaths as we immediately came face-to-face with the intel that lay at the crux of this conflict.

"To put it simply..." Mr. Lalo began, before launching into a summary of the history of the holy sword, as apparently penned by this newcomer.

It all started approximately two thousand years ago, during the War of Heaven and Earth only spoken of in legend—a great war where God clashed with the Devil.

Humanity was caught up in the conflict, resulting in countless casualties. Feeling pity for them, God bestowed power upon the people.

The power came in the form of Holy Sword Ikryl.

This marked the first appearance of a holy sword in human history.

With Holy Sword Ikryl in hand, its first wielder repelled the attacks of the Devil in hell. The divine blade protected humanity from the calamities wrought by the Devil and aided God in His counterattack. By the time the War of Heaven and Earth reached its conclusion, the wielder of the holy sword had come to be known as “the Hero.”

It was the first time in human history that a true hero had been born.

Humanity faced numerous calamities after that, but each time, they would overcome them with the aid of Holy Sword Ikryl. Demon invasions, the awakening of the ravenous beasts, even natural disasters. Heroes of various generations, aided by the power of Holy Sword Ikryl—the gift from God—overcame every calamity thrown at them.

But then, approximately eight hundred years ago, a mysterious new holy sword entered the scene: the Holy Sword Andros.

At the time, the demon lord sought to conquer the world, and instead of Holy Sword Ikryl, it was Andros’s wielder who stepped up to destroy the demon lord of the era. Holy Sword Ikryl remained sealed away without purpose while Holy Sword Andros saved the world.

The people of the world conflated the two holy swords.

As per the legends of old, they believed that the original holy sword had saved the world as it always had, and praised the hero of that time. Many of the human nations rewarded that hero with glory, honor, and status.

Around the world, recognition of these two holy swords became muddled. Holy Sword Andros—which seemed to have come from nowhere—came to be seen as the same blade as Holy Sword Ikryl, which had served humanity for ages. And ever since, Holy Sword Andros became the key player in history.

Holy Sword Ikryl remained sealed away while Holy Sword Andros took the stage. Their roles reversed, Holy Sword Andros became the one and only holy sword. The only one known in the present day.

Holy Sword Ikryl was forgotten, buried by history.

Despite its accomplishments, however, this doesn’t change the fact that Holy Sword Andros is a mysterious sword of unclear origin. It suddenly burst onto

the stage of history roughly eight hundred years ago and has served its role ever since.

Where did it come from? Who made it? How was it made? Not a single thing about it is known.

Every attempt to trace its roots results in nothing but dead ends.

On the other hand, the origins of Holy Sword Ikryl are clear. It was crafted in the divine realm during the War of Heaven and Earth. It was a sword given power by God, and it has always served humanity reliably.

So what is this mysterious Andros?

As the wielder of Holy Sword Ikryl, how could I trust the fate of the world to another sword that no one knows anything about?

“...or so it is written.”

We all fell silent as Mr. Lalo’s explanation wrapped up.

The sword in Cain’s possession was Holy Sword Andros. It was the holy sword recognized all across the world, but according to these documents, in reality it was of unknown provenance. On the other hand, Dia possessed the Holy Sword Ikryl, a sword that was said to have been handed down by God.

I didn’t know how I was supposed to interpret this information.

“This document was likely compiled by that new hero. There are several personal comments included. He says it was difficult to dig into the history of the era where the two swords became conflated, but he reached this conclusion by going through mountains upon mountains of records,” Lalo said, glancing at the bookshelf behind him.

The shelf was lined with old, worn books. They were probably all historical texts relating to the holy swords. Dia had deciphered them to draw her conclusion.

“Hmm...” Cain folded his arms. “It’d be easy enough to dismiss it all as ridiculous drivel...but he gathered a lot of references to get to this point. If we want to refute all that evidence, we’ll need to provide some evidence of our



own.”

He remained calm. He wasn't going to deny Dia's data based on his emotions; he calmly analyzed the current situation.

“I heard that your holy sword was guarded by your family for generations,” said Lalo.

“Yeah, that's true. Maybe we can get some information from them? But we're talking about eight hundred years ago. It's possible they were just honoring the teachings of their ancestors without knowing squat.”

“Hmm, I can see that happening...”

We cocked our heads, pondering what was written in the document. We didn't have the basis to refute it all here and now. There was no guarantee that everything written within was true—it was information from the enemy, and it was only natural to approach it with suspicion. But that didn't mean we had the grounds to completely deny it.

But then, I realized something.

During my conversation with Dia, she'd mentioned something: that her objective in luring the heroes here wasn't to fight them. She just had to bring them to the hideout—that was enough. She'd certainly said something to that effect.

Surely her true objective had been to show these documents to Cain and his comrades. To present her thesis that *her* Holy Sword Ikryl was the real one and to shake their faith in Cain's Holy Sword Andros. It was to this end that she had orchestrated the heroes' visit to her base.

She said she couldn't trust Cain's holy sword. That she wanted the false hero to step down. She was attempting to assert her legitimacy to rattle the heroes.

I stared at the band of heroes. Due to the information suppression spell, I couldn't disclose these thoughts to the others. It was frustrating.

“No need to think too hard about it. In the end, it's information from the enemy. We've got no obligation to take it at face value.”

“Point taken.”

Cain casually scratched his head. He seemed unconcerned. There were some things we just couldn't know for sure. That was the conclusion we all seemed to reach.

“Oho ho ho! Why, Cain, this document ends with quite the passionate love letter.”

“Love letter?”

Lalo's sudden laughter had Cain furrowing his brow. Mr. Lalo lifted the papers high and read them out.

“Cast aside the title of hero along with your holy sword. I will take care of saving the world.”

Our faces all stiffened. To think someone in this world would dare tell him to quit being a hero. It was such a bold statement, it had us all holding our breath.

But Cain alone gave a bemused grin.

“Well, ain't that something?”

The edges of his lips curled into a wicked grin, a smile that suited him perfectly. Like a predator who had found the ultimate toy, he chuckled softly to himself at this new challenge, clenching his fists.

And so, the battle between the current and new heroes intensified.

## Chapter 51: Now—Of Kunoichi and Aphrodisiacs

Angry yells echoed through the streets. A fight had broken out in a corner of town. Two grown men were throwing barefisted punches at one another, their faces swelling with each blow. A crowd of onlookers gathered around them, jeering and shouting—egging them on and cheering for every punch and kick.

The sun was still high in the sky, but the crowd was clearly drunk already. I could see the flushed faces and unsteady steps of everyone present.

“Ha ha ha... Quite the scene.”

“It’s always like that around here. Don’t stare too much, Liz. I don’t want you getting any bad ideas.”

“G-Got it...”

Cain’s casual explanation got a dry chuckle from me. With a side glance at the continuing fight, we continued on toward our destination.

The name of the town was Gyauk Down. It was roughly a three-hour carriage ride from Academy Town—relatively close, but significantly rougher around the edges.

Academy Town was a place where the nation’s pride was on the line; where national dignity shaped an optimal educational environment, ensuring the highest standards of safety. Conversely, all the elements that could undermine public order—brothels, gambling dens, and the like—were systematically excluded.

Yet there was still a deep-seated demand for such places, something that drew the people who couldn’t find a foothold in Academy Town. What couldn’t thrive there found a home here, forming the town that came to be known as Gyauk Down.

It was here that Satina and I once wandered into the red-light district by accident. For some unclear reason, we were treated with great respect and enthusiasm by seasoned courtesans like Vanessa and Sumire. *What even was*

*that?*

But I digress.

We were now in one of the more unsavory parts of Gyauk Down. The red-light district where the courtesans resided had been relatively welcoming and well maintained. This area was more akin to the slums.

There was a constant din. The streets were filthy, with grime clinging to every surface and trash strewn all about. It was a place rife with violence—a truly unhealthy environment.

“What brings us here today?” I asked. “No one told me anything.”

“You’ll see when you get there.”

“It’s nothing too important. Don’t get your hopes up.”

I was joined by Sylphie, Cain, and Melvy. They were going out on some errand and asked me to come along—and that was the extent of my debriefing. I was never told where we were going, or for what.

I could only guess it was somehow related to dealing with Dia, the new hero. But without any concrete information, I’d followed them to Gyauk Down.

Incidentally, we’d come on our own feet without using a carriage. The heroes were faster than horses. They’d trained themselves so well that they preferred running over riding most of the time. It was a bizarre reality that I had no choice but to accept.

Naturally, I was roped into it too, and forced to run.

*Urgh... Why does it feel like running will be our primary mode of transportation from now on?*

“We’re here. This is the place.”

My thoughts were interrupted as Cain came to a stop in front of a particular building. It seemed we’d reached our destination.

“‘Where-a-Pawn’?” I read out the sign.

*Pawn... A pawnshop, perhaps? What business could we have at a pawnshop?*

“Hey there,” Cain called as he pushed open the door.

The bell jingled, announcing our arrival to those inside.

“Welcome... Oh, Cain.”

“Yo, David. I got a request for you.”

“Always appreciated.”

We were greeted by a man called David. He appeared to be the shopkeeper. He was clearly not busy, as he was currently reading a newspaper behind the counter.

The shop was completely devoid of any customers besides us. Its shelves were packed with all sorts of items, giving it the typical cluttered look of a pawnshop. Perhaps it was the poor location, tucked away in the depths of the slums, to which this shop owed its lack of business.

“I hear you’ve been having issues with this new hero.”

“Yeah, *huge* issues. He suddenly attacked us right in the middle of the street. I’m sure you can guess why we’re here today.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know already.”

David was tall and lanky, and spoke casually to Cain. He seemed like a mild man despite his ragged clothes. But there was just *something* about him. I got the feeling he would look perfect doing business in a sharp, snazzy suit.

I didn’t really understand why, but that was my impression of him.

“That makes things easy,” Cain said before violently planting his elbow on the counter. “The request is about the new hero. Fork over every last bit of info you have on them; I’ve got a list of other things I want you to look into too.”

“Come now, we handle *those* requests in the back room. Not here.”

“Who cares? There’s no one else in the shop.”

David lowered his newspaper and slowly stood.

Something felt off about their conversation. This was supposed to be a pawnshop—a place where people came to pawn goods for money. So why was Cain here, asking about information on the new hero? David didn’t seem to find the request unusual either. Neither seemed to even consider the pawnshop’s



typical services.

*What does he mean by “those requests”?*

I tilted my head a little, puzzled.

“Sylphonia, Melvy, it’s been far too long. How have you been?”

“I’m glad to see you in good health, David.”

“Um, thank you for setting up shop so close to our new base. It’s very convenient.”

Sylphie and Melvy were both friendly with him. It seemed I was the only one unfamiliar with the shop and the man who ran it.

Scratching his head, David said, “Opening up within Academy Town was too difficult, you see. But this place is interesting in its own right, with all the unique info that comes in. With that said...”

“Hmm?”

For some reason, David suddenly cut himself off, his body freezing up. He was clearly acting strange. He was *petrified*, his mouth stuck open mid-sentence, his eyes wide. *What could have happened to him?* I wondered. It was almost like he’d seen something, realized something, and couldn’t hide his shock. Something completely unanticipated had appeared before him, scaring him stiff.

*What could he have seen to surprise him that much?*

David’s eyes were pointed at...me.

*He’s surprised to see me? No. Surely not.*

I was meeting David for the first time. What part of me could have surprised him, exactly? And so, it was utterly impossible for him to be reacting to me.

“L-L-Lady L-Lisalinde?!”

“Wah?!”

His voice transitioned into a high-pitched squeal.

“Wh-Wh-What is Lady Lisalinde doing here?!”

“Huh? Wha...?”

He shuffled back, face pale.

His legs were shaking like a newborn fawn as he pressed his back against the wall to keep himself up. His eyes were open as far as they could go, as he seemed startled by my very existence.

*But why? What's gotten into him all of a sudden?*

“We added Liz to our team as a trainee,” Cain spoke up. “Didn’t you get the report?”

David’s voice quavered as he replied, “I read the report...but no one told me she was coming *today!*”

Seriously, what was wrong with him? He’d begun acting strange the moment he saw me.

“Um, Mr. David?”

“Eeeeeep?!”

I only had to say his name for him to shriek like the world was about to end. What had I even done?

“Um... It is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Lisalinde, and I am currently working under the hero’s party as a trainee. I still have a long way to go, but I do hope we can get along,” I introduced myself.

“Th-Th... The pleasure is all... Yes, the pleasure is all mine... Ha ha...” he replied, the corners of his lips twitching.

*Yes, I’m sure of it. We’ve never met before.*

It was our first time meeting, so why was he so terrified? I’d never gotten a reaction like this from anyone before.

“Good, now you know one another. Let’s get down to business. Show us to the back room.”

“Uh, Cain... My stomach is suddenly starting to act up. Maybe I should close up shop for the day...”

“Stop whining and get to work, idiot.”

“Aaaaaah...”

Cain grabbed him by the collar and dragged him into the back room.

*Seriously, what was that?*

Neither Sylphie nor Melvy seemed in any way put off by David’s curious behavior. They followed behind, perfectly calm. But something just wasn’t sitting right with me.

*What did I do? No, I haven’t done anything. He’s just being odd. I have not done anything!*

With a lingering, hazy feeling, I trailed behind into the back of the shop.

“An...information broker?”

I blinked in surprise.

We were in the back room of the pawnshop. David had let us through, and now he and Cain were about to discuss the real business at hand. I was the only one who didn’t quite understand what was happening. *So this isn’t a pawnshop, then?*

Cain, Sylphie, and Melvy had never intended to use this as a pawnshop at all. They hadn’t brought anything of value to pawn, and David hadn’t gotten ready to appraise anything.

I was the only one lost, caught in a daze. So they decided to explain it to me before getting down to it.

“That is correct, Lady Lisalinde. The pawnshop is just a front. In reality, the merchandise we handle is information.”

“A-An information brokerage...”

I stared, wide-eyed.

“Dealing with information is a delicate job, you see. There are times when we need to conceal our identity to do our work. A lot of people prefer to keep their mouths shut once they know you’re an information broker,” Cain explained.

“And you do tend to get your life targeted,” David added. “Those who are up

to no good... Well, they'd love nothing more than to wipe out everyone like me. That's why we need to work in secret like this."

"H-Hmm..."

I gulped as I learned about these inner workings.

An information broker. That was certainly a job that made it difficult to live within the world at large.

"A pawnshop pairs decently well with an information brokerage, you see. The valuables that the customers bring in, how they obtained them, why they're selling them. You get information just by hearing the stories they tell."

"And that's why this pawnshop's actually an information brokerage in disguise. You get it, Liz?"

"Yes, thank you very much. It sounds like you have a lot on your plate, David."

I could accept that explanation. It was a difficult and demanding job. I found myself worrying for the man who worked in such a dangerous field.

"A lot... A lot indeed. Ha ha ha..."

"Mr. David?"

*But why?*

The light seemed to fade from his eyes as he heard me speak.

"It really is a lot. There's no telling what might happen to you if you get captured by the enemy... Ha ha... Seriously..."

"What's wrong, Mr. David?"

"Ah! I-I didn't mean anything by it! I'm just talking about the industry as a whole. I'm not complaining about anything *you've* done, Lady Lisalinde!"

"Mr. David?"

"Eep! Don't bully me!"

*What is this?*

I hadn't said anything; he'd just taken it upon himself to be terrified of me. His whole body was trembling again as he cried out. For some reason, he was

looking at me like I was some great lord of terror.

*I don't get it. Why? Why is he so afraid of someone as pure, wholesome, and well-mannered as me? I've never bullied anyone in my life. Is there just something wrong with him?*

"O-Oh...that's right! How about a gift to mark our first meeting?"

Sensing that our conversation was spiraling into a muddled mess, I forcibly changed the topic.

"A gift? From you, Lady Lisalinde?"

"Yes, Sir Cain said he was going to introduce me to someone I would be working closely with, so I brought a gift."

Though I'd only changed the topic out of desperation, I had indeed brought a gift.

"A gift... Don't tell me... Is it the sweet release of death?!"

"It's not!"

Just how scared of me was he?

I produced an item from the paper bag I'd brought along with me.

"It's...a candle?"

"An aromatic candle, to be precise."

Everyone stared fixedly at the item I presented.

An "aromatic" candle was just a scented candle. Once lit, the smell would spread all across the room, filling it with a pleasant and soothing fragrance. They were quite relaxing and popular among women.

Making one by hand was surprisingly easy: you just had to melt an existing candle in a double broiler, add essential oils, and voila. Aromatic candles were so popular among women that the kits to make them were often sold out.

"Hmm, an aromatic candle? Not too shabby."

"It's a surprisingly normal gift, coming from Liz."

"I'm *always* normal!"



*What do you take me for, Cain?!*

“Thank you, Lady Lisalinde. Shall we light it up now?”

“Go right ahead!”

David promptly transferred a light to the candle wick. The flame trembled as the fine scent of lavender rolled across the room.

“It’s a very calming fragrance.”

“An aromatic candle. I’ve never used one before, but it’s better than I thought. Maybe I should try using one in my room sometime.”

“Just say the word and I’ll make one for you too, Sylphie.”

“That would be wonderful.”

The smell of the aromatic candle put everyone at ease. Finally, we could talk about work. It was, of course, regarding intel on the new hero Dia.

“Well then, allow me to share the information you’ve requested of me.”

“Go ahead.”

David pulled out some documents and was just about to read them. But then, there was another surprise interruption.

“Hold it right there!”

“Hm?”

The door flew forcefully open, the air booming with the voice of a young girl.

“What?”

Our attention was turned to the commotion—to the girl who stood in the doorway. After raising her voice, the girl hustled into the room.

“Sir David! I daresay, please wait before you share that information! There is a secret agent among us!”

“H-Huh? Um, Noelia? What’s gotten into you?”

The girl pulled the brakes on our discussion, her demeanor dire.

“Um?”

Everyone blinked in confusion. Who exactly was she? We were all at a loss.

“Sir David! You must be vigilant with these things! I daresay, a spy has made it into your *very castle!*”

“Wh-What are you talking about, Noelia? Er, for starters, I should introduce you. Everyone, this is my subordinate, Noelia.”

“Right...”

We offered an ambiguous reply, still unsure what to make of this.

Noelia had blonde hair, which she'd tied into a bun at the back of her head. She stared at us defiantly, her chest puffed out and her head held high. She seemed like a strong-willed girl.

“I am Noelia! The one in charge of intelligence for this fine establishment! It is an honor to meet the esteemed members of the hero's party!”

“R-Right...”

Noelia cockily introduced herself. But we could do little more than give a half-hearted reply. What did she mean by a spy? What gave her that impression? We had plenty of questions.

But...

Before that, there was one thing that had to be addressed first.

“Ms. Noelia... Why are you dressed like a ninja?”

Namely, her peculiar outfit.

She was wearing the garb of a ninja: a short black robe fastened with a red sash at the waist. Her hands were covered in armored gloves while her forehead was wrapped in a headband with a metal forehead protector. She was unmistakably dressed as a *kunoichi*—a female ninja.

Ninja were traditional espionage agents from the Far East. They dressed in black to blend into the night and performed assassinations, reconnaissance, and sabotage. They were a shadowy group operating on the underside of society.

Essentially, they were the East's equivalent of spies.

It just so happened that ninja were incredibly popular in our country. The

image of them stealthily moving through the night in dark robes appealed to the adventurous spirit of young boys. By contrast, our country's spies were often imagined in sleek suits. They had their own degree of coolness, but the gap between these two images seemed to further the popularity of ninja here.

All that aside, *why* was Noelia dressed like a ninja? It felt like it would be impossible to have a proper conversation without addressing the question.

Noelia puffed out her chest and replied, "I keep no secrets! Truth be told, this information brokerage is a ninja clan, and I daresay, this attire is the traditional uniform for—"

"Oh, there's really no particular significance to her outfit, so you can just ignore it, Lady Lisalinde."

"Sir David!"

David had cut Noelia off and answered in her place.

*No significance?* Noelia's eyes widened in shock.

"What are you saying, Sir David?! Are we not a proud ninja clan that upholds the noble spirit of the ninja, using our secret techniques to gallantly gallivant across the world?! How could you, David?! How could you dismiss the noble ninja legacy like that?!"

"As. I. Told. You. The fact that the organization has the whole ninja motif is just something leftover from an old incident. It doesn't really mean anything anymore."

"But, Sir David!"

The two of them had begun squabbling. By the sound of things, Noelia was a huge ninja fanatic, while David was far less enthused. The organization also seemed to have some complicated circumstances.

*I don't really get it.*

Regardless, it didn't seem to have anything to do with us.

"Oh, for crying out loud! Enough of that! More importantly, who's this spy you're talking about, Noelia?! Please explain!"

“Grrr!”

Noelia puffed out her cheeks in discontent. She clearly didn't want to move on from the matter, but she knew she had to obey the orders of her superior. She cleared her throat before getting back on track.

“As I said, there is a secret agent among us! It is incredibly dangerous, I daresay! This is no place to be discussing confidential matters!”

A secret agent. A spy. She was trying to say that a spy had slipped in among the people in the room.

“A spy, huh?”

“Who could it be?”

But everyone frowned at this revelation. There were only six people in the room: Cain, Sylphie, Melvy, David, Noelia, and me. It wasn't me, of course, and neither Sylphie nor Melvy were about to betray Cain at this point.

Then David? No, he was Noelia's superior.

“You cannot deceive my eyes, you fiend!”

As we mulled over who the spy could be, Noelia proudly and confidently pointed her finger at one individual.

“The secret agent is none other than *you*! Lisalinde!”

“Huh? *Huuuuuuuuuh?!?*”

The name she said was my own.

*Me? A spy? Absolutely not!*

“Drop the act and admit it, Lisalinde!”

“No, no, no! I could never be a spy! This must be some sort of mistake!”

I frantically shook my head. The very idea was preposterous.

“Playing dumb won't save you! Just look at this host of evidence!”

But Noelia paid no mind to my protests. She spread out some documents over the table and began her explanation.

“Lisalinde! There are numerous suspicious points about you!”

“H-How so?”

“You claim to have lost your memory a year ago, correct?! From what I hear, you have absolutely no recollection of the time before and after the incident!”

“Ah!”

She was right about that. According to my family, I’d suffered severe injuries from a demon army attack over a year ago, developing memory loss in the process. Sure enough, I couldn’t recall anything about the years surrounding that event.

Since then, I’d enrolled in the academy and devoted myself to my studies in Academy Town.

“But I daresay, there is something downright absurd about your memory loss!”

“Wh-What makes you say that?!”

“Even with a professional investigator like me looking into it, I could not trace your whereabouts during this period of time you’ve so conveniently forgotten about!”

“Huh?!”

“I looked into the town you supposedly lived in and could not find a single lead on you! Even questioning the townsfolk, I did not gather a single testimony of you being there during that time!”

“Th-That’s...?!”

“Where were you *really*?!”

Her words threw me for a loop.

*No trace of my whereabouts?*

Even though I’d forgotten all about it, I was supposedly living an ordinary life at home during that time period. And yet, she could find absolutely no evidence of me having actually been there.

What did it all mean? She was asking questions about me that even I didn’t have the answers to.



“Someone as suspicious as you—a girl who seemed to manifest out of thin air—comes to Academy Town, makes contact with the heroes, and infiltrates their party as an apprentice! Isn’t that all just a little bit too convenient?!”

“Wha?!”

“Tell the truth! Are you working as a spy for some organization? Did you cozy up to the heroes as a ploy to steal their information?! Do you *truly* have amnesia?!”

“...!”

I held my breath.

If Noelia’s information was to be believed, then my situation did indeed seem suspicious. A mysterious figure with no clear background infiltrating the hero’s party. The fact that she could find no trace of me during my period of forgotten time was hard to believe—but if it was true, it was completely understandable that she suspected me of being a spy.

And yet...

“Wait, is *that* what this is about?”

“Huh?”

Cain’s brusque voice cut through the tension.

“Noelia, was it? Don’t worry about that stuff. We’ve already come to terms with it. It’s no issue.”

“Huh? Huh...?”

“More importantly, cough up some info on the new hero. I don’t really care about this nonsense with Liz.”

“W-Wait!” Noelia was stunned.

Cain’s attitude toward this intel was terribly nonchalant. He simply leaned back in his chair, lighting the cigar he held between his teeth. It was like he hadn’t the slightest bit of interest in my mysterious past. A light sigh from him sent a puff of smoke drifting through the air.

*He truly doesn’t care.*

“Y-You aren’t concerned... What is the meaning of this?!” Noelia stammered, clearly confused by his attitude.

I didn’t really get it either. Cain wasn’t concerned about suspicions that a spy had slipped right into his inner circle. Or perhaps he was already certain that I wasn’t a spy.

*Which is it?*

“N-Noelia? P-Please calm down. It’s fine, really. We have everything under control when it comes to Lady Lisalinde. We are confident she is not a spy.”

“But David!”

“I said enough! Noelia! You mustn’t offend her!”

David also seemed convinced I was no spy, his voice quavering as he admonished Noelia. But why was he so afraid of me? I didn’t get it.

“And come on now, David,” said Cain. “Why don’t you get HQ to send someone who actually understands the situation? This is turnin’ into a pain in the ass.”

“M-My apologies, Cain. Noelia is one of our most promising young agents. I wanted her to gain some experience by bringing her to this branch.”

David patted the sweat off his brow with a handkerchief. It was clear that he and Cain shared some secret knowledge about me that I myself was not privy to. But what was this close-guarded secret? I could feel the mystery of it exciting my inner childish imagination.

*Grah! The old wound on my right arm aches!*

Not that I had any old wounds.

“I...cannot accept this.”

“N-Noelia?”

She glared at me sternly.

“Listen well, Lisalinde! Everyone may say otherwise, but I cannot trust you! I’ll uncover your secrets someday, just you wait!”

“Noeli—”

Before I could respond to her declaration of war, David cut in with a terrified shriek.

“I told you not to! Noelia! Whatever you do, don’t make an enemy of Lisalinde!”

“Wah?!”

We were both startled.

“Don’t! Please don’t, Noelia! This woman is a horrifying creature! She’s far beyond anything you could ever hope to stand against!”

“Wait, D-David?”

“Sir David, why are you so afraid of this woman?”

David’s face paled as he desperately tried to talk Noelia out of it.

“Value your life, Noelia. I don’t want you to end up like us! To suffer a terrible fate for not knowing our place!”

“A-A terrible fate?”

“But I haven’t done anything...”

I was only meeting David for the first time today. How *could* I have done anything?

“Noelia, I... I don’t want you to suffer.”

“David...”

“I want you to treasure your ass more!”

“My what?!”

Out of nowhere, David dropped a bombshell.

“A-Ass? Wh-What are you talking about?! Why are you bringing up asses here?!”

“Do not defy Lady Lisalinde, Noelia! Isn’t your ass important to you?!”

“Um, excuse me?! David?! Please stop speaking nonsense!”

“A-Ass...?”

An uproar was brewing.

“Please don’t say anything that could invite misunderstanding! The way you put it almost makes it sound like I did something to your a-ass, Mr. David! These are completely baseless accusations!”

“Eep! I-I’m sorry! Please don’t take me to the punishment room...”

“As I just said! Please stop saying things like that!”

*Please stop insinuating that I did anything to you! This is a complete misunderstanding! What is with this person?!*

“Well, it’s Liz we’re talking about.”

“You can hardly blame him.”

“I’m telling you you’re all wrong!”

Sylphie and Melvy were sharing a nod, but I wished they wouldn’t mutually accept such an accusation. *If it didn’t happen, then it didn’t happen! I’ve never bullied anyone, nor have I ever tampered with someone’s behind! Never! Absolutely not!*

“Ass...”

Noelia’s face reddened as she pressed a hand against her behind. The way she slowly backed away, keeping a wary distance, stung a little.

“Ahem... Getting back on track, let’s move on to the sale of the information regarding the new hero.”

“Took you long enough. That was one hell of a detour.”

Some time had passed since the awkward conversation. Perhaps it was the calming effect of the aromatic candles, but the atmosphere in the room had finally settled and we were able to shift the conversation to the main topic at hand—the reason we’d come to the information brokerage in the first place: the intel on the new hero.

Indeed, we had come to the shop to hear about the new hero, Dia, who had suddenly shown up out of the blue. Our visit had nothing to do with asses,

punishment rooms, or anything of the sort. In fact, even that bit about ninja had been an unrelated tangent.

*I'd like to get down to business soon.*

“Grrr...”

Noelia was containing herself for now. David's orders had her perched on a sofa. Although she was still glaring daggers at me, it seemed she was allowing me to listen in on the conversation.

“For starters, here are some documents on the new hero, Dia.”

David spread a bundle of papers over the table: detailed records of the new hero.

“Dia?”

“Yes, that is how they introduced themselves.”

For the first time, Cain and his comrades heard the new hero's name. Naturally, I'd heard it when we'd met in person, but I was bound with information suppression magic that restricted me from repeating even her name.

David read out the information on Dia. “The new hero wears an old, reddish-brown coat. They always have a hood over their head and a white mask on their face. We haven't heard testimony from anyone who has seen what they actually look like.”

Even the information broker didn't know her face. He probably didn't know about the cat ears atop her head either.

“It's hard to tell with the mask muffling their voice, but they are most likely a woman.”

“What?! A woman?!” Cain's eyes widened.

“It's not confirmed yet,” cautioned David. “There's a chance of them being a man with a high-pitched voice too.”

“Sir Cain, have you yet to hear the new hero speak?” Noelia asked him.

“Well...if you count ‘Wha?!’ and ‘Graaaah!’ then yeah. I guess that bastard did

have a high voice.”

Dia had a beautiful face and a distinctly feminine voice. But that white mask covered it all up; even her gender wasn't widely known. It really was such a shame. Doing heroic deeds while hiding away that pretty face felt like *such* a waste.

“W-Well, it doesn't matter if they're a guy or a girl. Tell us about the eyewitness accounts.”

“Of course. Going in chronological order, the first sighting was in a village at the base of Mt. Ikrythorn. The village was being ravaged by a rather large beast, but they were saved by a mysterious individual who claimed to be the true hero.”

David continued to recount the known deeds of Dia.

Her legend began with the slaying of the magical beast at Mt. Ikrythorn. She then made significant contributions on the front lines of the war with the demons and single-handedly wiped out a very large band of mountain bandits that had been terrorizing a region. It seemed that the new hero, Dia, had done her share of heroic deeds.

But her name wasn't yet widely known.

Even her very first accomplishment—the battle on the holy Mt. Ikrythorn—was a recent event; she didn't have a long enough record nor enough significant accomplishments for her to become a household name.

Still, those she saved spread tales of her, and her star was slowly rising.

“We have yet to hear any bad press about Dia. All of her deeds have been virtuous, and all the villagers she saved seem to hold her in high regard.”

“Hmm...”

Cain pursed his lips a bit.

Dia had saved a great many people, conducting herself in a way that did no shame to her name as a hero.

And yet, Cain had been on the receiving end of her blade. They were irrefutably at odds. Surely it wasn't a good feeling to hear about his enemy's



apparently pristine reputation.

“There’s one point consistent across several testimonies—everywhere she goes, she makes a point of noting the existence of her holy sword. Whenever she saves a town or village, she always brings up the Holy Sword Ikryl and tells its legend to all who will hear.”

Holy Sword Ikryl—the true holy sword, if Dia was to be believed, a blade gifted by God, bestowed upon humanity long, long ago in the War of Heaven and Earth where God fought against the Devil.

The holy sword Cain possessed was known as Holy Sword Andros, and according to Dia, it was a sword of dubious, unknown origin.

“Due to her constant insistence on mentioning her holy sword, it seems the notion of a new hero is being accepted more readily than you might expect. Based on our investigations, there are very few who question her existence or harbor any hostility toward her.”

“The holy sword and the hero go hand in hand. Having an easy-to-understand item to cling to likely raises her support.”

“I agree. We know absolutely nothing about her background. Her true face, her origin, her battle history, even her date of birth—nothing. With so much about her shrouded in mystery, her rising popularity likely stems from her emphasis on the holy sword itself.”

“So you still don’t know anything? I guess that’s about right.”

Dia’s background remained a mystery. She was a figure cloaked in secrets.

However, Dia was a half-beast. Her cat ears made her very distinctive, and narrowing down the investigations to that feature alone would likely uncover all sorts of things. It was clear that gathering information would become much easier if only they knew that factoid.

Once they found out she was a half-beast, perhaps they’d even be able to track down her origin in no time.

*Of course. This information suppression magic makes it so I can’t even bring up the cat ears...*

“Considering her deeds—the beast slaying, and her achievements against the demons—Dia’s combat prowess is presumed to be over S-Rank,” said David.

S-Rank was the highest rank among adventurers and knights, the top level among standard classifications and a level that commanded respect. It was easy to see just how high Dia was rated.

But Cain seemed to have a different take on the matter.

“She caught me off guard, admittedly, but she managed to land a hit on me. And even if it was brief, she managed to hold off my team on her own. Tell them to crank that up to SSS-Rank.”

“Understood. Thank you for the information.”

SSS-Rank. The rank above the rank above S-Rank.

It most certainly did not exist on the standard scale. Normal humans did not know about the existence of SSS-Rank, and even if they did, they regarded it with the vagueness of an urban legend. It was a secret qualification, spoken of only among those at the top of their fields, a rank for those extraordinary powerhouses whose strength couldn’t be adequately described with a measly S-Rank.

Incidentally, Cain and his party were in the middle of tackling an SSS+ dungeon. Naturally, they too were SSS-Rank or higher.

“That’s all the information we have on hand. Did it suit your fancy?”

“It was pretty interesting. Her being a woman was the biggest surprise, I’d say.”

“Oh dear, that won’t do, Cain. You mustn’t get involved with another woman when you already have multiple fiancées.”

“That ain’t it, dumbass.”

The two bantered a bit.

Even with this type of conversation going on, neither Sylphie nor Melvy showed any signs of unrest. In fact, they remained completely calm.

“We plan to refocus our investigations on the new hero. Is there anything

particular that concerns you?”

“Hmm...” Cain put a hand to his chin, his eyes fixed on the documents spread across the table.

Sylphie and Melvy both sank deep into thought, their expressions serious as could be.

“Here...”

After some time had passed, Cain pointed at one of the documents.

“The place the new hero was first sighted, the sacred Mt. Ikrythorn. Can you do some digging into that place?”

“What do you mean?”

“In the historical records and research texts she left behind, there was a mention of Mt. Ikrythorn. As I recall, it was where the Holy Sword Ikryl was sealed away.”

Dia had left her research into Holy Sword Ikryl behind at her hideout. She’d likely done so intentionally—to nudge Cain toward the legitimacy of her Holy Sword Ikryl—but the information was still valuable to us.

“Presumably, she obtained the holy sword at that mountain and saved the village at the base right after. I’m guessing the beast hunt was her way of testing the sword’s power. But if we think about it along those lines...”

“There’s a high chance that some trace of the new hero remains there.”

“Precisely.”

The place where they first stepped up as a hero. It was very likely that they’d done so immediately after obtaining the holy sword, and if Dia was ever to make a mistake—if she was ever going to leave anything that could trace back to her identity—it would likely be during her very first outing.

“David, I’m asking your organization to look into the new hero, but as part of that, I want you to go through the records she left as well.”

“You are referring to the documents left at her hideout, correct?”

“Yeah. Her records have it that Holy Sword Ikryl is the true holy sword, while

my Holy Sword Andros is some dubious blade from who knows where. How trustworthy is this information? I want you to investigate the records and see how true that is.”

“Very well. I’ll go to pick up the research documents later.”

“Counting on it.”

With that exchange over, Cain heaved a deep sigh.

“That’s everything from us. Pleasure doing business with you.”

“Understood. I shall handle the matter with the utmost care.”

David gave a warm smile. It was probably his business smile, the kind of sociable well-mannered look that could easily cause others to drop their guard. But we couldn’t be lax around him. He was an information broker and a spy of sorts.

That was the end of today’s business.

The outcome was so-so. While we hadn’t uncovered any information that would lead to Dia’s true identity, we had learned some new things about her. We’d decided on our course of action, and it felt like we’d made some progress.

“And that’s that. We’ll be leaving.”

“Such a busy man you are, Cain. How about a cup of tea before you go?”

“There’s no point in chatting with you. Let’s go.”

“Okay.”

Cain stood from the sofa as the rest of us hurriedly got ready to leave. We were heading home as soon as we’d finished up business. That was the Cain I knew.

“Wait. I daresay, *wait*, Lisalinde.”

“Hmm?”

As I was gathering up my things, Noelia called out to me.

*What is it now?*

“The others might accept you, but I’m still not convinced.”

I stared at her doubtfully.

“I will be blunt. Lisalinde, you are someone I simply can’t trust.”

She stuck her index finger out at me.

“Listen well, Lisalinde! I will uncover your secrets someday! Prepare yourself.”

It was a clear declaration of war. There was a gleam in her eyes as she directed her hostility at me. She was going to be the one to expose whatever I was hiding—her resolve was clear from her serious expression.

I gulped. I wasn’t even hiding anything. At least, that was how I saw it, but what she’d said about the period of time I’d lost my memories of still bothered me. Cain and the others didn’t seem to see it as an issue, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that something important was being kept from me.

Noelia was trying to dig up information not even I knew about, and she was a professional.

A bead of sweat dripped from my brow.

“Lisalinde!” Noelia shouted, “Whatever you are plotting, I won’t let you have your way! I will bust through your evil schemes and... Hyaaahn?!”

“Huh?”

Right in the middle of her passionate declaration, Noelia suddenly let out a strange sound.

*What was that? How to put it... That sounded painful but almost sensual. What happened?*

“I... I shall stop... Aah... Aaaaaaaaahn?!”

“N-Noelia?”

Her body quivered. Clearly, there was something strange afoot.

I hadn’t done anything. No one in the room had moved a single step from where they were, and none of us had even touched Noelia. Yet all of a sudden, she had begun to let out strange sounds.

“Wh-What is this? M-My body is...h-hot?”

“N-Noelia? What’s wrong?” David called out to her, concerned.

Something was very clearly wrong with Noelia.

She was trembling all over, her breathing growing ragged. There was a heat building up on her body, bringing a faint flush to her skin. Her face turned red with a hot breath escaping her lips.

*What is this? What’s happening to Noelia?*

The more this went on, the more pain she seemed to be in. Her legs started to clatter, and before long, it seemed like a herculean task just for her to remain on her feet.

“Hah...hah! Mmm!”

*Wait, is this pain? No...don’t tell me...*

“Mmm! C-Could this possibly be...an aphrodisiac?!”

Indeed—Noelia was aroused. The voice she let out was a sensual one, her fidgeting, quivering body most provocative. She was growing hotter and hotter, her skin growing more flushed by the second.

She was clearly in a state of...arousal.

“But why all of a sudden?” David voiced what we all were thinking.

Noelia had suddenly gone into heat. But we hadn’t done anything. We hadn’t laid a finger on her. So why was she like this?

“L-Lisalinde! Wh-What did you do to me?! Aaaaaahn... ≡”

“Wait, me?! No, no, I haven’t done anything!” I shook my head furiously at this sudden accusation.

*I swear I haven’t done anything. I haven’t moved, and everyone in this room can vouch for me.*

“Hah! Hah! S-Such a strong effect! Nnngh! ≡ I-It’s too much! This is... ≡”

“U-Um, Noelia? Are you okay?”

“Lisalinde! Wh-When did you...slip me...this vile aphrodisiac? ≡”

“I’m telling you it’s not me!”



How could she possibly accuse me of that?

“Hey now, Liz. What did you do?”

“Don’t bully the rookie too much, Liz.”

“It’s not *me*...”

*Why are you all so convinced?! It’s like my comrades don’t trust me at all!*

I hadn’t done anything, and I’d never even encountered an aphrodisiac before. Not in my life. I didn’t know how one would go about using one, nor did I know how to make one.

And so, there was no possible way for me to drug Noelia.

*I am absolutely innocent!*

“M-My word...”

“Did you figure it out, Melvy?”

“Um, yes, about that...”

Noelia was the only one acting strange. Neither I nor anyone else in the room had been inflicted with whatever it was. It would be impossible to poison only Noelia in this situation.

“Er, this right here. This is the aromatic candle that Liz brought with her.”

“Bweh?”

Or so I thought, but Saint Melvy swiftly pinned down the source. The handmade aromatic candle I’d brought as a gift; according to Melvy, that was what was driving Noelia insane.

“Um, well, the aromatic candle seems to be laced with an aphrodisiac. I suspect Ms. Noelia took in the scent and went into heat.”

“L-Lisalinde!”

“No, no?! Melvy, there’s definitely something wrong with that explanation!” I protested to Melvy. “I admit I made that candle by hand! But its fragrance has already spread all across the room, right?! So isn’t it strange that Noelia is the only one being affected by it?!”

The aromatic candle had filled the room with the smell of lavender, and everyone had been breathing it in. So logically, everyone should have been put into a similar state.

*So I declare there is no way that my aromatic candle was what did it!*

“No, well, you see Liz,” said Melvy, “There seems to be a counter-trap spell imbued into this candle.”

“Huh?”

*A counter-trap spell?*

“From what I can tell, it is a spell that releases an eros-inducing fragrance that can only be smelled by those who harbor ill will toward you. That’s why it only worked on Noelia.”

“H-Huuuuuuuuuh?!”

Melvy spelled it out, but I couldn’t make any sense of it.

*Hostility toward me? An aphrodisiac effect? What does that mean?! I don’t get it!*

“Wow, that’s some nasty stuff, Liz.”

“You really went all out, Liz.”

“You have it all wrong!” It was so out of left field, I could barely keep up. “Wait! Please wait! I don’t understand! I didn’t put any kind of weird, complicated magic into that aromatic candle!”

“Must’ve done it unconsciously, then.”

“How could anyone do that unconsciously?!”

*What’s going on?! Why is everyone so suspicious of me?! If you just look at it logically, there is no possible way I could unconsciously imbue the candle with something as complicated as a counter-trap spell!*

“First of all! Yes, first of all! The fundamental issue! I have not laced the candle with an aphrodisiac! I’ve never even seen an aphrodisiac before.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Sure, sure.”

“Come oooooon!”

*Those are the voices of people who don't believe me at all! Why?! Why can't they understand that pure, innocent me would never use something like a counter-trap or an aphrodisiac?! Why do they have so little faith in me?!*

“L-Lisaliinde! Now you've done it!”

“No, no, no! This is all a misunderstanding!”

Noelia was glaring knives and daggers at me. She was still breathing hard, her body shaking.

“M-Making my body act so lewdly... You are trying to make me submit to your will! Just like in an ero-manga! Like what they do to the kunoichis in all the ero-manga!”

“What are you talking about?”

“I-I won't break so easily! Mmn... ≡”

Her body violently convulsed. Though she was putting on a strong front, she seemed to be at her limit.

*None of this is my fault.*

“Hah! ≡ Hah... ≡ I-I'm going to go crazy at this rate! I need a release... ≡”

With that, she unsteadily staggered toward the room in the back. That was presumably where her personal room was.

“I-I will pay you back for this someday! Mark my words, Lisalinde!”

“It wasn't me.”

I wasn't going to admit to it. Definitely not. By no means had I ever laced an aromatic candle with an aphrodisiac.

“Remember this, Lisalinde!”

And with that last cry, she was gone. The door violently slammed behind her.

“Aaaaaahn... ≡ I barely touched it, but it feels so good... ≡”

Silence.

Silence.

More silence.

Her sultry voice echoed from the back of the room.

We'd all heard it far too clearly.

We all felt like we weren't supposed to be there.

"Let's get outta here."

"Um, er, yes. Let's."

"We don't want to make things worse for Noelia."

Cain, Melvy, and Sylphie quickly packed up.

We couldn't stay in the shop any longer. To protect the dignity of Noelia—who had just lost control—we needed to be gone at once.

"David."

"What is it, Cain?"

"I apologize for our idiot's behavior today. I'll make sure to scold her properly."

"Hey, wait! Cain?! I haven't done anything!"

For some reason, it seemed like I was in for a scolding.

*I don't accept it! You're telling me I somehow unconsciously obtained an aphrodisiac, mixed it into the aromatic candle, and set a counter-trap to release it? There's no way I can accept that explanation! I am not that sort of pervert!*

"Ha ha ha, it's quite all right, Lady Lisalinde. Our Noelia was the one who started it. Consider this her baptism by fire."

"David..."

Meanwhile, David wasn't angry at all. His gentle smile put me at ease—and yet, he was also acting under the premise that I was the culprit. That was still a little frustrating.

"Seriously, being put through the wringer by you is essentially the fate of everyone who works at our shop, ha ha ha... Oh excuse me, it seems I'm having

flashbacks.”

“I have not done anything to you!”

He started to tremble as if recalling a traumatic memory.

*Seriously! I have not done a single thing to anyone who works here!*

“Um, er, the aphrodisiac seems to be on the weaker side. It should leave her system naturally if you give her some time. Probably...”

“That’s good to know. Thank you for the expert opinion, Melvy.”

David bowed to Melvy.

*Why is Melvy knowledgeable about aphrodisiacs?*

“All right, c’mon now, Liz. Say you’re sorry. C’mon.”

“Whyyyy?!”

Cain pushed my head down, forcing me into an apologetic pose. He lowered his head alongside mine almost like he was my guardian.

*I don’t accept it! I don’t accept this one bit!*

“Hyaaaaaaaaahn! ≡ Why am I so sensitive? ≡”

“...”

On a fine, sunny afternoon, the moans of a ninja—fallen victim to a mysterious attack—echoed through a shop in the slums.

“Ugh, what even happened today? What was all of that?”

That evening, as the setting sun dipped low and the sky began to take on shades of red, after we returned from the information brokerage, I made my way back to my room. Exhausted in so many ways, I dove straight into the bed, savoring the soft embrace of the covers. There was nothing quite like the bliss of lying down after a long day—that brief instant as the body acclimated itself to the mattress.

With that said, today had truly left me drained. What exactly had happened at the brokerage?

*No, let's not think about it. Dwelling on any of this feels like a waste of time.*

“ ... ”

I rolled over to stare absentmindedly at the monochrome ceiling.

The new hero, Dia.

She had been the crux of our conversation today—a half-beast girl whom only I knew about. Going off what David had said, few people were even aware of her at all.

Perhaps I was the only one who knew her real face and who'd spoken to the girl directly.

“ ... ”

She was an enigma. Despite our conversation, there was very little I'd actually learned about her. She'd retreated from her battle with the hero's party, but her true power was still unfathomable.

Yet all told, I couldn't bring myself to believe she was a bad person.

She could have used me as a hostage—a shield—but didn't. She didn't make any attempt to kill me, and I'd ultimately returned from her hideout without a single scratch. She had, in fact, shown me a fair bit of consideration.

I was convinced that her fundamental stance was to avoid casualties whenever possible. The information suppression magic she'd placed on me, and the fact that she'd revealed her true face to me only after that... Perhaps it was all to minimize the harm done.

That was the impression I got.

*Would it be possible to reach an understanding with her? Is there some sort of special reason she's going after Cain's holy sword? If we talk things out properly, is there any way we could find some common ground?*

*Is there any way to resolve this peacefully?*

I wanted to sit down and talk to her properly. If we could talk, then surely we'd find a way forward. That was what I believed.

So...I decided to give it a go.

“Mmm...”

Sitting up in bed, I reached out a hand.

My mind was focused on the flow of my own mana. I focused it all across my body and concentrated it into my outstretched right hand. I closed my eyes, sharpening my senses to an even finer degree.

Dia had said it herself—spatial magic leaves behind traces of mana. That was what she believed would lead the hero’s party to her hideout. She had tried to abuse this property to lure the heroes in, and it was through these traces that Kuon’s space-bending magic had taken Cain and his comrades straight to Dia.

Traces of mana, a magical line that guided one to their destination.

Maybe I could do it too.

The information suppression magic afflicting me had been cast by none other than Dia herself. And so, wouldn’t that be enough of a connection? The bond between us had already been formed.

All I needed to do was follow that connection.

I visualized Kuon from yesterday—the sight of her using her magic. How she bent space, ignoring time and distance to infiltrate the hideout in an instant.

I directed the flow of mana throughout my body. I molded the mass of directionless mana in my right hand, kneading it into a spell.

Delicately, intricately, precisely, and boldly.

Warping space with magic was far from standard. It was an incredibly high-level spell with difficulty to match and was not something an ordinary student like me could pull off. Anyone would realize that. It was just common sense.

*But, well, you never know until you try. See?*

“There.”

The space before me warped.

“Um... Huh?”

I could see Dia, staring back at me with a bewildered expression. I’d jumped through space and arrived instantly at her location.



This wasn't another one of her hideouts, however. This seemed to be a room in some inn—a cheap one, at that, if the damaged and unclean wood walls and floors were any indication.

Dia sat alone in that small room.

“Huh? *What?*”

She blinked, seemingly doubting her own eyes.



She clearly hadn't grasped the situation. I'd appeared before her without warning, leaving her confused and wide-eyed. And who could blame her? A person had just materialized in her room out of nowhere. Anyone else would have been just as shocked.

Thus, my attempt at space-bending magic was a success and I found myself reunited with Dia. A far-too-quick reunion only a day in the making.

"I haven't seen you since yesterday, Ms. Dia."

I greeted her with a smile, but Dia offered no reaction. She remained frozen, keeping the same blank stare.

*That's understandable.*

*But wow, I just might be a genius.*

I'd managed to pull off Kuon's spatial manipulation through pure and simple imitation. I couldn't help but silently congratulate myself.

## Chapter 52: Of Kunoichis and Paradise!

“Find the weaknesses of Cain the Hero.”

Such was the request a particular spy organization had received.

This shadowy group never revealed itself to the public. It had no qualms about breaking the law or harming others; its members operated solely in the shadows.

This was the spy organization Borschtino. One of the criminal underworld’s finest was about to bare its fangs at the hero and his comrades.

This time around, it was Lemrest—a northern country—that had requested the commission, and Borschtino had accepted the job.

Cain was a beacon of hope for all of humanity, his team receiving fervent support from the masses. Yet even so, there were those who held the party in contempt—antiestablishment organizations that wanted them gone.

Lemrest was a nation far removed from the front lines of where human and demonkind clashed, so it had little to gain from the hero’s victories. In turn, it offered as little support as possible to Cain’s grand quest.

However, the hero’s amazing efforts and exploits led to tremendous levels of influence all across the world. The more the heroes excelled, the weaker the voices of the nations that did not support him grew in international circles.

Even though the hero’s party was performing remarkable feats, unfortunately, not everyone was pleased with their success. It was for this reason that Lemrest—keen on being a hindrance to humanity’s shining star—had hired a spy organization to identify any weakness they could use against him.

The task fell to a young man named David, a member of Borschtino.

David diligently kept watch over the hero’s team, exercising the utmost caution to ensure he wasn’t detected even by the ever-vigilant Cain. He’d tail

them discreetly and, whenever he could, would gather information through indirect means to avoid suspicion.

And of course, David wasn't the only one on the mission. Many others from Borschtino had been dispatched as well, operating in separate teams.

This was a request that came directly from a national government, and it promised a staggering payout. It was a high-stakes mission that could determine the fate of the organization. Borschtino spared no effort in deploying their finest agents.

David was one such agent. The one thing that set him apart from the other agents, however, was the fact that he worked alone.

And so, his investigation continued. It wasn't too long before David found something about the hero's party that piqued his interest.

Her name was Lisalinde.

The members of the hero's party were already world-renowned, with tales of their heroism and bravery spread far and wide. Yet amid these famous figures was one outsider—an unknown.

David kept his eye on this girl. Why had she not become famous while operating alongside the hero's party? It seemed reasonable to assume she wasn't a combatant.

He had witnessed her performing domestic tasks, handling the laundry, cooking, and carrying supplies to support the hero's efforts. It was likely because she played a subdued role behind the scenes that her name never came under the spotlight.

Perhaps she was Cain's mistress, whom he'd brought along on his travels. If that was the case, then Lisalinde herself could very well be the weakness that Lemrest was searching for.

The moment David reported this information, another order came down to Borschtino: "Abduct her."

Abduct a member of the hero's party...

It was easy to imagine how difficult such a mission would be, but their target

was a noncombatant. No matter how strong the team was, there would always be a gap in their defenses.

Yes, even if the target was part of the hero's team, kidnapping one feeble young girl was far from impossible for the battle-hardened spies of Borschtino. So, late one night, David had infiltrated the inn where the hero and his party were staying. He'd waited long enough that the target, Lisalinde, was surely fast asleep. Thanks to the disinformation spread by the other Borschtino units, the main members of the hero's party had left the town and gone off to slay a monster that only appeared at night.

It was a one-night mission for them, and they would all likely be back by the next morning. It was also the sort of mission that had no reason to bring along a maid or mistress, so Lisalinde would surely be left alone at the inn.

In the dead of the night, as the whole town slumbered, David moved through the silence and darkness. His excellent night vision allowed him to maneuver without light as he reached the door to Lisalinde's room.

The door was locked. But a lock was meaningless before him. Without a sound, he managed to pick it in a matter of seconds. Then he opened the door.

He couldn't feel any nearby presences. Once he absconded with the girl slumbering in the room, this mission would finally be over.

"Huh?"

However, it was at that point that he realized something: the room was completely empty. The bed where Lisalinde should have been sleeping was vacant and the room was wrapped in an eerie silence.

*What's going on?* David's mind raced.

Had Lisalinde, a mere maid, gone to slay the monster alongside them? No, that couldn't be so. According to the reports from the other teams, the party that had left town to face the monster hadn't included her.

*Then where is she?*

It was then, while he was in the middle of thinking, that the floor suddenly opened up beneath him.

“Wha—?!”

Without warning, he was swallowed up by a massive hole. Down and down, he fell into the pitch-black depths of the abyss.

“Aaaaaah!!!”

As he fell, he found himself utterly befuddled. Why had the floor opened up? What exactly was happening to him?

No, there was something more fundamentally wrong. The room had been on the inn’s first floor, so even if the floor had given way, he shouldn’t have fallen such a long distance. So what was this deep pit? He desperately racked his brain, trying to piece it all together as he fell. But it was such a bolt from the blue that there was no way for him to find an answer.

“Urgh!”

Eventually, he reached the bottom, managing to land on his feet by sheer luck. He had fallen a great distance, but his training kept him unscathed.

“Welcome to the depths of hell, Mr. David. I believe that was your name?”

“Whuh?!”

No sooner had he landed than a voice called out to him.

David raised his head.

“Wha—?!”

There stood a woman dressed in peculiar clothing. She wore a short, black kimono reminiscent of the traditional garb of a land to the east. A curved katana was snugly fitted into the sash around her waist, and she held an angular kunai in her hand. She was fully armed and ready.

“A ninja...” David muttered to himself as he took in her attire.

Before him was a ninja, a traditional espionage agent from the East.

“Heh heh heh... I imagine you’re confused by this sudden turn of events. Would you care for an explanation, Mr. David?”

“Grr!”



The woman smirked at him mockingly. This ninja was none other than Lisalinde, his target. Her unmistakable long, blonde hair cascaded over her kunoichi costume.

The vast, underground space had been fitted with hemp ropes that sprawled crisscross throughout it like a spider's web.

Lisalinde stood perfectly balanced atop one of them, looking down at David from her perch.

"I see! An Eastern spy! You're neither a combatant, a maid, nor a lover—you're the party's covert operative!" David cried out.

"Hee hee hee! Bingo! I am the ninja of the hero party, Sadoking: Kunoichi Version, my good sir!"

"Well, not really."

The retort came from Cain, who was casually standing there.

"What?! Cain?! What are you doing here?!"

"Hey, I'm not here because I want to be. I just knew that Liz was getting up to something stupid again, so I thought she'd need someone to keep her in check."

Cain's presence came as a surprise to David. Lisalinde simply had so much presence herself that David hadn't noticed Cain slouching nonchalantly against the wall in the corner this whole time.

"This doesn't make sense! Cain, aren't you supposed to be outside the city hunting monsters?! You can't be here!"

"You're really underestimating us."

"Hee hee hee! Sadoking: Kunoichi Version saw straight through the false information spread by your spies! Yes, you spies may be pros at information warfare, but don't think for a second you can pull one over on the hero's party!"

"Erk!"

David clenched his teeth in frustration. "I see. So the hero's party had a ninja on their side! How badly I've miscalculated. To think we'd be outplayed in a

battle of information.”

“Hee hee hee, you thought too little of me. Nin-nin!”

“Don’t get the wrong idea; she’s not actually a ninja. She’s totally faking it.”

“Nin-nin!”

Cain’s retort was promptly ignored.

“Incidentally, this was originally a perfectly ordinary inn, but we performed some magic modifications with the owner’s permission. It’s practically a full-blown house of traps.”

“What?!”

What was such a deep hole doing in a normal inn? David had been curious about that, and as it turned out, it was all Lisalinde’s doing. The entire inn had been overhauled for the sole purpose of turning the tables on the spy who would come for her today.

“Now! This pesky rat who’s been sniffing around Sir Cain must be punished! Here I come!”

“Guh!”

With a cry from Sadoking, the battle was underway. Lisalinde kicked off the rope she had been standing on, launching herself forcefully at David. David quickly drew a knife from his waist and prepared to intercept her.

“Fire Style! Infernal Void Jutsu!”

“Gwaaaaaaah!”

Forming hand seals, Lisalinde spewed a torrent of fire from her mouth. The flames engulfed David, who quickly rolled on the ground to put them out.

“How do you like that?! This is my Fire Style Ninja Technique!”

“Guh!”

Lisalinde proudly passed off perfectly ordinary fire magic as a ninja art.

“And there’s more where that came from!”

Lisalinde again positioned herself on the ropes, taking the high ground over

David.

“Eat this! Ninja Art: Tatami Flip Jutsu!”

“Wha—?!”

Through spatial magic, Lisalinde summoned a horde of tatami mats seemingly from nowhere. Dozens of mats floated in the air around her before she directed them to fly at David in unison.

These straw mats spun like shurikens as they hurled at breakneck speed at the hapless spy.

“Gwaaaaaaaaah!”

His body was battered again and again, sending him tumbling across the ground.

“How 'bout that one?! That was my Ninja Art: Tatami Flip Jutsu!”

“Hey, are you sure about that? Is that *really* Tatami Flip Jutsu?”

“Nin-nin!”

Cain was again ignored.

Lisalinde was a ninja role-player. Nothing more, nothing less.

“Nin-nin-nin! ♪ Ever a kunoichi at heart! Sadoking ♪ Master of erotic ninja arts  
♪ Nin-nin-nin! ♪”

“Shut it.”

“Now, now! Can you keep up with the moves of this kunoichi?!”

“Guh!”

Lisalinde bounced from rope to rope, using her mastery of the three-dimensional space to bewilder David. Every one of the multitude of ropes stretching across the area could become a foothold for her, and his eyes struggled to keep track of her complicated acrobatic movements.

“Now! Let's end this!”

“Damn it!”

Before he knew it, Lisalinde was right behind him. By the time he turned to

face her, it was already too late.

“Ninja Art: Tortoise Shell Bondage Jutsu!”

“Gwaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Don’t disgrace the ninja arts.”

Lisalinde bound David’s body in a bondage style straight out of an S&M scene.

“Urgh! I can’t let this go on!”

Unable to move, he fell to the ground in an unsightly display. For a spy, getting captured by the enemy was something that could never be allowed under any circumstances. There was only one thing he could do when captured—it was the absolute rule of the organization.

David tried to take the last option available to him.

“Oh, no. No, no, no. We don’t do that around here.”

“Mmph?!”

Lisalinde promptly stopped his attempt.

She roughly shoved her hand into his mouth and pulled something out.

“Just as I thought. A poison pill hidden in the molars. That’s no good; you need to value your life more.”

“A-Ah...”

He had planned to bite down on the poison to end his own life. Death over capture—that was the organization’s law. He hadn’t hesitated to put that law into practice.

But Lisalinde had gotten in his way. She’d snatched the poison from his molars and left him unable to die.

Bound and powerless, David’s face contorted as he cried out, “Dammit! Just kill me!”

“Wow, that sounds like something a female knight in an eromanga would say. Very nice. It seems you understand exactly what’s going to happen to you. Let’s enjoy this to the fullest.”

“St-Stop! Don’t come any closer!”

Wearing a sadistic grin, Lisalinde slowly closed in, one step at a time.

“What happens when a spy gets captured by the enemy? Do you know, Mr. David? Hee hee hee...”

David’s face paled. What was going to happen to him now? Would it be so horrible that death was the preferable alternative?

For what it was worth, he was working as a spy. He had always known this could happen to him someday, but faced with this bizarre, unknowable ninja, he couldn’t stop his body from trembling in fear.

“Now, now, let’s all go together. To a sweet little garden called ‘hell.’”

“St-Stop! L-Let go of me!”

Lisalinde hoisted up his body, carrying him under one arm toward the single, large door that was present in the space. The man could do nothing but quiver like a condemned sinner awaiting his execution.

“Welcome to hell. Allow me to be your guide!”

Lisalinde threw the heavy-looking door open with gusto.

“Wha?!”

And upon seeing what lay beyond, David was at a loss for words.

Beyond the door lay complete and utter despair.

“Wah ha ha! You thought you could take us on? Try again in ten billion years!”

“Aaaaah! Please stop! Show mercy, Lady Rachel!”

“Oww! It hurts! But it feels so good!”

“Please forgive my insolence!”

The air was filled with the sound of human bodies being struck by whips.

The high-pitched laughter of girls mixed with the screams of men. A great many men.

The men were tied up with rope and suspended in the air while girls dressed as kunoichis went to town on them with whips. It was a hellish sight indeed.

“Wh-What is this?”

David’s body trembled in fear, but soon he realized: the men who had been captured were none other than the members of his own organization.

“Huh?! Captain?! Chief?! Why are you here?!”

“That voice... David?! You were captured too?!”

The sight of his superior officers caused a wave of overwhelming despair to wash over David. From what he could see, every single agent that had been placed on the mission had been captured.

And that wasn’t all.

The high-ranking officers who were supposed to be at HQ had been tied up. The director, the deputy director, and all the battle-hardened commanders had been gathered in one room, all hung up as helpless victims.

Moreover, even the high officials from Lemrest—who had commissioned the mission—were being bound and whipped like everyone else.

“Um, er, Sylphie. When you swing a whip, you need to snap your wrist. More like this...”

“Hmm, interesting. This is educational.”

“Aaaaaaaaahhh! A whole new door is opening up for meee... ≡”

Melvy and Sylphie, both dressed as kunoichis, cracked their whips.

The room echoed with the cries of men who had begun to feel a twisted sense of pleasure despite their pitiful predicament.

But how could this be?

David realized, then and there. *We have been completely and utterly defeated. Everyone involved in trying to find the hero’s weakness has been captured and forced to submit to them.*

*How have we, a spy organization, lost so horribly in this battle of information?*

The answer was simple. It was laid out right in front of him.

“The hero’s party...is actually a ninja clan!”

“No, we’re not,” Cain calmly retorted.

The outfits they wore were nothing more than cosplay.

“Hyah! Speak! Spill everything you’re hiding! Who was the bastard that hired you to target Liz?!”

“You’ve already got everyone involved!”

“Aaah! The sting of the hemp rope! I might just get addicted to how it tightens around me! ≡”

“My sensitivity is up a hundredfold! ≡”

Every captive had been drugged to increase their physical sensitivity.

“Take, Um, this!”

“Aaah! Fine wood, subtly different from a whip!”

Melvy used a wooden pole called a keisaku to pummel one of the spies.

The keisaku was a tool used in the temples of an Eastern country. It was a stick used to smack the backs and shoulders of meditating monks to ward off drowsiness and lapses in focus. That was the keisaku.

Ninja was a culture from that same Eastern country, but they had no relation whatsoever. Something was clearly getting mixed up here. But regardless, with a snap of her wrist, Melvy expertly swung the keisaku.

“And this, and, er, this!”

“Aaah! I’m reaching nirvana!”

“So this is the state of emptiness they preach in the East!”

“Amen!”

The spies cried out, faces flush.

“And more of that! And this too!”

“Evil thoughts begone! ≡”

Using a tool meant to dispel worldly desires, Melvy delivered top-notch techniques.



“Hrah! Spit it out! Spit out all the information you have!”

“Nothing good will come from keeping secrets!”

“Aaaaaah! Forgive me! ≡”

It wasn't just Rachel, even Cain seemed to enjoy wielding the whip.

“It's quite rare to see you participating in S&M, Cain.”

“Yeah.”

Cain rarely ever took part in these bouts of nonsense, so the sight of him enthusiastically cracking the whip came as something of a surprise to Lisalinde.

“They're scoundrels who tried to kidnap you. I'm not really feeling any guilt.”

“As expected of our natural-born sadist.”

“Shut it.”

“Ah ha ha! It's not very heroic to enjoy the torment of others, Cain!”

“You're having a blast too, Rachel.”

This get-together had stoked the sadistic tendencies of both Cain and Rachel.

“Oh, but do remember, it is not just about causing pain, okay? True S&M is about making the other person enjoy it as well. Mindlessly swinging a whip doesn't count!”

“I know, I know.”

“Always a stickler, Liz.”

“I consider myself a professional!”

A first-rate sadist was one who delivered the exact kind of stimulation their partner truly desired. A true sadist thought hard about their partner's needs, sensed their desires, and wielded the whip accordingly.

Sadism was a form of love. An S&M artist had a certain code of honor.

“Yes, just like that!”

“Wh-What?!”

“The bite of that whip! It's different from the others!”

“Paradiiise!”

When the Sadoking: Kunoichi Version snapped her whip, the men shuddered. This was completely different from any of the whip cracks they’d tasted before. The pain and stimulation immediately transformed into a euphoria that overtook their entire minds. It was a pleasure so intense it could change their very personalities.

They were becoming masochists. They *had* become masochists.

The whip this girl swung was able to change the very shape of their souls.

“Aaaah! It hurts so good!”

“Please torment me more! ≡”

“Paradiiise! ≡”

The men cried out.

“It’s all about practice...”

“I’m amazed, Liz.”

The sadistic kunoichi playfully licked her kunai with a smirk.

“I usually prefer being on the receiving end of these, but this isn’t so bad once in a while.”

“Oh, Sylphie. Are you awakening to sadism as well?”

“Hmph, it’s all in the experience. You need a new stimulation to broaden your horizons.”

“There’s sadism in masochism and masochism in sadism. It’s all a great cycle. All right, here comes the Fire Style Jutsu. Fire Style: Candle Drip Jutsu! ♪”

“Aaaaah! ≡”

“The mystery of the ninjaa! ≡”

Despite calling it a fire-style jutsu, Lisalinde was simply dripping perfectly ordinary candle wax onto the men’s skin. The hot, white wax seared the flesh of these pitiful swine.

“I-I submit!”

“We pledge our loyalty to the hero’s party!”

The captured men finally declared their defeat. With flush faces, they swore allegiance to the hero and his comrades.

“I-I submit! Like a samurai... Like a samurai, I serve my daimyo!”

“Please become our shogun, oh great hero!”

As soon as one of them surrendered, the others followed in quick succession, all pledging their loyalty. Those gathered were part of the upper echelon of the spy organization Borschtino as well as high officials from the nation of Lemrest. They were men of status and honor.

It was no exaggeration to say that their surrender meant that the entirety of Borschtino and Lemrest had allied with the hero.

“Ha! And with that, this case is closed!”

“Lady Sadoking!”

“Madame Kunoichi!”

Sadoking: Kunoichi Version stuck out her chest with pride.

This fine performance from the woman who could twist everything around her had turned everyone into the hero’s ally.

“Now then... You’re the only one left, Mr. David.”

“H-Huh? Wh-Whaaat?!”

Their last remaining opposition was David, who had only just been captured.

He had been left in a daze after witnessing the carnage. This was a bit of escapism on his part, but seeing such a hellish scene had left him with no will to do anything.

Starting with Lisalinde and spreading to the others, it wasn’t long before every set of eyes on Team Hero had locked onto David.

“I-I swear my loyalty! I pledge my allegiance to you! That should be the end of it, right?! Isn’t that enough?!”

“Oh, no. I would feel bad if you were the only one left out of the loop, Mr.

David. There's no need to be shy. Why don't we enjoy this banquet together?"

"E-Eep?!"

Sadoking slowly approached him.

David was still tied with rope, unable to do anything.

"Hey! David! What makes you think you can get out of this alone?!"

"D-Director?!"

"Come on over, David... It's fun on this side... ≡ Let's all be happy together!  
≡"

"Ch-Chief!"

He had no allies left. Every human in this underground chamber had capitulated to the mighty Sadoking.

"Upsy-daisy."

"Eeek!"

His restrained body was easily hoisted up again. His face was pale as a sheet.

"Oh, that's right, Mr. David. I do have one question..."

"Wh-What could it be?"

Lisalinde went on. "Do you have any hemorrhoids? This might be a bit harsh if you do."

"Why now?! Why are you asking about the condition of my rear now, of all times?!"

David broke into a sweat all over.

"Well, whether you have them or not doesn't really matter to us."

"Stop it! Please stop! I'm suddenly fearing for my ass!"

Though he cried and screamed, no one would come to his aid. Helpless and unable to resist, he was carried to the back of the room.

"It's quite all right. It's only scary at first, you know! ♪"

"Lady Sadoking is right, David. The pain leaves fast, and so many wonderful

things come to take its place.”

“Listen to him, David. You’ll be happy in no time.”

“Save me! Director! Chief! Dear client!”

This was the first circle of hell.

A captured spy met a miserable end.

“Stoop! Not my ass! Anything but that!”

Try as he might, his cries and screams were unable to escape the underground chamber. His desperate voice could never reach the world outside.

“Mweh heh heh...” Lisalinde lightly chuckled.

Back to her question: What happens when a spy gets captured by the enemy?

Her bewitching smile hinted at the tragic answer.

## Chapter 53: Now—Panties Ain't No Game

“Wh-What?! What’s with you?! How did you even...?!”

Dia, the new hero, was flustered. Sweat dripped from her brow, her eyes wide in shock at my sudden appearance.

It was evening. We seemed to be in an inn room that Dia had rented out. That was where we reunited—only a day after we’d gone our separate ways.

“Wh-Where did you come from, Lisalinde?! Just who are you?!”

“P-Please calm down, Ms. Dia.”

“How am I supposed to stay calm?!”

Dia backed away, pointing the tip of a knife at me. Her breathing was ragged, and she was fully on guard. And I couldn’t blame her. I’d warped directly into her room without warning with spatial distortion magic.

By imitating Kuon’s magic, I’d twisted the space between my own room and this one, ignoring both time and distance to forcibly barge in. From Dia’s perspective, I’d suddenly appeared out of nowhere, neither the door nor the windows having been opened.

No wonder she was scared.

And with that being the case, she was incredibly wary of me.

“Ms. Dia, please calm down. Listen to me for a moment.”

“S-Stay away! Don’t get any closer to me! Let me guess! The heroes must be nearby too, right?! Did you all come here to kill me?!”

As I figured, she wasn’t about to let her guard down. But she was mistaken. I hadn’t the slightest intention of fighting her.

“I came here alone! I am not with Cain or any of my other comrades! Please believe me!”

“Then *why* did you come here?!”

“Why? Well...”

I’d simply come to talk to Dia. That was it. I just wanted to have a conversation.

As far as I saw it, though the hero and the new hero were opposed, I believed that if we both sat down and each said our piece, it might be possible to resolve the situation.

“Ms. Dia, if I may.”

“Wh-What is it?”

But before that, there was something I needed to address.

“Could you take off your clothes for me?”

“Huh?”

Conversation was important. But first, I had to confirm something. I couldn’t start our dialogue before I did, and I needed Dia to strip her clothes off for that.

“Wha... Whaaaaaaaat?!” Dia shrieked. “Y-You want me to take off my...?! Wh-What do you mean by that?! Is that why you came here?! To strip me?!”

“Ah, no, that’s not exactly what I meant.”

*Now I’ve done it.*

I’d said too little in my impatience. I’d been so worried for Dia that I’d skipped over the whole explanation and jumped straight to my request. I certainly wasn’t getting ahead of myself because I was so absorbed in wanting to see her undressed. I was *not* that sort of pervert—nor *any* sort!

“A-Are you planning to strip and assault me?! Y-You’re insane!”

“You’re misunderstanding.”

“A-Are you actually into this sort of thing?! Even if you are, you’re my enemy, and you’re breaking into my room and telling me to u-undress?! Unbelievable! Absolutely unbelievable!”

“It’s *not* like that.”

Dia was panicking. Her eyes were spinning, her face flushed a bright red.

What an innocent girl. To see someone get so flustered just because I told them to undress—it was honestly endearing.

“Spatial Distortion... You possess such high-level magic, and you used it just to go after my chastity?! A-Are you stupid or something?!”

“No, I’m saying it’s not like that.”

“I-I’m not going to lose! There’s no way you’re getting my clothes off! I’ll never lose to a p-pervert like you!”

“I am *not* a pervert!” I insisted. That was the one point I wouldn’t concede.

*Why are so many people accusing me of being a pervert lately? This is completely unreasonable!*

“That’s not what this is about. Argh, please, just hurry up and show me the wound on your back!”

“What?!” Dia cried out. Her expression finally changed. “Oh, my back... I-It’s nothing.”

“I saw Cain cut you quite deep just yesterday! Please let me treat your wound properly!”

The day before, Dia had fought with Cain. During the battle, Cain had managed to inflict a severe slash across her back. The attack had come straight out of a spatial distortion and caught her off guard, dealing her significant damage. And, if my hunch was right, her wound hadn’t been properly treated yet.

Before we got to any discussion, I wanted to examine her.

I didn’t just tell her to strip because I wanted to see her naked. Definitely not! Honest!

“Wh-What’s my wound got to do with anything? We’re enemies! Why are you trying to treat my wound?!”

Dia turned the other way.

She had a point. So long as Cain was on hostile terms with the new hero, Dia and I were enemies. I had no obligation to provide her with treatment.



But that didn't matter; I'd come to talk regardless of such things. Treating her injury was the first step.

Besides, she didn't say "I don't need to have it looked at" or "It's already been taken care of." Most likely, her wound hadn't received any decent care whatsoever, but she refused to accept help from someone she didn't consider an ally.

"Yes, yes, enough of that. Just take off your clothes so I can see your wound. You haven't treated it yet, have you? What are you going to do if it gets infected?"

"Grrr..."

Dia gritted her teeth, unable to come up with a retort on the spot. It seemed my suspicions were correct.

"Grrr... Gnnn..."

Her mouth curled into a sharp frown as she dealt with her internal conflict. She seemed well aware that her wound needed treatment, but why did it have to come from an enemy? It was quite easy to see what was going on in her head.

Worst case, dealing with this wound could mean life or death for Dia. I wished she would stop being stubborn and just let me have a look.

"Then how about this: if you don't let me see the wound, I'll call Cain and the rest of the hero party here. If you don't want that, then let me examine your back right now."

"Hah! What sort of threat is that?!"

I tried tacking on a strange ultimatum. It wasn't so much a genuine threat as it was a means to gauge her reaction.

"Mmm..."

She was troubled. Her lips were pursed as she glared at me with discontent.

It went without saying that a medical examination would be to her benefit. But was it all right to trust me? She seemed to be mulling it over.

And after thinking it over a while, she ultimately let out a resigned sigh. “Fine. Got it. Ah, good grief. What’s wrong with you?”

“Oh, well then.”

“But! Any funny business and I’m going to cut you down on the spot, you hear?!”

Dia gripped the hilt of her holy sword tight as she threatened me.

“That’s quite all right. You can trust me.”

She had a fierce intensity to her. Anyone hostile to her would surely freeze in fear from that alone.

But I was fine. After all, I just wanted to treat her, plain and simple. There was no way I’d ever do anything strange to sour her mood.

“Also, no anesthetics or anything. No drugs, period.”

“I know. I didn’t even bring any. All right, now please take off your clothes and lie down on the bed.”

“...”

“Dia?”

For some reason, she wasn’t moving.

“It’s embarrassing to have someone watch you undress. Could you turn the other way?” She was fidgeting a bit, bashfully averting her eyes as she made her plea, her voice soft and face red.

At that moment, it felt as though an eagle had clenched its talons onto my heart.

*So innocent! So ridiculously innocent!*

Her animal ears were twitching a bit as her embarrassment radiated from her face. She was this flustered just by the thought of undressing in front of another woman. How could she be *so innocent*?

*What? That’s kinda adorable. How horribly pure and pristine...*

“H-Hurry and turn around, would you?”

“Huh? Oh, of course! I’ll do that right away...”

I quickly spun around.

*This is bad. She’s so cute, I might get a nosebleed.*

I could hear the sound of rustling cloth behind me. Rustling cloth was bad news. The sound alone was so sweet and delicate, I started to feel as though my hands might slip during treatment. Indeed, my hands might slip and touch somewhere they shouldn’t!

*No, no... Calm down. I am not a pervert. I am not the kind of lowlife who would use medical treatment as an excuse to do something inappropriate!*

“Calm down, Lisalinde! Simmer down!!!”

“Wah!”

Dia was startled by the yell that suddenly escaped my lips.

*Settle down! You must be calm, Liz! You must never allow such an innocent and purehearted girl to be tormented! Especially not by your own hands! After all, aren’t you a maiden just as pure and modest as she?!*

*Pretending to treat her wounds while toying with such a young and delicate soul—you mustn’t play out a scene straight out of an eromanga! You would never stoop to such debauchery, would you?*

“Calm down! You must calm doooooown!”

“L-Lisalinde? Wh-What’s gotten into you?”

“Simmer doooooown, Liiiiiz!”

I smacked my palms against my cheeks several times. I did ultimately break into a nosebleed, but whether it was from the blunt force trauma or the image of Dia’s naked body conjured up by the sound of rustling fabrics, I couldn’t say.

“Evil thoughts begone! Evil thoughts begone!”

“Wh-What? You’re scaring me.”

Though my back was still turned on Dia, her fear was palpable.

“Y-You can turn around now, Lisalinde.”

“Oh, right.”

Turning to her voice, I saw that Dia had finished preparing herself. She’d stripped her top off and had lain face down on the bed. Clearly, she was very well trained. There wasn’t an ounce of excess flesh on her beautiful, bare back.

“O-Okay, I’ll begin my treatment. Hff... Hff...”

“Why are you out of breath?”

*Because I’ve been smacking myself to get rid of all my worldly desires. I’m already exhausted. What am I even doing?*

“Pardon me. I’ll start by applying some salve.”

“I’m...not entirely convinced. But please do.”

I sat on the edge of the bed, opening the medicine box I’d brought with me. As I’d expected, the grievous wound still remained on her back in all its gruesome detail. She hadn’t taken any decent measures to treat it. Sure, she’d at least wrapped a bandage around it, which she’d kindly taken off for me. The bloodstained fabric lay on the ground.

“You couldn’t go to a hospital?” I asked her.

“Not really,” she softly replied.

Dia was a cat half-beast—an incredibly rare race born of human and beast blood. Her kind were few and far between. Unfortunately, this scarcity came with a particular set of problems—namely, discrimination.

Beasts were typically classified alongside the demons rather than humans. Consequently, most of them lived in demonland rather than the lands of humans. And humans, for the most part, only lived within the bounds of human territories.

Caught in the middle of it all, sharing blood from both sides, half-beasts were in a difficult position. They were seen as neither human nor demon, and with their small numbers, they often found themselves facing discrimination from both sides.

I, for one, didn’t approve of that sort of thing.

“If I went to a hospital and they gave me some nasty drugs, it’d be over for me. There’d be hell to pay if they sold me off as a slave while I’m out cold.”

Dia said it so casually, but it was a heavy matter indeed. I was starting to see why she rejected anesthesia. She’d lived thus far under harsh circumstances—and she continued to do so. The white mask she wore to hide her face was perhaps her way of avoiding the prejudice directed at half-beasts.

*Such a noble girl... It makes me want to support her!*

“Do you not have any comrades? If you showed them your wound...”

“No comment. No, I guess you’ve figured it out already. I don’t have any.”

*Well, I figured.*

According to the information broker’s report, she was always seen operating alone. She’d been alone the day before too, as she waited in her hideout to intercept Cain.

Without comrades, Dia couldn’t treat a wound on her back—a place she struggled to see or reach. That was why I had to be the one applying the medicine.

*And I’ll make sure to slather the hell out of it! I’ll put on a second coat too!*

“Aren’t you creeped out by a half-beast like me?”

Dia tilted her head ever so slightly, glancing at me from where she lay.

“Ha ha, what are you talking about?”

Who would ever get creeped out by such an adorable girl?

“Why don’t you move to Academy Town, Dia? That town has very little discrimination. It’s my recommendation.”

Since Academy Town took plenty of foreign exchange students, it was a place where a variety of people from different nations and regions gathered together. I was sure she wouldn’t feel out of place there just for being a half-beast. She’d even be able to visit the hospital without worry.

“Hmph. I doubt it. Every town’s just about the same,” she said with a scoff.

“That’s not true. I mean, that town even has a drag bar.”

“Are you serious?!”

Even Dia was shocked by that one. Her ears and tail pricked up.

“Wow. I hear those folks face even harsher persecution than us half-beasts.”

“Well, it’s more of a secret, underground bar, but still, isn’t it amazing?”

Since our first meeting, I’d chatted with the owner, Happy, from time to time.

No one was inherently bad. I believed that in time, people would come to accept drag queens and half-beasts alike.

“No. I can’t exactly move to the town where the hero lives,” Dia muttered with a sigh.

She had a point. We’d have to wait until the hero issue was resolved.

I finished up the treatment as we chatted.

“All right. I’ve finished applying the medicine.”

“Very well. Seems like you didn’t use anything strange. None of my senses feel off.”

“Of course not.”

Dia flexed her hand open and shut to test her senses. Evidently, she was still wary of me slipping in some kind of numbing agent or sleeping drug.

“Well...thanks, I guess.”

“We’re not done yet. Please stay still.”

“Huh?”

I stopped her before she could jump off the bed. There was still much more to do.

“I’ve finished applying medicine. But I thought I would throw in some healing magic as a little bonus. What do you say?”

“Hmm... You sure know how to treat your customers.”

Medicine wasn’t the only way to treat wounds. She would heal faster if I mixed in some healing magic as well. Given how severe her wound was, and how she hadn’t received treatment for a full day, I wanted to ensure I

addressed everything.

And so, I asked her to remain face down.

“It’s great to get the full deal, but don’t expect any thanks.”

“Ha ha, I’m doing it because I want to.”

“Hmph.” She let out a light snort.

I gathered mana in my right hand and gently pressed that hand to her wound, beginning the treatment.

“What the nyah?! Nyah hah?!”

*What just happened?*

Dia suddenly began letting out sultry moans. Her body twitched as sensual catlike sounds escaped her lips.

“Nyah?! Wh-What is this?! N-Nyan?! L-Lisalinde?! Wait... Hold on a nyan?!”

“Wh-What’s wrong, Dia? This is just healing magic.”

“No, this is definitely not just... Nyaaaaaaaaaan?!”

Something was definitely off. All I’d done was cast healing magic on her, yet she began to squirm on the bed.

“Lisalinde... What are you doing to...nyan! Nyaaaaaaaaaan!”

“No, no, this is perfectly ordinary healing magic and... Dia? Ms. Dia? Deep breaths, deep breaths.”

“Nyah?! I-It’s no good! I’m going crazy! Nyaaaaah?!”

“Dia, seriously, what’s gotten into you?!”

*Rather, I remember something like this happening before.*

It had happened when I’d cast healing magic on my school friend Satina. When a demon executive had infiltrated the academy, Satina had suffered a deep wound on her thigh. I was the one who’d treated her, and I’d cast the same spell I was using now. When I had, Satina had started to act strangely.

“Hm?”

I stared at my magic-infused hands. I was using the same healing magic I usually used...right?

Perhaps the flow of mana was a little...off. Or maybe not? Perhaps I was just imagining it.

*No, that can't be. This is a perfectly ordinary, everyday healing spell.*

“Nyaaaaaaaaaaaaahn!”

As soon as I resumed my treatment, Dia was writhing again.

Her tail was going through a cycle of pricking up straight before slowly wilting, while her cat ears were twitching back and forth. The parts of her that we humans lacked seemed especially reactive.

“Lisalinde! You... You...!”

“It's not me! I swear, this really is normal healing magic! Believe me!”

*I'm not doing anything inappropriate. I'm not using this treatment to play around with a young maiden like they do in those eromanga! I'm not! At least I don't think I am... So why?!*

“I'll admit it! I feel really, incredibly healed right now! I can feel incredibly fine-tuned magic flowing into my body... I get that part! But still—! Nya-nyaaaaaaaaaaaaahn!”

I somehow got a compliment from the girl as she writhed in agony.

*Incredibly fine-tuned magic?* Hearing that from a first-rate warrior like Dia made me blush a little. *But you're wrong—this is perfectly normal healing magic!*

“Please stay still, Dia!”

“Mmmgh!”

Something was definitely going on with Dia.

Her face was red. She panted in heated breaths that seemed to come from the depths of her chest. But I couldn't stop now. I had to treat her fully, properly, and perfectly. I wasn't going to let my half measures lead to a horrid infection.



I steeled my heart and continued casting healing magic.

It wasn't because I found Dia writhing around to be cute! Definitely not! And it certainly wasn't because I wanted to hear more of her adorable cat noises!

"I'll remember this, Lisaliiiiiiiiinde!"

I wasn't about to demand thanks for what I was doing. But this was the first time I'd been cursed for healing someone.

"Nyaaaaaah..."

"D-Dia? Are you okay?"

Finally, the treatment was done. But she wouldn't reply. Dia was limp and spent.

"M-Ms. Dia?"

She didn't speak another word to me that day. And so, with everything still left unresolved, the night quietly came to an end.

A few days passed by.

"Dia, the rabbit stew is done."

I'd whipped up some lunch in Dia's inn room. The delicious scent of stew filled the air.

The rooms at this inn were furnished with kitchens, allowing its residents to cook. It was presumably an inn geared toward customers who intended on taking longer stays.

And so, I had a pot simmering just for her. Its burbling cut through the silence.

"Wait, Dia? What's wrong?"

Yet for some reason, Dia seemed discontent. She obstinately refused to reply whenever I called out to her and continued to stare at me with a frown.

"Lisalinde, can I ask you something?"

"Yes?"

"Why exactly are you making lunch in my room?" She gave me a sharp glare.

With a light sigh, I replied, “Well, I mean, it’s because your living habits are absolutely abhorrent. I couldn’t stand to watch, so I went ahead and—”

“As I’ve told you time and again—we’re enemies! Why am I letting one of the hero’s comrades cook for me?!”

Ever since the day that I’d treated the wound on her back, I’d paid frequent visits to Dia’s room, during which I’d end up hunkering down and spending a lot of time lounging around there. My goal was to get close to Dia; close enough to talk to her about her issues with the hero and to reach a compromise. My efforts to further our relationship were certainly no accident.

However—to put it mildly—Dia put no effort into taking care of herself. Her diet consisted of junk food for every meal. It seemed she didn’t bother to clean her room, and even though it was a rented room that had surely been cleaned before she moved in, the dust had already begun to build up.

She seemed indifferent to the wound on her back, and if I didn’t insist, she wouldn’t even change out her bandages for fresh ones. Given how severe her injury was, I wished she would take it a bit more seriously.

And with that being the case, I found myself acting as her caretaker.

“Now, now, let’s not dwell on such things. We should eat the stew while it’s still hot.”

“Hmm...”

Despite the disgruntled look in her eyes, Dia sat at the dinner table. Perhaps she was prone to going along with whatever happened to her.

“Amen.”

“Hmm... Amen.”

We both settled in and said grace.

We sat across from one another, eating cream stew together. The rich creaminess of the milk spread to every corner of my mouth. It was quite delicious, if I do say so myself.

“Ugh...” she sighed. “Seriously, why do you keep sticking to me?”

“I’ve told you plenty of times. My goal is to hear what you have to say and search for a compromise.”

“Hmph, like that’ll ever happen.”

Dia was trying to strip Cain of his position as the hero, but I just couldn’t see her as a villain. Why did she want to defeat him so badly? What was her goal? What was she trying to gain from it all? I needed to know everything before I could try to find a solution.

“Now, Dia, please tell me everything that’s been bothering you lately! I’ll tie it all up in a pretty bow!”

“Like. I. Told. You. I already explained everything. I can’t stand that shady-as-hell sword the hero is toting around. That’s why I plan on snatching it and destroying it. That’s all there is to it, seriously.”

“Is that really *all* there is?”

She had in fact explained this before, but it still felt like she was hiding something from me.

She was trying to destroy Cain’s sword, and that didn’t sound like a lie. Judging from her actions so far, that likely was her ultimate objective. But I couldn’t shake the feeling she was hiding something far more fundamental—a reason so deeply personal it touched on the core of who she was as a person. That was the feeling I was getting.

Looking back, I realized I knew absolutely nothing about Dia’s past. Her origins, her experiences, the path she’d taken.

“Lisalinde. Listen well. I will never see eye to eye with the current hero. There is no way to resolve this matter with a measly discussion. Not a chance.” In a rather poor display of table manners, Dia pointed the tip of her spoon at me. “You are deluding yourself. Quit thinking I’m some sort of good person. I’m the villain here. I’m trying to quash the world’s hope, and I don’t care what I have to do to do it.”

“Right...”

Dia was trying to play the villain. It wasn’t convincing at all. If she really was a

bad person, she would have killed me ages ago.

“It seems you’re still not getting it. Fine, then! I’ll spell it out, just for you. Now listen closely to the heinous plan that emerged from my twisted mind!”

“What plan?”

“A grueling, horrible plan to drag the current hero off of his pedestal! If this succeeds, he’ll be driven from his position without any means to resist! He’ll be ruined!”

“Oh, really?”

Dia was finally offering up some new information. Her information suppression spell was still in effect, and I wouldn’t be able to divulge her plot to anyone. But I would be able to further my personal plot to get to know her better.

“Don’t let a single word slip by, Lisalinde!”

Dia stood and began monologuing.

“My next foul move will be to join forces with a prestigious university that specializes in archeology! The historical records concerning my Holy Sword Ikryl and his Holy Sword Andros are more valuable than you can imagine! I will present the documents, convince the academy professors, and have them research the holy sword’s history alongside me!”

“Oh?”

“The goal of this research will be to throw mud on the perceived historic value of the Holy Sword Andros in the hero’s possession! The moment I prove the legitimacy of Holy Sword Ikryl’s historic value, it will naturally lower the influence of Holy Sword Andros!”

“Um...”

Dia triumphantly laid out her plan, her chest held out proudly.

Meanwhile, I could only stare at her in stunned silence.

“Once the legitimacy of Holy Sword Ikryl is proven, I will have the university publicly release the findings! An official announcement by an accredited

institution! That holds far more sway than anything I could have presented as an individual! And then, people's trust in Holy Sword Andros will crumble! Crumble I say!"

"Er..."

"Once the credibility of Holy Sword Andros collapses, the current hero will obviously lose his claim to the title of hero! Society will no longer support him, and he will be abandoned by the world! I'm sure he'll struggle to continue operating as he did before!"

"..."

"Can't you see? I put together such an unscrupulous scheme!"

I was speechless, but a triumphant smile tugged at the corners of her lips. She was clearly pleased with herself, lording over me as though she'd come up with the most sinister scheme imaginable.

"How about that, Lisalinde?! Do you finally realize who you're dealing with?!"

"That's...way too roundabout!"

"What?!"

I couldn't stop myself from raising my voice.

"What you're trying to do is so roundabout! *Way* too roundabout! What part of that is supposed to be sinister whatsoever?!"

"What?! Wha?!"

Dia was taken aback by my rebuttal.

This had previously occurred to me when she'd cast the information suppression magic and whatnot, but she really did like to take the roundabout approach. Surely there was a simpler and more effective way. There *had* to be.

There was absolutely no chance of anyone dying in the sinister (lol) plot I'd just heard from her. She wanted to reduce casualties as much as possible. That was probably the basis for this unnecessarily convoluted scheme.

*Just how many years would it even take to pull that off?!*

"And on top of that, what you're doing is completely legitimate, right?! How is

this a villainous plan at all?!”

“Wh-wh-what?! No, no...”

She wasn't doing anything illegal or even nefarious. Her plan was to openly and honestly conduct joint research with a university in order to assert her own legitimacy and earn the fair and earnest support of the people. There was no deception or foul play involved at all. In fact, I felt no inclination to even try to stop her from doing it, namely because she wasn't doing anything shady. I could only flat-out tell her, “I see absolutely no reason to stop you from doing what you're doing.”

“Wha...?! What?!” No, you're missing the point! I'm the villain here! I'm trying to bring down the current hero, you know!

“It'd actually be admirable if you managed to pull off something so unmalicious. Even Cain would pat you on the back for it...”

He'd never been that fixated on the hero position to begin with. I could see him taking it all with a light chuckle.

“Wrong! This is all wrong, Lisalinde! I am a horrid, heinous individual! The worst villain in all of human history, hell-bent on besmirching the world's last light of hope!”

I was so flummoxed I didn't know what to say. Honestly, I felt like just picking my nose out of sheer boredom.

“Look, this all sounds like such a pain. Between you and me. How about you stop using these roundabout methods and just go and kill him? That way, you can take out the current hero and the current holy sword in one fell swoop.”

“K-K-K-Kill?! How could you say something so horrible?!”

Her ears perked up. How terribly pure she was. I'd made the proposal knowing full well there was no way she would agree to it, and it was just as I'd suspected.

She was a hero through and through.

“K-K-K-Kill?! By 'k-k-kill,' you mean... I will never allow it! Never!”

“Whose side are you even on at this point?” The whole conversation was

starting to feel backward. “Why don’t you just stop pretending to be a villain and talk it out? I can set up a meeting with Cain whenever you want.”

“That is the one thing I will never accept!” Dia screamed.

Her face had turned red, her tail fretfully swishing from side to side. My straightforward suggestion had agitated her quite a bit.

“Goodness...” I sighed.

Honestly, it was starting to feel like there was absolutely nothing to worry about. I’d come here to resolve the dispute between Cain and Dia, but I couldn’t see there being much escalation if I just left her to it.

“Thank you for the meal.”

“Hey! Wait! The debate isn’t over yet, Lisalinde! Don’t you dare run away!”

I’d ended up finishing the stew in the middle of our conversation. Dia had been speaking in such a fervor that she’d only managed to scarf down half of hers.

I stood.

“Wait! Lisalinde!”

“Yes, yes, I’m not going anywhere. For starters, please finish your soup. I can’t clean your bowl until you do.”

“Mmm...”

Despite her pouting, Dia sat back down and silently started working at her stew.

*What an honest person.*

With a slight sigh, I found my eyes drifting to the window.

The sun hung high in the sky, shining down with all of its might. It truly was a pleasant sky. Outside sprawled a peaceful scene, the fluffy clouds lazily drifting through a clear blue that seemed to stretch out forever. It was the kind of day that made you feel like nothing bad could ever happen.

“Thanks for the meal. It was delicious.”

“You can just leave the dishes in the kitchen. I’ll take care of them.”

“You know, I’ve been thinking it for days now, but...what are you, my wife?”  
Dia muttered, giving me a sidelong glare.

*Oh, quit it. You’re making me blush.*

“Phew...”

Once I’d finished briskly washing two sets of tableware, I let out a satisfied sigh. Lunch was over, and with nothing left to do, I found myself idly wandering the room, unsure of how to pass the time.

“If you’re that bored, why don’t you just go home already?” Dia said with a sigh.

*How cold.*

“Come to think of it, what have you been doing about laundry?” I asked, fishing for any more chores I could help with. I’d usurped most of the housework; besides treating her wounds, I often found myself doing the cooking, cleaning, dishwashing, and shopping, but I had yet to extend my reach to the laundry.

“Hmm... Laundry, eh? I’ve been doing it, but...”

Dia gave a half-baked response while shifting her gaze to the dresser in the room. Taking that as permission, I opened it up.

“Wow...” I gasped as I inspected the contents. The clothes in the dresser had been stuffed in without care, without any rhyme or reason.

*I see. Now I get why she was so wishy-washy about it.* The laundry *had* been done—that much was true. The clothes were all clean, and nothing was stopping her from wearing them.

But nothing had been folded.

She was one of those people—the ones who lacked the drive to get their environment in order. She was capable of living on her own, but she was sloppy in her daily life, so focused on her work that she let all the other little things slide.



“Your clothes are going to get wrinkled like that.”

“Quit nagging me. Are you my mother?”

I'd been promoted from wife to mother. *No, maybe that's a demotion.*

“What's the harm, anyway? Why must clothing be folded? The clothes will naturally develop wrinkles as you wear them, so the effort that goes into folding them is a complete waste of energy. It's inefficient. Besides, I hardly ever interact with other people, so what's the point in being fussy about my appearance?” she quickly prattled, all the while averting her eyes from me. She was using sophistry to cover up the awkwardness she was clearly feeling.

“Oh, come now, let's not be silly. How about we fold your clothes properly?”

“Hmph!”

She puffed out her cheeks, but I ignored her as I casually scooped up an article from the dresser. One by one, I spread them out and carefully folded them before returning them.

“Good grief. You march into the home of your enemy, and for what? All you've done is meddle in all my business.”

“I am aware that I'm a bit of a busybody.”

I tended to enjoy housework. Cooking, cleaning, laundry—you name it. Although I lived alone in the academy dormitory, I found the most satisfaction in doing housework for others' sake. Not that I was anything like Sylphie, but indeed, I did like to make myself useful. That was why I found fulfillment in cleaning up Dia's room.

I attentively folded up the battered coat she usually wore when she went out. It was a coat that had seen so much use that the fabric was largely in tatters. I made a mental note to patch up the holes later—though I knew she'd probably complain about me meddling again.

“Hmm?”

It was then that I came across a certain something. Much like the coat, it was tattered and ridden with holes. It had been artlessly shoved into the dresser drawer and was so scrunched and crumpled I couldn't even recognize what it

was at first. But for some reason—why, I could not fathom—the sight of it caused a wave of dread to wash over me.

I held up the wrinkled article of clothing, spreading it out between my hands. It was, as it turned out...a ragged old pair of bloomers.

“This is...?! Why would...?!”

I held my breath, sweat erupting from my forehead. I had just uncovered the most unbelievably unfashionable panties to ever exist.

“Wh-What...?” Dia called out to me, but I couldn’t reply. My entire body trembled. My breath ran ragged.

*Lame... Lame... So horrendously lame!*

“Wh-What’s with these panties?”

*They aren’t just lame, they’re downright disgraceful!*

To start with, they were absurdly large! They were far from the triangular design that was standard in our generation, instead puffing out from the waist and forming a pumpkin-like silhouette.

*These are the kind of panties you’d see on a little girl! No, worse! These are the sort of panties a mother would force on their fashion-unconscious child just because they were easy to put on. No, somehow, they’re worse than that still!*

“H-How could such a...?”

My voice trembled. This was unbelievable.



I simply couldn't believe that a beauty like Dia was going around wearing such unfashionable panties. Of course, I'm not saying that bloomers of this style were inherently bad. Professional designers did create undergarments in a similar style specifically to suit adult women. But those ones were meticulously crafted—the size, color, and design were all taken into careful consideration to create something genuinely cute.

The panties in front of my eyes were everything but! To an irreparable degree!

They were baggy and beat up! It was like someone had simply scrunched up some fabric and forced it into something vaguely panty-shaped! These were the kind of embarrassing panties that no self-respecting person of culture would ever wear. They weren't just plain drawers, or some elegant fashion statement. No, these were just awkwardly split at the crotch, puffing out in the most ridiculous, unfashionable way.

Even someone with absolutely no interest in fashion would look at them, wince, and think, *That's a bit...much.*

*And let's not forget about the gaping holes! They're everywhere! These things are so well-worn they're practically tatters! What is the meaning of this?! As a fellow woman, I can't believe anyone would wear such panties!*

"Lisalinde? What's wrong?!"

"Everything!"

"What?!"

It was a scream from the depths of my soul.

"Why?! *Why?! Why* is someone so beautiful wearing such...such *lame* panties?!"

"L-Lame?"

"They don't have a shred of sexiness! I can't understand your sensibilities! They're so lame I'm starting to feel dizzy! At this point, these panties are disrespecting the very concept of panties!"

"Huh? What?"

Dia looked dumbfounded. But that didn't matter. My sense of aesthetics was crying out in horror. My very soul was screaming that these panties could never be forgiven. They had to be purged for the sin of their existence!

"I won't allow it. I can't allow it! This is unacceptable! It's not about good or bad—it's about what should and shouldn't be! The existence of these panties and the fact that someone as beautiful as you is wearing them goes against *everything* I believe in!"

"U-Um..."

"They lack character—dignity! These are not the kind of panties any woman should wear! In fact, they're so far beyond lame, they shouldn't even exist! I can't forgive their existence! Why?! Why *these* panties?!"

"..."

"Why?! Someone tell me! Answer me! *Whyyyyyyy*?!"

Her eyes were wide. She seemed startled by my outburst.

"D-Does it really matter what kind of panties I wear? Wh-Who cares?"

"It absolutely matters!"

"Wh-Whoa?!"

I firmly grabbed Dia's shoulders.

"All girls are cute! Every girl carries a gem of cuteness deep within her soul! When polished, every girl can shine with their own unique brand of cuteness! But these panties are a complete insult to that cuteness! They are blasphemous against the very essence of being a girl!"

"I-I have no idea what you're on about!"

"Honestly, I wouldn't fault anyone for ending a relationship or a marriage over panties like these!"

"Wh-What's gotten into you, Lisalinde?! It's like you've become a completely different person!"

Dia was baffled.

Sure enough, I could feel myself becoming far more passionate than usual.

But it didn't matter. My soul was set ablaze. My soul was telling me I couldn't stop here!

“Put on some stylish panties! Right now. Right this instant, change into something fashionable!”

“Whaaaaaa?!”

I'd begun shaking her by the shoulders.

“No one in the world benefits from a beautiful woman wearing ragged, holey, worn-out panties like theeeeeese!”

“B-But no one's even going to see them. It doesn't matter if they're worn out!”

“Panties ain't no game!”

When it came to panties, I simply couldn't allow for any concessions!

“These panties are no good! No good at all! They don't even seem like they'd be any fun to suck oooooon!”

“Wha...? S-Suck?!”

“Wait, what am I even talking abooooout?!”

*Forget that last bit! I already regret saying that.*

*What's wrong with me?! What am I saying?! I think I'm going crazy!*

*No, but I am absolutely in the right on this matter! You're supposed to throw out your panties when they have holes in them, right?!*

“Besides, if you wear panties like that, then what will you do when...when it comes to sex?!”

“S-S-S-S—?!” Dia's face turned bright red. “I-I-I-I... I don't have anyone to do that with!”

“Don't be so naive!”

*Look, I don't have anyone either. But you never know when your chance is going to come around, right?! Not that I know anything! I've never had a boyfriend, so I'm just as oblivious! But c'mon!*

“Wait!”

It was then that I realized something. There was something missing from the dresser.

“Wh-What now? Speak to me, Lisalinde...”

Dia’s expression turned to one of suspicion as I suddenly fell silent. But I was trembling within, shaken up by the sudden realization. I’d been too distracted by the panties, but there was something else—something essential—missing from the jumble of laundry.

“Um...Dia? Could I ask you an unrelated question?”

“Sh-Shoot.”

Dia held her breath.

Trembling with fear, I hazarded the question. “Where do you keep your bras?”

“Huh? I don’t have any.”

I reached out and touched her chest. No bra.

“Whaaa?! Wh-What are you doing, Lisalinde?!”

Dia jumped back in shock, her face turning crimson as she quickly shielded her chest with her arms and distanced herself from me.

“What am I doing?! That should be my question to *you!*”

I was the one who was aghast.

She wasn’t wearing a bra. She *wasn’t* wearing a *bra!* Dia was not! Wearing! A bra!

“Why?! Why don’t you have any bras?!”

There were no bras in the laundry pile. I’d been so caught up in the panties that I’d been late to realize the bra situation.

*How could it be? How have I not noticed anything these past few days?*

*That’s right...*

Whenever I was treating her back wound, I’d always have her take her top off

for me. But, innocent as she was, she was too embarrassed to be seen stripping, and she would plead for me to look the other way. If only I'd peeped at her... If I'd just taken a peek, I would have noticed this crucial predicament much sooner!

“Why would you do that?!”

“Huh? Well, I mean...are bras even necessary?”

“Bwaaaaaaaah!”

She was so frustratingly dense that my anger, my sorrow, and my exasperation mixed into what sounded like a groan from a demon in hell. Dia had a normal chest. Normal breasts in every sense.

“Listen to me, Dia! A bra is not only worn for fashion! It also stabilizes the chest and protects your Cooper's ligaments from harm! If those ligaments get damaged, your breasts will sag and lose shape!”

“You're...very knowledgeable about this, Lisalinde.”

“This is common sense!”

Cooper's ligaments would never be the same once damaged. The moment breasts sagged, they would be sagging for life.

*I can't stand it! If there's anything I can do... If there's anything within my power, I want to gaze at Dia's beautiful chest for as long as I can!*

“Your breasts are crying! They're crying out in paaaaain!”

“You're really passionate, huh?”

Of course I was. Panties with gaping holes were shocking, but the bralessness was on another level. Did this girl have some sort of grudge against underwear?!

“B-But c'mon. Hear me out, Lisalinde...”

“Go on.”

Dia began to fidget nervously. Her face was faintly red as she uneasily shifted from one foot to another.

“Putting on a bra... It kinda makes it feel like I'm putting on airs. Getting all



dolled up, you know? Isn't it embarrassing?"

"It's even more embarrassing to not wear one!" I roared from the depths of my soul.

"Wha?!" Dia jumped in shock.

*I get it now. Her sense of modesty's stuck at the level of a ten-year-old. In short, she's still a child.*

Her mind was still at the age where she mulled over whether to wear a bra or not. The time of her life when she'd think, "Well, I'm still fine, right? Maybe I can get away with not wearing one. I mean, it's not like anyone else is wearing one yet. And it's kinda embarrassing since I've never worn one before." She hadn't taken a single step forward from that point.

That was why she was completely indifferent to the holes in her panties, and she didn't wear a bra. No, if I had to take a guess, she was embarrassed to wear panties with a presentable design as well.

"We're going shopping."

"Huh?"

"We're buying you some panties and bras—right now!"

I couldn't let this stand. I had to be the one to guide her.

*I must be the shepherd to this poor, lost lamb!*

"Come now! Prepare to head out! We are going to the shopping district this instant."

"Huh? R-Right now?"

What would happen if I left her to her devices? That was obvious enough. She'd be on a date with her (eventual) boyfriend someday, and she'd show up in holey panties and no bra. It would be like challenging a mighty dragon with nothing but a cypress stick and a worn leather shield. A reckless, hopeless battle.

And there, she would surely be scarred for life.

*It's no good. I can't bear the thought of it. Just imagining it is making me sad!*

“Wait, panties and bras... What’s the big rush? I don’t see why it has to be right now.”

“It’s necessary! Urgent! Critical! We can’t be even a second behind! Before we’re too late, before we’re left behind by the times!”

“Wha?! Wha?!”

I pushed her from behind, not taking no for an answer. Swiftly, I rushed her through all the steps she needed to get ready to go out. But I knew I was in the right. This was a holy crusade. A holy war to present Dia with both panty and bra, and to safeguard her future!

“And away we go!”

“Okay, okay! Just *calm down!*”

We prepared ourselves with haste and sallied forth into town. And as we did so, I thought to myself, *Wait...why did I go to Dia in the first place?*

“Wow, I never expected to meet you here, Ms. Bienvenuta.”

“Likewise. Well, come on in, Lisalinde. It’s good to see a familiar face at one of the branch shops.”

Dia and I had ventured into a clothing store in town. It was her debut into the world of bras. I arduously scoured the city, determined to find a shop that sold stylish undergarments.

Dia, on the other hand, kept insisting that any store would do. That anything would be fine, and she just wanted to finish up quickly. But there was no way I could let her settle for just *anything*. I was panting in excitement, dead set on getting her the most beautiful bras and panties.

And in the shop we finally singled out, I’d found Ms. Bienvenuta.

Bienvenuta was the owner of an armor shop in Academy Town and an acquaintance of mine. I’d occasionally worked part-time at her shop, and she’d previously helped me pick out some cute clothes for Remphie. We’d been crossing paths quite often lately.

“With you here, I can shop with some peace of mind. Please pick out some

undergarments that suit this fine madame.”

“Wah ha hah! Just leave it to me! I’ll pick out only the finest undergarments available!”

Bienvenuta was somewhat eccentric, but she certainly had a sharp eye for fashion. Since this clothing store was one of her branches, I had high hopes for the quality.

That aside, she didn’t seem the least bit suspicious about meeting me here instead of in Academy Town. I’d been dreading having to explain myself if she questioned it, yet for some reason, she didn’t.

Which was convenient. I wasn’t going to complain.

“So? Would the girl I’m selecting these for happen to be the one standing behind you?”

As Ms. Bienvenuta called out to her, Dia grew even warier. She glared at the fashionista while hiding behind me.

She was probably shy to the core, fearful of strangers. She’d pulled her hood down over her face, using my body as a shield as she tried to keep as far away as possible. Like a nervous cat, she was clearly tense in this unfamiliar, fashionable store.

“What’s your name, madame?”

After a pause, Dia replied, “Tina.”

“Huh?”

She’d answered the question with a lie.

*Tina? Is that a fake name? Why is she using a fake name here?*

It startled me a bit, but I soon understood. The name Dia was spreading as the name of the new hero. And today, she wasn’t wearing the mask she usually wore while on duty. By the sound of it, she used the fake name “Tina” whenever she was living her normal life.

“I see, I see. Tina it is, then. Welcome to my shop. Please allow me to assist you in finding undergarments that meet all your needs.”

“You don’t have to. Anything will do.”

“Oh? You don’t seem very interested.”

Bienvenuta offered a wry smile to Dia, who spoke in a lower and fainter voice than usual. She wasn’t hiding the fact that she had been reluctantly dragged to the shop.

“Ms. Bienvenuta... The thing is...”

“Yes?”

I brought my mouth to her ear and whispered a few things.

“Wh-What?! N-N-No bra?!” she cried out in shock.

Naturally, I’d told her that Dia was wearing hole-ridden bloomers and was braless. That alone was enough for her to understand the urgency I felt in bringing Dia in.

“T-T-T-Tina, Tina my dear! You mustn’t do that! Truly! Listen up! Bras are not just for fashion! They also support the chest and protect your Cooper’s ligaments! If those ligaments get damaged, your breasts will sag and their shape will deteriorate!”

“I just heard that! Almost word for word!”

Bienvenuta grabbed Dia by the shoulders, shaking her back and forth vigorously. Our hearts were as one. She and I were united in our mission.

“We can’t waste any time! I must prepare the perfect bra and panties for Tina at once!”

“Y-You don’t need to get so worked up about this! Just give me anything!” Dia stammered, flustered by Bienvenuta’s heated enthusiasm. “Or something plain! At least keep it plain and simple!” she cried out. “I’ve long since abandoned my identity as a woman! As a warrior, I only need to think about the battlefield! That’s why there’s no point in dressing me up! Got it?!”

“Huh?”

“What?”

Dia’s bold declaration was met with dissatisfied groans from both of us.

She was a warrior and a hero. She was clearly proud of that. To her, donning frilly, extravagant clothes was an unnecessary distraction. She likely believed that simple and sturdy attire was all that suited her as a fighter. If my suspicions were correct, it was going to be quite the herculean task to get her interested in fashion.

*I might need to devise some sort of strategy.*

“Right. In that case, how about something like this?”

Bienvenuta rummaged through one of the shelves and brought out a pair of lingerie.

“Um...”

Dia took it, and held it up to get a better look.

The underwear was formed from only a few very small pieces of fabric, and despite being a pair of panties did not bear the shape of panties at all. Something long and stringlike dangled from both sides of the main cloth.

Dia cocked her head, puzzled by the sight of panties unlike anything she’d seen before.

“What is this?”

“A G-string.”

“G-String?!”

The item Bienvenuta presented was a type of panties fastened at the side with strings—commonly known as a G-String. It could only assume its final form as panties once the strings were tied at the waist.

“Th-Th... Th-This... This is...”

Dia’s face flushed red as she trembled all over.

A G-string.

It was unmistakably classified as sexy lingerie. These were unmistakably lewd undergarments.

*I see. So that’s her angle.*

I could read all of Ms. Bienvenuta's intentions.

"Are... Are you stupid or something?! There's no way I could ever wear something this...th-this *indecent!* What are you thinking?!"

"Oh, I'm sure it will suit you perfectly, Tina."

"It's the shamelessness that's putting me off here! It's a threat to the healthy development of young boys everywhere! Whether it suits me or not isn't the issue! Are you both idiots?!"

Dia was prattling on a mile a minute as she shouted, her face growing redder and redder, to the point it was nearly steaming.

*Yep, she's nice and easy to read.*

"All right Di... Tina. Then how about this?"

"Oh? Let me see it, Lisalinde."

I returned with another item and handed it to Dia.

"A T-back," I declared.

"T-back?!"

T-backs were undergarments that exposed much of the buttocks, the fabric resembling a T when viewed from the back. Hence the name.

And this, too, was undoubtedly sexy lingerie.

"S-So you're an idiot too?! Lisalinde, are you out of your mind?!" Dia wailed.

She was completely overwhelmed.

"Well, well, to think you would bring out a piece by the Lingerie Fashion King. You've got quite an eye, Lisalinde."

"Lingerie Fashion King?"

I'd just picked out a fine-looking T-back, but I'd somehow managed to impress Bienvenuta. *Who could that be? This Lingerie Fashion King person?*

"They were an up-and-coming lingerie designer, you see. Their work took the world by storm, and they were incredibly popular."

"Hmm..."

“Choosing one of their designs shows you have impeccable taste, Lisalinde,” Bienvenuta nodded with a hand on her chin.

I didn’t really get it, but it seemed I’d done well in her books.

“Unfortunately, around a year ago, the Lingerie Fashion King suddenly called it quits, just when they were set to take off. It’s a waste, really. Such a waste...”

“Hmm.”

Bienvenuta spoke with a deep sense of longing.

*But that’s a strange name they chose for themselves. Lingerie Fashion King. A bit on the nose, if I do say so myself.*

“Who cares about that?! You’re both stupid! Bringing me such stimulating underwear... What do you expect me to do with it?!”

Dia’s eyes were spinning, the G-string and T-back still clutched in her hands.

Now was the time to go on the offensive.

“Now, Tina. Between the G-string and the T-back, which one do you want to try on?”

“Which do you want to test out first?”

“Q-Quit it! G-Get away from me!”

We slowly closed the distance, laying down the pressure. Dia was supposed to be the strongest one in the room by a large margin, yet she was sweating and backing away.

“Now!”

“Now, now!”

“Now, now, now!”

“S-Stop! Stop it! You’re idiots, the lot of you!”

Holding on to such lewd undergarments, Dia put her cute—so very cute—innocence on full display.

*Hmmm. How enticing.*

“Hmm. Then what about something like this?”

Bienvenuta presented yet another set.

“That’s...?”

“A baby doll.”

“More stupidity?! Is that even underwear?!”

Bienvenuta had brought out what looked like a see-through dress.

*Oh my, she’s pressing hard. Dia’s vocabulary seems to be on a rapid decline.*

“Then what about this one?”

“What now?”

I handed over a pair of panties.

“Hmm?”

This time, she stared at it, puzzled. She examined the oddly shaped panties with a curious tilt of her head. *I see. So Dia lacks the knowledge to discern what those panties really are.*

“Those, you see. They’re called open-crotch shorts.”

“Open-crotch?”

I brought my face up to Dia’s cat ears and softly explained.

*“Mumble mumble mumble...”*

“...?!”

Like a ripening apple, her face turned redder and redder. It was as if her cheeks had caught fire. Even I was feeling a bit hot and bothered. Even though I knew it was part of the plan, I did feel a bit of shame as I explained the purpose of those panties.

“Y-Y-Y-Y... You’re stupid! S-S-Stupid! Stupid!” She let out a shout louder than all the others.

These panties had a hole in the crotch area. As for why the hole was there. Well...that’s a little embarrassing to explain, but...it was to insert things. For sex!

In short, yes, to summarize, to put it in brief! These were wonderful panties



that allowed for sex without even taking them off!

*Phew, I'm too embarrassed to explain it any more than that. I'm getting red myself.*

“Foool! Lisaliinde! Bringing me something like this... Are you... Are you actually some kind of pervert?!”

“How rude.”

With Dia completely out of sorts, I boldly puffed out my chest. It wasn't like I was a pervert of any kind, after all. Certainly, crotchless panties had a strong erotic connotation. But it wasn't like I was seriously trying to recommend them to her.

I'd only brought them out to go along with the plan. Our strategy had kicked off the moment Bienvenuta presented the G-string. By no means were we seriously trying to put them on her.

*That's why I am not a pervert! It's not like I'm getting excited imagining Dia wearing such lewd undergarments! It's all part of the plan! And it's not like I've gotten relatively serious about pushing this stuff on her either! I mean it! I am not a lewd girl!*

“I've been saying it from the start!” Backed into a corner, Dia yelled from the pit of her stomach, “I told you to bring me normal underwear! Just regular stuff!”

“...”

“Regular underwear! Why do you keep bringing me all this extreme nonsense!” I exchanged a look with Ms. Bienvenuta.

There it was—the line we'd been waiting for. Dia had completely forgotten what she'd actually said at the start.

“Got it, got it.”

“All right, I'll bring you something normal.”

“Huh? Wait, what?”

Dia's eyes widened as she watched us back down just like that. She'd surely

expected some fierce resistance.

But it never came to that. Bienvenuta and I began searching for normal, yet stylish undergarments.

Everything up to that point had been the prelude. It was the necessary groundwork to soften up her stubborn attitude.

This was where the real fun of choosing underwear began.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dia stood alone in the fitting room, trying on new lingerie.

It was a narrow room, sectioned off with only a curtain, and furnished with a large mirror that reflected her entire body. Within a space designed to house only a single soul, she equipped the underwear Liz and Bienvenuta had picked out for her.

Looking at her reflecting in the mirror, Dia pouted a bit.

She was wearing a perfectly ordinary set of panties, and a completely normal bra. Nothing weird at all. They had a bit of a high-class design to them that helped to bring out the color of her hair and tail. The moderate amount of lace added a touch of elegance, making it a tasteful choice appropriate for her age.



At first, she'd feared for the worst, but now Dia felt a wave of relief. The lingerie that Lisalinde and Bienvenuta initially brought her were all way too showy, and Dia had dreaded what scandalous undergarments she'd ultimately be pressured into purchasing.

But what she had on now was simply high-quality, normal underwear. A set that suited her well.

Yet...at the same time, she couldn't help but feel like she'd been tricked.

She'd finally recalled her initial request.

Something plain. Yes, plain and simple was what she'd asked for.

Yet, after being bombarded with nothing but provocative choices, she found herself relieved to settle for anything resembling *normal* lingerie.

What she wore now was indeed ordinary, but it wasn't plain. This was what Lisalinde and Bienvenuta had proudly recommended to her—a set adorned with intricate lace. Presumably, she would have demanded something simpler if they'd brought it to her first.

This was the door-in-the-face technique at work. A negotiation tactic that started with a large, outlandish request. Once that was turned down, it was followed up with something much smaller, and more reasonable. It was a well-known compliance method.

"I really fell for it, huh?"

She sighed before the mirror.

Still, the panties and bra did fit her body very well. They'd been chosen by Bienvenuta—a bona fide fashion designer—and were neither too loose nor too tight. Wearing them felt perfectly natural to her.

They were even rather comfortable.

Having lived without a bra so far, the sensation of her chest being supported felt a bit fresh to Dia. She could sense that this would make her battles that involved intense movement a lot easier.

Though she'd always detested bras as overly feminine, she was starting to

reconsider her stance. This just seemed to feel right.

“Maybe I should buy another one while I’m here...”

Just thinking about it rationally, she would need two or three if she was going to wear them on a daily basis.

“Hey, Lisalinde. Sorry to bother you, but could you get me another one in this size?”

Dia opened the curtain of the fitting room to consult with Lisalinde. And that was when tragedy struck.

“Hm?”

“Hmm?”

“Huh?”

Lisalinde was nowhere to be seen. Instead, Bienvenuta was there, along with...two men.

Bienvenuta held a ledger of her inventory, directing the two men on where things ought to be placed.

“Huh?”

The three of them stared blankly at Dia.

Dia’s mind went completely blank. Mostly because she was standing there in nothing but her underwear.

But that wasn’t all. The two men were no strangers to her—they were none other than Cain, the Hero, and his comrade Wolfe.

“...”

“H-Hey, wait a moment! You shouldn’t do that, Tina! Don’t open the curtain when you’re in your underwear like that!”

“Aaah! What are you doing, Tina?! Don’t show anyone your underwear!”

Noticing something off, Liz—who was a short distance away—rushed to the scene.

“Wait, Cain?! What are you doing here?!”

That was when she realized that Cain and Wolfe were there too and cried out in surprise.

“Liz? I could ask you the same thing... What are you doing in this town?”

“Oh, what? I just went and assumed that Liz came to this town along with you two.”

Bienvenuta cocked her head as she tried to process the situation.

As it turned out, Cain and Wolfe had come at Bienvenuta’s request. There were certain materials she needed to craft a custom set of armor, which they had to collect from monsters and bring to town.

That’s why when she met Liz, she was convinced she’d come with Cain. She hadn’t even questioned why Liz would be there otherwise.

It was all a tragic coincidence for Dia.

“NYAAAAAAAAAA-AAAAAAAAAA-AAAAAAAAAH!!!”

A scream erupting from her very core, Dia pulled the curtain shut to conceal herself, shutting herself in the fitting room.

“NYAAAAAAAAAAH... Nyaaaaaah... Nyaaaaaaaaah!”

Horrendous wails of lament leaked through the curtain.

Dia had turned crimson from head to toe as she curled into a ball and quivered in the narrow private room.

“Um...”

Liz was just as confused by the situation.

Dia had just experienced the ultimate humiliation play. But putting that tragedy aside, more concerning was the fact that Liz had unintentionally brought the new hero and the current hero together.

It would be a catastrophe if a fight broke out here. Despite the absurdity of the situation, she had to avoid a clash at all costs.

“...”

Fortunately, Cain didn’t seem to realize that the girl before him was the new

hero. That much, Liz was confident of. Whenever Dia acted as the new hero, she wore a ragged cloak with a hood and white mask to conceal her identity. She hadn't brought any of those distinguishing features with her.

Cain didn't know her face, or even that she was a half-beast.

"Um, yes, well, Cain...that was Tina. She's an old friend of mine from before I came to Academy Town, and..."

Liz frantically waved her hands around as she began her explanation.

For starters, she needed to keep the peace. Facilitating a discussion between Cain and Dia had been her grand objective, but it didn't seem like anything of the sort could happen in such a chaotic scene.

"She must be in shock that you saw her half naked. To avoid any further distress, could I ask you and Sir Wolfe to step away for a bit? Shoo, shoo," she said, providing an arbitrary reason to remove them.

But her attempt didn't go as planned.

"Look, even if—for the sake of argument—I accept that you've got some reason to be here, Liz." Cain frowned while scratching his head.

It was a miscalculation on Liz's part. She had no way of knowing that Cain was already acquainted with the girl inside the fitting room.

"What are you doing here, Altina?"

"Huh?"

The name Cain called out wasn't Dia or Tia—it was Altina.

The moment the name left his lips, the twitch of a cat's tail sent waves through the curtains.

"Huh? Huh?"

Liz blinked, taken aback. This unforeseen development had thrown her mind into chaos.

"Hold on... You *know* her?"

"Well, yeah."

It was a question directed at Cain, but Wolfe answered in his stead.

“Um, Ms. Lisalinde. I believe I mentioned that I had one more childhood friend apart from Cain. Do you remember that?”

“Oh, yes, you did mention that.”

Wolfe and Cain were childhood friends who came from the same hometown, but they had one more friend who was around their age. The three of them would use signs to cheat in mahjong, swindling pocket money from the adults.

“That other childhood friend is the girl behind the curtain.”

“Huh?”

Liz stared, mouth agape.

The mysterious new hero, Dia, who held such animosity toward Cain, was none other than his childhood friend Altina.

“Huuuuuuuuuh?!” Liz cried out in disbelief.

The hero and new hero had crossed paths once more.

But instead of a fateful showdown, it had turned into an accidental reunion of childhood friends.

“Today is the woooooooooorst!”

Dia—or should I say, Altina—screamed from the depths of her soul.

The new hero’s past had been a mystery up until that point. But it seemed her history ran far closer to the hero’s than anyone could have expected.



## Chapter 54: Then—The Elephant Goes Brrrr

“Cain! Sir Cain! Please look at this new lingerie design! What are your thoughts?!”

“My thoughts? Well first of all, what the hell are you doing?”

It was late at night, The town was quiet, only the sound of insects softly echoing in the distance. Liz had suddenly barged into Cain’s room, a loud bang filling the air as she pushed the door in.

“What the heck are you wearing?”

Cain furrowed his brow as he took in the appearance of his sudden visitor. She was in her undergarments. She was wearing nothing but a bra and panties, her flawless skin on full display.

“Please take a proper look at them—especially the panties! They’re a new set made by yours truly.”

“Hmm?”

Liz was wearing a pure white bra and panties. The lingerie perfectly complimented her fair skin and golden hair, giving her an air of purity and elegance. Standing there like this, she was practically a work of art.

The issue, however, lay with the panties. An elephant’s trunk had been attached to the front.

“What’s with that, er...*phallic* thing hanging there?”

“It’s an elephant trunk. How could you possibly see it as anything else?”

The front of her panties featured the face of an elephant with its trunk hanging down from the center.

“Is this a dirty joke?”

“It’s not! It’s an elephant’s trunk?”

What sprouted from her panties was, without a doubt, an elephant’s trunk.

Nothing more, nothing less.

“You want to know the amazing thing about these panties, Sir Cain? Have a look-see. If you channel mana into the nose... Voila!”

The elephant’s trunk stood proud and upright, growing larger and larger. Soon, it was boldly erect.

“It’s totally a dirty joke.”

“Owwwww! ≡”

Cain lowered a clenched fist on Liz’s head, the impact making a very satisfying sound.

“It is not a dirty joke, Cain! The elephant is simply lifting its trunk! What’s wrong with a groin elephant’s trunk growing to a splendid size, hardening, and standing proud?! There’s nothing dirty about it!”

“Do you think you can get away with anything if you just make it sound figurative?” Cain lamented. He could only sigh in disbelief.

“But a similar design I made sold pretty well, you know?”

“Huh? You’re selling these things?”

A proverbial question mark hovered over the hero’s head.

“Well, of course. I’ve been concealing my identity and secretly working in the fashion industry as the Lingerie Fashion King, putting out all sorts of undergarments!”

“Why are you like this?”

He held his head. Outside of her work in the hero’s party, Liz had taken on a substantial number of side jobs.

“Oh, come now. Just have a look at these ledgers.”

“Whoa, you’re actually raking it in... Damn.”

Liz showed Cain her lingerie earnings. As was the case for many of her other jobs, her side hustle in the fashion industry had been contributing substantially to their journey.

“The Lingerie Fashion King is gaining attention as an up-and-coming artist, you see! People all over the world are waiting for my designs!”

“Yep, that settles it. The world is filled with idiots.”

Liz puffed out her chest. The elephant’s trunk puffed out alongside it.

“Can you quit making the trunk bigger?” Cain scolded her.

“Aww. But this trunk is super high-tech, you know. If you rub it repeatedly while it’s in this enlarged state, it can release a sticky, white fluid just like elephant snot. Want to see?”

“And enough of the dirty jokes too.”

“Aww.”

It was not a dirty joke. It was an elephant’s nose dripping with elephant mucus—that’s all it was. At least, that was what Liz continued to insist, but Cain wasn’t having it.

“I actually wanted to develop a mechanism where the wearer’s sensations were linked to the elephant’s trunk, so they’d feel good when they rubbed it. But that magic’s proving quite hard to develop. I’m working with the magic association right now to work out a sensory connection spell.”

“Can you stop wasting cutting-edge technology on something like this?”

It was a simple fact of the world; technological progress was oftentimes driven by eroticism.

“And hold up. Are people seriously buying those things?”

“Well, you know. When it’s between women, or when a man has a hard time keeping it up.”

“Oh.”

Cain decided to end the conversation at that. He didn’t want to delve any deeper into that world.

“How about you try on a pair too, Cain?”

“Not happening. Don’t drag me into this.”

“I have other panties too. Like these glowing ones that constantly pour out light magic, always covering the groin with that mysterious beam you often see in eromanga.”

“Why would you want that?”

“Or transparent panties...”

“Is there a point in putting them on?”

“Or how about underwear padded to make the wearer look very, *very* big?”

“I don’t need that false sort of majesty.”

“A pair that makes a loud sound to announce whenever your member grows a bit?”

“That’s a violation of every man’s human rights.”

“String thongs for men?”

“They’d slip off the moment it gets hard.”

“Edible underwear?”

“What’s the goal here?”

“Panties that dissolve in water?”

“You can’t wash ’em, then.”

“Panties with a built-in clock?”

“Why would panties need that function?”

“Steel panties?”

“Sounds heavy...and cold.”

“Or what about ones that burst off after a certain amount of time, trousers and all, leaving everything wide open. For those who like to live dangerously.”

“That’s just public indecency.”

Cain continued to shoot down every single one of Liz’s ideas for panties.

“Seriously, what kind of panties *would* you approve of then, Cain?”

“If you want my approval, bring me something normal, stupid.” Cain heaved a

deep sigh. "I've decided. I'm never going to wear any of your creations."

"Huh? You're already wearing them, though."

"What?"

Her casual remark had Cain staring at her wide-eyed. His body froze in place.

*Huh? Already? Right now?*

He pulled at the waistband of his trousers, hastily confirming the pair of underpants he was wearing.

There didn't *seem* to be anything strange about them. It looked to be a perfectly ordinary pair of boxer briefs. Black, for the most part. Simple, snug, and easy to move around in. They looked like perfectly normal underwear, as far as he was concerned.

Silently and timidly, Cain lifted his face, his gaze returning to Liz.

Though they looked normal, had she done something to them? Had he simply not witnessed their effects yet? Or worse, had they activated without him noticing? What was he going to do if these were those explosive undergarments she'd mentioned earlier?

Cain gritted his teeth. "Hey, Liz, spit it out. What did you do to these underpants?"

"I haven't done anything to them. They're just highly absorbent underpants."

"Absorbent?"

Cain blinked in confusion. That sounded...normal. Like they were just normal, run of the mill, underpants.

"That's really it?"

"Yes, that's it. I swear it. They're just functional, highly absorbent underpants."

Cain rested his weight on the back of his chair. If that's all it was, then it wasn't an issue. If they were simply absorbent panties, he didn't have to worry about anything strange happening. But then, Liz went on.

"However, them being highly absorbent means they do take in a lot of sweat

—and a lot of smell too! They’re the finest underpants for sniffing!”

“Why would I ever trust you?!”

Once again, Cain lowered a fist on her head. Liz’s body twisted in ecstasy.

“Ow, ow, ow! ≡ Hff, hff! ≡ Getting to sniff your underpants, and being hit too? ≡ Hff, hff... ≡”

“I never said you could sniff me. Good grief. If you’ve got nothing else to do, just leave. Shoo, shoo.”

Cain waved her off, trying to expel her from the room. But Liz, still writhing on the floor, sat up with an undaunted grin.

“Hee hee hee, how long will you be able to keep up that composure, Sir Cain?”

“What?”

“Once you see my serious work, you won’t dare talk to me like that again. You’ll bow before the Lingerie Fashion King.”

Cain stared at her.

“This way if you will, Cain.”

She left Cain’s room, heading for her own room down the hall. It felt like this was about to be a nuisance, but Cain silently tagged along anyway.

Finally, Liz threw open the door. “Now step in.”

“Th-This is?!”

Urged on by Liz, Cain stepped into the room. His eyes widened.

“H-Hey, Cain. What a fine night it is.”

“Um, er... Good evening, Cain.”

Inside, Sylphie and Melvy awaited him. And they weren’t just waiting; they were both dressed in lingerie, clearly prepared for his arrival.

“Erk!”

Cain’s heart skipped a beat. They were both far too beautiful to behold.

Sylphie was adorned with crimson and black, the subdued design of her bra and panties mature and bewitching. Her abundant chest was propped up by her bra in such a way that he knew his eyes would be glued to them if he let his guard down.

Meanwhile, Melvy had put on undergarments that went in a cuter direction. They were made of a light robin's-egg blue base with lace and embroidery, fully drawing out the appeal of her natural sweetness. They were both elegant and endearing.

“Um, er... Cain...”

“Er, how do we look?”

Their faces were both a bit flushed as they asked. The sight of them fidgeting so bashfully couldn't have been any more provocative.

“Dammit!”

Cain clutched a hand to his chest.

“Ha ha ha ha! How about *that*, Cain?! Is your heart racing? Has my lingerie done the trick?!”

Liz let out a hearty laugh, her chest puffing out with pride.

“Grr, you little...!”

She'd thrown him a fastball. The underwear she'd prepared was beautiful—nothing more. And that's what it had to be. Cain was forced to submit before Liz's earnest skill. All the tales of strange and quirky undergarments he'd been told had prepared him for the worst. And this huge disparity from what he'd feared had caused his heart to flutter even more.

“You underestimated me! You underestimated my skills as the Lingerie Fashion King! But you see, Sir Cain, it is but a simple task to force you into submission!”

Cain was silent.

“Can you endure it?! Of course you can't! The sight of these two is making my elephant go *brrr* too. No need to hide your excitement!”

The elephant trunk on Liz's panties stood proud and tall. And as a matter of fact, Cain could hardly contain himself. Liz's lingerie had brought out Sylphie's and Melvy's charms to the fullest. He felt like his rationality would crumble at any moment.

"Hmm?"

But then, he realized something.

"Why should I even be trying to hold back? C'mon Sylphie, Melvy. To the bed."

"Ah..."

"Cain..."

Giving them both a push on the back, Cain proceeded toward the bed. They were both engaged to him. There was no need for him to hold himself back. He planned to go at it then and there.

"Aaah! No fair! No fair! You can't keep me out of the loop! Let me in too!"

"Shut it."

Liz chased after them.

"Let's make it a foursome! Foursome, foursome! C'mon! You know you want to!"

"Have some modesty!"

He scolded her as a mother would scold her teenage daughter.

"Liz, go change out of those elephant panties."

"Aww."

She pouted. With her expert manipulation of mana, she swung the elephant's trunk wildly back and forth.

"Well then, why don't you wear them, Cain?"

"Why? I've got my own elephant."

Slowly, the night drifted along. They talked about all manner of inconsequential things among themselves. And once again, an obscene banquet



of the succubae gloriously unfolded.

## Chapter 55: Now—Where Tears and Snot Meet

“Ah, er, well, how should I put this?”

“...”

“Long time no see, Altina.”

“...”

We were sitting in a café. It was a fine establishment, its stylish interior both welcoming and comfortable. The worn wooden tables and chairs carried a sense of history, while the aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled the air. Sunlight streamed in through the windows, bathing the room in a soft glow.

It was in this shop that Cain was trying his best to strike up a conversation with Altina.

“Ahem, I didn’t expect to run into you here. How’ve you been, Altina?”

“...”

But she refused to respond. She remained silent and sullen. The only sound that came from her seat was the soft clinking of the ice in her glass.

“Ha ha... Ha ha ha...”

Me, Cain, Wolfe, and Dia—or rather, Altina—had come here as soon as we left the clothing store. The tragedy of Altina exposing her undergarments had died down a bit, and now we were trying to cool down and have a little chat.

“...”

However, her mood hadn’t improved in the slightest. Her brow was still furrowed, and she wasn’t making any effort to hide her displeasure as she slurped at her cold milk.

It was understandable. Sure, it had been a tragic accident, but they’d still seen her in her underwear.

“W-Well...in any case, a toast to our reunion.”

“Ch-Cheers!”

“Cheers.”

“...”

Despite our best attempts to liven up the atmosphere, Altina was having none of it. A heavy and awkward silence continued to loom over our table.

After a heavy sigh, Cain finally said, “Look...I’m sorry for seeking you naked and all, but if we’re being real here, you’re guilty too. Who’s the one that suddenly threw open the curtains without warning?”

“I mean! I mean, I never go to clothing stores, so I don’t know how they’re supposed to work!” Altina protested, slamming at the table. Her face turned as red as an apple as she relived the incident in her head.

“Even if you don’t usually go there, it’s common sense.”

“Even you, Wolfe?! Even *you’re* acting all high and mighty?!”

Altina was hissing like an angered cat.

“What’s the harm?” asked Cain. “We all used to run around naked by the river, didn’t we?”

“That was more than ten years ago!”

“Anyways, you’re being stupid.”

“Stupid.”

“Stupid.”

“*MROWRRR!*”

“H-Hey! Don’t make a ruckus in the café!”

I desperately held Altina back as she unleashed a furious flurry of cat punches. The situation was spiraling into chaos.

Clinging to her waist, I tried to clarify the situation. “Er... Let’s change the subject. You were all childhood friends?”

“Yeah, we’re all from the same backwater town.”

The new hero Dia was antagonistic toward the current hero Cain. That was

common knowledge, but I was surprised to find out that the two of them were childhood friends. The name Dia that she'd previously introduced herself with, and even the name Tina—they'd both been fake names. It seemed Altina was her real name.

"It was a tiny, run-down place. Just being brats around the same age meant we were naturally stuck hanging around one another."

"Well, Cain was in the dungeon more often than not. It wasn't like he was around me and Altina all the time."

"Right, right. So rather than old friends, I guess you'd just call them people I used to know."

"Hmm..."

I gave a slight nod.

*But what's the meaning of this all, then?*

Just the other day, new hero Dia had launched a surprise attack on Cain. She had taken a hostile stance, declaring that the hero's holy sword wasn't to be trusted.

But the two of them were old acquaintances, it turned out, and so I couldn't help but think that her true motive lay elsewhere. This wasn't about whether the hero was legitimate or not; there had to be some deeper connection from the past driving her cause.

I sipped my coffee as I thought it over.

So far, neither Cain nor Wolfe had realized that Altina was the new hero. They treated her simply as an old acquaintance. That was surely why Altina was acting so horribly awkward. *What am I supposed to do now?*

Sadly, the longer I thought, the more I realized there was nothing I *could* do. I was still under Altina's information suppression spell. I was still unable to reveal any information to Cain.

*Well, whatever.*

There was no point in sitting there getting all worked up. I knew Cain and his ever-reliable party could handle this on their own. *I'll just let the three of them*

*work this out, and enjoy my coffee in peace.*

“No, forget about *us* for a moment—why are you and *Liz* together? You two know each other?”

“Guh?”

Altina froze up for a second.

She couldn't tell him the truth. But if she said something that didn't fit in with the timeline, she risked exposing her identity. I myself was in quite the laid-back position. After all, I couldn't say anything even if I wanted to, and honestly, it wouldn't really affect me if her secret got out.

So I left it up to Altina to figure it out.

“U-Um, yes. Y-You know! Lisalinde just said it, didn't she? I came to know her a while ago. We arranged to meet up again, seeing as it'd been so long!”

“Hmm?”

Altina latched on to the excuse I'd hastily concocted at the shop.

“Are you going by Tina nowadays?”

“Yeah, why a fake name?”

“Um... That's, er... Actually, there was a period of my life when I had this persistent stalker on my tail! I've been using the name Tina lately!”

“Hmmm...”

Altina desperately threw out excuses in a panic. For what it was worth, she hadn't contradicted herself yet.

“Yes, that really was a surprise for me too. Sir Cain, I never knew that you and Altina were childhood friends.”

“It's a strange coincidence, huh.”

That was an honest thought, so I felt free to chime in.

“And wait, Altina, if you're living this close, you shoulda paid us a visit, you know. We're only a few days out from Academy Town.”

“N-No way! I never knew you were living in Academy Town! If I'd known that,

I would have popped in! Of course I would've! But I didn't know a thing! And you can't blame me if I didn't know anything, right?!"

"Er, our party's transfer to Academy Town was pretty big news when it happened."

Altina's eyes were darting everywhere now.

This once cool and mysterious new hero had quickly devolved into a frantic, bumbling small fry character desperate to hide her identity. She had it rough.

"Well, Altina always tries to play it cool, but she's been a scatterbrain for as long as I've known her. Remember that time you said you saw some suspicious figures in the woods, and you were sure they were a group of bandits out to raid the village? Then when we beat them up and brought them in, they turned out to be innocent people from the capital who'd come to discuss the holy sword with Cain's old man?"

"Mwraaaaah! Quit it! Shut up, Wolfe!"

Wolfe mercilessly exposed her past failures.

"What's with you?! This whole time, you've just...! What's your problem?! Do you have a bone to pick with me or something?!"

"I haven't forgotten about how you left me behind on an unfamiliar mountain eight years ago."

"Oh, still stuck on that, are we?! It wasn't even a dangerous mountain, and I planned to return for you once I had things in order. How many times do I have to tell you that?!"

Wolfe brought up the sorts of old grievances that only a childhood friend could. Altina had been pretty awful, but Wolfe was also being relatively persistent.

"My old acquaintances are all idiots, as you can see."

"Oh dear. That's very rough, Sir Cain."

"Hey! Cain! Quit acting like you're the victim here! And Lisalinde, don't encourage him!"

“Right.”

Altina’s ears perked up.

No matter whose side I took, someone was bound to start berating me, so I decided to stick to vague responses. *Long live neutrality. The fence is my favorite seat.*

Altina held her head as she groaned in frustration. “Hah, good grief. It’s been so long, and you guys haven’t changed one bit. You’re just as stupid as you were back then.”

“Don’t wanna hear it from you.”

“Nor from you.”

“I could say the same about you.”

“Well you, for one, ought to shut up.”

“Am I the only decent person here?”

“No, you’re an idiot.”

“You’re all idiots.”

“Takes one to know one.”

The three of them bickered like children, their words as empty as air. They were all equally immature, as far as I was concerned.

“Getting back to it, I understand that Cain left the village to become a hero, but why did you leave, Altina? I always wanted to ask you that.”

“U-Um... That’s...” For a moment, Altina’s eyes wandered from Wolfe’s question. “Was I supposed to spend my whole life in that run-down place? No, thank you. I mean, anyone would want to get out of there, right? Didn’t you do it too, Wolfe?”

“Fair enough.”

Wolfe nodded at her nonchalant reply.

“Was Sir Cain the first one to leave the village?” I asked.

“No, I was the last. The first one was Altina; one day, she stormed out, just

like that. Next was Wolfe, and finally me.”

“Hmm.”

“How many years has it been since Altina left?”

“Um... I was fourteen at the time, so four years ago.”

Which meant Altina was now eighteen years old—the same age as me.

“It was four years ago for me too, though it was still after Altina.”

“And finally, I left three years ago. But that’s just because I couldn’t leave until I obtained the holy sword. If it hadn’t been for that, I would have left ages ago.”

And after saying that, Cain took in his black coffee with a rather rude slurp.

“Wolfe, how about I take a guess at the reason you left the village?” Altina teased with a malicious grin. “You were chasing after the nice flower shop lady you used to like. That’s it, right.”

“Completely wrong.”

“Nice flower shop lady?”

“Back then, Wolfe had a thing for the lady who ran the flower shop. But she ended up leaving the village. He was devastated; I teased him all night over it.” Cain was courteous in providing an answer to my question, but it ended up being a far meaner response than I could have expected.

“Are you even human?”

“Anyway, quit teasing me about old love stories. It’s all in the past,” Wolfe sulked.

“You ever grow out of it, Wolfe? Or do you still like those sorts of graceful, older women? It must be troublesome to have standards that high. A stick-in-the-mud like you’s never going to get anyone with that much popularity. It’s just not going to happen.”

“Shut up. Shut up!”

Wolfe fended off an assault from Altina as she beamed from ear to ear.

That was where Cain dropped the bomb.



“That’s where you’re wrong. Wolfe’s become a pedo these days.”

“Um...what?”

“H-Hey! Wait! It’s not like that! Twisting the facts like that is downright unfair!” Wolfe panicked, while Altina was taken aback.

Cain was, of course, talking about Remphie.

“Huh? P-Pedo?”

“Wr-Wrong! Completely wrong! I haven’t done anything, nor do I intend to!”

“This guy here? He’s working his charm on a twelve-year-old princess.”

“Huuuuuuuh?! And a princess, no less?!”

“Definitely not! I’m not working my charm on anyone! I’m saying you have it all wrong!”

Altina stared wide-eyed. She’d presumably been gathering information on the people around Cain as the new hero, but it seemed this bit of intel had escaped her.

“W-Wolfe?! That’s bad news! You’re in dangerous waters there! A muscle-bound meathead like you approaching a little lady... That’s bad news enough! I’m smelling criminal undertones here!”

“I’m not approaching her!”

“We’ve told him time and again, but...Wolfe, oh Wolfe. He just won’t stop.”

“Princess Remiphinia is the one who refuses to give up!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! You’re creeping me out here!”

“You’re wrong! And annoying too!”

Altina and Cain had no mercy for their old friend.

“Pedo!”

“Pedo!”

“Pedo!”

“Shut uuuuuuuuuup!”

The radical love story of a friend she hadn't met in a long time. It was surely the perfect spark for conversation. And for yet another day, Wolfe was relentlessly teased.

"Man, to think Wolfe turned out to be a pedo, huh? Seriously, you get together after ages, and there's no telling what's become of your friends."

"You're telling me. I'd love to cut ties with him."

Taking in a gulp of cold milk, Altina leaned back in her chair.

The three old friends let out a collective sigh.

"On that note," said Cain, "what are we all doing here anyways?"

"Seriously. We all left our dingy little village behind, so why are the three of us gathered up again?"

Cain and Altina exchanged wry smiles.

A coincidental reunion of old acquaintances. That was something I felt just a little bit envious of.

"Yeah, what are we even doing, huh? I slipped out of that place because I hated how small the world felt, so why are we building that tiny community back up?"

"Coincidence can be a scary thing."

Altina and Wolfe seemed overcome by emotion.

With drinks in hand, they shut their eyes as they thought back to days long gone. Though they were cracking jokes at each other's expense, I could certainly feel the bonds of old friends.

And yet...

"Coincidence?"

"Hmm?"

Cain reacted to the word they'd brought up in conversation. Suddenly, he lifted his face and stared at Altina.

"Coincidence, huh?"

“What’s wrong, Cain?”

But Cain didn’t react to Wolfe’s question. He put a hand to his chin and began thinking. A small flash of inspiration. A small realization. I could practically see the spark cross his head.

He carefully analyzed this realization.

*Oh, this might be bad for Altina...*

“Hey...Wolfe, can we explain all of this away as pure coincidence? You sure there isn’t anything intentional mixed in?”

“What are you talking about, Cain?”

“How about we get our information in order?” Cain grinned. But that smile was a fierce one, sadistic and mean-spirited. It was a smile he directed at Altina.

She shuddered. It seemed that she too had realized the crisis she was in.

“Wolfe, try listing out the major events that have happened to us lately.”

“Um... The demon lord transferred to the academy, we captured the villa, negotiations between human and demon royalty began, and in accordance with that, some officials from the royal family were stationed in Academy Town. We breached the fortieth floor of the SSS+ dungeon, Royal Guard Captain Brian revolted, we engaged the new hero Dia...”

Wolfe counted them out on her fingers—all the latest events. That was the first I was hearing of the fortieth floor of the dungeon, but it seemed they were making steady progress.

“Out of all those events, which one was Liz most deeply involved in?”

“Lisalinde? Um, the villa capture, the revolt, and the battle with the new hero.”

“Okay. Now who is the person we met alongside Lisalinde?”

“Ah.”

As soon as he said that, Wolfe picked up on it too.

*That’s Cain for you.*

He'd connected so many small points practically on pure instinct.

Sure, it could all be wrapped up as a coincidence, but there still had to be some sort of cause and effect to it. It was all self-evident to me since I knew the whole situation, but it wouldn't have been so easy to piece together my relationship with Dia from such limited information.

Cain went on, "Liz was abducted by the new hero for a time. I'm guessing they formed some sort of kinship then. Next, she's here introducing us to our old friend Altina. Now is this just a coincidence?"

"I see... It's a bit too contrived to call it a coincidence."

Through me, Cain was accurately approaching the truth. Altina was oozing sweat all over her body.

"Y-You've lost me, boys. What are you two talking about?" She frantically played dumb. I felt I might get a little teary-eyed seeing the earnest effort she was putting in.

Cain planted an elbow to the table, propping his head up as he began his interrogation.

"Altina, what's your relationship with Liz?"

"I-I told you already, didn't I? We've known each other for a while."

"How are you related to the new hero?"

"W-Well, backtracking a bit... What's this about a new hero?"

*Oh, Altina. What a masterful show of obliviousness.*

Had she told him she wasn't related, he would have countered by asking how she knew about the new hero in the first place.

"A hero's started showing up lately. A brand-spanking-new one. Word is, they've got a bone to pick with me."

"H-Hmm! Really?! They must be pretty brazen then, calling themselves a hero! The nerve of some people, am I right?"

"You're the new hero, aren't you?"

"Wh-What makes you think that? I don't get it."

*She's trying her best.*

Altina was hanging on as best she could, really putting her heart and soul into it. It was a moving performance.

“How did you get that holy sword of yours? Why do you have it?”

“Like! I! *Said!* I'm *not* the new hero!”

“Show me that wound on your back. Knowing you, I'm sure you didn't see a doctor. You must've patched it up on your own.”

“Are... Are you stupid?! Why would I show my naked back to a man?!”

“No, that must be why Liz is here...”

But Cain had already concluded that Altina was the new hero. *It'll be difficult to turn it around from here, my girl.*

“Still, that's something. Altina, the new hero... You always were as carefree as a cat. Being a hero? It just doesn't suit you.”

“Hey! What do you mean it doesn't *suit* me, Cain?! N-Not that I am the new hero!”

“Your coat's ragged as all hell. You've always been like that. How about you think a bit more about fashion?”

“What's it matter to you?! Who cares what my coat looks like?!”

The desperation was starting to sink in. Altina stood from her chair, stamping her foot against the ground to make her point.

“Hey now. Altina...did you just want to be like Cain or something?”

“N-No! Who even cares about him?!”

“Don't tell me you left the village to become a hero like *me*? You're making me blush here.”

“Wr-Wrrrrong! All wrong! I *don't* care about you! Keep that inflated ego of yours in check! And c'mon, let's stop talking about the new hero already!”

*Is this an interrogation or are they just bullying her?* I wondered. Cain and Wolfe had both broken into smiles as they nagged their childhood friend. They

really did get along.

“I see, I see. Wearing a hood and a mask to hide your face was all because you didn’t want us to recognize you.”

“You’ve got a cute side after all.”

“No! No! No! I don’t know anything about this new hero!”

“And hold up, do you not have any comrades or anything? I haven’t heard any intel about the new hero ever working with anyone else. I guess some things never change; you’re still a hopeless loner when we’re not around.”

“At least call me a lone wolf! It’s badass! Not that I’m the new hero!”

“Can’t you do something about that mask and hood? They’re pretty lame.”

“They’re not lame! Not that I would know anything about that!”

The teasing had developed into simple insults as things began to spiral out of control. Whether it was because of their constant badgering or the heat of the moment, Altina was starting to let slip all sorts of things.

“And forget about that—don’t you find *this* strange?! I’m friends with Lisalinde!”

“Hmm?”

As if she’d struck upon a brilliant idea to turn everything around, Altina pointed her finger at me.

“Lisalinde’s your comrade, isn’t she?! If I’m really the new hero, that would mean that Lisalinde is colluding with the enemy! Don’t you trust your own party members?!”

*Oh my.*

Altina was intent on using me as a shield. But she wasn’t entirely off base with that one. I believed that my actions were in the best interests of both Cain and Altina—yes, both of them. Yet, from an outsider’s perspective, my actions would come off as rather treacherous. Add to that the information suppression magic, which meant I couldn’t even give a proper explanation from my end. I was acting on my own, ready to take a scolding, and hadn’t stocked up on any

decent excuses.

“Cain...”

It worked. Wolfe’s lips curled into a frown as he struggled to find the right words. It looked like the tables were starting to turn.

“Ha ha! How about that?!” Altina smirked triumphantly, a cocky grin tugging at the corners of her lips. However...

“Oh c’mon. It’s pointless to overanalyze all the nonsense Liz gets up to.”

“Huh?”

“Hmm?”

Cain casually waved off the matter. “If I wasted time thinking there was a logical reason behind everything Liz did, I’d have lost my mind ages ago.”

Altina’s eyes widened in disbelief. “What?”

But I was even more taken aback than she was. “Huh? Wait...Cain?!”

*What’s with that evaluation?! What exactly does Cain see me as?!*

“Hey, Cain?! You’re making it sound like I’m some sort of uncontrollable disaster!”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“But why?!” I was deeply offended. “I am a moral, upstanding, and academically excellent young lady! A noble among nobles, embodying the spirit of nobility!”

“Uh-huh. Sure.”

Cain dismissed me as he picked at his ear.

*Why?! Why won’t he understand?! I’m as modest and elegant as they come!*

“In fact, I should ask you. You all right, Altina? Liz didn’t do anything weird to you, did she?”

“Huh? What?”

“*Seriously?! Cain! Why are you suddenly making me out to be the villain here?!*”

For some reason, Cain was showing concern for Altina instead of me. *Anything weird?! What's that supposed to mean?! Isn't there a chance that Altina's holding something over me and forcing me to do her bidding?!*

"There wasn't anything weird, right, Altina?!"

"U-Um..."

When I pressed her for an answer, she hesitated. Her cheeks flushed red as she fidgeted and averted her eyes.

"It was a little...embarrassing."

"There you go."

"ALTINAAAAAA!"

Instead of a firm denial, I got a bashful face from her.

*What?! Embarrassing? I haven't done anything to her! Wait, is this about that healing magic that made her overly sensitive?! Or...is she talking about me insulting her bra and panties?! Which is it?!*

*Crap. I can think of a few embarrassing things, actually!*

"Hmm..."

As I found myself staring so intently at Altina, I suddenly noticed something peculiar.

"Huh? What's wrong, Lisalinde?"

My sudden silence had her staring back at me blankly. But the oddity lay with her, and not me.

She wasn't carrying something she was supposed to have with her—she didn't have the holy sword.

I scrupulously scanned the area around her. But, as expected, the sword was nowhere to be seen. It wasn't on her hip, nor was it leaning against her chair.

She had certainly been carrying it when we left her room. It was too important for her to leave it at the inn. She'd stuffed it into quite the crude-looking scabbard to ensure it didn't stand out, but it had definitely been on her hip at the time.



So, why wasn't it here now?

"..."

It didn't take much thought for me to reach an answer: She'd most likely left it in the fitting room.

Sure, one might wonder if it was okay to do something so idiotic, but on second thought, she really didn't have much choice in the matter. In short, she couldn't let Cain catch on to what her sword truly was. Carrying that sword around was practically confessing to her identity as the new hero. And so, Altina had been unable to bring the sword to the café.

Everything had been so chaotic since Cain had run into her. Hiding the sword in the fitting room at a moment's notice was completely understandable on her part.

*No...wait. Is that really okay? I mean, isn't it scary? Isn't it ridiculously scary to just leave the holy sword in some random dressing room? What if someone tries to walk off with it?*

And just as the thought occurred to me—

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

A piercing scream came from outside.

"Wh-What?!"

"What's going on?!"

The sound put us all immediately on guard. We quickly readied our weapons and burst onto the road where the scream had come from.

"Wha...?!"

"The hell is this?!"

Our eyes were peeled at the state of the street.

"S-Save me!"

"Run!!!"

The town was in chaos.

The people all seemed to be panicking, fearful of something. They cried out, faces pale, racing about in a flurry as though a monster was chasing after them.

“Ah! Look over there!”

“Hm?!”

Many people were trying to escape from something. And I pointed to the center of it all—the individual who seemed to be the culprit behind this incident.

“That’s...”

I honed my eyes, carefully observing the perpetrator. It was no monster—it was a human. A man walked slowly while swinging a sword around.

“What’s up with him?”

But there was clearly something amiss.

The man’s eyes had rolled back to show their whites, and he didn’t seem to be fully conscious. His steps were unsteady and uncertain. Additionally, his complexion was pale, and there was a lifeless look to his face. He was certainly not in a normal state of mind.

Most pressingly, the man’s body was clad in a mysterious white light. It was an odd glow with an eerie presence. There was something mesmerizing, almost divine about it—something that drew in the eye and made it impossible to look away.

“Aaaaaaaaah!”

“Aah... Aah...”

The man stiltedly swung the sword in his hand. And when he did, a bolt of light shot forth and smashed into a nearby building. At a glance, it didn’t look like anyone was injured. His attacks had damaged structures, but he seemingly hadn’t targeted any people.

Yet he had let out a dangerously powerful attack—unimaginable from any ordinary person.

“Aah... Ah, ah... Aaah...”

He let out faint grunts as his eyes went wide. It was clear that none of this was being done of his own volition. He was not in control of himself. The strong light of the sword seemed to be depriving him of his sanity.

*Now then. With this much information, I doubt I even have to check it at this point. But I will, just in case.*

The man's sword was letting off a silver glow, its hilt adorned with beautiful ornamentation. It was the holy sword, Ikryl. No matter how I looked at it, that was clearly the holy sword belonging to the new hero.

A long silence dragged on as I looked at Altina. Cain and Wolfe looked at her too. Three pairs of eyes fixed upon one hapless soul.

And she, meanwhile, was dripping with sweat. Her eyes were wide as plates, her face petrified, as she oozed from every pore in her body. Though frozen and silent, she was panicking.

At this point, it was clear what had happened. Someone had stolen the holy sword Altina had left in the fitting room. Unfortunately, the man who'd stolen it was unable to handle the power of the sword. He had suddenly been blessed by its overwhelming strength and had lost himself to a state of wild frenzy.

The power of the holy sword Ikryl was a poison too great for an ordinary person to bear. And this was the result. The man had lost his mind and could only flail around with the holy sword in agony.

“Wh-What the *hell*?! What's the new hero's holy sword doing over theeere?!”

Cain was the first to break the heavy silence. He spoke loudly in an overly theatrical tone.

Altina flinched.

“No, don't tell me! Has the new hero's holy sword been stoooooolen?!” Wolfe joined in, his line delivery monotonous as can be.

“There's no way something so ridiculous could happen, right?! Letting some random person steal the holy sword?! There's no way the new hero could be such a foooooool!”

“Maybe they accidentally left it behind somewhere—like, say, the fitting

room of a clothing store!”

“No waaay! The holy sword—the world’s treasure?! There ain’t a fool in the world who would do something that stupid!”

“I know, right?! The new hero couldn’t possibly be thaaat stupid!”

“Of course not! What sort of fool of a hero would that make them?!”

*They’re riling her up. They’re riling the freaking heck out of her.*

Cain and Wolfe looked Altina straight in the eye as they boldly played dumb about the situation. Altina’s face turned beet red out of shame.

“Urgyaaaaaah!”

Finally, unable to bear the humiliation, the girl roared. In a fit of desperation, she rushed out to attack the rampaging man.

“Take this! And this! This is what you get for taking what doesn’t belong to you!”

“Graaaaaah...”

Weaponless, she faced him in hand-to-hand combat. Flying knee, punch, punch, drop kick. Even with a holy sword in hand, he couldn’t hope to compare to Altina in skill. No matter how wildly he swung, he couldn’t so much as graze her. Despite the boost imparted by a divine weapon, he was bested by Altina, even completely unarmed.

“One more! And then—!”

Altina beat the man to a pulp. She was mostly venting her frustrations.

“Graaaaaah...”

The fight was over in an instant. The man let out a pitiful scream as he collapsed to the ground, motionless. It was Altina’s victory.

“I never...shoulda tried makin’ off with...this blasted sword...” he faintly muttered, perhaps regaining his sanity at the end. And just like that, he slipped into unconsciousness.

Altina had a stern, yet apologetic look on her downcast face. But regardless, she had won. The town was safe again, and she managed to regain her holy

sword.

“Altina!”

Cain raced over to her with the rest of us following closely behind.

“Are you okay? Did he hurt you?”

“You were watching the fight, weren’t you? He didn’t get a single hit on me.”

“Yeah, I figured. How about him? Is he okay?”

“Well...”

We glanced down at the man on the ground. His life didn’t seem to be in danger, but his face had swollen up from all the wallops Altina had given him. Sure, he was a thief, but it was hard not to feel sorry for him. He was more a victim than anything else.

“I’ll take him to the hospital...”

“Yeah, good idea.”

Perhaps out of guilt, Altina volunteered to carry him there herself. And so, the incident of the rampaging holy sword came to a close.

“Now then. About this new holy sword,” Cain said, his gaze shifting to the holy sword in Altina’s hands. “I’ll take custody of it. That’s the weapon of the new hero who’s out to get me. And right now, for some *strange* reason, it’s not in that hero’s possession. Now isn’t that convenient? I’d better keep it with me.”

With that, Cain grabbed onto the sword’s hilt. He tightened his grip and tried to pull it toward himself.

“Hey...let go, Altina.”

But Altina wouldn’t release her hold on the sword either. Her face was stiff as she maintained a stranglehold on the holy sword.

Sweat dripped from her brow as she said, “U-Um...this is clearly a lost item. It’s only proper to bring it to the police station!”

“What?”

She stammered out an incomprehensible excuse.

“L-Lost property should be turned in to the authorities, right?! I-It’s okay! No need to worry! I’ll take full responsibility for delivering this sword to the station! I-I won’t pocket it, promise!”

Cain stared at her in disbelief.

Honestly, Wolfe and I were just as dumbfounded. We didn’t even know what we were supposed to do with her desperate excuse. The holy sword belonged to the new hero, but she was doing her best to hide that she was that new hero. She couldn’t assert she was its owner, so she was insisting she’d give it to the proper authorities while keeping it for herself.

Even after everything, she still refused to acknowledge her identity.

“Hey now...that’s a bit of a stretch. Turning the holy sword in to the authorities? Are you hearing yourself?”

“I-I don’t see the problem. It’s lost property, so it has to be...”

“Let go, Altina.”

“No, no, no, I need to take this to the station.”

Neither was willing to let go of the sword.

“The new hero’s out to take my head! Are you okay with me being killed?!”

“N-No, no, no! Even if you’re being hunted, I don’t think it’s right for a hero to pocket lost property!”

“You’re the one trying to pocket it here!”

“Th-That’s not true! It’s not true, right?!”

What a burglar she was. A cat burglar. *Ba-dum-tss.*

*Wait, this is getting ridiculous.*

“And c’mon, how long are you going to keep pretending?! You’re the new hero! Everyone knows that already!”

“N-New what now? I have no idea what you’re talking about. I have nothing but the purest intentions of taking this holy sword to the station.”

Altina's excuses were becoming more and more absurd as she stammered through them. *Seriously, isn't it about time you gave up already?*

"Let go of it!"

"I don't want to!"

Cain and Altina continued their tug-of-war. Despite how silly the scene looked, they were both putting in a tremendous amount of strength.

"Argh! For crying out loud! Fine already!" Altina ultimately cried out, desperation in her voice. "I'm the new hero! This is mine! It's my holy sword! Is that what you wanted to hear, you jerk?!"

Tears welled up in her eyes as she made her confession. Finally, she'd admitted she was indeed the new hero. With a swift and forceful yank, she wrestled the sword out of Cain's hands.

"I challenge you to a duel, Cain!"

Her face a bright red, Altina thrust her finger out at Cain. She cradled her sword against her chest like a precious treasure.

And so, in a rather anticlimactic fashion, the new hero officially declared war on the hero.

## Chapter 56: Then—Reflecting on Bygone Days

It was raining cats and dogs. The droplets drenched the green mountain, watering the fields that spread across the village, nourishing the crops that grew in them. Hefty clouds blocked the sun, casting a gloomy shadow over what was supposedly midday.

“Cain...how are your wounds?”

“I’m fine.”

Altina and Cain sat on a small embankment as they spoke. The heavy rain beat down over their umbrellas, making for a loud and rhythmic rumble overhead.





Cain was twelve, while Altina was eleven. This had happened seven years ago.

Back when they had both lived in their tiny village, they would often sit and talk when it rained.

“But you were hurt so badly. It doesn’t hurt?”

“It hurts, but I’m fine.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

Cain’s young body was wrapped in countless bandages. He was in the midst of the trial to be chosen by the holy sword. Alone, he would dive into the dungeon where the sword was enshrined; the trial ended only once he managed to retrieve it from the dungeon’s depths.

But each time, his life was on the line. He would have to fend off vicious monsters while making slow progress toward the dungeon’s deepest chamber. Each time he set off, he would come back stronger, bit by bit transforming into someone worthy of wielding the blade.

It was both a trial imposed by the sword and a form of training.

Cain’s parents were the ones who had ordered him to take on this dangerous challenge, and Cain’s body would always end up covered in wounds. His head, his arms—everywhere Altina looked had been wrapped up. Presumably, the gauze and the plaster had been wrapped under his clothing as well.

“...”

Altina couldn’t stand it.

Why did her dear friend have to suffer like this over and over again? Why were the adults of Cain’s household putting their own child in such danger?

The adults of the village would put it like this: “The boy is undergoing trials to save the world. It is a great honor. If he overcomes these trials, he will become a hero and the world will be saved.”

They insisted it was necessary.

But Altina couldn’t accept it. What were they supposed to do if Cain ended up

dying in the dungeon just like that? What then? What if he didn't have to dive into the dungeon of the holy sword? What if he didn't have to do something so absurd as becoming a hero?

More than anything, she hated to see him hurt. So, she told him, "Let's run away from the village together." She looked into the eyes of the boy sitting beside her and spoke with an air of seriousness.

The rain swallowed up all the sounds around them. This was a secret conversation, a discussion shared between just the two of them.

But Cain slowly shook his head.

"Someone has to do it," he said.

He refused the hand Altina had extended to him.

She hung her head. What could she do? How could she stop him from being hurt anymore? How could she make him stop? From that moment, she began thinking. She didn't want Cain to accept the fate that had been thrust upon him.

And from then on, the question lingered: *What can I do to make Cain give up on being a hero?*

## Chapter 57: Now—Hero vs Hero

“Ladies and gentlemen! The time is near! The battle of the century is about to begin! Today’s match is an exhibition match! The main event—none other than hero versus hero!”

The voice of the announcer echoed across the arena, closely followed by the frenzied cheer of the crowd.

This was Academy City’s coliseum. The venue was filled with an abnormal level of enthusiasm.

The coliseum was one of the Adventurers’ Guild’s facilities. It was a large venue used for tournaments and sporting events, and was a place for adventurers to make merry. It consisted of a sizable circular arena surrounded by spectator seating on all sides, and today each and every one of its numerous seats had been filled. The voices of the crowd rang out from every direction, creating an air of tremendous cheer and anticipation.

And what had so many people come to see? One look at the center of the arena and it was obvious.

There, facing one another with steely gazes, stood the main attraction of the day—Sir Cain and Altina. We were only moments away from witnessing the duel between the current hero and the new hero.

“And here we are! The crowd is going wild! And no wonder—Altina, the girl calling herself the new hero, has challenged none other than our reigning hero, Sir Cain!”

The announcer, a woman holding a microphone, raised her voice to reach the masses. Her microphone was imbued with an amplification spell which—as the name implied—allowed her voice to reach every corner of the venue.

“And what is at stake here, you ask? Why, it’s none other than Sir Cain’s retirement! How arrogant! How insolent! And yet, Sir Cain accepted those conditions!”

The woman's excited commentary spurred another wave of cheers from the crowd.

"If Altina, the new hero, wins, the current hero, Cain, must retire! If Cain wins, the new hero's holy sword will go to him! Who knows what will happen?! It's no exaggeration to say that the fate of humankind hinges on this match!"

"Whooooaaaaa!" the crowd roared.

"As per usual, commentary will be provided by me, Fiore! It's an honor to be here! Please stay tuned and enjoy the match!"

Today, a woman named Fiore was commentating. She often took on the role at events like these. Though she usually staffed the counter at the Adventurers' Guild, she was a multitalented woman capable of handling a wide range of tasks—one of those being sports commentary. She did a very good job keeping herself busy. At thirty-seven years old, she had maintained a youthful figure and showed no signs of slowing down.

"As for the match analysis, we've brought in some prestigious guests! Introducing the Princess Knight and the Saint, Lady Sylphonia, and Lady Melvy! They're both members of Cain's hero party! And last but not least, a young lady who ranks fourth at the academy despite only being a second-year student! Hero team trainee and a celebrity in Academy Town! Lady Lisalinde!"

"Sylphonia speaking. Pleased to be here."

"U-Um, er... I'm Melvy. I hope you can put up with me..."

"I-It's Lisalinde. A-A pleasure..."

The three of us had been called as analysts for the match, and we were sitting at the commentary table. This meant we had front-row seats to the match. Though I wasn't so confident in my abilities as a commentator, I was with Sylphie and Melvy, who both knew everything there was to know about Cain. I figured everything would turn out fine if I left it to them.

"But, with that said..."

"How did it come to this?"

I shared a wry smile with Melvy as we both took care to make sure our voices

didn't reach the microphone.

It was practically a festival. The honorable duel between Cain and Altina over the ownership of their holy swords had become nothing but a source of entertainment for the residents of Academy Town.

*How did it turn out like this?*

It was incredibly simple. Cain and Altina had decided to go through the proper channels to rent out the guild's training area for their duel. But that had turned out to be a careless misstep on their part. Seeing an opportunity to make a killing, the guild had immediately begun to organize the event. A duel between the current hero and new hero—there was no way the arena wouldn't sell out. The Adventurers' Guild wasn't a charity; it was a business. And what business wouldn't jump at such a profitable venture?

As ideas were passed back and forth, the event had continued growing bigger and bigger. Ever since the existence of the enigmatic hero Altina and the details of their wager had come to light, the whole town had been ablaze with enthusiasm. By the time they realized it, the spectacle had spiraled into something beyond Cain and Altina's control.

"I didn't think it'd turn into a spectacle."

"Seriously."

As they stood at the center of the arena, Cain and Altina already seemed tired of it all. Despite the energy of the audience, they were both less than enthused.

"And now, what we've all been waiting for! The betting odds! Here we go! Current hero Sir Cain is favored at one-to-three!"

The match was also being used as a form of gambling among the citizenry.

"The current breakdown has seventy percent of the bets placed on Cain, and around thirty percent on Altina. What do you make of these odds, Lady Sylphonia?"

"That's a surprising amount placed on the new hero," Sylphie said, sounding perplexed. She placed a thoughtful hand on her chin.

Cain was a hero of worldwide acclaim. He was incredibly renowned and seen

as a beacon of hope all across the globe. The extent of his strength should have been very well understood. By contrast, Altina was still largely unknown. Her battles and achievements were equally unknown—in fact, many people were only learning of her existence through this very event.

Yet despite that, thirty percent of the bets had gone to Altina. It was strange, to say the least.

“What could this mean?” Sylphie mused. “Given his fame, it wouldn’t be strange if nearly a hundred percent of the money was on Cain.”

“That is a little strange.”

Sylphie and Melvy cocked their heads.

But I had a decent idea of what was going on.

“It’s one of those things, surely. I’m sure there were plenty of people who put their money on Altina just because she’s a cute girl.”

“Is that how it works?”

“Oh, I see! Did you hear that? Just how many of you out there just broke into a sweat, feeling called out by Lady Lisalinde’s statement?!”

The crowd was astir as Fiore riled them up again.

“These guys... Are they really okay with that?” Cain muttered from the center of the arena.

“Now, for the opening remarks, let’s hear from the headmaster of Academy Town’s namesake Forst Academy, Kabenford Baffoel!”

“Thank you for having me.”

For some reason, the headmaster was giving an address.

“Ahem. The heavens have blessed us with fine weather on this lovely day. Fine weather indeed. As you may know, Academy Town has a long history of traditional duels, dating back over a hundred and fifty years to a quarrel between two of our academy’s students. One of those students was none other than the now-famous eighteenth minister of the right, Bottrel Geld Hoffman, who first established the rules for student dueling. As the honorable Hoffman

put it...”

The headmaster’s speech went on for another fifteen minutes.

“...or so it was said. And thus, I wish both participants a safe and injury-free duel. Thank you so much for having me.”

“Yes, thank you, headmaster! Now, without any further ado, the main event you’ve all been waiting for! The duel of heroes is about to kick off! The fate of humanity hinges on this!”

By this point, the audience was visibly weary from the headmaster’s lengthy address.

“It’s almost time! Almost here! The gong will sound in...five! Four! Three! Two! One!”

The unmistakable clang of a gong echoed through the coliseum.

“Let the match begin!”

Silence spread over the field.

“What’s this?! Neither Cain nor Altina is making a move! Are they waiting each other out?!”

“How the hell am I supposed to fight in this atmosphere?” Cain grumbled.

It was hard to blame him. Being asked to jump straight into a heated duel after the headmaster’s long-winded speech was a tall order.

“Neither side is making the first move! What’s your take on this, Lady Lisalinde?!”

“They probably don’t feel like fighting right now.”

“How could this be?! A lack of motivation! I should’ve seen it coming—starting the match right after that speech was too much to ask for!”

Even in this heavy atmosphere, she was doing her best to keep up an enthusiastic commentary. Fiore was truly a professional.

“Urgh...fine. Moping around’s not gonna do anything. Guess we should get on with it.”



“Yes, I guess so.”

With a sigh, Cain cricked his neck left and right. He heaved a deep sigh as he and Altina reluctantly raised their holy swords. They were finally poised for battle. However, it was still plain how unenthused they were.

“Well, since my motivation’s at rock bottom, how about you make the first move, Altina?”

“How generous of you.”

Cain lazily waved his hand, inviting Altina to take the lead. He seemed content to start on the defensive. Perhaps because of his provocation, I could feel the mana that circulated around Altina’s body rising. Evidently, she was starting to feel motivated.

“Cain, I hardly need to even try to read you at this point. I know how strong you are!”

“Oh?”

“So I’ll be going all out from the start! *Hraaaaaah!*”

She let out a roar as a powerful aura burst from her body. She was quickly enveloped in a brilliant white light.

“What’s this?! What could it mean?! Altina’s body is emitting a radiant glow! What could this light possibly mean?!” Fiore exclaimed.

Even from this distance, I could sense the intense mana radiating from the dazzling torrent of light shining from her; I could feel it prickling at my skin. Just witnessing it made my body quiver at the sheer enormity of the power she wielded.

This was the might of her holy sword; I understood this instinctively.

“Here I come, Cain! Prepare yourself!”

Not a moment after she’d uttered those words, Altina was gone.

No—that wasn’t it. She’d burst into action at speeds imperceptible to the naked eye.

“Hah!”

“Guh!”

Her lightning-fast thrust managed to graze Cain’s cheek. Cain had evaded the brunt of it, but only barely.

“There’s more where that came from!”

“Tch!”

One movement led fluidly into the next. Dashing left and right with incredible speed, she fired bolts of light at Cain in a relentless assault. Cain carefully deflected each projectile, but he was clearly on the defensive. He couldn’t keep up with her rapid movements.

“Hyah!”

“You little—!”

As soon as one of the orbs managed to throw off his stance, Altina closed in. She wasn’t about to let this chance slip by. In the blink of an eye, she took a swipe at his flank—and again Cain barely managed to react in time, still coming out with a light cut.

“And again! She’s fast! Way too fast! What’s with that speed?! The underdog Altina has Cain dancing on the palm of her hand!” The announcer’s voice boomed through the arena, setting the crowd astir. “What’s going on here?! Cain is being pushed back! What was supposed to be an overwhelmingly advantageous match for Cain has been turned on its head! The crowd is agog!”

She was right. Regardless of the betting odds, the current hero had a very impressive track record, and nearly everyone was sure he’d easily come out on top. Yet here we were, witnessing the impossible. Altina was the one on a one-sided offensive, with Cain struggling to match her.

“This... This is holy magic.”

“Do you recognize it, guest commentator, Melvy?!”

A more experienced commentator had joined the fray.

“That white light that Ms. Altina is manipulating—it’s most likely related to holy magic. Much of her fearsome combat prowess seems to stem from that magic.”

“Holy magic, you say? Could you elaborate, Lady Melvy?”

“Holy magic is a branch of magic said to derive its strength from the power of God; it is an incredibly potent force that normal people are unable to wield. Due to its formidable power, it can grant a massive boost to physical abilities when channeled through the body. If channeled into healing magic, it’s possible to even restore severed limbs.”

“Incredible! Holy magic is truly extraordinary!”

Melvy went on, “Very rarely, someone will be born with the innate ability to use holy magic. Those individuals are often called ‘saints’ and ‘apostles,’ and they hold special positions within the church.”

“Wait, aren’t you talking about yourself...Saint Melvy?”

“Um, er, you could say that. I’d rather not bring it up. It makes me feel like I’m patting myself on the back.”

Melvy fidgeted a bit, her cheeks turning red. Despite the difficult position Cain was in, I found myself instead captivated by how adorable Melvy could be.

“Since holy magic is rooted in the divine power of God, it cannot be imbued into weapons made by man. And normally, a weapon wouldn’t be able to grant holy magic to its wielder either.”

“So what does that mean?”

“It means that the sword Ms. Altina wields is undoubtedly an artifact beyond human understanding—a genuine holy sword, if you will.”

The audience gasped at Melvy’s words. The honorable Saint of the Grand Cathedral had publicly recognized the value of the new hero’s blade as a genuine holy relic. This was meant to be a lighthearted, festive event, but her words made this no laughing matter.

And no one doubted her. The reason being the very power of the holy sword that was being swung around before their eyes. Cain, the hero celebrated for his globe-spanning achievements, was clearly being pushed back by its might. It was obvious to everyone present that Melvy wasn’t just spewing some offhanded nonsense.

“Hyah!”

“Damn it!”

Altina’s white light swirled through the arena. My eyes stung—it was so bright it was painful to look at. Perhaps it was a minor annoyance compared to the sheer power of the holy magic itself, but the way this blinding light worsened her foe’s field of vision was another one of its troubling features.

Meanwhile, Altina darted freely across the battlefield as though she had become a flash of light herself. As a half-beast, her physical capabilities were already superior to those of a human. In that sense, using hit-and-run tactics with bolts of light magic suited her perfectly.

Everyone could see that she had the advantage. Even as Melvy laid out the situation, Cain remained on the back foot.

“Strong! She’s far too strong! The new hero, Altina, is overpowering Cain! Is this truly the passing of the torch?!”

“Hyah!”

“Urgh...”

Altina landed a clean roundhouse kick on Cain, who was sent flying crashing into the arena’s wall with a powerful thud.

“Who could have seen it coming?! Now what will Cain do?! Is he fated to suffer a crushing defeat?!”

“No, that’s not going to happen.”

“No, it’s impossible.”

“Oh?”

Their leader Cain was clearly struggling. And yet Sylphie and Melvy both seemed perfectly calm. Fiore’s escalating commentary had done little more than bring wry smiles to their faces.

“How about it Cain?” asked Altina. “If you can’t turn things around, isn’t it about time we wrap it up?”

Cain was still slumped against the wall, sitting on the ground. Altina loomed

over him, staring from above. Their contrasting postures told the whole story—a tale of strength and weakness.

“Pfft... Ah ha ha ha!”

“Hmm?”

But Cain laughed. Though his shoulders drooped and his head was hung, a quiet chuckle escaped his lips.

Lifting his face, he said, “Well, well, well, Altina. I never expected you to get this strong.”

She stared back at him.

“But using your trump card right off the bat? I’d say that’s a bad move.”

And with that, Cain stood—slowly and smoothly, like it was nothing. It was just the simple act of standing, but he possessed such an air of complete composure that it was hard for anyone to think he had been driven into a corner. There was no urgency, no fear.

“But, well, you’ve played your card, so whatever. I guess I’ll have to play mine too.”

A wary look crossed Altina’s face.

“This is a party, right? I’d hate to bring it to a close too early. But there’s no point in dragging this out. Like you said, we should wrap things up.”

Cain lazily lowered the holy sword in his hand. His posture was perfectly natural. There wasn’t a hint of tension or strain. Sensing something ominous from him, Altina braced herself. She tightened her grip on her sword and mustered the strength in her body.

“You ready?” he asked. “Then here I go. Just try not to die, okay?”

Altina gulped. The entire audience seemed to hold their breaths.

And then, it happened. A slight grin spread across Cain’s face as his holy sword let off its own radiance. His light was an eerie black and red, an unsettling light that sent shivers down my spine just looking at it. There was something not normal—something otherworldly—about it.

“Wh-What?” Altina stammered, sweat oozing from her brow.

In no time at all, the blackish, reddish light had engulfed Cain’s body. It wasn’t merely an aura that surrounded him; his skin itself, his very being, seemed to be stained by the sword’s malign hues.

It was alien, unnatural. The air around him shifted into something bone-chilling, yet mesmerizing. There was something bizarrely captivating about it.

And now, he was ready.

“Make sure to block.”

In the next instant—Cain’s fist was buried in Altina’s face.

“Nghah!”

She left only a short scream as she was blown away.

Once, twice, three times. She bounded off the ground before crashing straight into the opposite wall.

There had been some distance between them only moments before. Yet Altina hadn’t even registered that Cain had approached, or that he had attacked her. She’d taken his punch head-on without even attempting to defend herself.

“A-Altina has been hit! She’s been sent flying!”

Fiore tried to commentate as best she could, but the commentary was clearly falling behind the events taking place. Cain was already on his next move.

“Hup!”

“Nghah?!”

He gave chase and was instantly upon her, trying to stomp on her where she lay. This time, Altina barely managed to react, evading his foot with a sudden leap. His foot caused immense damage where it struck, leaving a massive crater in the arena floor.

“Don’t run.”

“Gwah?!”

Cain relentlessly pursued Altina, who was desperate to gain some distance.

She couldn't block him. His fists would find their place in her abdomen and chest, blow after devastating blow.

The battle had been completely reversed. Cain was now one-sidedly pummeling Altina.

"What's this?! What on earth is happening?! The tables have been turned!"

"That's the trump card of Cain's holy sword."

"Please elaborate, Princess Sylphonia!"

Sylphie began explaining what had just happened: "His last resort enhances his physical abilities to a ridiculous degree but with a kickback. There's a time limit, and after the effect wears off, his body is racked with immense pain. With that said, for a limited time, he gains a body that surpasses the limits of humankind."

"Ph-Physical enhancement? That doesn't sound too impressive."

"But as you can see, it's letting him beat up someone as powerful as Altina."

Altina's body was enhanced with holy magic. This wasn't just your normal enhancement; it was incomparable to any ordinary strengthening spell. The power she wielded was derived from God himself, and it was incredible. The simple fact that she'd managed to overwhelm Cain in the early stages of the match was commendable in its own right.

But even Altina and her holy magic couldn't stop Cain as he was now. His red-and-black form had gained him a complete hold over the arena with its speed. The enhancement his holy sword gave him easily surpassed even the tremendous boost of holy magic.

"As you can see, the enhancement Cain uses isn't normal. Anyone who assumes it's the same as normal strengthening magic would be in for a rude awakening."

"And that's why there's a kickback, right?! There's a time limit, and his body will be hit by unbearable pain once it's over. Should he really be using a move like that in front of such a large crowd?"

"Yes, well, technically...no. It's not ideal. But it should be fine. He's already

used it in front of the demon army, after all.”

There was concern about leaking such a powerful technique in front of so many onlookers. But there wasn't much he could do about that. Altina wasn't the kind of opponent he could hold back against.

“Prithee, Sylphie.”

“Hmm? What is it, Lady Kuon?”

As it turned out, the former demon lord Kuon was sitting behind our commentary booth.

Kuon lightly tugged at Sylphie's sleeve. “He didst not employ that technique when we fought. What does that mean?”

“Oh, there's a reason for that.”

Sylphie discreetly switched off the amplification magic on her microphone.

The alliance between the former demon lord's house and the hero's party remained a well-kept secret from the world. Details of our battle with Kuon couldn't be allowed to run through the mic.

“Even up to the end of the fight, we could feel that you were saving some energy for something big. It was possible you still had a trump card up your sleeve. It's difficult for Cain to use the move in that sort of situation.”

“Oh, yes, what with the time limit.”

It was a last resort technique that incapacitated the user after its effects ran out. It was too risky to use it when he didn't know the extent of his foe's strength.

“Hmm! Hm-hm-*hmm*! I see, I *see*! So thou didst see right through me! That I still had yet a trick up my sleeve! The fight went not as I'd hoped, but, yes of course! Thou couldst tell I was far mightier than I let on—that my true power was yet unseen!”

Kuon was suddenly very talkative. She smirked smugly, her cheeks flushed, looking very pleased with herself. She seemed to be in a very good mood knowing that her strength had been recognized.



*But why are you so happy about revealing your secret trump card? She's one of those people—the sorts that cough up top secret information surprisingly easily if you egg them on. Is this really all right? For the former demon lord's house, I mean.*

While I was occupied with those worries, Sylphie flicked her microphone back on and resumed her commentary.

“Altina was going all out from the start. That holy magic must have been her ace in the hole. But because of that, Cain had a far easier time playing his own trump card.”

Cain's technique was difficult to use without a full grasp of his foe's capabilities. However, Altina said it herself, that she was “going all out from the start.”

“Ms. Altina doesn't seem to have much left in her. I doubt that she can give any more than that.”

“Right, a comeback at this point seems unlikely.”

Melvy and Sylphie analyzed the situation with cold, near-brutal accuracy. By now, the battle had reached a level far beyond what an ordinary person could follow with their eyes. It was a clash of two warriors trained to the absolute limit, further boosted by the powers of the swords in their hands.

But even at such unfathomable mastery, there was a clear gap between the two.

“Hrah!”

“Urgh...!”

Cain's backhand struck deep into Altina's side.

For a while now, he had stopped using his holy sword as an actual weapon. His attacks came only from his fists and feet and had stacked up immense damage, even bare-handed.

Why was that?

Even I could answer that question. If he used a sword, then Altina would be dead.

Cain had realized that Altina wouldn't be able to defend herself from him. That's why he had chosen to cast aside a lethal weapon and suppress her with only his fists. Indeed, Altina could no longer keep up with his movements. She was the only one taking damage now.

"In other words, revealing her full strength from the start put Altina at a disadvantage?!"

"Well, I won't say it's wrong to give it your all from the start...but, right. In this fight, that was her undoing."

"Hey, Altina. They're already talking about why you're gonna lose."

"Sh-Shut up!"

Cain leveraged the commentary to taunt her. With labored breath, Altina drew an even stronger light from her holy sword. She produced enough orbs of light to cover up the entire venue before sending them at Cain all at once. It was an omnidirectional attack, and likely her final act of desperation.

But even that wasn't enough to stop Cain. With calm and care, he parried each bolt as he advanced, moving closer to Altina one step at a time. Not even her fearsome attack could slow him as he continued pushing her further and further into a corner.

Then, Cain performed a beautifully executed spinning kick which struck Altina on the chin.

That was the final blow. She staggered once before going down. The end of the battle was an anticlimactic one indeed.

Perhaps the damage she'd suffered was so great she could no longer control the orbs, as they all blinked out in an instant. The holy sword in her right hand was held down by Cain's left.

Altina was now on her hands and knees, silent, barely holding up her trembling body. Cain, meanwhile, looked calmly down at her. As one of his hands held down her sword arm, his other hand pressed his own sword against her neck.

There was no comeback, no last-minute reversal.

It was, without question, a victory for Cain.

“We can call this my win, right?” Cain pressed Altina to surrender.

But she stayed silent. Her silence was one that enveloped the whole venue. No one could bring themselves to say a word.

“No.”

After ten-odd seconds of stillness, Altina’s determination finally broke through. Cain’s eyes widened ever so slightly. She refused to accept defeat.

“You don’t know when to give up... No matter how you slice it, I’ve won.”

“...”

“If we keep this up, I’ll be forced to kill you. You know that, right?”

“Even so...I...won’t give up.”

She wouldn’t yield. She wouldn’t accept defeat. Beaten down so badly she could barely speak, she continued to defy Cain.

“Let go of your sword,” he said.

“No...”

“What’s with you? Good grief.” He let out an exasperated snort.

Now, the silence returned. Both combatants stood still. Cain didn’t move. Altina *couldn’t* move.

And as both held their tongues, time seemed to stand still. One could do nothing, while the other refused to do anything. The audience watched over the scene with bated breath.

“...”

The match had no referee. It would continue until one side either surrendered or died. It was a battle between heroes, with the fate of the world on the line. There wasn’t a referee in the world with the qualifications to determine such a match. And so, it was up to the two combatants to decide who won and who lost—no one else. All we could do was watch over them in silence.

“Why?”

“Hmm?”

The first one to speak was Altina.

“Why are you so fixated on being a hero?”

“Huh?”

Her voice was small, barely a murmur. Her head remained hung.

“You could just give it up, couldn’t you? Being a hero. If you lose here, you’ll finally be free from the burden of a hero, you know.”

“Hey now, what are you even talking about?”

“So, why?!” Altina clenched her fist. “Why do you keep listening to what that family tells you to do?”

“What?”

“You only became a hero because you were born into that family, right? You can’t... You can’t listen to what they say. You can just ignore them, your parents. The ones who threw their own child into a dangerous dungeon.”

“...”

“Even just one small mistake and you would have died in the dungeon that housed that holy sword, right? You always came out so beaten, so bloody...”

Cain had undergone the holy sword’s trial solely because he had been born into the family that guarded said sword. The coincidental circumstances of his birth had made him a hero candidate. He underwent the grueling, brutal trials of the holy sword and became bound by the heavy burden of a hero.

“And that holy sword itself... There’s something strange...something *wrong* with it.”

Altina went on, her eyes still downcast. And Cain said nothing. He rested his sword on his shoulder with a sigh and listened quietly to her speak.

“Quit this whole hero thing, Cain. Does it really have to be *you*? You’re going to die at this rate, I just know it.”

“...”

“Cain, you’ve...always been such a crybaby.”

She was barely managing to squeeze out a voice at this point. It almost sounded like she was on the verge of tears.

But suddenly, we understood. All along, Altina had only wanted to protect Cain.

As members of the hero’s party, we had all heard stories from Cain about his childhood. They were morbid tales, tales of all the countless times he had quite nearly lost his life to obtain the holy sword. We understood just how dangerous his path had been.

And so, Altina’s words of lament slotted deeply in our hearts. We could sympathize. She’d gone as far as to become the villain to try and distance Cain from the dangers he faced. Perhaps she’d wanted Cain to give up on his hero destiny even as far back as when they were still in the village. And now she’d usurped a holy sword, concealed her identity, and stood opposed to him.

If rumor was to be believed, she’d only recently obtained the holy sword. If she became the hero, she’d be able to free Cain from his duty. It was with that earnest plea that she had proclaimed herself the new hero.

I exchanged a look with Sylphie and Melvy. All of Altina’s actions had been done with Cain’s best interest in mind.

“Now, look here, you...”

Cain tapped his sword against his shoulder as he let out a troubled voice. He shrugged, looking mildly annoyed, yet he seemed unable to find the words to say to her.

And so came more silence.

Altina had gone quiet once more. On her knees, crawling on the ground, she waited for what might be the final blow.

Cain was in trouble. Big trouble. Once again, the situation had reached a standstill.

And so...it was my turn to pitch in.

I took out a piece of paper, and on it I wrote the following words: *“Thank you for worrying about me. I love you too, Altina.”*

I held the paper high. It was clear that it was time to break out Operation Cue Card. I waved the paper around at Cain, urging him to read out the words. Cain looked at me with a blatant scowl.



The distance didn't matter; with his superior eyesight, I knew he could read it with ease.

Conveniently, our commentary booth was positioned behind Altina. The cue card was in Cain's view, and not hers. I wouldn't be found out.

Sylphie and Melvy both looked between my cue card and Cain. They were grinning. I knew I had them on board.

The crowd had begun clamoring. The keen-eyed folks were surely able to see my card.

But the arena was still silent. Cain's lips were curved into a sharp frown. He looked none too thrilled.

"How much of a worrywart are you? What's it matter to you how I die and where?" he said bluntly. Those were most definitely not the words I'd written on the cue card. That cold, dismissive line was the polar opposite of what I'd intended.

Altina's body stiffened up, jolted by his harsh words.

A single tear formed in her eyes. Like a small crystal bead, it slid down her cheek.

"Boo! Boooooo! Boo!"

"Wha?!"

"And here it comes! The crowd erupts in a shower of boos! And who can blame them?! Our contestant Cain just brought a girl to tears!"

"Boo! Boooo! Boo! Boo! Boooooo!"

Jeers flew at Cain from every which way. No hero could ever stand a chance against a crying girl.

The crowd's sympathy wasn't with the hero who'd tossed out such a blunt reply, but with the new hero, who was shedding quiet tears. The criticism startled Cain. For some reason, he found himself in a pinch.

"Boooo! Boo! Boo! Boo! Boooooo!"

A bead of sweat trailed down his brow. Before his eyes was his weeping



childhood friend. All around him, the passionate boos of the peanut gallery. He seemed lost about what to do next.

*“Thank you for worrying about me. I love you too, Altina.”*

My cue card demanded his attention once more. I laid on the pressure.

“Tha...” Cain frowned even harder as he spoke. “Sorry for causing you so much worry.”

Altina lifted her head slightly at these words.

“W-Well, I mean...I’m being reckless. Pushing myself too hard. I’m aware of it. So I’m sorry for worrying you. I really am.”

Cain looked away from her, his words halting and hesitant. He seemed embarrassed. He was paraphrasing what I had written, trying his best to endure the awkwardness. It didn’t seem that the words “I love you” were going to make it past his lips.

*Yeah, I guess words like that don’t come to him naturally. He doesn’t seem like the type.*

His childhood friend blinked at him, wide-eyed.

*“So you’ve always cared that much about me, huh? I’m a lucky guy. You know, I’ve always felt the same way about you.”*

I held up another cue card. But again, Cain refused to read aloud. He was panicking, shaking his head at me. His expression was all but begging me to change it to something less embarrassing.

*Aww, fine. Be like that.*

*So everything you’ve done, it’s all been for my sake, huh? Thanks, for what it’s worth.*

I scribbled down something that sounded more like him.

“S-So everything you’ve done... It’s all been for my sake, huh? Thanks, for what it’s worth.”

He took the cue this time.

*I see. Writing it in his tone makes it easier for him to go along with it.*

“I-It wasn’t for your sake or anything.”

Altina blushed, turning away.

*So this is where she goes tsundere? I see. This is going to be a tricky one.*

“Next?! What’s next?!”

“What should we make him say next?!”

Next to me, Sylphie and Melvy were both staring eagerly, eyes fixed on my cues. They’d turned off their microphones ages ago. They were completely on board with the plan.

*“Really? I coulda sworn...”*

“R-Really? I coulda sworn...”

“N-No! It’s not like I did it for you or anything! I just felt something was wrong with your holy sword, so I wanted to destroy it! That’s all there was to it!”

*“Don’t be so cold. We’ve known each other forever, haven’t we?”*

“Don’t be so cold. We’ve known each other forever, haven’t we?”

“...!”

Altina was flustered, her face turning even redder.

*That’s right. This is the moment we draw out even more of her tsundere attitude. And now, the ultimate finisher! It’s time to end this!*

*“(Now pull her in by the shoulders and kiss her!)”*

This time I had a stage direction for him. The ultimate move—a kiss. After drawing out her true tsundere potential, blindsided her with a kiss. That alone was surely enough to lead to the finest of happy endings.

*Words aren’t enough. Your actions will say everything that needs to be said! With this, Altina will be all over Cain! Victory is mine!*

“Like hell I’m doing that, idiot!”

“Huh?”

But Cain rejected my cue yet again. He looked straight at the card, yelling red-faced.

*What? He turned down...my perfect...finishing blow...?*

“Um...Cain? What’s wrong?”

“Ah, no, it’s nothing. Forget about it.”

His outburst seemed to come from out of nowhere; Altina was taken aback. Cain hurriedly tried to cover it up.

But we were also panicking. Cain had turned down the finisher. The entire script was falling apart. I felt like an author penning a romance novel.

The goal was to make Altina, the female lead, fall for him, and to bring her to our side. If we couldn’t open her heart, we wouldn’t be able to resolve the situation. But the bumbling male protag of the novel was going against the author’s orders.

*What a difficult game this is!*

*“It’s all right. I understand how you feel, so...”*

“I-It’s all right. I understand how you feel? So...”

“H-How I feel?”

Taking Cain’s personality into consideration, I continued putting out cues. He spoke with a bit of hesitation but still read out his lines.

*It’s fine. We can fix this. Altina is all hot and bothered now. There’s no way these lines won’t work on her.*

*“So please, just surrender. I can’t bear to see someone so lovely in pain.”*

“So please, just surrender. I can’t bear to see someone so lo...lo... I don’t want to see you get hurt... This battle is pointless, right?”

“But...”

Cain wouldn’t stop tweaking the lines I gave him.

*Curses! You’re nothing more than a puppet! Stick to the script, goddammit!*

*“Isn’t this enough?”*

“Isn’t this enough?”

*“Your kindness, your feelings. They’ve reached me.”*

“Your kindness reached me.”

“Th-That’s not true. I’m not kind at all.”

I continued manipulating Cain to ease Altina’s heart. Sylphy, Melvy, Fiore, and I huddled together, exchanging ideas about what to write next. Not like this, not like that. It was a heated debate.

But we couldn’t go over our allotted time. It was almost like we were playing a game of chess. We needed speed and strategy to steer this maiden’s heart toward a checkmate.

*“You took on the role of the villain just for me, didn’t you?”*

“You took on the role of a villain for me, right?”

“Y-You have it all wrong, I tell you. I’m a bad girl. A terrible person who tried to undermine your status and rip it away from you. A very bad girl.”

*“You don’t have to pretend. It must’ve been exhausting being alone all this time.”*

“No need to pretend. It must’ve been exhausting for you, being alone all this time.”

Altina averted her eyes a bit.

A slight crack had opened in her defenses. She didn’t deny it.

She truly *had* been alone all this time. After leaving the village and parting with her childhood friends, she’d been out on her own, just her against the world.

I could feel her pain from those averted eyes. This was the best moment to go on the attack.

*“(Hug her.)”*

Cain frowned at me again.

But we weren’t going to back down either. I gave the order again.

*“(Hug your friend. You can at least do that, can’t you?)”*

“...”

*“(If this fails, we’ll be here all day.)”*

His inaction was only dragging this out further. He’d come off as far too insincere if he used only words.

*C’mon, hug her! Tight! Get in there! A nice, passionate hug! C’mon! C’mon!*

Cain heaved a deep sigh. The red and black light disappeared from the holy sword in his hand, his body regaining its original hues. It was only then at that point that he finally stood down.

And then, Cain embraced Altina.

“Huh?!”

It must have taken her by surprise. Her eyes widened and her tail twitched. Even though we were the directors, we couldn’t help but squeal in delight, our cheeks turning red.

*“Thank you. Your feelings have saved my heart.”*

“Thanks. Your feelings, they’ve...um, how to put it? Well, you didn’t do so bad.”

He’d changed the line again, but that was fine. Just watching the both of them acting all bashful would be enough to sustain me for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. We in the commentary booth were grinning from ear to ear, as were the entire audience in the venue.

“But in the end, I couldn’t do anything for you.”

*“That’s not true.”*

“That’s not true.”

“I couldn’t be useful at all.”

*“That’s not true.”*

“That’s not true!”

Cain gently patted her on the back. That wasn’t in our stage directions. It was his own way of showing kindness.

*“Your affection alone is all I ever needed.”*

“Just your feelings alone. That’s enough to make me happy.”

Hearing those words, Altina softly closed her eyes.

She released her holy sword of her own will. The blade dropped to the ground with a soft clang. Then, with her now-free hand, she reached around Cain’s back and returned the embrace.

“I...surrender.”



The strength drained from her body as she accepted him from the bottom of her heart.

The match had been settled. The long battle between hero and new hero had ended with two old friends rekindling their bond.

“Whoooooooooooo!”

The crowd burst into cheers, hailing the duo with ear-shattering applause.

“Yeah!”

“Heck yeah!”

Sylphie, Melvy, Fiore and I exchanged handshakes all around.

*Here's to a job well done.*

We had guided two lost souls to this moment.

And so, their duel came to an end.

“Are you kidding me? This is all a faaarce!” came the cry from Cain, who was left feeling rather unconvinced. But his voice rang empty, falling on ears far too swept up in the mood to care.



# Epilogue

Altina hated the village where she was born.

It was a small remote town in the countryside—a place where there was nothing but mountains and fields as far as the eye could see. As a child, all that awaited her every day was constant boredom. The village had a small population, which inevitably meant she had few friends her age. Whenever she had free time, she was made to help with the farmwork.

But none of that really mattered to her. Those were far from the reasons she hated her village. Instead, there was something she found strange—something she had found strange for as long as she could recall.

It was about her friend Cain, one of her few friends her age. Thanks to his family's background, he had been tasked with delving into a dungeon where a holy sword was sealed—in pursuit of becoming a hero.

Each and every time he returned from that dungeon, he would come back in tatters. Time and time again, he only narrowly evaded death as he slowly made progress through the dungeon.

But why? Why did Cain have to look death in the face every time? What would happen if he were to actually die?

When she voiced these questions to the adults of the village, she would only ever get awkward smiles in return.

*Because it's his family's duty. Because he has to if he wants to save the world. Because it's an honor to be a hero candidate, so you needn't worry about it.*

No matter how often she heard these responses, Altina was never convinced. As the years went by, her dissatisfaction only grew. She began to despise the adults who thought nothing of tossing a child into a death trap and then turned a blind eye to what became of him. No one from that accursed village could be relied on. Staying there wouldn't help her save her dear friend Cain.

So, four years ago, she had left the village. She wandered from place to place,

searching for a method, a solution that would ensure that Cain wouldn't have to resign himself to this cruel destiny—a way to defeat the demon lord without the holy sword.

Unfortunately, her journey saw little to no success.

Throughout history, whenever humans and demons went to war, a hero wielding a holy sword would always appear and play a significant role. There was no greater power than the holy sword, and humankind had become completely dependent on it. She searched far and wide for any alternative, but came up short.

Her journey was getting nowhere, and time was slipping away. Before she knew it, Cain had completed the holy sword's trials. He'd obtained the sword and had made a name for himself as the hero. As the world's hope, he was performing great deeds all across the lands.

With that, Altina could no longer discern any meaning behind her own quest. There was nothing left for her to do but wander from place to place, hearing about each new great deed Cain accomplished.

At the very least, she didn't want to get in his way. And with that thought, she lived a quiet, lonesome life.

However...quite recently, something unexpected had happened to her. She coincidentally stumbled upon *another* holy sword. Altina, without meaning to, had obtained the Holy Sword Ikryl.

Confused by the fact it existed at all, she began investigating the sword in detail. She looked into various legends, researching the two holy swords. Over time, she began to think there was something strange about the Holy Sword Andros that Cain wielded.

The sword she possessed, Ikryl, had been bestowed upon humanity during the War of Heaven and Earth roughly two thousand years ago. She managed to find clear records of its origin dating back to the time it was created.

But that wasn't the case for Holy Sword Andros. This sword was an unknown. No one knew who made it or where—it just suddenly appeared in history at some point, whereupon it replaced Holy Sword Ikryl.

Altina had always harbored strong doubts about Cain's family. Could the holy sword that family had protected for generations really be trusted? Could wielding such a dubious blade put Cain's life in danger yet again?

Altina then grew anxious. Perhaps it was best to take such a suspicious item away from Cain, before something fatal happened. But even if went straight up to him and asked him to give her his sword, he would naturally never agree.

That's why she hid her identity. She put on a mask, pulled up her hood, and chose the path of opposing Cain as the new hero, Dia.

That was all there was to it.

The day after the duel, we listened to Altina's story.

We were in Cain's room. All the members of Cain's Hero Party had gathered there, along with Altina.

The story was followed by silence. After she'd said the last word, she hung her head and closed her eyes. We should have heard all this right after the duel's end, but unfortunately, Cain had been bedridden ever since, suffering from the backlash of his holy sword's power boost. Melvy had stayed by his side the whole time, using healing magic to ease the pain.

Uninterrupted service from such a lovely girl... It was honestly enviable. It was largely thanks to her that Cain had recovered so fast.

Now, he had summoned Altina once more to hear what she had to say about the new hero incident.

"Hmm," said Sylphie. "So in summary, you've been acting out of concern for Cain this whole time?"

"I-It's not like it's just for Cain or anything. As a human being, I can't just ignore the existence of such a dubious holy sword." Altina blushed and looked away.

*Yep. She's a tsundere. It's one hundred percent all for Cain, no doubt about it.*

"Oh, but, but that's a relief," Melvy stammered.

"Yeah, it doesn't seem like we'll need to worry about fighting her anymore,"

Mitter agreed.

The hero party members all breathed a sigh of relief. The problem had been solved.

There was no way for Altina to overturn the outcome of the duel. The fight between her and Cain had reached its resolution, with both sides coming to a mutual understanding. This issue likely wouldn't escalate any further. Had she been driven by resentment or righteous indignation, things could have gotten far more complicated.

The tension that had filled the room began to ease.

"On that note, you are a devoted girl, Altina. Even for a dear childhood friend, few would go that far."

"Indeed, it's rare to find someone so dedicated in this day and age."

"Th-That's not true! I'm not devoted or dedicated or anything!" Altina panicked, her voice quavering.

We knew. We *all* knew. This girl was head over heels for Cain.

Perhaps to distract herself from her embarrassment, Altina grabbed a cookie from the table and violently shoved it into her mouth, crunching it loudly. A wide variety of snacks had been laid out so we could nibble as we chatted.

The serious stuff—the tense interrogation—had passed. Now, everyone began snacking as they relaxed.

"But seriously, I didn't know you were working so hard for Cain. Hmm. *Hmmm*. Hmm. Interesting."

"Wh-What are you getting at, Wolfe?"

Of everyone in the room, the one with the widest grin was Wolfe. And of course it was. One of his childhood friends was so blatantly in love with the other one. He could hardly contain his urge to tease her.

"No, no, I'm just saying you two get along very well. Hmm. I see. So that's how it is."

"Is there something wrong with that?! Is it that strange to work hard for a

friend?!”

“I never said it was strange,” Wolfe noted with a mean-spirited smirk.

Altina gritted her teeth, her face a bright red. She downed her cold milk and slammed her glass down on the table. Again, she shoved a cookie into her mouth.

“Hey, lay off her, Wolfe.”

“Hey, how about it, Cain? What do you say? Knowing you’ve got such an adorable childhood friend who’s been looking out for you this entire time? It must feel nice, right? Right?”

Cain folded his arm, having stayed silent this entire time. But his cheeks were slightly flushed.

Of course, they were. Teasing Altina right now was the same as teasing Cain. Whether he liked it or not, he’d come to know of his childhood friend’s affection, and he had no idea what to do with that information.

“Hey, Sylphie.”

“Hmm?”

Out of nowhere, Cain called Sylphie’s name.

“Go get your sister. Tell her Wolfe wants to see her so badly he can hardly contain himself.”

“On it!”

“Hey, stop it you fool! That’s playing dirty!” Wolfe shot up in a panic.

’Twas a drastic measure, trading blow for blow, trumping one love story with another. This teasing had now devolved into a no-holds-barred mudslinging match where both sides were aiming for the other’s vitals.

“Now, now, calm down people,” Mitter tried to regain control before it all went off the rails. “Why don’t we have a toast?”

The three childhood friends gritted their teeth but, after a sigh, followed Mitter’s lead.

“A toast to what, exactly?” asked Rachel.

“Well, to Altina joining the hero’s party, of course.”

“Ah, of course.”

Rachel nodded and lifted her glass.

Altina was to become a member of the party. It only made sense. Though she’d been an enemy just yesterday, that matter had been resolved. And with her goal being to keep Cain out of harm’s way, joining the party seemed the most assured way to achieve that.

She just had to stay by his side and protect him.

Altina was strong, her abilities a match for the other members. It all worked out in the end.

“Yes, that seems to be the natural outcome,” said Lalo.

“U-Um, I look forward to working with you, Altina!” stammered Melvy.

No one objected to her admission. Everyone raised a glass to welcome her into the fold.

And yet...

“No. I’m sorry.” The dissenting voice came from none other than Altina herself. “I won’t be joining your party... I can’t.”

“Huh?”

We all froze, our glasses still up in the air.

Altina slowly went on, “I launched an attack on you. I tried to drag Cain off his throne. It’s unforgivable. Even more so since I lost.”

“But...”

“The way I see it, I have to take responsibility for what I’ve done.”

She stood and faced Cain.

“Cain...”

“What?”

“Here’s your prize for beating me. I’m leaving this with you.”

And with that, Altina held out her holy sword to Cain.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“I need to take some responsibility for going against you. I’ll leave the holy sword behind and put this town behind me.”

“Wait, Altina?!”

I was taken aback by her words. A wave of unrest spread across all of us. Altina intended to cast aside her sword and walk away, alone once more.

“This isn’t an issue you can just brush aside,” said Altina. “You’re the representatives of the world; you’ve got to be strict with anyone who attacks you.”

“B-But...”

“Otherwise, you won’t set a proper example.”

Altina’s expression did not waver. Each word that came from her was grounded in a firm resolve. She really intended to leave Cain.

*You’re leaving the childhood friend you cherished so much?*

Silence.

More silence.

Cain stared sternly into Altina’s eyes. And she returned that gaze with the same intensity. There was no hesitation. She truly was intent on parting ways.

“Got it,” Cain said at last.

“Cain?!”

“You’re right; we need to set the record straight. Who’s gonna accept it if we forgive the enemy just because she’s an old friend?”

“C-Cain? You don’t need to read so deeply into it,” I tried reasoning with him. “Wh-What’s the harm?”

“No, it has to be this way.”

He was resolute. I wanted to stop Altina from leaving, but he wouldn’t give me the green light.

“Altina. Let me hand down your sentence for all the trouble you caused.”

“ ... ”

“You’re to leave Holy Sword Ikryl behind and leave town. Never get involved in the hero’s battles ever again.”

“I understand.”

The words they exchanged were as cold as ice.

Cain was a world-renowned hero. The eyes of the people were on every action he took. And so, this was his way of showing his resolve. Even if he was dealing with a friend, he had to be harsh with anyone who meant him harm.

That was the responsibility of someone who stood at the top of the world.

“ ... ”

“ ..... ”

Everyone else understood it as well. No one opposed his decision.

“But... But...”

Logically, I understood it. But I found myself wavering.

Was this really the right choice? Would this decision bring happiness to Altina?

I mean, Altina was someone who’d isolated herself to such a degree that she couldn’t even bring herself to go to the hospital on her own. As a rare half-beast, she couldn’t trust anyone to watch her back. Surely the only ones who could ease her loneliness were her childhood friends, and if she were to lose that, she would be alone again.

Was that all right? Was that *truly* all right?

“Thanks for everything, Cain. Let’s never see each other again.”

“I see. Take care of yourself, Altina.”

“Yeah.”

In my moment of hesitation, the two were already exchanging their farewells. The moment of separation wasn’t far off.



“I’ll take your suspicions about my sword seriously. We’ll do some digging on our end.”

“Glad to hear it. I guess my efforts were worthwhile after all.”

“Yeah, I’m grateful.”

Altina cracked a slight smile. She was trying to find fulfillment in such a tiny, inconsequential exchange.

“Lisalinde...”

“Y-Yesh?!” I squeaked. I’d been lost in thought when she reached out to me.

“You’ve done a lot for me. You have my gratitude.”

“N-No, I... I didn’t do anything.”

“It’s thanks to your meddling that I was able to have a proper conversation with Cain. I accept how it all turned out, and I’m satisfied with it. Thank you, Lisalinde.”

She smiled at me—such a willowy, feeble smile.

She said she was satisfied, but *I* wasn’t. Was this really the end? Was there nothing more I could do?

“The cookies you baked were delicious. I’m glad I got to eat some before I left. Thank you.”

“Ah, no. That’s not...”

“Hmm?”

I hesitated, desperately racking my brain to see if there was anything I could do.

But it was at that moment that the atmosphere suddenly shifted.

“Wait a second. Altina? What did you just say?”

“Huh?”

Cain cut into our conversation with a question. For some reason, his voice was trembling slightly.

“I just said that Lisalinde’s cookies were delicious.”

“W-Wait, wait, hold the hell up! You’re saying Liz’s cookies are here?! In this room?!”

“Hm? Yeah. Right there.”

Altina pointed at the center of the table.

There was a wide array of sweets laid out—chocolates, scones, and the like. They’d all been prepared for the meeting.

“Oh, yes, I baked some cookies. Please feel free to help yourselves.”

“...!”

Most of the sweets on the table were store-bought—not that I had anything against that. The store-bought ones were very tasty, but I felt it would be a little too impersonal to have them all outsourced, so I’d made some cookies by hand and brought them in.

“C-Cookies?!”

“Homemade cookies?!”

“Fuck! We let our guard down!”

Why was it? For some reason, a chill ran through Team Hero.

“Altina! No! Whatever you do, don’t eat them!”

“Altina! Those cookies are toxic!”

“Huh? *Huh?*!”

The members of the party cried out with desperation on their faces.

*What? What’s going on here? Why are they reacting like that to my homemade cookies?! And toxic? Toxic?!*

“Hold on a second, what’s with that reaction?!”

“Liz! What did you put in the cookies?! Be honest!”

“What? Well, butter, sugar, and other perfectly normal ingredients!”

With everyone else panicking, Altina and Wolfe were left blinking in confusion.

*What's going on?! What have I done wrong?! Wait...Cain?! Why are you drawing your holy sword on my cookies?!*

"I feel greatly offended! Are you implying I put something strange in those cookies?! There's no way I'd ever do anything of the sort! I'm completely innocent!"

"Gah?!"

"...?"

And then...

Altina started acting strange.

"M-My body...is burning...up."

"Huh? Huh?"

All of a sudden, she crouched down, clutching her chest.

Her face was red, her body feverishly flushed. She began to tremble, fidgeting in discomfort as a heated breath escaped her mouth.

*Huh? What? What's gotten into her?*

"Dammit! We were too late!"

"Um, er, Altina! Are you okay?!"

"Nngh!"

Altina writhed painfully. Yet for some reason, the way she moved seemed strangely...provocative.

She was in heat. For some reason, she was suddenly in heat.

"Altina, listen to me. You just ingested a cookie loaded with aphrodisiacs."

"A-Aphro...?"

"Aphrodisiacs?! No, no, no, I didn't put any of those in my cookies!"

I frantically waved my hands around to deny it.

*Spiked handmade cookies?! Why would I go through the trouble of making something so perverted?!*

“Must’ve done it unconsciously, then.”

“How could anyone do that unconsciously?!”

*Does that sound remotely plausible?! To anyone?!*

Sure, when I was baking the cookies, I did space out a bit, and I didn’t have a clear recollection of everything that happened. And, well, now that I was thinking back on it, I did see some seasonings on the shelf that were a little different from the usual, but that didn’t mean I’d ever make cookies laced with aphrodisiacs! Definitely not!

“Hff! Hah! So hot... My body is... S-Something’s...wrong with me...”

“Argh! That should’ve been the first lesson! I forgot to warn her about the cookies!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

*What do you mean the first lesson?!*

“Damn it all! It’s been so long that I let my guard down!”

“We should have told her to watch out for the succubus’s cookies!”

“Who are you calling a succubus?!”

*What do you mean?! I could never be a succubus!*

“Urgh! I feel funny! Wh-What do I do?! I can’t hold it in!”

“A-Are you okay, Altina?!”

“C-Cain!”

“Wah!”

Suddenly, Altina latched on to Cain.

“A-Altina?!”

“S-Sorry, Cain! B-But! I! I-I just don’t know anymore... ≡ I c-can’t hold back... ≡”

“Guh!”

Altina clung to him tightly. Her face was flushed red, her face a mix of

confusion and euphoria. Though she trembled, unsure of what exactly to do, she still eagerly pressed her body against his.

“Cain... ≡ Cain... ≡”

She buried her face in Cain’s chest, taking in his scent.

*Lucky... I mean...no! That’s not it! This isn’t my fault! I did not do this!*

“Cain, at this point...” Sylphie placed a gentle hand on Cain’s shoulder as if urging him to resign himself.

“Hey, you’ve gotta be kidding me! This has to be a joke!”

It seemed Cain understood exactly what she was getting at.

“Accept it, Cain. No one has ever eaten one of Liz’s cookies and come out unscathed.”

“T-True... But... But Rachel...I can’t...”

“H-Hold on! What is all of this?! What’s with your perception of my cookies?! What exactly have I ever done to you?!”

“Liz, can you be quiet for a bit?”

*Urgh! Why? I haven’t done anything!*

“Um, er, Altina? Can I have a moment?”

“Nyah. ≡ Nyah... ≡ Hmm?”

Melvy slowly approached her.

“So, um, you see... Please calm down and hear me out. There is only one way to cure your...state of arousal. You need to have sex with a gentleman.”

“S-SSS-S-Sex?!”

Altina’s ears and tail stood on end. Her body winced in shock.

“Unfortunately, there’s no way around it. I’ll ask to be sure, but...are you all right with Cain as your partner? Or would you prefer I call in a male escort?”

Altina let out an indescribable sound. Her mouth opened and closed as the redness spread from her face to the rest of her body. Her eyes were spinning and it looked like steam was about to erupt from her head.

Even she couldn't be a tsundere in this situation.

"C... Cain is good!" she said. "No, I *want* Cain! I don't want anyone *but* Cain!"

She strengthened her grip on him as she loudly made her declaration.

"That settles it."

"That it does."

"A-Are we really doing this?! *Seriously?!?*"

By that point, Cain was the only one who was still flustered. Even Altina had steeled herself.

"You'd better resolve yourself to it, Cain," Sylphie warned him. "You're not completely against the idea, are you?"

"What has the world come to?"

Cain buried his head in his hands, but he didn't deny it.

"Nyaaaaaahhh! ≡ C-Cain... ≡ Hurry, *hurry!* ≡ I can't hold on for much longer... ≡"

"All right, I got it, I got it. But hang on just a little, okay?"

Altina's tail swished to and fro. I could have sworn I saw heart marks in her eyes.

"Well then, break a leg."

"Take your time."

Everyone began to casually exit the room, as though this were a routine occurrence.

This was Cain's room. We couldn't stay any longer. After all, a rather intense night was about to begin for the two of them.

"Liz! You're getting punished for this later!"

"But whyyyyyyyyyy?!"

*How am I supposed to accept this?! I never baked any aphrodisiac cookies!  
This is just unfair!*

And so, the long battle between the new hero and the hero reached its conclusion. But in truth, the true battle between the two of them was only now set to begin.

Everyone save for Cain and Altina left the room, the door closing behind us with a soft click.

The next day...

“And so, er...Altina, the new hero, will officially be joining as a member of the team.”

“Hooray.”

“Hooray.”

A smattering of applause broke out here and there.

It was the day after, and we were gathered in Cain’s room again.

The reason—as one might expect—was to debrief everyone on the outcome of...last night’s events.

“Then the punishment you imposed on Altina is revoked?” asked Sylphie. “She doesn’t have to leave town anymore?”

“W-Well yeah, of course. If we kicked her out after that, it’d be like I hit it and quit it.”

In the end, the matter of Altina’s assault on Cain was left up in the air. She was safely added to the hero roster.

“Mm, mm, yes, despite everything, I see this as a peaceful resolution,” Sylphie said, nodding repeatedly while Cain held his head.

“What part of it?” the hero groaned.

Altina was sitting beside Cain, her face beet red as she stared at the floor. Unconsciously, her tail was swishing back and forth, a small bit of last night’s heat seemingly lingering in her body. It seemed things had gone quite well between them.

“Well, how to put it? All things considered...I’m happy for you, Altina.”

“Arrrgh!”

Altina covered her face when Wolfe called out to her. She groaned, embarrassed from the depths of her being.

“Um, er, let’s all get along from now on, Altina!”

“Indeed. Let us support Cain together, Altina.”

“Huh? Huh?”

Melvy and Sylphie both placed their hands on Altina’s shoulders.

Neither seemed the least bit shaken by the fact that another woman had joined Cain’s circle. In fact, they seemed to welcome it. They were far too adaptable.

“Liz, you really need to reflect on this, okay? How many times do I have to tell you not to drag innocent people into this mess we’ve got going on?”

“*Why* am I being scolded?!” I lamented.

I already had several bumps on my head by then, courtesy of Cain’s scolding fist.

*This is unreasonable! I mean, I’m such a pure and wholesome noble lady!*

“Still, it feels like everything’s been wrapped up nicely.”

“As Liz always says, sex truly is the solution to everything!”

“Yes indeed. A win-win for all. Sex truly is the strongest!”

“Hold on! Melvy! Sylphie! I never said that!”

*Stop putting words in my mouth! I never said anything like that...!*

“U-Um... Lisalinde?”

“Wh-What is it, Altina?”

Altina shyly looked my way. I stiffened.

*What could she possibly have to say to me? No! Not that I have anything to feel guilty about!*

“U-Um...th-thanks.”



“Huh?”

But contrary to my expectations, the words that came from her mouth were those of gratitude.

*Thanks? Did I do anything to warrant my thanks?*

As I stared at her perplexed, she went on, “Th-Thanks for picking out that bra and panties for me. You really saved me. Without those, I-I would be dead right now.”

“Oh...”

It dawned on me.

*That’s right. Up to a few days ago, she’d been wearing holey panties with no bra. Yeah, getting intimate with the person you’ve been in love with for years in those rags would make anyone want to die. That really was for the best.*

From the bottom of my heart, I was glad I’d bought her some stylish undergarments. After all, panties ain’t no game.

I’d saved a maiden’s life!

“You still need to repent.”

“Owwwwww!”



Yet again, Cain's fist came down on my head. My punishment wasn't over yet.

"I didn't do anything wroooooong!"

My scream resounded beyond the window, out into the endless expanse of the sky—a sky so beautiful and blue.

The long-standing feud between two childhood friends had finally come to an end, and the two of them would now walk the path together.

And so, the curtain closed on a battle between two heroes.













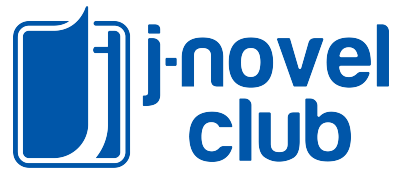












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I Could Never Be a Succubus! Volume 5

by Nora Kohigashi

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私はサキュバスじゃありません 5

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