











Maractara OVERVIEW



Sylphonia

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



Lisalinde

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



Cain

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



Melvy

A white mage and a member of the hero's party, she's the anointed Saint of the Russel-Bell Sect.



Luna

Liz's classmate with morals befitting a noble's daughter. A member of the disciplinary committee who reins it in whenever Liz causes chaos.



Remiphinia

Sylphonia's little sister. Twelve years old, and for some reason the target of Melvy's ire...

Table of Contents

	$\overline{}$				
1		\cap	1	Δ	r
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Color Illustrations

Prologue

Chapter 40: Then—The Black Knight and the Princess

Chapter 41: Now—Sightseeing around the Demon Villa

Chapter 42: Now—Crazy for Mira!

Chapter 43: Then—Mira on a Mission!

Chapter 44: Now—Let's Rock! The All Girls' Pajama Party!

Chapter 45: Now—What Was Supposed to Be a Peaceful Boys' Night

<u>Chapter 46: Now—How about a Thousand Gold a Pop?</u>

Chapter 47: Then—The CQC Boot Camp Training!

Chapter 48: Now—The Height of the World's Summit

Chapter 49: Now—Never Take Your Eyes off Me

Epilogue

Bonus Textless Illustrations

About J-Novel Club

Copyright

Prologue

The morning sunlight beat down relentlessly. Fluffy white clouds wandered lackadaisically across a deep blue sky that seemed to stretch to the ends of the earth. The crisp, clear air gently caressed my skin. As the morning sun streamed into the classroom, casting shadows onto the wooden floor, my classmates entered, rubbing their drowsy eyes as they exchanged greetings.

It was a typical, unremarkable morning. An everyday scene at the academy, one that unfolded as it had countless times before.

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"Urgh...urgh...urgh..."
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But amid this mundane setting, there was one female student who seemed to be acting quite strangely. She let out painful groans as she sat at her desk.

"Urrrrrgh... Oww...ow ow ow ow..."

And of course, that student was me.

In stark contrast to the refreshing morning scenery, I, Liz, was lying sprawled across my desk emitting pathetic groans that did wonders to bring down the surrounding mood.

"What's wrong, Liz? What's gotten you in such a slump?"

"Seriously, what's goin' on with you? You're actin' like a weirdo."

"Luna... Adeline..."

I was approached by my classmates Luna and Adeline. I was quite close with both of them. Luna had pale brown hair woven into braids, while Adeline sported black hair tied up on one side and spoke with a slight foreign accent.

Calling me a weirdo is a bit much. I'm aware of it, but...

"Well, err, my muscles are sore...everywhere. Every muscle in my body..."

"Sore muscles, is it?" Luna blankly cocked her head.

"I was participating in the hero party's morning training just earlier... And they

pushed my body past its limits..."

"Oh."

At present, I was taking part in the same training as the heroes. Well, more precisely, they were whipping my body into shape. I was training diligently with their support, striving to awaken and stabilize the powers that slept within me.

"But the training's so harsh it's driving me insane!"

Adeline grimaced as I suddenly screamed and slammed my fists on the table. "Shh!"

But it's really draining! It's ridiculously harsh!

Day after day after day, I was tasked with a horrendous training regimen beyond all common sense. Though the world's greatest warriors, as could be expected, pulled it off like it was nothing. They imposed a strict training upon themselves and endured it in silence. Their unwavering dedication was likely what maintained their status as the world's strongest.

But it was too much for me. Far too much.

As a result, I was now propped against my desk, unable to move an inch. Every muscle in my body ached from overexertion, and even the slightest movement sent waves of pain racing through me. Even lifting myself up was unbearable. The walk from the training ground to the classroom had been a hellish experience. And thus, I was left sprawled over my desk like a helpless caterpillar.

"Owww... Owww..."

"Is the hero party's training really that tough?" Luna asked with a wry smile as she observed my suffering.

"It's beyond that... It's nonsensical..."

"Nonsensical?"

"The plan I'm on right now is called the 'Anyone Can Do It! Hero-Style Boot Camp!"

Adeline frowned. "Sounds stupid."

"Yes, well, this 'Anyone Can Do It! Hero-Style Boot Camp!' is supposed to be a healthy exercise program that Cain and the others proposed for the average household. At a publisher's behest, they put it all together into a book and had it published for all the world to peruse."

"Hmm, I didn't know about that." Luna blinked, startled. She was a huge fan of the hero party, and she was clearly shocked that she had never heard of a book authored by her idols. She would have certainly bought it if she had known about it. Books on home workout routines were all the rage with the ladies these days, especially the ones that promised effective weight loss. Cain and his friends had tried to ride the trend.

But there was a reason that Luna didn't know about it. A very stupid reason...

"Despite the title, the regimen is ridiculously brutal. The hero party was completely oblivious to the physical abilities of an average person. And I'm not saying it's the sort of routine that only a grown man could manage—I'm saying it's a devilish regimen that not even a seasoned soldier could complete..."

"The hell?"

"I'm doing squats with a three-hundred-kilogram barbell for three hundred reps! What part of that is an easy workout routine?! They're completely out of touch with the common man!"

"Whoa..." Adeline winced.

I found it as absurd as everyone else. What part of this bone-crushing, excruciating training regimen was fit for "home fitness"?

"We thought it'd become a trendy easy-to-do weight loss program among women," Cain had insisted to me, which I thought was downright idiotic.

"And now, this 'Anyone Can Do It! Hero-Style Boot Camp!' will forever be remembered as the 'Impossible Boot Camp That *No One* Can Do!"

"They're all stupid."

"After it made the rounds, this fitness routine was appropriated to be used as my introductory course, and now I'm going through hell... Owww..."

"That sounds like a disaster."

"It was supposed to be a simple weight loss routine, and yet... Owww..."

My immobile body trembled as I muttered complaints under my breath. Wouldn't it be nice if they, y'know, put together something that gradually increased in difficulty to get me up to form? Right now, I feel like a newbie E-Rank adventurer who's suddenly been tossed into an S-Rank mission.

"Urgggh... That stings..."

A chipped groan escaped me as my muscles acted up again. I just wanted them to be a bit gentler with a delicate rookie like me.

"Come to think of it—and I'm changin' the topic here—but I hear the prince is coming to Academy Town."

"No, please...don't change the subject."

Adeline heartlessly steered the conversation elsewhere, as if my aching, shaking body meant nothing to her. She'd presumably come to terms with the fact that the heroes possessed such an absurd mindset that it was pointless to even try to understand. She couldn't have been any more transparent in her desire to promptly move on to another topic.

Please, comfort me more! Please, just let me vent a little more!

"You know, it's that first prince dude. Anzel. He's urgently gotta take a stay in Academy Town, apparently? Everyone's talkin' about it."

"Adeline. When you refer to His Highness, you must address him by his proper title. It's Prince Anzel."

Well... Fine. Whatever.

Prince Anzel was going to pay Academy Town a visit. It had become the talk of the town. Prince Anzel was not only handsome but intelligent too. He was a popular figure among the citizenry. With his knack for diplomatic work, he was already involved in significant state affairs at the age of twenty-two, and apparently, even the king expected great things from him. His decision to stay in Academy Town had caused quite a stir, breathing life into the streets.

However...

"Why is Prince Anzel coming here?" Luna asked with a curious tilt of her head.

The reason for the prince's visit hadn't been made public. Why Academy Town? Why now?

It was subject to much speculation, and various outlandish rumors were being tossed all around.

"Liz, do you know the reason for the prince's visit?"

"You're asking me?"

I craned my neck ever so slightly to look up at Luna.

"Well, you're very close to Princess Sylphonia, aren't you? I thought you might have heard something..."

Needless to say, Princess Sylphie and Prince Anzel were siblings. As I was a trainee in the hero's party, I was on close terms with Sylphie. Luna seemed to think I might have learned some extra information from that relationship, but...

"…"

I did, in fact, know why Prince Anzel was coming, even regardless of all of that. However, I couldn't speak about it. It was a secret known only to a select few.

"I don't know either," I said.

"Yeah, that sounds 'bout right."

"I suppose so."

With a somewhat stiff smile forced onto my face, I tucked the secret away in my heart.

A refreshing morning breeze sneaked in from the open window. Another typical day at the academy was set to begin.

The next day, First Prince Anzel and his entourage arrived.

A splendid carriage entered Academy Town. It had been crafted by top-notch artisans to reflect the dignity of the royal family. It approached slowly, barely swaying at all due to its fine suspension.

The carriage came to a halt in front of us. The coachman descended and

reverently opened the door. From within emerged a man adorned in dazzling attire. "It is an honor to meet you. I am Anzel, first prince of the Bahelgarn royal family. I appreciate this warm welcome you have extended to me." The man elegantly bowed with one hand to his chest.

It was indeed First Prince Anzel. He was tall and slender, with short and tidy red hair. At his hip was a silver ornamented rapier, but judging by his physique, he seemed more like a bureaucrat than a warrior.

There was no applause, only silence. Hardly anyone was present. To avoid chaos from the townsfolk, the time of the prince's visit had not been disclosed to the public, and the reception took place on the outskirts of town. Thus, it was only attended by the town's lord, the academy's headmaster, and the master of the adventurers' guild, among a handful of other influential figures.

Cain and his comrades were there too, and I was with them as their trainee. Although it felt like my body was being torn apart from the pain, I somehow managed to join the reception.

But even with all the big names gathered, not a single one of them would take the leading role.

"Verily, I thank thee for making thy lengthy journey," said a young girl who stood at the forefront. She was the first to respond to Prince Anzel's words. "I am Kuon, rightful head of the house of the demon lord. The pleasure is all mine."

The small girl, whose long black hair billowed behind her, was the former demon lord, Kuon... Although she grew incensed whenever anyone brought up the "former" part.

A few days ago, we had fought Kuon, and as a result, the heroes formed an alliance with the demon royal family. This alliance was naturally reported straight to the king, and important government officials were dispatched to conduct negotiations with the demon lord. The one leading these negotiations was none other than First Prince Anzel.

The alliance hadn't been made public yet. It was only natural that Luna and Adeline didn't know why the prince was coming.

"From the bottom of my heart, I pray for a fruitful partnership," said Anzel.

"Fwah ha ha hah!" Kuon burst out. "Thou art far too stiff. Let us be amiable; relax thyself."

A firm handshake was exchanged between them, marking a peculiar alliance between humans and demons. Within their interlocking hands, we all witnessed a turning point in history.

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"Very well, then... First, may I ask you a question?"

"Verily."
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With a wry smile, Anzel asked, "Lady Kuon, why are you wearing a maid outfit?"

"Grrr! Shut up! Shut up, I say! I do it not of my own volition! That man there...! 'Tis all that man's doing!" Kuon snapped.

Following her defeat, Kuon had nominally become Cain's subordinate. As her superior, Cain ordered her to work while wearing a maid uniform. Her angry reaction seemed to please him immensely. He really was a wicked man.

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"Lady Kuon..."

"Hm?"
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It happened as Kuon was raging away. Following Anzel, another girl emerged from the carriage.

"It is a pleasure, Lady Kuon. I am the third princess of Bahelgarn, Remiphinia. Please treat my brother well." She pinched the hem of her skirt in an elegant curtsy.

It was the third princess, Remiphinia. Her lustrous, long red hair flowed in the wind like silk. She was clad in a white, dignified dress, her nobility apparent even in how she stood. Although her hair was red like her older sister Sylphie's, it was a slightly lighter color, almost pink.



At just twelve years of age, she was short and petite, and presumably the youngest person present at the gathering.

"Hmm? Doth a babe so small as thee partake in the negotiations? Be it known, our discussions shall not be mere child's play," Kuon said with some discontent.

But Remiphinia answered her, "Not at all, Lady Kuon. I've mainly come to transfer to the academy. My brother Anzel will be the one speaking with you."

"Hmm. Well, I surmised as much."

"But I would love it if I could sit in on the discussions as a learning experience. I am not the most learned, and I would greatly appreciate it if you could teach me about demon royal culture and tradition."

Kuon harrumphed at her explanation. "I see, so thou art not a negotiator, but a guest. Provided thou dost not hinder, thou mayest do as thou pleases. I shall permit it."

"Thank you, Lady Kuon."

"Now that that's settled. Heh heh! Ye shall experience firsthand a demon lord's grand reception!"

Kuon arrogantly leaned back, a mean-spirited smile on her face as she expressed her gratitude. Remiphinia smiled warmly.

Not that it really mattered—but the two of them were around the same height. Despite being a demon lord who had apparently lived for nearly four hundred years, Kuon was tiny. From an outsider's perspective, it looked like two girls of the same age were standing side by side, one girl haughtily acting out and the other taking on the role of the mature adult in the situation.

"Why does Kuon lack so severely in dignity if she's supposed to be the demon lord?"

"Shh, she'll hear you."

Rachel blurted out something incredibly rude... Although the same thought had crossed my mind.

One after another, new faces emerged from the carriage to greet Kuon. They all seemed to be officials affiliated with Bahelgarn's royal family—the ones responsible for solidifying the alliance.

A conspicuously large figure stepped out from among them, extending a hand to Kuon. "I am Brian," he said, "captain of the royal guard. I am responsible for the protection of Prince Anzel and Princess Remiphinia. I am pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Hmm."

Brian, captain of the Royal Guard, towered over everyone else at around two meters tall. He had a stern look to his countenance and an imposing presence, and the scars carved into his face told tales of his valor on the battlefield. Brian was one of the country's most renowned warriors, having achieved numerous feats since his early days as a soldier. His achievements had earned him the prestigious position of captain of the Royal Guard.

"So he's the rumored Sir Brian..." muttered Mitter.

"You mean the one who could have joined our team?" Rachel whispered back.

There was a certain rumor surrounding Brian. Apparently, he was someone who might once have joined the hero's party. Back when Sylphie joined, Brian was supposed to come with her. However, he'd opted to remain in the country to perform his important duty of protecting the royal family. Had the circumstances been different, he might have joined the party and traveled with them, gaining great glory along the way. At least, that was what the public speculated.

I swallowed my breath as I remembered the rumors. This meant that Sir Brian was just as strong as the heroes. Having trained alongside them, I understood their capabilities to a painful degree. I'd quite literally had it hammered into me. I shuddered a bit at the thought of a man who could rival the heroes.

"Fine... The pleasure is all mine." Kuon reciprocated the handshake.

Was Brian an unsociable man? The two formidable individuals stiffly shook hands with grim looks on their faces.

Once the greetings had all been exchanged, Kuon proclaimed, "Now then, let us forgo the formalities for today. First, I'll have you indulge in a reception worthy of a demon lord. Follow me!"

She took the lead and walked off.

Today, the members of the Bahelgarn royal family and the demon royal family were set to have a banquet to further friendly relations between them. According to the schedule, they were to use a teleportation circle to head for the town that stretched around the demon lord's villa, where they'd eat and rejoice on the demon lord's tab. An official spatial circle had been installed at the point where Kuon had forcefully twisted space to connect the two locations. This allowed for free movement between Academy Town and the villa.

The circle was located just outside Academy Town, where an impromptu hut was erected with a communication device to send messages straight to the town's higher-ups. While the general public likely wouldn't make use of the facility, it would probably see frequent use by those who needed to pass between the town and the villa. Thus, a bridge between humanland and demonland was steadily being established.

"Come on! Dawdle not! Follow behind me." Kuon led us, chest puffed out, a maid uniform swaying with each step.

The large group began to move at a leisurely pace.

"Sis!" That was when Remiphinia jogged over to us. With great momentum, she threw herself onto her sister Sylphie and locked her in an embrace. "Sis! It's been too long! I'm so happy I can finally see you!"

"Ha ha, good to see you, Remphie. How have you been?"

"I'm doing great! And I'm glad to see you're doing well for yourself!"

Remiphinia shouted in delight, and Sylphie stroked her head with a gentle touch. It was surely a long-awaited reunion. The moment she'd been given a bit of free time, Remiphinia immediately rushed to her sister. The young girl smiled from ear to ear. It was quite a heartwarming sight to behold. Sylphie called her Remphie, which was likely her nickname—similar to how Sylphie was short for Sylphonia.

"Haven't you grown taller since I last saw you, Remphie?"

"Have I? I can't really tell myself."

There was a significant height difference between twelve-year-old Remiphinia and nineteen-year-old Sylphie. One could feel a palpable sisterly love between them as Remiphinia wrapped her hands around her sister's waist, and Sylphie warmly accepted her with a gentle glint in her eyes.

"Now, now, don't focus solely on me. You need to greet everyone properly. Let me introduce you to my comrades."

"Oh! Y-Yes! Of course, sis!" Remiphinia replied, straightening her posture. I found it quite admirable for her to be able to put her feelings on hold.

"First, the woman next to me is our party's newest trainee, Lisalinde."

"It is an honor to meet you, Princess Remiphinia. I am Lisalinde, daughter of Marquis Lafort. I hope we get along," I said with a bow of my head. It was a bit impolite for me to do my introduction while walking, but there wasn't much I could do given the circumstances. We could properly greet one another later.

"Yes! It's been too long, Lady Lisalinde!"

"Huh...?"

Huh?

Remiphinia's response was strange.

It's been too long? No, I'm pretty sure I'm meeting her for the first time... Have we met one another somewhere before? No, I've never been to the palace, and it would be irreverent of me to forget a meeting with the princess of our nation...

As I thought it over, Sylphie tugged on Remiphinia's cheeks.

"It's a pleasure. To. Meet you. Right? Right, Remphie? I'm sure I put it in the letter."

"S-Sorry, sorry, sis!" Tears welled up in the girl's eyes as she apologized profusely and took it from the top. "Right, it's a pleasure to meet you!"

What letter? What is she talking about...? What sort of circumstances could

make you mistake someone you're meeting for the first time with someone you're not?

I tried posing the question to Sylphie with a questioning look, but she averted her eyes.

What's going on here?

I could feel Sylphie silently conveying that she desperately wanted to talk about something else, so I changed the topic a bit forcefully. "U-Umm... Princess Remiphinia, you said you came here to transfer to the academy, right? Will you be entering the junior high division?"

"Y-Yes!" Remiphinia went along with it. "I'll be transferring to the junior high division next week! I'm a little early, but since Anzel was visiting Academy Town anyway, I decided to come along with him!"

Beyond the high school division that I attended, Forst National Academy also included an elementary school, a junior high, a university, and even a kindergarten—numerous academic institutions to cater to various age groups. It seemed that Remiphinia would indeed be entering the junior high division.

"And so, I am just here to accompany my brother. While it is important for me to interact with the demon lord's subjects as an ambassador of the royal family, my brother will handle all of the important negotiations. Father told me to focus on my studies..."

"You have it tough, Princess..."

She was still only twelve, but already carried so many responsibilities. I had to tip my hat to the dedication of the royal family.

"I'm not too knowledgeable about the junior high division. If you've got any questions, feel free to ask Liz. She's lived here longer than all of us."

"I'll be in your care, Lisalinde!"

"H-Hey, I've only lived here for a year! My friends Satina and Luna were born and raised here, so I'll introduce you to them later."

Compared to the girls who'd lived here for more than seventeen years, there was far too much I didn't know. Asking for their guidance would probably be

our best bet.

"You see the guild master of the adventurers' guild up ahead? Satina is his daughter."

"The guild master's daughter? That's reassuring! Please introduce me to her!" Remiphinia said with an affable smile.

She gave off a truly, yes, a very innocent vibe. Though we'd only just met, being around her put my heart at ease.

I must cherish this.

"Next up, we have Saint Melvy. Starting with her, we've got members of the party that weren't there when I joined, so they should all be new to you."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Princess Remiphinia. I'm Melvy and I serve as the saint of the Russel-Bell Church."

"Yes! It's an honor to meet you!"

Just like that, the members of the party introduced themselves one after the next. Melvy, Mitter, and Lalo. They were all world-famous individuals, and Remiphinia seemed familiar with them. And so, their introductions went smoothly even if they didn't say much.

However, the most important member of the hero's party had yet to greet her.

"Huh? Where's Cain?"

"I don't see him anywhere nearby... W-Wait, what's he doing all the way out there?"

While Kuon was walking at the lead, Cain was at the very back. In fact, he seemed to be lagging quite far behind. He was walking next to Wolfe and... What? Are they arguing about something?

It looked like Cain was grabbing Wolfe's arm and forcefully pulling him along.

"What are you doing, Cain? Wolfe?"

We approached them.

"Ah! You came at just the right time! Something's wrong with Wolfe! Scold

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him for me!"
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"Wrong?"

Cain frowned. Wolfe was the newest addition to the hero's party, having only recently arrived in Academy Town. He was Cain's childhood friend, and Cain had entrusted the protection of Academy Town to him while the other members of the party were away.

"Out of nowhere, this guy started griping, 'My stomach's not feeling good,' and 'I suddenly remembered something important I have to do,' and he tried to bolt! This is work, for crying out loud! What's with those stupid excuses?!" Cain exclaimed.

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"Bolt?"
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"What's wrong, Wolfe?"

"Well, umm..." Wolfe stumbled over his words.

There was something clearly amiss. Sweat was pouring from his face and though he didn't seem sick... What was it? It was like he couldn't bear to stay a second longer. A tangible awkwardness was exuding from his entire being. He hadn't made eye contact for a long while; he was avoiding it, stubbornly refusing to turn his face in our direction. Something was clearly odd.

"Umm, err... Did something happen?"

"No... Don't mind me."

That didn't seem feasible. Sure, we all knew how to play dumb, but none of us had mastered the craft well enough to ignore someone behaving so blatantly strangely.

"What is it? Seriously! You were acting normal a few minutes ago! Quit causing trouble!"

"No, u-umm... Cain, cut me some slack..."

Why he needed that slack was still completely beyond our understanding.

"What's going on with Wolfe?"

"I wonder ...?"

We hadn't the slightest clue. He began stuttering without offering the slightest explanation, and all we could do was exchange puzzled looks.

The answer came from where we least expected it.

"Sir Darkbringer?" came a faint whisper.

"Huh?"

I turned to the voice. It had come from Princess Remiphinia.

"You're... Sir Darkbringer... Aren't you...?"

Wolfe flinched, his entire body trembling even more violently now. His sweat burst forth with even greater intensity.

""

Remiphinia's eyes were wide as plates as she stared at him. She seemed dumbfounded, unable to hide her shock.

"Huh? Wh-What? Do you two...know each other?"

Sylphie looked at them with bewilderment but got no response. Remiphinia seemed frozen in surprise, while Wolfe seemed unwilling to offer any explanation through his tightly pursed lips.

Something was off... Darkbringer was the name Wolfe had used while he was active in the demon lord's army, and only a small handful of humans knew the name. How exactly were these two connected?

"Sir Darkbringer!" And suddenly, Remiphinia sprang into action. She let out a squeal as she raced up to him and wrapped her hands around his waist. "All this time...! I've been searching for you forever! I wanted to see you for so, so, so long!"

"N-No... You have the wrong guy..."

"I haven't forgotten my debt to you, not for a single day!"

A fiery embrace was panning out right before our eyes. We were all petrified. The princess of a nation was embracing a man. That alone was scandalous enough. What's more, she was expressing such intense emotion. Her enthusiasm made it clear that this wasn't just a casual reunion between

acquaintances. Remiphinia was hugging him so tightly it was like she never wanted to be parted again, her eyes so misty it was like tears would start falling at any second.

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"…"
"…"
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Something outrageous was happening. That was what our instincts were telling us.

"N-No? I don't know anyone named Darkbringer, especially not one affiliated with the demon lord's army...?"

Wolfe tried making a feeble excuse, but no one had even mentioned the *demon lord's army* yet.

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"Wh-What...?!"

"Princess?!"
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Remiphinia's loud voice drew unneeded attention from those walking ahead, and they, too, began noticing the strange situation unfolding. The more influential they were, the more shaken they seemed.

I couldn't blame them. The princess of their nation was clinging to a man from who-knows-where. Chaos spread through the group, and soon every single set of eyes had locked onto the two of them.

"Princess?! What is the meaning of this?! Who is that man?!" Brian, captain of the Royal Guard, yelled as he closed in.

Meanwhile, Wolfe could barely muster a quivering, ambiguous "No, umm, y-you have it all wrong..."

The situation was so out of hand that it wasn't even clear what was wrong.

"Everyone! Please, allow me to introduce him!" Remiphinia released Wolfe and loudly proclaimed, "This man is Sir Darkbringer! The man I admire!"

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"Huh...?"

"A-Admire...?"
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Her words were met with gasps. For a moment, we didn't understand what

she was saying. Remiphinia's face flushed red. She didn't seem to be joking. She spoke of passionate feelings from the depths of her soul.

And, in an even louder voice, she yelled, "He is the man of my destiny!"

"Huuuuuuh?!"

"Whaaaaaaaaah?!"

Everyone cried out at once. This was a scoop. An extra large scoop with sprinkles.

The revelation of the nation's princess's secret love left everyone unable to do anything but raise their voices in shock. And for some reason, Wolfe's voice was mixed in among the chorus of confusion. No, in fact he was more surprised than anyone.

It was only the first day of friendly relations with the demon royal family, yet something unexpected had already unfolded.

Chapter 40: Then—The Black Knight and the Princess

It happened roughly three years prior. As the battle with the demons escalated, Princess Remiphinia found herself in the midst of a crisis. Her kingdom, Bahelgarn, was one where the demon invasions were at their fiercest, the borders embroiled in a constant state of brutal warfare.

Her elder sister, Princess Sylphonia, possessed an unparalleled knack for combat, and by taking direct command of multiple armies, she managed to keep the war at a stalemate. However, there were many demon races that simply outpaced humanity with their immense physical capabilities, and Bahelgarn was constantly struggling to keep up.

In such dire circumstances, the human nations were eventually forced to come together and establish a system of mutual support. The lands that were relatively unscathed lent aid to the ones suffering the most.

Facing a common enemy in the demons, humans joined hands and pooled their strength to confront their formidable foe.

But there was a traitor.

Gogorr, a militaristic nation that neighbored Bahelgarn, suddenly launched an invasion on Bahelgarn territory. The two nations had a long history of hostility with tensions that had persisted for generations. However, once the war with the demons broke out, these old wounds became the least of their worries; they set aside their differences and signed a nonaggression treaty for mutual self-preservation.

But Gogorr didn't keep its end of the bargain.

While Bahelgarn was occupied with fighting the demon army, Gogorr caught them unaware. Indeed, at a time when all humans needed to unite their strength, Gogorr prioritized its own self-interests and attacked Bahelgarn.

During the attack, Princess Remiphinia was unfortunately caught up in the

conflict. Bahelgarn was unable to react to the surprise attack, and she quickly found herself captured by the nation of Gogorr.

The young princess, still only nine years old, could do nothing but tremble in the face of this betrayal.

Gogorr demanded an exorbitant ransom for Remiphinia's release, leaving Bahelgarn with limited options. They were caught up in a fierce war with the demons and lacked the surplus to deal with the backstabbing of fellow humans.

But amid this betrayal, a righteous individual did raise his voice in anger. And it wasn't who anyone had expected.

The outcry came from none other than a battalion commander of the demon army—someone who was supposed to be an enemy seethed with fury against the cowardly assault from Gogorr.

And so, the demon battalion commander took actions that none of the humans could have anticipated. He stormed single-handedly into the nation of Gogorr, decimating their armies. Rampaging like the devil incarnate, he laid thorough waste to army facilities.

No one could put a stop to this mysterious figure. The lone knight clad in black armor struck down thousands of formidable soldiers as though it was nothing. In just one night, Gogorr's most crucial military base lay in ruin, damaged beyond recovery. And from the depths of this base, the mysterious figure managed to rescue a lone girl—Princess Remiphinia.

Then came the long trek. To deliver an unfortunate girl kidnapped by wicked men back to her home, the mysterious figure set course for the capital of Bahelgarn. It was a leisurely journey, sometimes on carriage and other times on foot—the peculiar journey of a dark knight and a princess.

"Why... Why did you save me, Darkbringer?" the princess asked one dark night along the way. They were resting at an inn.

Remiphinia had adopted the false name Remilia ever since she was rescued. Initially, she couldn't help but be put off by the man who had rescued her, so she dared not introduce herself with the same name as a notable princess. She lied, claiming to be a mere noble who lived in Bahelgarn's capital, and traveled

with Darkbringer under that false alias.

"Because I hate people," Darkbringer replied, short and simple.

"You saved me, even though you hate people?" she asked again, puzzled, unable to comprehend his response.

"I despise the ugliness within humans more than anything. I couldn't accept what was going on around me, so I joined the demon army despite being human myself. I may be an enemy of humanity at the moment, but the deeds of Gogorr were the epitome of the kind of ugliness that I despise. I crushed them simply because I hated them the most. Saving you, Remilia, was merely a byproduct of that hatred."

He had a stiff way of speaking. In the time she traveled with him, Remiphinia came to recognize him as a rigid military man.

"And why do you hate humans?" Remiphinia asked as she rested on the bed.

Her question was only natural. Throughout their journey together, she'd heard numerous times that Darkbringer had turned coat to the side of the demon army despite being a member of the human race. Remiphinia wanted to know more about this kind yet mysterious man.

"It's...not much of a story. There was a village I came across during my travels that extended its hospitality to me. But before I knew it, the village had been destroyed by human hands. What's more, the plunder, the death and destruction, was all pinned on the demons. Humans attacked other humans and used the demons to cover up their sins."

"That's..."

The flickering lamplight danced around the dark room. Remiphinia tried to say something but closed her mouth as she realized she couldn't find the words.

"I realized then..."—there was a heady pause—"...that humans are ugly."

Darkbringer spoke calmly. He did not raise his voice. He simply recounted the facts of the matter. Remiphinia felt a tightness in her chest as she watched him in profile, bathed in the red glow of the lamp.

"I grew weary of it and put the lands of humans behind me. That's all there is

to it."

"Darkbringer..."

"That's the end of the story. It's late. Let's sleep."

He stood from his chair and approached the lamp to snuff out the flames. And that was when Remiphinia suddenly sat up.

"I will never become that sort of person!" she shouted. She knew that she couldn't let that be the end—desperately, she cried out as though to anchor his heart before it could drift further. "I will never become like them! Just you watch! I'll be someone kind, and warm, who cherishes others...!"

She pleaded with all the strength her small body could muster. In a room lit only by a single feeble light, the girl's gaze burned bright as she stared at the mysterious man.

"I want you to believe me..."

The two of them were locked like that for several seconds. Remiphinia held her gaze. She poured her earnest emotion into her eyes in the hopes that her savior would know that her feelings were sincere. Eventually, it was Darkbringer who looked away first.

"Even so, nothing will change," he said. "Get some rest, Remilia."

With that, he extinguished the light.

At the end of their travels, the two of them finally reached the capital. There was no longer any danger to be found. Remiphinia breathed a heavy sigh of relief, knowing she was back in her own city. Back when she had been captured by the enemy, she had resigned herself to death. But what about now? She had returned to her homeland without a single scratch, and she owed it all to the savior standing next to her.

Remiphinia lifted her face to take in his tall figure. "Darkbringer! Please, come to my home! I want to thank you!"

"No, I..."

"You must! You saved my life! I cannot let you leave empty-handed!"

Remiphinia insisted as she grabbed his arm, attempting to drag him into the city.

Will he be surprised to learn I'm actually a princess? she wondered with a smile. But then...

"Hm."

An arrow whizzed through the air with sharp precision, flying straight at Darkbringer. The man caught it mid-flight with no difficulty whatsoever. But the arrow had been aimed at his head. It was shot with the intent to kill.

"Huh? What...?!" Remiphinia was flustered, unable to process what had just happened. Yet Darkbringer, the target, remained calm. He surveyed his surroundings with poise as if he understood everything.

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"Hyah!"

"Hah!"

"H-Huh...?!"
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In sync with the arrow, several armed individuals burst from the shadows. They took sharp swings with swords, again striking to kill Darkbringer.

These were no bandits. They were well-trained soldiers, all wearing respectable armor. Darkbringer met them with ease, using his fists to knock each one out with a single blow.

"Wh-What's going on?!" Remiphinia panicked, still struggling to grasp the situation as she hid behind Darkbringer's back. And looking around, she noticed something.

"Huh?"

By the time she realized it, they were surrounded. Soldiers had continued to pour from the shadows, encircling them in all directions to prevent their escape. Any civilians had been swiftly evacuated from the area, and in no time at all, the streets were populated only by her, Darkbringer, and the soldiers that opposed them.

"Hear me, brigand!" a figure who seemed to be their captain boomed.

"Resistance is futile! We have you completely surrounded! Release the hostage

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and surrender!"
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"B-Brigand?!"
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Remiphinia finally realized what was going on. She was supposed to be a hostage, held captive by the nation of Gogorr. Yet, she had suddenly appeared at the capital accompanied by a large, imposing man of unknown origin. They were mistaking Darkbringer as the culprit who kidnapped her.

The kingdom's soldiers were trying to take Darkbringer down to rescue her.

"I don't understand why you brought a prisoner of war directly to the capital, but I'm sure you're up to no good! We're prepared to mobilize thousands of troops! You've underestimated our surveillance net!"

"P-Please, wait! This is a misunderstanding! This man is not an enemy! He's my ally!" Remiphinia circled around in front of Darkbringer, her arms spread wide to protect him.

At the very least, she knew the soldiers wouldn't be able to shoot their arrows if she did that.

"Young girl! Move aside! Get away from that man!"

"You have it all wrong! Please listen to me! He's an ally!"

"Dammit! Brainwashing magic? This is trouble!"

The captain purposely refrained from mentioning Remiphinia's name. In the case that the suspicious man didn't understand the true value of his hostage, calling the princess's name would only worsen the situation.

And so, up to the very end, Darkbringer never did learn the name of the girl who'd accompanied him along the way.

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"It's all right, Remilia."
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"Darkbringer...?" Remiphinia turned to look at his face, at his gentle smile.

"Seeing someone desperately trying to protect someone else is one thing I don't hate..."

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"Huh?"
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[&]quot;Farewell."

With that one word, he gave the girl a push on the back.

"Eep?!"

Remiphinia stumbled forward. As a gap formed between her and Darkbringer, the captain immediately caught her and shielded her.

"Fire!"

And in that instant, arrows were loosed from every which direction. So many arrows it would be impossible to avoid them all.

"Hmph."

But Darkbringer remained unfazed. Countless arrows landed direct hits on his body, yet an ordinary bow and arrow were incapable of harming him in any way. The iron arrowheads deflected off of his body, reinforced by mana, and the arrows fell to the ground. He made not the slightest attempt to dodge, yet he remained completely unharmed.

"Wh-What?! Arrows don't work?!"

"Who is that man...?!"

Unrest spread among the soldiers.

"Stop it! Please, stop! He's not...! He's not like that!"

"H-Hey! Please, settle down!"

Despite Remiphinia shouting at the top of her lungs to put a stop to this, the situation remained unchanged. The captain held her firmly, refusing to let go.

And Darkbringer silently turned his back to her. He did not argue, nor did he grow angry. Without a word, he walked, step by step, down the same path he'd come. He left with the same gait as a weary office worker returning home after a long day.

"Wh-What's with this guy ...?"

His lack of any will to fight only made the soldiers even more unsettled.

However, the road he was going down was already closed off. The soldiers had formed a barrier—a human wall—when they'd surrounded him. As the mystery man slowly walked towards them, the soldiers attacked.

"Take this!"

Their attacks were meaningless.

The mysterious man met the charge, skillfully knocking each soldier out with a single blow. He didn't take lives, though, and would knock down only the foes that flew at him.

"Bwah?! Wh-What is this?! Who is he?!"

The arrows didn't work. Anyone who approached was effortlessly dealt with. There was only a single enemy, yet they couldn't stop him from slowly walking away.

"Don't go! Please, don't go, Darkbringer!" Remiphinia screamed with tears in her eyes.

Even so, he didn't stop walking.

"I want to talk! More! About all sorts of things! I don't want to say goodbye like this! Don't go! Darkbringer!"

He continued walking without anyone being able to stop him.

Remiphinia could only watch as his back shrank in the distance.

And so, without turning back even once, he walked on, marking the end of their journey.

Chapter 41: Now—Sightseeing around the Demon Villa

"And that's what happened!" Remiphinia exclaimed, her voice bouncing with excitement.

She sported a smile of genuine happiness as she clung tightly to Wolfe's arm.

We were now in the town that surrounded the demon lord's villa.

Demonland's characteristic miasma covered the sky, painting it in a murky black. The grand castle towered, tall and imposing, contrasting the vibrant lifestyles led by all the demons around it.

Today marked the first day of the official exchange between Bahelgarn and the demon royal family. The demon lord's vassals would show us around the town in an effort to foster friendly relations. This was an event that held significant implications for the future of both races, an opportunity for humans and demons to develop a mutual understanding of one another's cultures.

However...

"And that's why, from the bottom of my heart, I admire Sir Wolfe, the man who saved my life!"

"Princess! Princess Remiphinia! Please get away from that man!"

Trouble had reared its head from a completely different direction.

Princess Remiphinia described the events that had befallen her three years ago—in vivid detail. She revealed the surprising connection she shared with Wolfe, which was massive gossip fodder to say the least. After all, it had to do with the love of a princess of a massive nation.

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"H-How could this be...?"
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Everyone was dumbfounded.

[&]quot;Isn't this...pretty bad...?"

The princess was deeply in love with a former battalion commander of the demon army. Witnessing her clinging to a man's arm—insistent she would never let go—the envoys of Bahelgarn's royal family began to sweat profusely.

"Princess Remiphinia! This is unacceptable! Your father, the king, would never allow it...!"

"And who are you to decide that, Brian?! I'm never going to leave Sir Wolfe again!"

"Princess!"

Despite the stern warning from Brian, captain of the Royal Guard, Remiphinia remained steadfast, unmoving. The princess was embracing a man from who knows where. From both a security and a dignity standpoint, this had to be a headache for the captain of the guard.

But the greatest confusion didn't come from anyone of the royal house.

"How did it come to this?"

Staring into space, his eyes open wide, was none other than Wolfe himself.

"R-Remiphinia, please let go of me..."

"Never! I'm worried you'll disappear the moment I take my eyes off of you!"

"No, umm... Well..."

His body moved stiffly, awkwardly as Remiphinia clung to him. There was a large height difference between them. Wolfe was nineteen, while Remiphinia was twelve. And Wolfe was already far burlier than the average human. By sight, the gap between them went far beyond that between an adult and a child. If he wanted to shake her off by force, he could have easily done so, but he probably had his qualms about doing that to a small child. There was little Wolfe could do as he remained locked in her embrace.

Soon, First Prince Anzel was storming up to them with rage coloring his face. "You little...! Is everything Remphie just said true?!"

"Err, it's true for the most part, but... Love and whatnot, I don't really understand that part..." Wolfe said, holding his head.

"Could it be that you didn't pick up on Princess Remiphinia's affection?"

"I mean, I simply took charge of a child that had been captured by bad people... Huh?"

He was dense. That was more than enough of a situation for love to bloom, wasn't it?

"Bwah ha ha hah! What a development, eh, Wolfe?"

"Gah hya hya hyah! Thou lookest like a criminal!"

Cain and Kuon clutched their stomachs in laughter.

"Sh-Shut up! Stay out of it...!"

Those who had nothing to do with it really had it nice and easy. They didn't have to worry about all the stomach ulcers the royal entourage were coming down with, and could instead laugh at their friend's troubles.

"I never knew you were into that sorta stuff, Wolfe!"

"Wr-Wrong! I never had any indecent intent...!"

"My vassal Cerberus told me all about it. The law looketh not at thee who admires older women, but coveting little girls is a sin!"

"Oh right, that guy!"

The two were teasing him to high heaven. These bits of love gossip were the finest entertainment. It seemed that this was a bit of shared culture between humans and demons, and the more irritated he became, the smugger the grins on their faces grew. Cain and Kuon both had no reservations about toying with Wolfe.

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"Pedo!"
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"Pedo!"

"Pedo...!"

"I'm saying you have it all wrong!"

Having found a common form of enjoyment, the humans and demons truly were deepening their bonds. Their relationship was blossoming.

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"Remphie."
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"Sylphie..."

It was at that moment that Sylphie slowly approached Remiphinia. She stooped down slightly, matching her eye level with her little sister's.

"Good for you!" she said.

"Thank you, Sylphie!"

Sylphie was an advocate for free love, and that was the last thing Wolfe needed right now. He cried out, on the verge of tears, "You're her sister! Stop this!"

"Make Remphie cry, and you won't hear the end of it, Wolfe."

"Give me a break! I'm the one who's about to cry! I do not have any such relationship with this child! Please don't move the conversation along without me!"

It had been only a few dozen minutes since their reunion, but Wolfe was already losing his means of escape.

"I won't accept it...!" a loud voice boomed from the side.

"Whoa?!"

It was First Prince Anzel.

"Remphie! You mustn't fawn over this man of unknown origin! We've all been born to the long-standing and traditional royal family! Any lovers or companions must come from appropriate dignity and status...!"

"That's right! You tell her!"

The older brother, Anzel, seemed to be vehemently opposed. He was objecting to his little sister's love so strongly he'd completely lost his dignified tone from before. And for some reason, Wolfe was the very first person to endorse his opinion.

Remiphinia turned sullen. "Anzel, I hate you when you get like this."

"Gaaaaaaaaah...!"

"Prince Anzel!"

This merciless, inhumane blow from his own younger sister saw the prince now collapsed on the floor, coughing up blood. He began to twitch and convulse, and without these meager signs, everyone would have taken him for dead. My first impression of him had been as a graceful, mature person, yet for him to turn out like this...

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"He's a funny guy."
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"Sir Cain, isn't that a bit rude to say...?"

The hero's cackling only made me even more concerned. Prince Anzel was quite a pitiful human being.

"Remiphinia, please give it some serious thought. Your fondness for me is just a flight of fancy," Wolfe protested. "Why don't we have a good talk about this after you've calmed down?"

"That's not true at all! I truly love you!"

"Then...for starters, could you please let go of my arm? It's difficult to walk like this."

"Never!"

Prince Anzel reacted the moment she said the word "love." With bloodshot eyes, he glared up at Wolfe.

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"Curse you..."
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"I haven't even done anything!"

Why do I have to be glared at like this?! he seemed to be thinking. He couldn't keep himself from complaining about the unfairness of it all.

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"Pedo!"

"Pedo!"
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"Quit it...!"

At the moment, Wolfe hadn't the power to convince everyone to accept his argument. He could only stick to his futile attempts to keep the situation in control as the relentless teasing continued, and as Anzel glared at him with

murder in his eyes.

"But 'tis time to cease this tomfoolery. 'Tis time we went on our way!"

"This isn't my fault!"

Former Demon Lord Kuon urged on the crowd, and so the retainers of the royal family reluctantly followed her lead. By the looks on their faces, they clearly thought a few more choice words were in order; but the leader of the faction they were allying with was pressing them on, so they had to follow. They couldn't be caught up in their own personal matters forever.

"Sir Wolfe, let's enjoy this tour together!"

"Why did it come to this ...?"

What was supposed to be a cordial cultural exchange had somehow turned into a date.

With the flutter of a maid uniform as their guide, the party of dignitaries took a stroll around the demon town. The dusky, sunless townscape was lined with countless dim lanterns that let off a faint red glow. Apparently, the light output was purposefully constrained so as not to interfere with the natural beauty of the overhanging darkness.

The castle town—or rather villa town—was quite rich in culture. It had a stable infrastructure and was overall quite clean. The roads were wide and lined with tall buildings that had been laid out in a systematic fashion, and just one look at it was enough to know that it was easy to live in by design.

One thing that set it apart from the towns of humanland was the numerous races that we could see walking around us. There were orcs and lizardmen, along with other lesser-known species that sported a great number of tentacles. Demons of all shapes and sizes prowled the streets.

"This town is very well maintained. It would be near impossible for us to achieve this level of infrastructure, even in our royal capital."

"Indeed, we demons do possess rather advanced magical tech. 'Tis a tool that does wonders in our daily affairs. Though we are ever lacking in manpower, we excel at fashioning compact, high-quality creations."

"I see, that's enlightening."

Prince Anzel was the one discussing policies with Kuon. He was the king's trusted envoy, and he was fulfilling his duties of observing demonland with his own eyes—all while furthering relations with Kuon.

As a member of the human side, I had a feeling we'd find peace if I put my trust in him.

However... Anzel's face was still a little pale. He was still affected by what Princess Remiphinia had said to him.

"Hee hee, hold your surprise for what's to come. This hath served as the demon lord's land of rest and recuperation for countless generations. It boasteth a plethora of leisurely pursuits, making it the finest tourist destination!"

Though her smile was malicious, Kuon's bragging wasn't mean-spirited in the slightest.

"Come! Follow me! 'Tis our first destination of the day! The zoo!"

"Whoa!"

A large gate with a colorful sign. We'd arrived at our first sightseeing location—a place where we'd apparently be able to observe a variety of animals.

"Wow!"

"This is incredible!"

The humans all let out gasps of amazement. We could catch glimpses of various animals just beyond the front gate. A vast park was sectioned off with fences, each zone showcasing rare animals like gorillas, zebras, and giraffes.

And that was only the area in *front* of the gate. We hadn't even entered the *zoo* yet. Perhaps there were even rarer beasts contained somewhere within. The thought was enough to get my heart racing.

"I have heard tales that such zoos exist not in the realm of humans."

"Yes...you're right. The only places where you can see rare animals are in traveling circuses. And small exhibitions, perhaps... Whatever the case, we have

no places on such a large scale or with such variety," Anzel answered.

When it came to pandas and giraffes, I only knew of their existence from books. This would be my first time actually seeing them. And naturally so. How would I ever get an opportunity to see rare animals that lived only in small regions within distant countries?

"Hah hah! I see, I see! This zoo is a novelty in your eyes! Indeed, a zoo of this grandeur is a rarity even within the confines of demonland! But I see, I see! I've amazed you! Hah hah!"

Kuon stood quite blatantly triumphant.

But the zoo was, in fact, truly incredible. I could understand why she was so proud of it. We couldn't underestimate the cultural and technological heights achieved by demonkind. I could tell that this sightseeing tour would be a very meaningful one indeed.

"The zoo is vast. Let us take in as much of its splendor as we may. Waste not thy time at the entrance, and follow my lead!" Buoyantly, Kuon walked ahead and tried to strut straight through the gates.

But...just at that moment.

"Guh-bwaaah?!"

The gates swung forcefully shut, causing her to run straight into them. The low metal doors smacked into her unguarded abdomen, and with a peculiar scream, she fell to the ground, writhing in pain.

Huh? What?

We stared blankly, not quite knowing what had happened.

Right before us was Kuon—former demon lord—quivering in pain where she lay.

"Umm, dear guest, what do you think you're doing...?"

Immediately, a zoo employee with a bearlike appearance raced over.

"Please buy a ticket over there first. You can't get in if you don't pay."

"Oh, come on! I'm the demon lord! My face alone should grant passage!"

Kuon yelled back, her head snapping up.

But the bearlike demon remained completely undeterred. "We've never had a system like that before. How about you just pay? We're going to go under like this."

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"Grrr..."
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Broken down by the staff member's sound argument, Kuon produced some money from her wallet.

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"Hey, did Kuon just lose an argument?"
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Cain and his comrades were impressed. The demon town really did strive to maintain order. Within the zoo, the management regulations prevailed over the might of the demon lord. It was evident that they weren't about to yield to some dictator throwing around their authority. There was much to learn from the way they did things.

"Cease your cultural appreciation!" Kuon's face turned bright red with embarrassment as she held her aching belly.

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"And there's Kuon, ever undignified."
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"Right."
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"Shut up!"

Pulling ourselves together, we entered the zoo.

"Whoa...!"

"This is incredible!"

A lively and spacious plaza spread before us. The park was far larger than I'd imagined, and the animals we could see from the entrance only made up a small portion of what it had to offer. The colorful guide map stationed nearby made this clear enough. Among all the various smells wafting about, there were a few beastly scents I'd never smelled before, but that only added to my excitement.

[&]quot;I see. This is a cultured place, indeed."

[&]quot;It seems the citizens have a voice, and they refuse to bend to tyranny."

It was vast and peaceful. The animals in the enclosure didn't seem cramped; they appeared to be relaxing at peace.

"Sir Wolfe! Sir Wolfe! It's a panda! There are pandas over there! I can't believe it! Let's go see them!"

"Ah, don't pull me, Princess..."

Remiphinia urged Wolfe along. Judging by the atmosphere between those two, it seemed this outing really had just become a date for them. With all the surprise and wonder, perhaps the princess had somewhat forgotten her job of observing the place.

But I did understand where she was coming from. Rare animals that we would usually never see in our lives had been gathered here. The princess wasn't alone in her excitement, and all the humans were in the same boat, to a greater or lesser extent.

"The zoo is vast. 'Tis no time to dawdle. Let us be off. Follow me."

With Kuon at the lead, we toured the zoo. Zebras, hippos, koalas, and more—just this leisurely stroll allowed us to encounter so many foreign sights. Of course, Princess Remiphinia, the youngest among us, seemed to be the most excited of anyone, running around and squealing in joy.

Yes, this really is an amazing place.

If we could ever establish one in the human nations, it would most definitely be popular. I could see it bringing huge economic benefits as well. I could imagine the envoys of the royal family all desperately racking their brains over what they'd have to do to bring a zoo to their lands.

With that said. Once I'd become somewhat accustomed to the zoo's environment, I noticed something rather odd.

"Cain. That's..."

"Yeah... I was wondering about that too..."

One of the enclosures happened to contain horses. Several horses were kicking back within an area overgrown with luscious grass. That was fine. There wasn't anything particularly strange about that.

However, the individual tending to those horses was a demon centaur. A monstrous creature with the upper body of a human and the lower body of a horse—that sort of centaur. He was putting his heart into grooming the horses' coats and diligently cleaning the enclosure. A horselike creature was fussily caring for horses.

"Kuon... Who's that centaur?"

"Hmm? A worker, no?"

"A worker..." Cain furrowed his brow. "The way I see it, a centaur's a hundred times rarer than a horse..."

Indeed. There were plenty of horses in humanland. However, the chance of encountering a centaur—one of the demon races—was practically nonexistent. This created quite a curious phenomenon where the zookeepers were more interesting to look at than the animals.

"Fear not. For us demons, too, a centaur is rarer than a horse."

"Really?"

"There are guests who come solely to see the workers," Kuon said in earnest. "A rather sizable number, in fact."

"And the zoo's okay with that?"

"It somewhat defeats the purpose, doesn't it...?"

A minotaur caring for cows, a medusa looking after the snakes—there were many more peculiar sights as we toured the zoo.

The demons had far more races than the humans did. While humankind consisted almost entirely of humans, the demons had birdlike monsters, fishlike monsters, plantlike monsters... You get the point. If I tried listing them all out, I would be going on for an eternity. There was an incredible variety, and so—according to Kuon—there were some races that were rarer than others. The diversity of the demon species could be observed within its zoo.

"When a horse falls ill, the centaur shall dwell in the enclosure in its stead, personally assuming the responsibilities of entertaining the visitors."

"The hell?"

"But troubling enough, he gets an even warmer reception than the steeds themselves."

Do you really need a zoo when you have the employees?

All of a sudden, I found myself pondering over the very nature of zoos. But as I stared at the horses in confusion, the centaur in question noticed us and approached.

"I am not an exhibit," he called out from across the fence.

"A zoo animal is picking a fight with us..."

"Long time no see, Demon Lord."

"Sbassino. 'Tis a joy to see you in good health."

"I appreciate the kind words."

He seemed to be an acquaintance of Kuon's.

"Hey, why's a centaur looking after horses?"

"Why...? Because it's my job?"

"Mmm..."

Cain tried posing the question, but there wasn't much he could say after it was spelled out like that. There didn't seem to be any complicated circumstances behind it.

"How long hath it been since I last saw it? What of that ball-balancing trick thou dost?"

"Oh, I'm on the clock right now... I'd need to do some preparation if you wanted to see a trick..."

"Nay, worry not. 'Twas a sudden request. Another time, then."

"Much obliged."

The centaur bowed his head slightly.

"Do you perform, Mr. Centaur?" I tried asking.

"Well, when I have to replace a horse, my job's to have people stare at me. And they're a lot happier when I'm putting on a show than when I'm just standing around. It's a little difficult for the animals."

"It sounds rough, working here..."

His job was supposed to be tending to the animals, yet he had to be multitalented too.

"He conducts himself upright now, but this centaur hath a checkered past. He laid his hands on a multitude of the zoo's mares, sparking an adultery crisis that nearly ripped the equine community apart. 'Twas a mess, by all accounts."

"Please don't go spreading that around, Demon Lord."

"Aha ha ha..."

I could only muster a dry laugh.

This was a situation that could only exist with the animal-shaped demons. Why was a whole soap opera playing out with zoo animals?

Cain couldn't keep the bewilderment from crossing his stiff face.

"Fare thee well. And do thy work in earnest!"

"You don't need to tell me that."

After parting with the centaur, we moved on.

"What was that ...?"

"Who knows?"

Was that normal for a zoo? No, surely not.

We continued taking in the sights of a somewhat peculiar place, but when all was said and done, the zoo was a very high-quality entertainment facility. It was clean, and just walking around gave me a pleasant feeling. We were still plagued by demonland's characteristic dimness, but once I got used to it, it felt like I was walking around a lamplit park at night. It even came with the same sense of intrigue. It was no surprise the demon lord was so fond of this place. Being able to observe animals we would usually never have the chance to was more fun than I'd expected.

"Ah...! 'Tis...!" Kuon cried out as she abruptly stopped in her tracks. "An ancient dragon...!"

Her eyes widened as she raised her voice.

Her gaze was locked onto a dragon with a massive body.

"What?! An ancient dragon?!"

"You're telling me this zoo has ancient dragons?!"

Even the heroes were surprised to hear this, their bodies all tensing up. There was a nervousness that surrounded all of humanity's greatest.

Ancient dragons. The strongest variant of the already powerful dragon race, their very existence was so rare that they persisted in legends. The powerful ancient dragon stood boldly for all to see, showing off its dignified ashen scales, large, majestic eyes, and huge wings that seemed capable of carrying it to the ends of the earth.

"So that's..."

"An ancient dragon..."

Cain let out a heated breath as he bore witness to the strongest dragon of all. He and his comrades had fought dragons before, managing to overcome them. However, he had yet to even encounter any *ancient* dragons—the ones who stood at the very zenith. Even if he did meet one, he didn't know if he could beat it or not. I'd heard him say that before. And now, the heroes stood face-to-face with the strongest dragon there was, one they'd never encountered before. Sweat oozed down their brows.

"A-Amazing! There's an ancient dragon at the zoo...!"

"I-I gotta take a picture!"

The other guests were also excited by the presence of the ancient dragon. They pointed their cameras at the dragon again and again, capturing its divine figure in their reels for an eternity to come.

The ancient dragon gathered attention from anyone in the vicinity. And yet...

"That dragon's...a guest, isn't he?"

"Yes, 'tis true. He doth be a guest who came to see the zoo."

The ancient dragon was staring wistfully at a lion in one of the enclosures.

He'd seemingly brought his children with him, as there were several smaller dragons all peacefully watching the lions. The lion being watched seemed more perplexed than anything else.

"I'm pretty sure that ancient dragon's a whole lot rarer than a lion..." Cain grumbled.

"Indeed. They are legendary beings in our realm as well," Kuon confirmed. "Huh..."

In a strange turn of events, a guest was attracting far more attention than the zoo's animals.

The ancient dragon went on to enjoy the zoo as any ordinary visitor would. He loafed around and then left. On that day, the exhibit that attracted the most attention was neither a panda nor a giraffe. It was a general visitor.

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"Is this...normal for a zoo?"

"No clue..."
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I cocked my head alongside Cain. Was it normal for a zoo to have zookeepers and guests more curious than the animals? Something didn't sit quite right with me, and those feelings remained unresolved as our visit to the zoo reached its end.

Leaving the zoo, we made for our next destination.

"Now then! Onwards to the cinema...!"

With Kuon at the helm, we were brought to a place called a *cinema*. There, we went through another special experience.

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"Whoa!"
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"The pictures are moving!"

The castle town had a phenomenon known as "movies." Large pictures projected on a screen would move and shift almost like we were watching a scene in real life, or a stage production. The characters within the pictures freely moved around to create a story.

These moving pictures were apparently called "videos," and the stories made with them were apparently called movies. Although our human culture had the technology to take photographs, we did not have the means of preserving the motion of reality.

"This marvel hath been made feasible through our superior magic tech. We demons have newly fashioned a special crystal capable of storing moving images. Movies are an art form birthed from that technology."

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"I see..."
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"Movies are incredible..."

Their eyes were all glued to the screen. This was a technology not available to humans.

If we could spread this to the world of humans... Everyone was surely thinking this as they realized how worthwhile their inspection of demonland truly was.

"Wah hah! Amazing, is it not?! What say you? What say you to this?! Are ye in awe of the tremendous might of demon technology?!"

"Demon Lord, please quiet down. You're bothering the other guests."

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"Ah. Sorry..."
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The cinema staff had scolded us. Order was indeed being maintained. Not even the demon lord was allowed to act out unreasonably.

Putting that aside, the movie technology was truly astounding. As for the theory behind it, it was apparently simply projecting many photographs in quick succession, but if real world scenes could be recorded as videos rather than stills, then surely it would make all sorts of things a lot more convenient.

Yes, I knew in my heart of hearts that this was a technology that could be applied to all *sorts* of things.

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"I get it..."
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But within this air of wonderment, Cain was muttering to himself with a scowl.

"The movie technology's incredible, but what the hell are you showing us?"

"Yeah, I was wondering that too," Rachel said with a pout, in full agreement.

Apparently, they had their complaints with the contents of the movie.

"A love story between an orc and a goblin... How am I supposed to react?" Rachel grumbled.

"Yeah, I get you..." Cain grumbled back.

Projected before our eyes was a passionate love story that transcended racial boundaries. A small green-skinned goblin whispered his love to a large-bodied orc. Eventually, the orc was swayed by his fiery emotions and began responding to the goblin's feelings. Although everyone was impressed and excited by the technology that went into it, as the story progressed, their feelings of confusion grew stronger.

What in the heavens is this love story...?

Soon, we were all staring at the screen with straight faces. None of us could empathize with the romance between monsters.

"Wh-What...? Do you find fault with the contents? Mere moments ago, ye were going on about the magnificence of movies..."

Kuon began to panic as she took in our somber reactions. Apparently, she didn't see the movie as strange in the slightest.

"Well, I mean... If you show me a romance between nonhumanoid monsters, all I really think is...'Uh-huh. I see'..."

"Hmm? Is that how it works? As long as the tale is well crafted, I see no fault in a romance between a goblin and an orc."

Cain spoke as our proxy, and Kuon genuinely didn't seem to understand. She cocked her head in confusion. It seemed this came down to a fundamental difference in values.

"Perchance...yes. We demons have dwelled amid beings of all shapes and sizes from the moment of our birth. The human world mainly consists of humans alone, correct? Perchance therein lies the difference?"

A sour look crossed both of their faces. For demons, who lived alongside various races of various appearances, they probably didn't bear any aversion to

the romance between other races. However, in our world, romantic emotions were mostly only directed at humans. Sure, cats and dogs might fall in love too, but humans didn't really understand the feeling.

"Your green skin is as beautiful as ever. I love you, my honey."

"I love you too, my darling."

The goblin and the orc exchanged a passionate kiss, but even this climactic scene failed to move our hearts. On the contrary, we were only growing colder. Everyone was watching the screen with eyes as lifeless as the undead.

"Your small goblin body is so cute, darling..."

"You have to get through this. Just a little more, Rachel..." the warrior muttered to herself.

Finally, some of us began to show adverse reactions. A single movie had accentuated the vast difference in values between humans and demons.

"Hey, come here..." the orc called out with a bewitching voice as she lay on the bed.

Her face flushed red—no, a deeper green—her clothes loosened sensually; she put on quite the provocative show. The goblin gulped, nervously removing his own clothes.

The two of them lay on the bed... And then it clicked for me.

"Wah! A love scene! It's a love scene!"

Before I knew it, I was raising my voice. My heart was pounding away in my chest as I found myself excited by the captivating scene.

I see! Movies truly are a wonderful thing! If you manipulate the space and the angles and make effective use of background music, you can make a nighttime scene even more sensational than the real thing.

The sense of realism is incredible! A goblin and an orc are whispering sweet nothings on the bed! And it's like I can even hear every breath they take! If we develop this movie technology even further and put it to even lewder application...what happens then?!

I'm trembling at the possibilities!

"Liz, you..."

Yet despite my excitement, my comrades were all looking at me coldly.

"You've finally started lusting after goblins, huh..."

"Come back, Liz. I think that's going a little too far."

"Huh?!"

Their weary voices snapped me back to my senses.

"What was I just thinking about...?! Use movies for...what?! Y-You have it all wrong...! I'm not the sort of person who would think of using movies for lewd stuff...! I-It's all that scene's fault! That dirty scene! I'm usually a wholesome person!"

"No, I'm more scared that you managed to get aroused from that scene."

"Don't get all hot and bothered by an orc and a goblin, stupid."

"Huh?"

I was being scolded for something more fundamental than that. It felt a bit unfair.

It was worth noting that, apparently, the work was meant for all audiences, so the screen faded to black right before the main event. By the time it faded back in, it was already morning. When I saw that, I felt a bit sad for some reason.

The movie reached its end, and I was left watching something called the "credits" roll by. And just like that, we had finished our movie appreciation session.

I stretched out as we stepped out of the cinema. Everyone was enthusiastically discussing their thoughts on the movie. Their opinions weren't particularly focused on the actual contents of the film, but rather on the technology of movies as a whole.

My body felt stiff after sitting still for so long, but getting a good stretch in after seeing a single piece of work from start to finish granted a special sort of comfort. If we make movies in the human world, they'll most definitely catch on,

I thought to myself.

"The movie was incredible, wasn't it, Sir Wolfe?"

"Yes, it was."

Remiphinia approached Wolfe with an affable smile on her face. The way they exchanged their thoughts right after watching the movie made this feel like a normal date. I'd seen similar things happening at the end of stage plays too.

"Umm..." Remiphinia fidgeted as she spoke, "Wouldn't it be nice if...you and I could have a passionate romance...just like in the movie?"

"Huh? That was the impression you got after seeing the goblin movie?"

She paused for a moment. "Perhaps that one was a bit pushing it," she conceded with a bitter face.

Remiphinia was trying out pickup lines to get Wolfe to fall for her, but the movie had been so questionable that she'd completely missed the mark. Her attempt ended in failure.

"Princess Remiphinia..." started Wolfe.

Just by looking at her, I could tell she was redrafting her strategy. But her internal planning session was interrupted as Wolfe turned to her with a serious look on her face. His demeanor had changed somewhat, and the princess was taken aback.

"I would like to lay this out clearly before it goes too far. Approaching me is futile. I am not interested, and besides, I must not respond to your feelings regardless."

"Huh...?"

It was a rejection that he had to offer her. Staring straight into Remiphinia's eyes, he continued, "There is our status, for one. I am not even well studied. To make matters worse, I was previously affiliated with the demon army."

Wolfe brought his right hand to his chest and concentrated his mana into it. In an instant, his hand surged with pitch-black power, causing those around him to shudder. Wolfe had obtained this dark power in his time with the demon lord's army; his strength originated from the darkest of forces.

He had strayed from humankind—that was what he was trying to show her.

"There is no way we will ever find acceptance. I am completely unworthy of anything of the sort."

"Th-That's not true...!"

Remiphinia was overpowered by his stern look and sinister power, yet even so, she desperately denied it. To her dismay, however, not a single soul took her side.

"Precisely! I won't give Remphie to someone like you! The royal family won't accept it! At the very least, I'll never accept it!"

"Anzel!"

The nation's prince butted in between them with a shout. He'd go as far as completely discarding his royal dignity to intrude on his sister's love.

"I must agree with him. Princess Remiphinia, you are in a position of responsibility, and so are bound by your duties. As I'm sure you are aware, you are not free to love as you please. Especially not this man, who has neither status nor honor. There is no reason for you to be with him."

"Even you, Brian..."

Captain Brian of the Royal Guard also offered his harsh admonishment.

No one took Remiphinia's side, all judging the situation on the same basis. Anyone who married into the royal house needed adequate status and authority, which surely went without saying.

"That's... That's not true..."

The princess hung her head and pursed her lips. She tried to deny it, but her voice was faint, and her eyes were touched with tears.

"Kuon...let's move on," said Wolfe, who had left Remiphinia's side and gone to the former demon lord.

"Art thou certain?"

"It's fine," Wolfe firmly replied without hesitation. It almost sounded like a farewell.

And so, we were once again on the move, with Kuon at the lead. Only Sylphie stood by Remiphinia's side, gently stroking her head.

And so, we visited the last sight of our tour.

"Woo-hoo! Hot spring time!" Rachel exclaimed as she cannonballed straight in. There was a great splash as her body sank into the water's warm embrace.

This place was Kuon's pride and joy—a hot spring complex. It seemed to house everything needed for relaxation; the hot springs were the main attraction, but there were massage and dining options included as well.

It was apparently called the Super Bathhouse. Personally, I felt that adding the word "super" to it somewhat cheapened the experience.

"R-Rachel! Umm, err, you're not supposed to jump into the water. It's bad manners!"

"Lighten up, Melvy. Live a little."

"W-W-Wah!"

Rachel enthusiastically splashed water at Melvy. The saint stiffened up as the hot water made contact with her pale skin.

"Good grief, what ruckus. A hot spring ought to be enjoyed in peaceful tranquility. Ahhh, now that's the ticket..."

"Ha ha, you're groaning like an old lady, Kuon."

"Oh, shut it."

The hot spring facility seemed to be one of Kuon's favorite haunts. One of the patrons told me that they'd come across her—the demon lord—quite frequently whenever they dropped by. Whatever image I had previously held of a demon lord had been thoroughly shattered as of late.

I entered the spring too. As I tried up my hair and submerged my body, a longing sigh seemed to escape from the depths of my soul. The hot milky water seemed to seep into me.

"Aaahhh..."

My body shuddered in the heat. I rested my back against the rugged rocks that surrounded the water and took a long breath. The rising white steam bathed my skin and made me sweat.

It felt absolutely divine.

"You're doing it too, Liz..."

"No, wait...there's a very good reason for this, Sylphie..." I explained to Sylphie and Remiphinia, who smiled wryly beside me. "My muscles have been so dreadfully sore lately... It really felt like I was melting away!"

"Muscle pain?" Remiphinia asked, her face blank, a slight tilt to her head.

Indeed, I'd been plagued by endless muscle pain as of late. It was all thanks to that ridiculous "Anyone Can Do It! Hero-Style Boot Camp!" My aching from yesterday's morning training hadn't healed yet. I mean, how could it possibly have? Not when I went through another harsh training plan after school too.

Today, I was just barely holding myself together. If I moved even the slightest bit, pain would shoot through my entire body. However, we were in the presence of the royal family's retainers, so I was desperately keeping it from showing on my face.

It's no exaggeration to say I'm the one putting in the most work today. The unsung hero lurking in the shadow of this outing is me!

The hot spring seemed to permeate deeply into my battered body.

"Lady Lisalinde, I've heard that you joined the hero's team as a trainee. Is my big sis's training that severe?"

"To call it even harsh would be doing it a disservice, Princess Remiphinia. It's hell, absolute hell... Just how many times have I imagined my arms and legs being ripped off...? The training I'm doing right now probably was never meant for humans. By the end of it, I'll likely have turned into some kind of monster. Surely..."

"R-Really..."

I sped through my response as fast as my tongue would take me. It had to do with her big sister, so perhaps I should have sugarcoated it a bit, but I was

simply incapable of conveying my time of suffering in any other way. Remiphinia was petrified.

As we spoke, Rachel and Melvy came over, chuckling.

"Ah ha ha! You're making such a big deal out of it, Liz!"

"Yeah! Yeah! It's not really that bad!"

"Now, be honest. The 'Anyone Can Do It! Hero-Style Boot Camp!' isn't that tough, right? ... Eep?!"

"She's furious!"

I asked about it later, and apparently, I'd made a face like a devil from the deepest pits of hell. Every fiber of me was seething with murderous loathing.

"You sad monsters who've lost your grasp of common sense..."

These monsters could never understand a human heart.

"Why? Why was the 'Anyone Can Do It! Hero-Style Boot Camp!' so poorly received? It didn't sell at all..."

"We even made it with beginners in mind..."

"Well, it didn't help that Liz was an accomplice..."

The girls of the hero's party seemed rather down over the whole affair. However, the fact that they truly couldn't comprehend the problem with that regimen proved more than anything else that they were all insane. The sort of training even a seasoned soldier couldn't pull off could no longer be called training. It was just torture.

I didn't really get why Rachel was calling me an accomplice, though. This had absolutely nothing to do with me.

"'Anyone Can Do It! Hero-Style Boot Camp!'?" Remiphinia inquired, but I wasn't going to explain it to her. There were some things in the world that were better left unknown.

"Aaaaaaahhh... The hot spring feels soooooo good..."

Still, when all was said and done, I enjoyed the hot spring from the bottom of my heart.

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"You're completely hooked."
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"Maybe I'll just live in the demon lord's castle for a while..."

And I'll visit the hot spring every day.

It wasn't like hot springs themselves were absent from the human world, but there were unfortunately none anywhere near Academy Town. With the transfer circle, it would take no time at all to move between Academy Town and the demon lord's villa. I could attend school every day, train with the heroes, and head to the villa to take a bath afterwards. Schedule-wise, it worked out just fine.

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Ahhh... It looks like I'm going to be a regular here...

"Hmm...?"

It was then that Melvy seemed to realize something, her eyes widening.
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"It can't be... She's bigger than me..."

"Huh...?"

Melvy let out an envious muttering. She curled up her body, her eyes staring fixedly at a certain point with a single-minded focus.

Her gaze was concentrated on a pair of breasts. In her eyes burned an unsightly, feminine jealousy.

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"U-Umm... Saint Melvy...?"
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The chest she was staring at belonged to Remiphinia.

The princess was clearly bewildered. Her face stiffened as her chest fell under such scrutiny—under such sordid, scorching sentiment. A bead of sweat dripped down her brow and plopped into the spring water.

But Melvy paid the girl no mind. She exuded an unfathomable pressure as she continued to stare fixedly at Remiphinia's chest.

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"She's only twelve...and she's bigger than me..."
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"E-Err...?"
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"Why must the world be so unfair...?"

There was a graveness to Melvy's voice as she lamented the irrationality of it all. To grieve for the world—that seemed like a saintly thing to do. But her grievances seemed far more earthly and vulgar.

Honestly, their chests weren't very different at all. They were both...practically nonexistent.

However, Remiphinia was twelve, and Melvy was seventeen. If she was already losing with a five-year age gap, I could somewhat understand why she'd grow resentful.

This helpless, sad reality caused even my own chest to ache.

"U-Umm... S-Saint Melvy, you're still a growing girl. I'm sure...!"

"Grah, grah...! Are you trying to insult me?!"

"Eep?!"

Remiphinia's half-baked consolation born of desperation had only hurt Melvy even more.

"You're Sylphie's sister! You're clearly the one who's going to grow here!"

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

"It's the breasts...! It's all the breasts' fault!"

"Yipe! Melvy, stop...!"

In a fit of rage, Melvy attempted to snatch Remiphinia's breasts right off of her. Remiphinia let out a yelp.

"You'll never understand the feelings of someone who's surrounded by huge breasts day after day after day...! God dammit! God dammit all!"

"I-I'm sorry! I said it, so please let go of me...! Eep...!"



No one would take the first step to put a stop to the tragedy. We all feared that the fire might spread to us.

"Unforgivable! Inexcusable! I shall never forget this humiliation! Know the rage of the flat-chested!"

"P-Please stop this, Saint Melvy...!"

"Hand them over! Give your chest to me...!"

"Eek! Hyaaaaaah...?!"

Melvy had become a chest-hunting barbarian. She shed tears of blood as she assailed the princess.

Melvy was a modest girl who never brought shame to her title as a saint. For her to become this rattled—the resentment of the have-nots was a truly fearsome thing indeed.

The chest-hunting savage's reign of terror was upon us.

Oh...but what a beautiful sight it was. Two beautiful lasses submerged in hot springs, not a thread of cloth between them. No hesitation to have their hands upon one another under watchful eyes. Cheeks flushed, the water's surface swaying as heated breaths escaped their lips.

At first, I felt simply ticklish, but there was something fleeting, something beautiful about the scene.

"…"

Wh-What is this feeling...? Watching those two is making me feel strange.

A part of me wanted to join in; another part wanted to stay put and stare forever... A heat was building steadily within my chest, and a flame I couldn't put into words was flickering within me.

The penis in my heart is throbbing...

"Wait, what am I even thinking?! That's wrong! I am a pure and proper human being! I mustn't think such strange thoughts!"

"Wh-What ails thee, Lisalinde?"

My sudden outburst took Kuon by surprise.

"C-Calm down... Calm yourself, my right hand..."

My right hand had begun to move all on its own, and my left could barely restrain it.

My hand embarks on an endless quest for breasts...! It's going out of control, longing to fondle...!

Y-You can't! Control yourself...!

If you do that, you'll become a pervert!

I am not a lewd girl! I mustn't think about fondling breasts or burying my face in them...!

"Hraaaaaah...! I need...! To cool down...!"

"H-Huh...? What? Art thou insane?!"

With stalwart will, I reasserted control over my rampaging right arm and used my right hand to smack myself in the cheek. Blood dripped from my nose—but whether it was from the slap, or from watching the girls play around, I couldn't tell.

"Evil thoughts begone! Evil thoughts begone...!"

"Thou dost scare me..."

Kuon retreated away as I continued to smack myself in the cheek.

But—and this is completely irrelevant to anything that just happened—I think I'll become a regular here.

I swore it to myself. It had nothing to do with it. It had absolutely nothing to do with the beautiful girls rubbing together right in front of me.

In the pure and sincere interest of healing my aching muscles, I made an oath that I would once again make a pilgrimage to the hot springs.

"Fork over your tits!"

"Hyaaaahn...!"

Remiphinia raised a remarkable voice. As it turned out, Melvy's hands were,

in some ways, surprisingly skilled.

It was already past evening. Although we were enveloped in the characteristic darkness of demonland, the many lanterns stationed around the bathing area lit the scene sufficiently.

The surface of the water rippled faintly. The white steam that rose from it was colored by the red light of the lanterns, giving it a faint glow.

Everyone seemed to have fully enjoyed the hot springs. Their skins were tinted red, and they let out deep breaths from deep within.

At some point, Remiphinia noticed something. "Huh? It looks like there's a path in the back," she said.

After her outburst, Melvy had slumped down, dead tired. But by now she had recovered and was showing some deep interest in this newly spotted path.

"A path?"

"Yes. Do you want to see where it goes?"

A path in the back of the hot springs? Do they have another type of bath we haven't tried yet?

Splashing about as she made her way through the water, Remiphinia made her way to the back of the springs.

"Hey, Remphie. Don't go off on your own. What if something happens to you?"

"Wait for us, Princess."

Sylphie and their maid attendants hurriedly followed after her. Soon, we'd lost sight of them through the steam and the darkness of the night.

"I'd advise you against the bath in the back."

"Huh...?"

At that moment, Kuon, who had become rather flushed and lethargic, spoke up.

"Wait, is there something dangerous back there?"

"Nay, 'tis not dangerous, per se..."

Her sudden warning had me panicking, but thankfully, it didn't seem to be that pressing.

Kuon went on to explain, "Many a demon possesseth no biological sex. Slimes, inorganic beings, and their ilk. This spring, divided 'twixt men and women, doth pose a quandary for such sexless souls. Hence, this hot spring has established a free space that barreth none."

"I see."

To summarize, the place Remiphinia entered was a hot spring for those without sex... *No, wait.* If anyone could enter, then it wouldn't be limited to just them. Any man or woman could go in if they so chose...

"And lo, as it be a free space, naturally, the entrance doth grace both the women's and men's sides alike..."

"You mean...!"

I stood, my mind clearly envisioning what Kuon was about to say next.

"In sum, the bath over yonder is essentially a mixed bath."

"Aaaaaaaaah!"

Kuon's warning came late. Far too late. It was precisely at that moment that I heard a scream from Remiphinia.

We immediately jumped into action. We wrapped towels around ourselves and quickly ventured into the bath's unknown depths.

The ground was wet, making it a little hard to run, but we were all well trained for the occasion. With little issue, we rushed to the scene.

"Princess! Are you all ri—?!"

After turning the corner, we were at a loss for words. We'd run straight into a naked Remiphinia, and Wolfe. There was not a single thread of cloth between them; all was on display.

They were petrified, both of them standing stock-still.

Their minds had likely gone completely blank. They were naked, facing one

another, motionless without so much as a twitch.

Remiphinia's face was red. Her naked body had been seen by accident. I didn't blame her.

Meanwhile, Wolfe was pale as could be. He was sweating from every pore of his body, panicking at the severity of what he had done by no fault of his own.

It was dangling. I won't say what, but something very important was immodestly dangling.

Sylphie and the others had wrapped towels around themselves. And so, Remiphinia and Wolfe were the only ones who had shown off their naked bodies.

"Wr-Wr-Wr-Wrong...!" Wolfe was the first one to speak up. "Th-This is a mistake...! I didn't know this was a mixed bath! I-I had no ill intent! I'm serious! Please believe me...!"

He stumbled over his words as he hurriedly prattled off his excuse. But his mind hadn't processed the situation to a point where he realized he ought to turn around and not look at her. He was clearly still in a complete panic.

"I'm sorry! Truly sorry...! But it truly was not intentional! Please forgive me...!"

Silently, I handed the spare towel and bucket I'd brought to Sylphie. She draped the towel over Remiphinia, covering up her sister.

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"Hmph!"
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"Gah...!"

And as for the bucket, she tossed it at Wolfe with gusto.

The man made no attempts to dodge it, purposely taking the hit for his sins. But the thrown bath bucket carried far more force than should have been humanly possible as it collided straight into Wolfe's face.

Surely, any normal person would have died had they been hit by that. There was an ear-rending boom as the bucket—unable to bear the force—shattered into smithereens.

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Wolf collapsed, his body sinking into the watery depths.

"Pedo!"

"Pedo!"

"Pedo...!"

"Grbewrbgbh..."
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I didn't know when they'd arrived, but Cain and the others from the men's side poked their faces out to chastise Wolfe. And Wolfe was unable to refute anything in his drowned state. Only gurgling sounds escaped him in his futile protest.

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"Pedo!"

"Did you really want to see the princess naked that badly?!"

"How are you like this?!"

"Grbewrbgbh..."
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As if to say it was up to the men to deal with a fellow man, Cain and his cohorts began to tie him up. No refutation would be accepted. They wouldn't even drag his body out of the water.

By this point, we were all wrapped in towels, so it wasn't an issue if they saw us.

"Remphie, are you all right?" Sylphie placed a concerned hand on her sister's shoulder.

She was still in a daze—motionless, her face bright red, and her eyes wide. She hadn't yet recovered from the shock. But eventually, her arms quivered and moved, her hands covering her cheeks.

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"He... He saw me naked... I can't get married anymore."

"Hmm?"
```

But something was off. Remiphinia's face was incredibly red in her embarrassment, yet for some reason, she was chuckling.

"Since I can't get married to anyone else..."

"Remphie?"

"That means Sir Wolfe really must take responsibility for what he's done."

An impish smile crossed her face.

She really *was* embarrassed. Her body was quivering as the shock of what happened remained with her. Yet there it was—the expression of a mischievous, calculating witch.

She was as transparent as could be. The thought going through her mind was clear: What luck! Her calculating demeanor chilled the air around her.

She wouldn't fall back that easily. She had made her will clear.

"Heh heh heh... Sir Wolfe has no choice but to atone for this..."

"Nicely done, Remphie," Sylphie patted her sister on the head.

She's already giving off those vibes at her age...

I was in awe of Remiphinia's innate talent.

Thus, our inspection of the town's facilities came to an end.

This single day had greatly altered Wolfe's fate. His life was set to undergo a massive change. The groundwork had already been laid, and he had nowhere to run.

It was one day...just one day, and there was no longer anything he could do to talk his way out of it.

The princess's siege had begun, and it was only a matter of time before the castle fell.

This was the start of a lone soldier's futile resistance.

Chapter 42: Now—Crazy for Mira!

"Liz! Help! Help me...!"

'Twas a sunny morning in the classroom when my schoolmate Satina clung to my waist with tears streaming down her face.

"It's terrible! Awful! I'm in a pinch here! Lady Liz...!"

"Yes, yes, what is it?"

She pleaded for my help, her voice desperate... Wait, didn't this already happen to me not too long ago? I wondered as I gently patted her green hair. I already had a general idea of what she was going to say.

"What job do you need help with this time?"

"Our guild's planning on holding a costume café fair...! But we don't have enough people to play the maids! It's so unreasonable! They told me to find someone to be a maid...!"

"Well, I thought it might be something like that."

Satina was the daughter of the director of the adventurers' guild, and she would turn to me for help with these sudden gigs whenever they were short-staffed. Last time, it was a sewing job, which Melvy and I had toiled hard on.

"Wait, a costume café fair?"

"That's right!"

Costume café fair. Judging by the name, the job probably involved serving customers at a café.

That's a bit of an embarrassing request.

I scratched my cheek.

"The whole guild's gonna hold a campaign where we serve customers while dressed in maid outfits and qipao, but we're a pretty large guild, right... It's a large space, and we don't have nearly enough people to run the place..."

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"Well, I see where this is going..."
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"I mean, we can't just have our fifty-year-old veterans dress up as maids, after all..."

Satina fidgeted apologetically.

It's understandable.

Though it was a harsh thing to say, no one would be happy seeing someone in their fifties in a maid outfit, and it would do little to attract new clients. The sight would likely cause little more than chaos.

What they really needed was young people.

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"…"
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But a costume café, huh... It's just, you know... It's a bit embarrassing...

I wanted to help Satina, and I did my best to never reject her requests. But I had my misgivings about this one.

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What to do...?
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But just as I thought over the matter—

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"I accept!"
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"Wah?!"

"Huh?! Wh-What?!"

A booming voice suddenly cut in from the side. Satina and I both turned towards it with a start.

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"Sylphie ...?"
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"Indeed!"

Sylphie was standing right next to us.

What's going on here? I can practically see the hopes and dreams sparkling in her eyes. But even more curious than that, she was carrying Melvy and Rachel, one under each arm. They both looked resigned to their fates, hanging limply in her grasp.

"Wh-What happened? Princess Sylphonia...?"

"Nothing happened at all! You're looking for maids, aren't you?! Then it's my time to shine!"

"Err. well..."

Satina seemed lost at sea, clearly not understanding the situation. But I had an inkling of what was going through the princess's head.

"Leave the maid work to me! I'll do it perfectly! I shall serve anyone, no matter who they may be, and provide the finest hospitality you can imagine!"

"C'mon now, we can't have the princess running around in costume..."

"Don't be shy!"

"Huh..."

Sylphie spoke briskly, decisively. She seemed to be overflowing with enthusiasm. And of course, she was. She personally believed that her life's calling was to be a maid. Despite her noble status as a princess, she found fulfillment in serving others. In fact, she loved maid duties so much that she would even have her personal maid swap roles with her from time to time.

"Hee hee, I can't wait. A costume maid café... I'm itching to show you what I can do."

"Wh-Why are you so motivated?"

Satina, not knowing Sylphie's inclinations, was utterly baffled. Understandably so. I'd also been overwhelmed when I learned about it.

"And with that said, the three of us will be joining in on this costume café fair! Look forward to it!"

Three, she said. Three.

Sylphie had arbitrarily decided on the participation of three people.

"It looks like the two of you were dragged into this, but are you sure about it? Melvy? Rachel?"

I called out to the two bodies hanging limply from Sylphie's arms. Unlike Sylphie, who'd volunteered of her own volition, the other two had clearly been forced into the roles. They'd yet to utter a single word since they'd arrived.

With lifeless eyes, Melvy and Rachel slowly lifted their heads.

"There's no way to stop Sylphie when she gets like this..." whispered Melvy.

"It is what it is..." Rachel added.

"I see..."

Their voices were lower than usual. I couldn't help but pity them.

And like that, our participation in the adventurers' guild's costume café fair was finalized.

"All right, everyone, let's all break a leg! Hip! Hip!"

"Hooray..."

Her cheer was answered by unenthusiastic cheer from girls who seemed a million miles away. Sylphie was the only one with a fire in her eyes, while Melvy's and Rachel's eyes lacked even the slightest glint of light.

"Is this...really okay?"

And Satina, the one who was petitioning for help, was more confused than anyone else.

A few days went by, and it was finally the day of the costume café fair.

"Welcome home, Master!"

The staff all wore frilly aprons over dresses, energetically greeting the customers. The adventurers' guild was packed, and business was booming. The guild complex housed cafés, restaurants, and bars, and they were all filled to the brim, lines stretching out the doors. It was quite a lively sight. Even the usually stern-faced adventurers wore lax, carefree expressions today. Those who usually steered clear of stylish cafés were lured in by the maid dresses.

"Sorry to keep you waiting! Here is your Fluffy Snowman Parfait!"

"Right, th-thanks..."

A burly, muscular warrior had ordered an adorable menu item.

It's good to see everyone's enjoying the festival.

I, too, wore an apron as I busily made my way around the store to tend to customers. The uniform I wore boasted a short skirt and far too many frills. It was presumably fashioned with the café specifically in mind; unlike a normal, practical maid uniform, it was very much style over substance. My hair was tied back in a ponytail, a departure from my usual style. The way that everyone called it "fresh" and complimented it made my cheeks prickle.

"Sorry for the wait! Here is your Love-Loaded Omurice!"

"Hey, cutie. Are you a student? How old are you?"

As I worked, one of the customers asked about my age... It was bad manners to ask the employees for their personal information. Asking for contact information, taking pictures, touching, and sexual harassment were all prohibited.

I could get the guild's guards to take him away, no questions asked, but...

I sent him a beaming smile, twisting into a pose as I replied, "Eternally seventeen! ☆"

"Oh..."

And with that, I left. The customer seemed a bit taken aback but blushed ever so slightly. It wasn't exactly the answer he was looking for, but he seemed satisfied with a whimsical response befitting the air of a maid café.

I'd managed to dodge a bit of a troublesome customer.

Phew... Too easy...

"Good going, Liz."

"Ah ha ha, it wasn't anything special..."

Satina, having watched that interaction, offered some praise.

Still, I wouldn't want that customer to grow arrogant over this, so I'll discreetly get in touch with security. That should prevent any further problems.

"Heh, that's Liz for you. The revival of the Super Maid King can't be far off..."

"Huh? What's that?"

Sylphie had brought up a term I was completely unfamiliar with. She seemed

to be praising me, but what exactly did it mean? Now and then, the members of the hero team would throw around words foreign to me.

"That outfit looks great on you, Sylphie."

"Hmm? You think so? Thanks!"

Sylphie wore her usual maid uniform like she had been born in it, doing her work with a master's touch... Well, not exactly. The outfit she was wearing now was actually something called a qipao.

Today's event was called the Costume Café Fair. The clothes the staff wore weren't limited to maid uniforms.

The qipao was a traditional garment from a distant Eastern land. Sylphie was wearing a version of it adapted to fit the aesthetics of a maid café.

With a stand-up collar, her qipao-inspired maid outfit was brimming with an exotic charm. Its tight-fitting design revealed her contours, which was perfect for Sylphie who maintained a fit, well-trained body.

"Hee hee, this shop is like heaven. To think I could have such an exciting maid experience... Please, use me more and more. Work me to the bone..."

"Why's this princess so into it?"

As she passed by, Adeline offered a sour look.

"That's...her identity."

"I don't get it."

This confusion was understandable from anyone who didn't know her true nature.

And Sylphie wasn't the only one wearing unique attire. There were also maid outfits inspired by kimono, another outfit from an Eastern land. Though this had nothing to do with maids, there were also church nuns' habits, female knights' armor, and noble dresses among others. The guild had prepared a wide assortment of outfits.

A...part of me felt that this lineup seemed somewhat reminiscent of the costume fashions of a certain red-light district. Just what exactly had the guild's

director—the mastermind behind the Costume Café Fair—used as reference?

No. I shouldn't read too deeply into it. The guild's director is Satina's father.

Putting all that aside, the maids wearing these costumes all looked exceptionally beautiful. Just looking at their costumes made me grateful for coming to work.

A sight for sore eyes. A blessing...

And among all of them, Luna stood out the most. She was a close friend from school, and the maid uniform suited her perfectly.

"Welcome home, Master."

Every little move she made would draw the eyes of all the customers.

Luna had her light brown hair braided and elegantly tied into a bun. She was the well-to-do daughter of the illustrious family of a marquis and had surely been rigorously trained in etiquette since birth. Each graceful gesture exuded beauty.

It was almost like she was a real maid. Her words were dignified, and even her posture was immaculate.

"U-Umm...could you please do that blessing?"

"Understood."

One of the customers requested a service from Luna. Without the slightest presentation, she answered their demands like a professional. Her two hands curled into the shape of a heart as she cast a spell on the man's cup of café au lait.

"May your meal taste delicious! Moe, moe, kyun!"

At that moment, a troublesome customer raised a commotion.

"HNGAAAAAAAAAH!"

"Huh?! Liz...?!"

It was *me*. I rushed over to Luna and let out a scream from the depths of my soul.

This was no time for work. As naught but a guest like any other, I approached as close as dignity would permit to burn her adorable—nay, goddess-like—beauty into my eyes.

From the top of her head to the tip of her toes, she was a perfect, flawless maid. A miraculous existence. And how could I possibly overlook the "Moe, moe, kyun" of such a sublime entity?

The moment her captivating, beautiful voice tickled my ears, I couldn't help but let out a roar. But that was a perfectly normal reaction for any human, and to not do so would have been disrespectful to the flawless presence before me.

The customer she was tending to looked perplexed, but what of it? My soul's cry was a completely natural physiological reaction. There was nothing to be embarrassed about. In fact, it was a wonder why the other customers hadn't let out roars of their own.

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Aaah! She's too beautiful!
 Luna is too precious!
 I wanna see her panties!
  I want to see what's under that black miniskirt!
  "L-Liz...? What's gotten into you?"
  "Huh?! What am I...?!"
  Luna's concerned voice brought me back to my senses.
  "All right now, Pervmaster. You can't go causing trouble for the staff."
  "How about you simmer down over there?"
  Melvy and Sylphie immediately came over and apprehended me.
  "Wait, that's not what this is! I am not that kind of perverted girl! I'm a pure,
righteous, and wholesome noble...!"
  "Yeah, yeah."
  "Good for you."
```

"Aaargh!"

And so, I was consequently dragged away. Luna's eyes—so wide as they shrank into the distance—burned a mark into my soul.

"Phew..."

I took an early break and took my time slowly calming myself in a corner. After taking a deep breath, I took in a sip of hot coffee.

The café was too stimulating.

What's with this place? Is this heaven? I want to come here six days a week. Can't they keep this fair going forever...?

Ah, no...this isn't right. I'm starting to have inappropriate fantasies again.

I took another deep breath—it wasn't helping. There was an even more delightful sight for my eyes. My eyes were naturally drawn in that direction.

"Welcome back, m'lady."

"Squee! It's the hero!"

A female customer shrieked as she was attended to by a certain butler.

It was Cain.

As it turned out, Cain was also working part-time at the same shop I was.

"Allow me to take your bags, m'lady. This way, if you will..."

"O-Of course!"

Cain escorted his female guest with a perfect bow.

At first, he'd come to the café as a customer. He'd presumably come to tease his fiancées Sylphie and Melvy over their maid outfits. But this event was the Costume Café Fair. There was nothing in its description that said the staff could only be *female*.

Cain had soon found himself captured by Sylphie and Rachel and added himself to the roster.

"Now! Get over here! Quit resisting!" Rachel cried out.

Cain, of course, resisted. "Q-Quit it! I just came to have some fun...!"

"Ha ha ha! Like a moth to a flame!"

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"No... Nooooooo...!"
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The moment he stepped through those doors, the hero's scream echoed through the café. Quickly, he was dragged to the back—so far back, that his screams faded away—where he was transformed into a staff member.

In short, he'd gotten caught up in it too. However, thanks to his presence, we now had a surge of female customers. There was a long line outside the store. We were already busy enough, and this made us even busier.

"T-To think, you can really be served by the hero here...!"

"The rumors were true..."

A pair of women drank the tea he brewed with hearts in their eyes.

But I could understand. Cain was truly very cool.

He was dressed smartly in a high-quality tuxedo, perfectly tailored to him. There wasn't a single bit of slack, and the black tie added to his gallant appearance.

I hadn't seen him in formalwear since the party at the academy, but he was still as dignified as ever. It was no wonder the female customers were squealing in glee.

My eyes continued to follow him as he took a short break and came to the same corner I was hiding in.

"Dammit, why do I have to go through all this?"

"Ha ha, you look good, Cain."

"Shut it. Ah, I need a smoke..."

It would be quite an issue if a café worker started smoking a cigar.

"Good grief, I didn't expect it to turn out like this... I'll get back at Sylphie and Rachel someday."

"Yes, you were quite splendidly dragged into this, kicking and screaming."

"If I knew this was gonna happen, I'd have dragged Wolfe down with me."

"Isn't he in a jail cell right now?"

"Well, yeah..."

Sadly, Wolfe was currently locked away in a prison managed by the Royal Guard. Needless to say, it was because he'd accidentally seen Princess Remiphinia naked.

Considering it was an accident, he was clearly remorseful, and above all, Princess Remiphinia personally stated that she would overlook the matter, so he would be released in a few days. It hadn't become too much of an incident.

But still, it was unfortunate.

"If this country was any more feudalistic, he could have been beheaded without a trial. In that sense, it turned out well for him."

"I don't know if his luck is good or bad."

Well, Wolfe would be able to escape by force if he wanted to.

In that sense, perhaps the nation's soldiers should have been thankful that he let them jail him without any resistance. Who was really the fortunate one in this scenario? The situation was all over the place.

"Still, me and Wolfe? We've both got it better than Mitter over there."

"Mitter..."

I followed Cain's eyes to where Mitter was. As it turned out, Mitter was also working in the shop. He'd come along with Cain and been apprehended alongside him. And with him, he emerged as a new member of the staff.

But the clothes Mitter wore did not belong to a butler. Not a *butler*, by any means...

"Mira! You're adorable!"

"Look this way, Mira!"

One corner of the shop was unusually lively. Loud, throaty cheers filled the air, and at the center of it all was an adorable maid in a frilly apron dress: Mira.

No, wait, Mitter.

"Wh-Why do I have to dress up like this...?!"

He quivered in embarrassment as he let out a feeble voice.

The noble knight was cross-dressing.



He wore a wig of long, fluffy blonde hair, and had makeup meticulously applied to enhance his naturally feminine features. This all resulted in a striking beauty.

His stage name was Mira. His androgynous coolness and cuteness harmonized perfectly, exuding masculine and feminine charm all at once. The raucous roars of male fans were what mainly filled the air, but he was so beautiful that the girls would discreetly flush red when they saw him too.

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"I-I'm not cute...!"

"That's not true! You're adorable, Mira!"

"Cutest in the world!"

"N-No...! I'm not!"

"She's so cute, but she's got no confidence. It makes me want to root for her..."

"Boyish girls are wonderful..."

"Sorry, Mira, you've been requested by name."

"S-Stop! Stop already...!"

He was ridiculously popular.
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He was already handsome, and as Mira, Mitter was acting bashful and innocent. Honestly, it was enticing.

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"It's frustrating that he's even cuter than me..."

"Rachel..."
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Yeah, I get it.

Before I knew it, Rachel was standing right next to me, giving her thoughts on her boyfriend. She had to be feeling pretty conflicted.

Mira was incredibly well received. He was popular with both male and female guests, and it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say he was the shop's number one.

And yet, I had no desire to be in his position. If asked to switch places, I'd

refuse without hesitation. And I was sure everyone here shared the same sentiment.

Cain, Rachel, and I sent him looks of pity.

"I love you, Mira!"

"Please keep working at this shop forever!"

"Stop it! Stop! Don't cheer for me!"

Mira was blushing profusely, troubled to no end. Seeing him like that was...how to put it...err...stimulating.

"Dammit! Why? Why do I have to go through this...?!"

It was at that moment that little Ms. Mira took desperate measures.

"I-I've had enough! I'll say it—yeah, I'll say it! I'm actually a guy!"

"Huh?"

Mira's confession caused the shop to go completely silent. The customers stared at him, wide-eyed.

What else could I expect? Of course they'd be bewildered upon hearing that someone so cute was actually a guy.

Someone swallowed their breath. A bead of sweat hit the floor. The tension in the store could be cut with a knife.

And, in the next instant...

"Whoooooooooo!"

"Huh...?"

Cheers erupted from the floor.

"Waaaaaah! It's a femboy! A real-life femboy!"

"Huh? What ...?!"

"You're cute, even if you're a boy! No! You're even cuter that way...!"

"Wait, femboys really exist...?!"

"It's a miracle..."

"Mira's the cutest in the world!"

"Huh? Huh?! Huh...?!"

The shop now swirled with even more excitement and enthusiasm than before, and Mira was even more flustered. He had revealed himself to disappoint them, but was met with an even greater reception. His eyes widened as he struggled to keep up with what was going on.

"I see, so femboys are popular now."

"You know about this, Melvy?"

Melvy drew near. She spoke like an expert on the subject.

"It refers to a boy that looks unmistakably female from every angle. Despite being a boy and identifying as one, they carry the charm of a woman and can experience a unique sense of shame from wearing women's clothing; this allows you to imagine inner thoughts beyond what you might get from someone who is just male or female, which lends to the genre its own sort of appeal that can't be imitated elsewhere. There are multiple patterns you can follow—those who appear female without doing anything, those that suddenly emerge as femboys after putting on makeup, and those that become a new self after dressing in women's clothing. Although it is summed up in a single word —'femboy'—the various ways you can tackle the genre is also one of its strong points."

"This world's full of idiots. The lot of them," Cain immediately dismissed the explanation.

While I was already familiar with the concept of "femboys," I couldn't recall where I'd first learned about it. Surely I'd never read any manga about that before.

"What is...this...this *excitement*...? Is this what it feels like to open a new door?"

"Femboys... This is what we were really searching for all along..."

"Stop! Why?! What's with you people?!"

"Mira! Mira!"

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"Mira! Mira!"

"Stop! Please, stop!"
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The shop was in a greater uproar than ever before. It had become a grand chorus.

Mira's resistance was pointless as both men and women fell captive to his charm, completely entranced.

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"I see... A Femboy Café... It could work..."

"Ah, papa."
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At that moment, the originator of the Costume Café Fair idea, the guild's director, appeared. He stood silently, gazing at Mira's performance.

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"It might be the next big thing..."
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"Papa..."
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With a hand on his chin, the director nodded a few times. Accustomed to managing large-scale businesses, the director saw a new business opportunity in front of him.

However, his daughter, Satina, furrowed her brow.

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"Mira! Mira!"
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"Mira! Mira!"

"You're the cutest in the world!"

The cheers in the shop echoed to the ends of the earth. All hearts in the guild became one at this new culture that had blessed Academy Town.

"I can't do this anymooooore!"

The roar of Mira's soul echoed far and wide.

Chapter 43: Then—Mira on a Mission!

It was back when Cain and his party members were still on their adventures. During their travels, they received a particular request.

A corrupt noble was committing misdeeds in a nearby town, causing many people to suffer. The request was for the heroes to discover evidence of these misdeeds so the noble could face judgment.

"You get the idea. It's another infiltration."

"Yeah, yeah."

Cain's comrades all replied without a care, as though they'd done this a hundred times before. And indeed, they had. Going undercover to gather information had already become commonplace for them.

"Good grief, why can't they let us concentrate on fighting the demons? We've gotten sidetracked more times than I can count."

"Now, now, this is also important..."

To them, helping people out was all a part of the job. So long as they traveled in the name of the hero—the ally of justice—their roles went far beyond vanquishing demons. They had to protect the peace of the populace, to embody the justice that the people desired. Otherwise, they wouldn't receive support, and their travels would come to an end.

"First, let's get our info in order."

They put together a plan for their covert operations.

Apparently, the vile noble was an indiscriminate womanizer. He hired far more maids than necessary at his manor and had his hands all over them. Using the money he unjustly obtained from misdeeds, he went on spending sprees and had all sorts of women waiting upon him.

"I guess we'll have the girls on the case, then?"

"Got it."

Sending the women would be their best bet to catch a womanizer off guard. Thus, the infiltration team would consist of Liz, Sylphie, Melvy, and Rachel.

"Let's have Mitter cross-dress and send him in too. Just in case."

Cain's suggestion came like a bolt from the blue.

"Huh?!" Mitter cried out in shock. "Cross-dress?! Wait, why me...?!"

"I mean, you've got a girly face... I think you can pull it off."

"No, no, no... Definitely not! Cut me some slack here!"

He was vehemently against it—naturally. Sending a man to serve under a womanizing noble as a spy was unheard of.

"I see. Cross-dressing, huh?"

"Now you're speaking my language."

"Umm, err... Mitter! Let's do our best on the mission!"

"Wait, wait, wait, seriously, wait...!"

For some reason, he wasn't hearing any objections from the rest of the party. You're all way too adaptable! No, wait, they're just going along with the bit!

Mitter broke into a cold sweat from every pore on his body.

"Well, hear me out, Mitter. Infiltration's a dangerous job, right? We'll just be standing around anxiously if we send the girls in, right? Wouldn't you have more peace of mind if you were there with them?"

"I'm not worried at all! There isn't an army in the world that could win against those four!"

Without context, it sounded like Mitter was saying something terrible, but this was simply a fact. No armed group in the land of humans could hold a candle to the four women of the hero's party. They'd return safely even if an entire nation turned against them.

To Mitter, it all sounded like excuses—just a pretext for them to watch him embarrassed while wearing women's clothing.

"Yeah, yeah, just shut up and do it. What if they run into a situation where

having just one more comrade could have decided life or death?"

"E-Erk...!"

But Cain's words did carry a smidgen of sense. There was no telling what they'd find in enemy territory. If they could send more people, then it was always better to do so. Caution was never wasted.

"B-But cross-dressing...? They're going to see right through me...!"

"You seem to be in a dilemma!"

Just as Mitter was about to voice his concerns, Liz raised her voice. Sandwiched between her fingers were a wide assortment of makeup tools she'd pulled from who-knows-where, and she'd even gone to the trouble of putting on sunglasses. She was clearly fully fired up.

"Umm... Yes? Liz? What's gotten into you...?"

"Right now, I am not just any Liz..." Liz let out a light chuckle. "I'm now the Cha-Liz-Matic Makeup Master, Super Liz!"

"Another persona!"

The Cha-Liz-Matic Makeup Master Super Liz had made her appearance.

"Now here I come, Mitter, dear! I'll turn you into the finest woman in all the lands!"

"St-Stop it! No! This is unreasonable!"

"A woman's path... Is a path of trials... I Gender has nothing to do with it! I"

Unable to do a thing about it, Mitter found himself being dragged off into the back room by the Cha-Liz-Matic Makeup Master.

"I'm itching to see what I can do!"

"Someone save me!"

There was a scream, then the sound of a door slamming shut. And finally, silence.

The covert investigation began. Women dressed in maid uniforms stood in a

line in front of the entrance to the corrupt noble's estate. These were the new maids who would start working in the manor from today onward.

But their faces were pale. They were not ignorant of the rumors of the master having his way with his maids. At the end of the day, however, they couldn't escape working at the estate. Some were poor with no other options. Others had been forcefully headhunted from their roles in other manors. They each had their own extenuating circumstances.

And each had a hint of fear in their minds: Are we going to be assaulted by the master too?

The anxiety of not knowing what was in store for them tugged at their hearts.

"It's impossible... It's not going to work. He'll find out... He'll definitely know..."

In the midst of it all, there was an individual harboring a somewhat different concern. Mira was her name—or rather, it was Mitter in women's clothing.

"It won't work. It won't work... He'll see through me, and that'll be the end of it... Why do I have to go through this...?"

"Oh come now, Mira. Be bold, or you'll only come off as more suspicious."

"Easy for you to say..."

Five members of the hero's party had slipped in among the gathered women. They were going to infiltrate the operation in the guise of newly hired maids.

"It'll be fine. He'll be none the wiser, I tell you. I mean, you're adorable."

"There's no way that's true... I know you're trying to cheer me up, but I need the truth. Especially at a time like this..."

Rachel tried to encourage Mira, but it was taken as an empty compliment. But Rachel had said it from the heart. The long blonde wig atop his head seemed to fit him strangely perfectly.

He had always sported a feminine face, but Liz's makeup skills had brought out even more of his beauty. This wasn't makeup to conceal that he was a man; rather, it was makeup to draw out his womanliness. His disguise was so perfectly natural that even those who knew him would look at him and think,

Isn't this how he always looked?

"Ooh hoo hoo hoo..."

Before Mitter could come to terms with his situation, the noble fiend revealed himself before them. He was a stout man with a vulgar smile plastered on his face.

"Ooh hoo hoo... So many darlings before me once more," he said as he looked over the newbie maids and appraised them.

"They've been drawn to your virtue, my liege."

"Ooh hoo hoo hoo..."

The maids in line all paled at the face and hung their heads, averting their eyes from the man. Meanwhile, all the members of the hero's party—save for Mitter—remained completely stone-faced, but by some stroke of luck, this did not arouse any suspicions.

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"Hmm...?"
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"...?!"

One of them, however, did draw the noble's curiosity.

Mira-no, Mitter.

The vile noble strutted up to him. Mira broke into a cold sweat and shrank back. Before he knew it, the noble was right in front of him, peering into his face up close.

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"You..."
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Mitter cowered. *It's no good! He knows…!* Mitter's heart was beating so fast it felt like it would burst.

Finally, the man burst into a grin.

"You're the darlingest darling of them all!"

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"Huh...?"
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That was it. That was all he said before he turned and moved on. After he'd finished inspecting all of the new hires, the man was off on his way.

This nervous time for the maids came to an end, though the weary looks on their faces persisted as they made for the rooms assigned to them. Mitter was the only one who stayed, frozen and spaced out.

"Good for you. Looks like he didn't find out."

"Is that...a good thing...?"

Rachel's words didn't sit right with him. He'd burst into a sweat when the nobleman stopped before him, and that sweat hadn't stopped flowing yet.

Regardless of Mitter's anxiety, the infiltration mission proceeded steadily.

"You're a strong girl, Mira. It's good to have you around."

"You're surprisingly robust for how adorable you are, Mira!"

Forget suspecting him. Mitter had managed to earn the wholehearted trust of his fellow maids.

Maid work required a fair bit of hard labor, and his strength was greatly treasured in a workplace of nothing but women. The foreign substance known as Mira had greatly lightened the workload.

"And...I wonder what it is... We're both women, but it's like...this... You have a charm the other girls don't have..."

"There's something about you that makes me want to dote on you..."

"I wonder what. What is this feeling...?"

Mira drew heated gazes from the other maids. The manly charm he faintly exuded was stealing their hearts away. As he interacted with them so close and personal as a woman, the masculine pheromones he let off were making them giddy.

Mira was quite the devilish woman.

"Hey, Mira, how about we hit the bath together after this?"

"P-Please, no, ma'am... I have a dreadful birthmark, so I try not to bathe with other people..."

"Oh, what's the harm in a little birthmark? You don't need to be worried

about that."

Mira was being hounded by a number of maids. He threw out an arbitrary reason to ensure he didn't go to the baths with them. Of course, he had no birthmark on his body. All he had was a certain something that would have shocked them all.

The dangling, ghastly thing I was born with!

"Hey, Mira, how about you go to town with me sometime? There's a nice shop I want to show you."

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"U-Umm..."
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"Ah, no fair. Hey, Mira. How about I take you somewhere nice? Do you want to go with me?"

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"No, err..."
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Two senior maids were closing in on him, one on each side, and Mitter had no idea what to do. He was incredibly popular.

"What are you blushing for?!"

"Bfwhoa...?!"

"Eep!"

It was at that moment that Rachel appeared, delivering a kick to Mitter's face. Her foot struck his head with such momentum it sent him flying back from his seat on the sofa.

"Wh-Why do you look so full of yourself having women fawning all over you?! Mira! You're all mine, you hear! Don't go flirting with anyone else!"

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"Owowow..."
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Rachel folded her arms and scoffed. Her displeasure could be felt from every fiber of her being.

And naturally so. Her boyfriend was being approached by other women. Even if it was through a show of intimidation, she needed to assert loud and clear what was hers. Her actions were a little violent, but she had a proper reason.

A proper reason, surely...

"Oh my, Ray. You say little Mira here is 'all yours'?"

"I never knew you two were in that sort of relationship."

"N-No...! Y-You're...not wrong...but, er...a little wrong...!"

Ray, or rather Rachel, was losing her mind. Ray was the false name she'd assumed to hide her identity.

"You two do get along so well. I just never thought your relationship was that deep."

"And both of you are girls to boot. Good going, Ray."

"No, err, that's...!"

Rachel and Mitter were lovers. But now, Mitter appeared to be a woman. This gave rise to a rather complicated situation.

Rachel struggled to speak in the face of the smug grins of her senior maids. She was hiding her identity and so could say nothing. In the end, she was left gritting her teeth.

"Oof, that smarts... Oh, right... I have a question about the master of this place..." Mitter stood and tried to steer the conversation in the proper direction. Even in this situation, he intended to do his work right.

"I've heard that the master of the manor is a womanizer. So, it's likely we'll be called to his room at some point..."

"Yeah, I guess the new hires would be concerned about that..."

The heroes were diligently drawing information out of their fellow maids, and the other workers. Luckily, Mitter was adored by almost everyone, and this made it easy to gather information.

They were mainly trying to track down evidence of the master's misdeeds. But this wasn't so easy to find. Still, they obtained an important lead.

There was apparently a room hidden in the master's bedroom. One of the senior maids had coincidentally found a strange switch while cleaning and flipped it. Then, one of the tables moved on its own, revealing a hidden passageway beneath it. The maid thought she'd stumbled upon something she

shouldn't have, and immediately flipped the switch again to hide the passageway. It was best to let sleeping dogs lie.

And so, the maid didn't see what was farther in and hid from the master that she even knew anything at all. She still worked in the manor as a maid.

The short of the matter was that there was a clearly suspicious room, and Mitter—alongside his other comrades—made it their goal to investigate it.

It wasn't going to be easy. The nobleman would always have his own personal soldiers stationed in front of his bedroom, and it would be difficult to infiltrate without being seen.

So they put together a plan. Eventually, one of them would be called to the nobleman's bedroom. When that happened, they'd knock him out and probe through the room without making a sound. They'd find the hidden room and claim the proof of his misdoings.

"The maids here have all been called to his bedrooms at least once. You might need to look out for that..."

"But it looks like he doesn't lay hands on the new hires. Not immediately. Maybe it's a matter of honor or something? I don't think you'll be called for, at least, not for now..."

"I see. Thank you..."

They obtained more information from their seniors in the business. Knowing that the grim fate of new recruits was deferred, they were able to continue gathering information with some peace of mind. They grasped at clues and put together a strategy.

As for when the trap would be sprung, that would depend on the nobleman's actions.

One day, Mitter was tidying up the storehouse. He worked diligently in the dim, windowless room lifting heavy things and organizing them. It was a job that mainly required brute strength, so he personally volunteered to do it.

"Upsy-daisy..."

Mitter carried a rather large and heavy box through the sprinkling of dust that lingered in the air. His arms were spread wide, as he had to use his entire body to move it.

That was when the storehouse door opened with a creak.

"Greetings. Are you making any progress?"

"Huh? Master...?"

The one who stepped in was the corrupt nobleman himself.

Mitter's eyes widened. Why had he come here? It was a complete mystery, and Mitter was startled by his unprompted appearance.

"Umm... What brings you here, Master...?"

"Oh, yes. About that. I was looking for something, and I thought I might find it in storage..."

"Oh, is that so? If you tell me what it is, we could search together."

"Oh, no, that's perfectly fine. I'll search on my own. Mira, darling, please continue your work."

The master began rummaging through the various things within the storehouse.

I guess it happens from time to time, thought Mitter as he accepted the situation and got back to work. He was currently moving a very large parcel. Both his hands were occupied, and he couldn't help out the master anyway.

But then it happened, as soon as he'd put that parcel where it was supposed to be.

"Mira, dear...!"

"Whoa?!"

The master embraced him from behind.

"Ooh hoo hoo! I can't hold it in anymore! It's your fault for being so cute, my dear Mira!"

"Huh?! Wha?!"

The master had aimed for the moment when Mira was working alone in the storehouse with no one watching to assault her.

"Ooh hoo hoo! Mira! Mira, my love...!"

"Wh-What are you...?!"

Quickly realizing the situation he'd been placed in, Mitter hesitated to act. He could resist if he wanted to—there was no way he'd ever lose to a normal human being.

But was it really all right to make a mess of things here?

Mitter thought for a moment. He was in the middle of a covert mission. If he put up a fight, wouldn't it ruin the entire operation? He or one of his comrades would be called to this man's bedroom, where they would search the room hidden beneath it. That was the plan they'd set up.

But this was a storehouse, not the bedroom. If he raised a ruckus here, perhaps they would be unable to claim the proof of his corruption.

Mitter continued to ponder his predicament.

What do I do? Put up with it? Isn't it better if I don't offer any resistance here...?

"Yeah, like hell I'm going to put up with this!"

"Gyaaaah?!"

His hesitation lasted only a brief instant. Mitter shook off the nobleman's hands and kicked his nether regions with all his might. By common sense alone, it was impossible for him not to resist.

"Aaaaaaaaah!"

The room was filled with a sound like a rooster's last throes as it was strangled to death. A man had been struck in his greatest weak point by a merciless blow from a master martial artist. He was about to fall unconscious from the pain.

A fitting end for this enemy of women.

Even though Mitter had been the one to launch the kick, he felt a chill run

through his own crotch.

"Aaaaaah...aaaah!"

The moment before he was out cold, the vile nobleman saw something. His eyes happened upon Mitter's panties. As the maid had raised his leg high in his kick, his skirt was turned up, revealing the panties within.

"The noble...bulge..."

And with those final words, he foamed at the mouth and was down for the count.

"Dammit..."

Mitter's face turned red as he pushed his skirt down. He was undoubtedly a man.

"Wh-What happened?! I heard a scream!"

It was around that time that someone came, having heard the man cry out in pain.

Oh now, they're already here. I don't even have time to hide his unconscious body, Mitter thought through gritted teeth.

The face he saw, however, gave him a bit of relief.

"Wait, it's just you, Liz."

"Mira? What's wrong?"

Liz was the first person on the scene. She saw the noble out cold on the floor and quickly pieced together the situation.

"For now...should I get everyone together?"

"Thanks... We should get out of here while we're at it."

The man was tied up and stuffed into a random box before the two of them left the storehouse. Quickly, they gathered up Sylphie, Melvy, and Rachel, and hid in the shadow of the manor.

It was time for a strategy meeting.

"I-I'm sorry, everyone. I've complicated things..."

"Not at all. Don't sweat it."

"Anyone would've smashed his jewels there."

Mitter was incredibly apologetic, but no one condemned him for it. With that said, they'd been driven into a corner. The body was hidden, but someone would surely notice something soon. Perhaps they'd already gathered after hearing the scream.

The soldiers on the estate would be on high alert. But the heroes couldn't make their escape just yet. They had yet to grasp any definitive proof of the crimes the man had committed. There was no turning back.

This was quite the predicament.

"Hmm..."

Everyone folded their arms and thought.

How would they get out of this situation? Was there any master plan to get them through this?

They put their heads together and narrowed down their options.

And finally, Rachel said, "This is a huge pain. Why don't we just brute-force it?"

Her offhanded comment brought a serious look to their faces.

"Yeah, why not?"

Their hearts were as one.

With looks of resignation, they stood silently. Without a moment's hesitation, they made a beeline straight for the master's bedroom.

"Wh-What are you doing here?!"

"This is off-lim—"

The soldiers guarding the bedroom attacked them, but the girls silenced them through force. These were, after all, the strongest humans the world had to offer. A noble's private soldiers couldn't hold a candle to them.

They stormed into the bedroom and began to violently rummage through it

like thieves. It was such a forceful, burglary-like ransack it made one wonder, What was the point of all the covert stuff?

"Found the switch!"

"We're good to go!"

Bulldozing through all the obstacles, they found the hidden room and forcefully found the evidence they were looking for. Mere minutes after the strategy meeting, through means that would make even bandits blush, they had completely succeeded in everything they'd set out to do.

"We should have just started with this...!" Mitter screamed. "There was really no need for me to cross-dress, was there?!"

It was a scream from the depths of his soul. A human who could stop these girls simply didn't exist. Even if every single soldier took them on at once, even one of the girls would be enough to completely overwhelm them. Thus, it wouldn't have been an issue if they forced their way through from the very start.

And it stood to reason, it all worked out perfectly.

Mitter had been sentenced to a pointless death—no, a pointless dress.

"Now, now, Mira. Settle down."

"Your cross-dressing was absolutely necessary. Probably."

"It served an important role, surely."

"You're all lying to me!"

Mira's sorrowful scream echoed through the air, his frilly skirt fluttering beneath him.

Chapter 44: Now—Let's Rock! The All Girls' Pajama Party!

"We shall now commence the pajama party!"

"Hooray!"

The room roared with scattered and sparse applause.

We were in Sylphie's room, five pajama-clad girls gathered inside a vast suite contained within a high-class hotel.

Special arrangements had been made for this special day; the number of beds had been increased so we could all lounge around together.

Today, it was just Sylphie, Melvy, Rachel, Remiphinia, and I having a pajama party.

"Umm, err... How should I put this...? This is very student-like!"

"This is my first ever pajama party!"

Melvy's and Remiphinia's eyes sparkled with excitement.

We all wore loose pajamas, lying around on our large beds and relaxing. Just five close friends getting together to chat the night away in a warm and cozy room. A quintessential vignette of youth.

"Back when we were traveling, we'd huddle together for warmth on the dirty floor."

"Yeah, this is definitely different from sleeping with comrades in the middle of a jungle that reeks of wild beast dung."

"But we were still sleeping together, despite the muck all over everything. Maybe that was a sort of pajama party too?"

"I-I don't think so...?" I offered.

Remiphinia agreed, "You all had it rough...didn't you..."

Sylphie and Rachel spoke of the harshness of the road. It seemed that the hero's party had experienced their fair share of miserable pajama parties along the way.

"I have some sweets on the table. Feel free to take whatever you want."

"Okay!"

Today was special. We would eat and drink to our hearts' content. No one was going to fret over something like calories. We had to let loose to our hearts' content and relish in the relaxing atmosphere with all our might. It was the duty of every lady to fully embrace a pajama party.

"Now then, let's start with discussing Remphie's love life."

"Ah, w-we're already getting into that...?" Remiphinia replied with a red face.

She was the main star of today's party.

Currently, a passionate love burned within Remiphinia. Her beau was Wolfe, former battalion commander of the demon army. He'd saved her life three years ago, and they'd just recently achieved a dramatic reunion.

He was seven years her senior, yet she was brimming with motivation—desperate to have him look her way. Today's pajama party was mainly a gettogether to consult on the issue.

"T-Today, I'd love to get some inspiration from the romantic anecdotes of my experienced seniors!" exclaimed Remiphinia. "Please share them with me!"

Remiphinia gazed at us with determination. She wanted to hear about our bountiful experience before anything else.

There was silence.

Silence.

Even more silence.

"Umm... Huh? Is something wrong, my experienced seniors?"

Yet for some reason, not a single one of us opened our mouths.

And it wasn't like we were trying to wait for someone to go first. How to put it —we were all giving off a rather troubled feeling.

"Umm...I, err, I have never had a boyfriend before so..." I started out.

My reason for staying silent was simple enough. I had no experience whatsoever.

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"Huh? L-Lady Lisalinde? Th-That's very surprising..."

"A-Aha ha..."

"I heard you were very popular within the academy..."
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"That is a different matter entirely..."

I let out a light sigh before taking in a sip of juice. The tart orange flavor reached every corner of my mouth.

"That's why I think you're better off hearing it from the three ladies who have lovers of their own. You're all hitting it off very well, aren't you?"

"Oh, that's right! Sis, I've heard you are very close with Sir Cain! Please tell me all about it!"

Remiphinia turned those sparkling eyes to her sister Sylphie.

But...more silence. Her lips were still heavy, as were everyone else's.

Finally, Sylphie timidly opened her mouth, speaking as if it was a touchy subject. "Y-yes, for me... Well, you see, my engagement to Sir Cain was decided by the officials of my nation... I did not win him for myself. I have no advice to give."

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"Umm, err...ditto..."

"Huh..."
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Sylphie raised her hands in surrender, and Melvy quickly followed suit.

The two of them had been dragged into a political struggle between the nation and the church; this culminated in their engagements with the hero regardless of the will of those involved. Despite the circumstances, the girls themselves fell in love and found themselves in a happy relationship nonetheless, but as they had not been the ones to spark these relationships themselves, they seemed to lack confidence in their love advice.

"If it's about romance, ask Rachel. That there is a woman who seized her love

with her own hands."

"Hey! Sylphie?! Don't put words in my mouth! I-It's not like I'm confident either!"

Sylphie handed the matter off to Rachel like a hot potato. But even Rachel struggled to pick up the baton.

"Rachel, I've heard you are in a loving relationship with Sir Mitter! Please tell us about it!"

"Nope! Not happening! I've got no feminine charm, you hear! It's almost a miracle that I'm even going out with Mitter!"

Rachel waved her arms around as she retreated on the bed.

Is it just me, or are there far too many people on the hero's party who lack any confidence in romance?

"B-But there has to be something that finally got you together! Some significant moment! What was the final push?!"

"The final...push?"

"Yes!"

For some reason, Rachel broke into a sweat.

"Rachel...?"

After a moment's hesitation, Rachel flushed red and cried out, "Mm... Bah! It's too early for you, Remiphinia!"

Wh-What in the...?

She seemed to panic before giving a conspicuous cough to regain control of the situation.

"Huh? What?! Wh-What's the harm?! Please tell me!"

"I-I can't! Anything else, but not this! It's not something a good girl should know...!"

"Aww..."

What exactly happened to her?

Remiphinia continued pressing her, but Rachel stubbornly refused to talk.

What's something that can't be shared with good girls?

The little princess and I were completely left in the dark, with no recourse but to cock our heads quizzically.

"It was homemade cookies."

"Yes, those homemade cookies..."

Sylphie and Melvy spoke quietly and calmly, a hint of nostalgia hanging on their every word.

"Hey! You can't, not another word! You fools!"

Homemade cookies...?

Why was that something that couldn't be shared with good girls?

"Oh! Homemade sweets? I have to make them and deliver them to my love! That may be a good start!"

"R-Right! You're on the right track..."

Remiphinia seemed delighted to receive some good advice. But still, Rachel was acting strange. Her voice quavered as she repeatedly voiced her agreement. It was like she was trying to cover something up.

Why was giving sweets—such a straightforward piece of advice—not suitable for the conversation? The three of them were clearly hiding something.

"Liz is looking at us doubtfully."

"The instigator herself..."

"Huh? Wh-What did I do ...?"

I was just staring at them, but for some reason, I was faced with resentful words and poisonous looks. I didn't get it.

Why me...?

"E-Even if you don't have any specific love stories, do you have any advice?! What is the best way for me to approach Sir Wolfe?!"

"Approach, huh...?"

Unable to hear the anecdotes she wanted, Remiphinia sought our advice instead. Certainly, just because we lacked romantic experience, that didn't mean we were unable to offer any advice whatsoever. If we put our heads together, perhaps we could devise some good way to win over a man.

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"Approach... Approach..."

"Hmm..."

We cocked our heads deep in thought.

Amid the prolonged silence came a single utterance:

"Sex."

Silence.

Silence.

"Hey... Liz."

"Huh?! What did I just...?! What was I thinking...?!"
```

"N-No! This is some sort of mistake! I never intended to say something like that! It was just a passing thought...!"

How could sex be the first step towards winning over a man? That was far too shameless.

You're wrong. Completely wrong!

My tongue had somehow slipped.

I am in no way a vulgar human being. I'm prim and proper, an exemplary person with class! And I am most certainly not interested in sex!

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"S-Se... Oh, my..."
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Remiphinia was red in the face. This was understandably too stimulating a topic for a twelve-year-old girl.

I'd said something uncalled for. If her attendants were to find out I'd said such an indecent word to the princess, that alone would see my head rolling.

This is bad. Really bad. I need to tighten my focus, to ensure my tongue doesn't slip again...

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"I-Incidentally..."

"Yes?"
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Remiphinia covered her heated cheeks with her hands as she asked, "If I use s-ss-s...sex...will Sir Wolfe b-be...all over me...?"

"You're interested in sex? Certainly. Through indecent acts, a loving couple can reach an even deeper relationship than before. For men, it emerges as a sense of responsibility, but it goes further than that. It causes intimate feelings to take root on an instinctual level. That is simply how we are made as living beings. It's perfectly all right. It may be scary at first, but sex is not an evil deed in the slightest. It is absolutely nothing to be ashamed of—it is a deed that allows humanity to survive and prosper, and to retain its humanity. The desire to forge a deeper bond with the one you love is perfectly normal—no, I'd even say it is precious, invaluable—but there is indeed good sex and bad sex, and wanting the person you love to like you in turn is also a natural thing, and yes. As for how exactly you can facilitate good sex, well..."

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"Liz! Stop!"

Huh?!

Suddenly I regained my sanity.

"N-No! There was something wrong with me just now!"

"A-A-Amazing..."

"Ah, wait! No!"

Remiphinia had turned so red there was practically steam rising off her head.

What did I just say? I can't even remember anymore!

"I-I am not the sort of person who would say such things...!"

"Yeah, yeah, the succubus can stay out of this."

"You're wrong! This is all wrong...!"
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At the end of all my discourtesy, I found myself wrapped up in a blanket and bound before I could do any more damage.

I am not a succubus. I could *never* be a succubus!

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This stings... It's all some sort of misunderstanding...

"S-S-Se-Se..."

"Yes, yes, you really don't have to worry about what Liz said."

As Remiphinia's body trembled, Sylphie gently placed a hand on her head.

"But that aside, we really aren't getting any decent advice here..."

"Right. What should we do...?"
```

Everyone was at a loss. If they couldn't offer any advice to Remiphinia, then this pajama party would lose its very reason for existence.

And I'd already lost my right to speak...

"I thought this might happen, so I called in some help."

"Huh?"

Just as we were wondering what to do, Sylphie came out with a surprise proclamation.

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Help?
Huh? What's she talking about?
"All right, you can come in."
"Coming."
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Before I could even ask who she'd summoned, the door slowly swung open. Our attention all gathered in that direction. Just beyond the doorway stood a lone girl.

"I raced here as fast as I could the moment I heard the boss was in trouble! It's me, Aina!"

"Wow."

The newest challenger came in the form of our classmate, Aina. Her pink hair swayed back and forth as she approached.

"Remphie, allow me to introduce her. This lady is a seasoned veteran when it comes to nabbing men. She's our classmate Aina."

"Good evening, Princess Remiphinia! I'm Aina!"

"Ah, err, it's a pleasure to meet you!"

The two of them exchanged a handshake.

I never expected Aina to be called in. That was a surprise.

Did Sylphie and Aina always get along?

"Oh? What's this? Why've they got you wrapped up, boss?"

"Ha ha ha, I said something I shouldn't have..."

"Oh, just what I expected from you, boss!"

What's that supposed to mean? I don't get it.

"I may be a novice in the field, but I, Aina, shall teach you the techniques you need to pick yourself up a man."

"P-Please do...?"

Before we had any grip on what was going on, Aina launched into a lecture. Remiphinia was still a little uneasy about the unfamiliar woman who'd suddenly appeared without warning.

However, the three members of the hero's party showed no surprise whatsoever. They were far too good at adapting to the situation.

"For starters, Princess. If I may be presumptuous, I believe you're trying to find the means to make a man fall for you, and what exactly you have to do to win them over. But that's not what you need at all."

"Huh? It's not...?"

"Men, you see. They're not meant to be hunted. You must make them the hunter."

Aina grinned. It was a devilish smile oozing with venom, but it was precisely for this reason that it also harbored a profound beauty.

"You must start by giving the targeted man a strong impression of you. It can be a fight, if that works for you. You can even give him a harsh reprimand. It does not matter if his feelings are initially hostile—you must simply make him

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very aware of you."
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"I-I can fight with him...?"

"That's right. But after the stick must come the carrot. Just a little bit at first." Remiphinia gulped at this.

"'You're more interesting than I gave you credit for.' 'I wouldn't stick around if I really hated you.' 'It's fun getting up to nonsense with you.' Something along those lines. It can be anything. Just a slight glimpse of your goodwill."

"A-And what happens if I do that...?"

"He'll start thinking about you."

"...<u>!</u>"

The course on romance had barely even begun, but having been informed of a tactic she'd never heard of before, Remiphinia was already being swept away by Aina's wisdom.

"By that point, you've practically won already. He's a fish that's already swallowed the hook. You can push or pull. Boil or bake. That ball's in your court from there."

"A-Amazing...!"

Remiphinia stared at Aina with radiant eyes.

That was a temptress for you. The academy's greatest temptress, and greatest tactician. Her devilish skills forged in the fires of faction building had our naive souls quivering in defeat.

"A-Are we sure about this...? Isn't Remiphinia being pulled down the path of a wicked temptress?"

"But it's far more wholesome than whatever Liz suggested."

"I wasn't in my right mind when I said that...!"

Please don't keep dragging that out! I can't even argue with it...!

"Aina! Please! Please teach me more of your techniques!"

"Now, now, no need to rush. Next, I'll teach you the trick to purposely

showing weakness..."

"Okay!"

Remiphinia had begun eagerly taking notes.

It's hopeless. It doesn't look like we can stop them now.

"Men, you see. They all have desires they hold close to their heart. They want to become someone reliable; they want to be able to support someone. It's baked into them. That's what you need to stimulate."

"H-How do I do that...?!"

"You show them a woman's weakness. 'I was hurt because of such and such. Won't you please be nice to me?' Just by creating that mood, the man will no longer be able to back away. Because it's shameful for a man to abandon a wounded woman. They'll offer you kind words and a gentle embrace. And that, you see. That is him closing the distance *for* you."

"M-My word...!"

Before we knew it, we were listening too.

We were there with Remiphinia, astounded by Aina's devilish technique.

"That's where you'll see your chance to strike. Even if they don't fall, you'll close the distance even further. After all, their guard will be down. An unguarded man, why, they're just asking to be struck down by some sweet whispers of love."

"I-Incredible..."

"So this is the academy's best..."

The pajama party had turned into a study group on the tactical intricacies of romance. A strange sense of tension had infiltrated the cozy space.

"Please, let me call you master!"

Remiphinia said something outrageous.

With eyes of respect and passion, she stared intently at Aina.

"Hmm... Are you sure you can endure my harsh training?"

"I'll do my best! I'll do whatever it takes! So please teach me more techniques to win over the man I love...!"

"Well said! Then I'll move straight onto the next secret art! Prepare yourself!"

"Stop, stop, please stop."

I tried stopping them as they got into a peculiar fervor, but it was pointless.

Standing boldly and triumphantly atop the bed, Aina raised her voice.

"Remiphinia, you have a powerful weapon on your side! And by that, I mean your youth!"

"Huh?! But wouldn't it be easier if I was a woman with an adult charm?!"

Finally, Aina was simply calling her Remiphinia and not Princess. It was fine since the princess in question didn't seem to care, but it would be treasonous if she did that in town.

"Men adore *cute* women. This is something carved right into their very souls, a shared, standard perception. And whenever you think of *cute*, a factor known as *smallness* is a huge modifier."

"S-So you're saying..."

"Indeed. Lolicon is an inclination engraved on a spiritual level!"

"Ooh...!"

Remiphinia was moved to tears.

It was as I feared. This was a terrible lesson for the girl.

"Well, calling it spiritual may be an overstatement, but there really are a great number of men who like young girls. Of all the abnormal fetishes, it's one of the more widespread."

Come to think of it, Cerberus said something similar, I thought. Those three dog heads crossed my mind.

"U-Umm... Then is Sir Wolfe a lolicon...?"

"Who knows? I couldn't say. Many men hide their lolicon tendencies away and take them to their graves..."

Aina folded her arms and thought. Remiphinia's eyes wavered with concern.

"But even if he isn't a lolicon right now, you can have him awaken as one."

"…<u>!</u>"

"So that's the name of the game. Let's turn Wolfe into a lolicon! That's the fastest and most effective weapon!"

"What a revolutionary idea!"

"Wolfe! Run!"

Remiphinia's eyes were shining more than they had ever shone before, but I was worried about Wolfe's fate, and Wolfe's fate alone. But I could do nothing. I was wrapped up, unable to move.

I'm sorry, Wolfe. It doesn't look like I can save you...

"Do we have any items that can draw out the cuteness of a loli?"

"Ah, come to think of it, Aina, I do possess a school swimsuit."

"Just what I was looking for."

"Why do you just have that lying around?!"

In no time at all, Sylphie produced a somewhat dicey cosplay outfit. I was left dumbfounded.

"You know, we had that Costume Café Fair not too long ago, right? It's a rejected outfit from the event."

"So the harmful effects of that plan are showing up here too...!"

It was a perfectly ordinary school swimsuit, but the moment it was used for anything outside of swim classes, it suddenly started looking obscene. It exposed less than a standard swimsuit, and yet, it still somehow gave off a sense of absolute immorality.

"No, no, no! You can't...! That's something that you should never do! I don't think you should dress her in anything lewd...!"

I had to stop everyone before they went too far. I felt a sense of duty.

"Huh?"

"It'll be pretty hard to send Wolfe down the lolicon route if we don't go with a bold offensive."

"You can't! Remiphinia is a princess, you know! You can't just dress her up in anything you want to...!"

"Huh?"

Why is everyone looking at me with reproach? Why?! You're all crazy! I'm simply stating common sense, so why am I the minority opinion here?!

"But, boss, this is an earnest plea from my sweet little disciple..."

"What's the harm, Liz? She says she wants to do it."

"You can't!"

"Huh?"

I firmly denied it.

Rather, Sylphie, this is your little sister we're talking about. Shouldn't you be on my side here? The adults around you are using your sister as an excuse to have fun playing dress-up.

It looks like I need to be the firm one here!

"You can't! You can't! I won't allow such an unethical getup for as long as I live! Never! Absolutely not! We mustn't let Princess Remiphinia tread down the path of evil! I must protect her to the end!" I screamed.

That was my firm resolve.

Ten minutes later...

"Hah! Good, just like that! Widdwe Wemiphinia, you'we adowabwe! Hah, hah... Tuwn youw head a widdwe to the wight... Aah! Good! Perfect! You're a star, Remiphinia! The cutest in the world! Hff, hff...!"

In a feverish daze, I snapped photo after photo, after photo.

Right before my eyes stood "widdwe" Remiphinia in a school swimsuit.

The waterproof fabric accentuated the developing lines of her body and was

incredibly provocative.

Her light-red hair contrasted nicely with the swimsuit's deep navy, making it seem even more beautiful than before.

"Doing gweat! Wunderbar! Looking cute, Remiphinia! How about a pose? Put your arm like this... Aah! You got it! That's the spirit!"

"R-Really...?"

"I'm serious, it's true! You're truly adorable! Now smile...! Aaah! Good! Perfect! Remiphinia, my sweet!"

The shutter snapped and snapped in a vortex of insanity. My hand wouldn't stop.

A heated breath leaked from my lips.

I had a feeling I was going insane, but that was of trivial insignificance. My instincts were screaming at me, telling me that my finger on the shutter button could never know rest.

My sense of duty compelled me to capture the form of this beautiful and sweet little girl. I needed to preserve it in some way, or it would be the greatest loss to all of humanity. My soul knew it to be so.

"Wonderful! So precious! Way too precious!"

"Liz, aren't you the one who's getting the most excited over lewd stuff here?" Rachel retorted.

The fact I had initially been so opposed to the school swimsuit made it difficult to refute the point.

"Th-That's not it at all! I'm simply a simple photographer pursuing pure beauty. I-I am not looking for anything lewd... I am in love with beauty and nothing more!"

"You're finally turning defiant, eh."

Y-You're wrong! As a photographer, I simply seek the zenith of aesthetic perfection! It's a pure and wholesome desire! When something so perfect is right before me, my hands move on their own...!

"You're cute too, Melvy! The school backpack suits you wonderfully! Aaaaaah! Cute! Cute! This is the best...!"

"I...see."

Right next to Remiphinia was Melvy in a charming cosplay of her own.

Not a school swimsuit though, no.

She wore the uniform for the academy's elementary school division with a regulation backpack on her back. The high-quality materials that went into making the uniforms of our prestigious academy served to draw out the class of whoever wore them.



Melvy was seventeen years old. Only one year younger than me.

But she was short and petite, and her cuteness was completely incomparable to anything my lowly being could possess.

That was the saint for you. She perfectly expressed the cherubic innocence and naivete of the kids in the elementary division. The finest legal loli, combining smallness and cuteness.

"Pheeew! Cute! Cute! This is great! It's the best! Melvy!"

"Yes, yes, I get it."

She seemed strangely used to this as she easily fended me off.

Has she ever done something like this before? I wondered.

"But to think the boss would get this into it... I guess I really am a wonderful producer after all!"

"No, Liz has always been like that."

Aina stuck out her chest proudly, only to receive a retort from Sylphie.

You're wrong. I'm not always like this. Right now, my heart simply burns with the pursuit of beauty.

"But, Remiphinia. Are you sure you should be wearing something like that?" Rachel asked, flat out.

"It's all right! If this is what it takes to fascinate Wolfe, then I'm prepared to do anything!"

Remiphinia was overflowing with motivation.

"I know you were just kinda swept up into this, but are you okay, Saint Melvy? You're not mad?"

"Hmph. I'm used to it..." Melvy replied with a scoff.

Used to it? How so? Is there someone in the hero's party who likes dressing her up in loli outfits? The way she stood so boldly brought to mind the gallant stance of a seasoned warrior.

"But...is that outfit really going to do anything to Wolfe?" Sylphie asked.

Rachel replied, "Point taken. It kinda veers so far into that territory it just comes out feeling criminal."

Perhaps they were right about that.

Wemiphinia and Mewvy were supremely adorable, but they had reached such tantalizing levels of cuteness that they had started coming off as completely off-limits.

Under all circumstances, no good adult should ever place a hand on a small child. This was known as the "Yes Lolita, no touch" spirit. Perhaps these outfits would only serve to strengthen that feeling.

For someone as calm and collected as Wolfe, perhaps this would only make him take even more distance from her than before.

"Umm... That would be troublesome..."

"Hmm, what should we do ...?"

We all folded our arms and thought.

I wanted to draw out all of Remiphinia's cuteness to make Wolfe head over heels for her. But too much of that would just drive him away.

Hmm... Is there any good way to resolve this...?

It happened just as everyone was pondering this pressing issue.

"I overheard what you were talking about!"

"Eep...!"

All of a sudden, the door to the room was thrown open with a bang. The sudden shout took us all by surprise.

We had an intruder.

"Leave all your woes in my capable hands! I will resolve them perfectly!"

"M-Ms. Bienvenuta...? What are you doing here...?"

The tall and slender woman proudly stuck out her chest.

Bienvenuta was now in the room.

"Huh? Who?"

"Umm... She's the manager of the armor shop, right?"

We all broke out in confused sweats.

Bienvenuta was the owner of the adventurers' guild's onsite armor shop. She was also renowned as a fashion designer, her clothing both gorgeous and popular. Melvy and I had worked part-time at the armor shop before.

"Wh-What is someone like that doing here...?"

Aina eyed her suspiciously. Understandably so.

Meanwhile, Sylphie and the other members of the hero party seemed to know about her. Presumably, they'd ordered armor from her before.

"I heard something very curious in passing, so I stuck my ear to the door and eavesdropped!"

"What do we do? Should we call the police...?"

We were rattled. As I thought, this woman was a little dangerous.

"Whoa, hold on there. Give me a minute, okay? Can you just pretend I pulled a fast one on you and let me handle it? You won't regret it!"

"Huh?"

Despite all the doubtful looks cast her way, Bienvenuta maintained her confidence as she took out a few sets of clothing. Such pluck in her situation. There was a sort of charisma, something abnormal to her.

"Try wearing these clothes I prepared in advance!"

"Huh?"

"Don't worry, I just know it'll work out!"

Still half in doubt, Remiphinia and Melvy changed into the provided clothes. I nearly broke into a nosebleed as I watched two beautiful girls changing, but I desperately endured, keeping it from showing on my face.

Once they were finished.

"U-Uwoooooooooh...?!"

Cheers rose from all around.

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"U-Umm... How is it?"

"It's not bad, is it?"

Bad? Heavens, no.
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Two angels had descended right before us.

They were both wearing maid outfits with some oriental inspiration. The traditional kimono of the eastern lands had been fashioned into maid clothes.

This was the same design used during the Costume Café Fair, but they had been modified for their height.

The cloth overlapped with itself at the chest and was fastened with a sash at the waist. The sleeves were long, and would elegantly sway with each movement of the hand. It was a peculiar outfit not found in our nation.

This traditional garment was paired with a pinafore and frills, producing an Eastern-style maid.

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"C-Cute..."
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I gulped down my saliva, my eyes locked onto Melvy and Remiphinia.

Cute. Far too cute.

The light and airy cuteness of a maid uniform mingled with the kimono's exotic charm, bringing out 120 percent of the two little ladies. It was cuter than I could bear.

My shutter finger wouldn't stop moving.

"But why is it...?" Sylphie muttered.

And I was thinking much the same thing.

The clothes they were wearing had originally belonged to the Costume Café Fair. They weren't meant for loli cosplay fun. And yet, they still managed to produce an overflowing sense of cuteness from these little ladies. What's more, the off-limits, indecent feel of the school swimsuit had somehow been mitigated.

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No! I see...! So that's what it is...!
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"This is one thing you need to get in your heads. Loli is not defined by age in the slightest. Loli is itself the embodiment of the atmosphere—the aesthetic that these kids possess," Bienvenuta explained as I reached enlightenment. "Small and cute. Soft and lovable. That alone is what it means to be loli."

"Wh-What do you...?"

"Turn that around, and anything small and cute is loli!" Bienvenuta declared with a triumphant snort. "To summarize! They are not loli because they're wearing loli outfits! No matter what a loli wears, it is loli!"

"S-Say what?!"

"All we're doing is drawing out the fundamental appeal of our loli material!"

It was just as she described. We'd prepared youthful clothing to bring Remiphinia's youth to the forefront. However, we were putting the cart before the horse.

Remiphinia's very existence was already adorable, and she let off more than enough loli-ness on her own. When we then went on to deck her out in loli attire, we raised the loli level to an excessive degree and relegated her to a minor niche.

That was why Bienvenuta prepared clothes that were far more subdued. Using an adorable and exotic maid uniform to bring that appeal in a different direction, she had perfectly matched it to Remiphinia.

As a result, she maximized Remiphinia's appeal and created a look that anyone could appreciate.

I see! I knew I could count on the charismatic fashion designer! She's not all talk!

"Hmph, that's the rumored coordinator for you. Not bad, Bienvenuta."

"No, I have to hand it to you when it comes to tactics and grand strategy. I'm glad I got to meet a talent like you, Aina."

Aina and Bienvenuta exchanged a firm handshake. Just now, at that very moment, we had witnessed the miraculous meeting of two geniuses.

"Yeah, just do what you want. It's...whatever."

Meanwhile, Melvy, one of the very people who'd been dressed up, was relatively calm about the whole affair. She really did seem accustomed to being treated like a dress-up doll. Did she have someone with deep, forbidden loli knowledge by her side?

"U-Umm, err... This is the important part, but... Will this outfit make Sir Wolfe head over heels for me?"

"It will, totally will! Of course it will! There isn't a man in the world who could look at you right now and not feel an aching in their heart!"

"R-Really...? Eh heh heh..."

Remiphinia's cheeks flushed as she let out a shy smile.

Cute.

Too cute.

How could anyone *not* be head over heels for her?

She'd won the war, plain and simple.

"Then shall we head straight for Wolfe right now? Show them that look, and you'll have every man in the world in the palm of your hand. It's a certain victory, I tell you."

"Huh...?! R-Right now?! I-Isn't that a bit sudden?!"

Remiphinia panicked at my proposal.

It seemed she wasn't mentally prepared for that yet. I get it. It takes courage to show off your cosplay for the first time.

But I wasn't going to back down. I couldn't back down here.

"You'll definitely lose out if you don't show him your adorableness. We had this study session to get Wolfe to fall for you, didn't we? Then this is where it really begins. If we don't deploy it in the field, then what was the point of any of this?"

"Urgh... But now that it's come to this... I'm embarrassed..."

She pressed her hands to her reddened cheeks and fidgeted.

Too cute.

Too lovable.

I took another picture.

"Remphie, make your resolve. If you are a lady of the royal house, you mustn't back down from a challenge."

"S-Sis..."

Sylphie reached out to her.

"This is your trial as a princess. Don't you see?"

"U-Understood...!"

Simply showing off a cosplay outfit had suddenly become something far more.

"Well, wait. Don't be in such a rush. To be honest, I actually prepared another outfit too."

"Bienvenuta...?"

Bienvenuta rummaged through the bag she'd brought with her.

Another outfit? She's already reached the pinnacle of cuteness. If you draw even more out of her, then what happens then? Will I even be able to survive this new outfit...?

Bienvenuta burst into a fearless smile. "Wear it and crash straight into that Wolfe of yours!"

"Yeah!"

We all thrust up our fists, our hearts as one.

This was the start of a woman's battle—an enchantress's gambit to get a man in her cage. She'd charge Wolfe and return with his head on a silver platter.

"Hip hip hooray!"

"Hip hip hooray!"

We were roused, our fighting spirit surging at the inevitable bloodbath that lay ahead.

Huh...? What was a pajama party supposed to be about, again?

Chapter 45: Now—What Was Supposed to Be a Peaceful Boys' Night

"Pon."

"Huh? That's a trash move. It's practically worthless, man."

"Dream a little! Be a man!"

"I'm fine. I prefer to take my time earning my points."

The night was calm, stars shining in the sky above. The clacking of mahjong tiles echoed throughout a brightly lit room. Four men surrounded a table, relaxing and downing strong drinks.

"All right, ron! Pure haku! That's a thousand points!"

"You little...! Mitter! Quit winning with lousy hands!"

"Give me back my half flush, dammit!"

The boys were having a game night in Cain's room, all four of them getting heated over a mahjong game. There was money on the line.

The players consisted of the usual members—Cain, Mitter, and Wolfe—alongside Clive, another male student from the academy.

"Look at you, Clive. Your old man would have a fit if he saw you smoking cigars and gambling."

"Oh shut it. It's fine. I need to unwind now and then, or I'll go crazy."

"Ha ha ha!"

Clive cursed as he arranged his pieces. He was the son of the lord who governed Academy Town. His parents had raised him very strictly to nurture him into a model aristocrat. And he'd lived up to those expectations; his grades were excellent and his conduct irreproachable. He acted as a devout follower of the Russel-Bell Church and was a respected figure within the academy.

However, the flip side of this was that he could often be found himself letting his hair down whenever his parents weren't watching. He'd hide away to smoke and drink. This was something that he and Cain found a lot of common ground in.

They were birds of a most shameful feather, two rebel peas in a pod.

"Ahhh! That's the stuff," Clive said, taking a swig of his drink.

"What a delinquent behavior for a noble."

"Just shut up, Mitter. And personally, I never thought I'd find the honorable hero party enjoying an all-night mahjong session. Don't you think that's messed up?"

"Anyone can enjoy a game of mahjong."

The smoke from Cain's and Clive's cigars filled the entire room with smog.

In Bahelgarn, the legal age for adulthood was fifteen, and this was also the legal age for smoking and drinking. Cain and Clive were both adults and were legally off the hook.

In terms of reputation, however, men who smoked cigars on school grounds were seen as somewhat less than respectable. That was why the two maintained their model student facade in public while indulging in their vices in secret.

"A'ight, time to get serious and make back those losses."

"Alcohol, cigars, and gambling. You've got a full house of bad habits, Mr. Honor Student."

"Shut it."

Clive adjusted his glasses with a flick of his hand. He fiddled with his short brown hair as he mixed up the tiles.

Today, the four of them intended to play mahjong all night, a practice known as "tetsuman." As they'd drink and gamble until morning, it would be a night of burning competitive spirit bubbling beneath their jovial facades.

"Our little honor student's picked up mahjong gambling of all things. It really

breaks your heart."

"It's your fault for teaching me, you hypocrite."

Cain feigned sadness. Ever since he became acquainted with the hero's party, Clive had become even more unhinged.

Mitter spoke up. "Come to think of it, I learned mahjong from Cain too. Where'd you pick it up, Cain?"

"Back home."

"Back home ...?"

"It was a boring, backwater place without a damn thing to do. No entertainment in sight. So I joined in on the games the adults were playing. One of them was mahjong."

"Oh, that takes me back." Wolfe nodded along to Cain's story.

The two of them were childhood friends. They shared a few memories.

"And the adults in the damn backwaters were damn bastards, the lot of them. They wouldn't even hesitate to take a kid's allowance in a betting game. There were some folks whose necks I wanted to wring back then if I'm being honest."

"Wow, sounds harsh..."

"But we didn't just sit back 'n' take it. Wolfe and I, and the other friend we had around our age. The three of us came up with a countermeasure."

"A countermeasure?"

As Clive cocked his head, Cain curled his lips into a grin.

"Signaling."

"Ha ha... Brilliant."

Signaling was a form of cheating in mahjong. They'd agree on signals beforehand to communicate their hand states and the tiles they needed. If they succeeded, they could effectively create a three-on-one game, giving them a huge advantage.

"We signaled the hell out of it and ended up ripping off those damn old men

instead. Serves 'em right."

"We spent all night coming up with new signals, you know."

"The funny thing is, there wasn't even anything to spend money on in the backwaters."

Basking in memory, Cain knocked back his drink.

"Whaddya think that jerk's doing nowadays?"

"Who knows?"

Cain and Wolfe thought back to their other childhood friend, gazing absently back at times lost.

"Anyway, what I'm trying to say is that you'll end up like the three of us—worthless scum—if you keep gambling away. You got that, Clive?"

"Was that the lesson here?"

Breathing out a column of smoke, Cain returned his eyes to Clive.

"Drinking, smoking, and gambling. Add women to the mix, and you'll become certified trash. That's what I'm worried about."

"Mind your own business."

"You want to hit up a brothel next time, Clive?"

"Forget about it. I'm scared I might actually be into it..."

"Ha ha, stupid."

And even as they spoke, their hands never stopped moving for a second. They shifted the tiles with masterful motions, keeping the game's progress flowing.

"Well, when it comes to women troubles, no one here beats Wolfe. You couldn't surpass him if you tried, Clive, my boy."

"Hey, quit it, idiot."

As the sparks scattered in his direction, Wolfe furrowed his brow.

"So, being real. What's the deal with Princess Remiphinia?"

"No idea."

Three sets of eyes focused on Wolfe. They teased with beaming, meanspirited smiles.

"A princess? You'll be marrying straight into money. Go for it, Wolfe."

"I won't."

"It's supposed to be a great honor to be adored by a princess, you know. Not reciprocating those feelings could even be seen as disrespectful."

"It's not."

"Even Sylphie finds it amusing."

"You're all just having fun toying with me!" Wolfe yelled as he slammed a tile down on the table.

"Oh, thanks for the ron!"

"Aah!"

Wolfe's discarded tile brought Clive to the top. He covered his face with his hands and gazed at the heavens. It was one misfortune after the next.

"You got distracted and handed it straight to him, you pedo."

"Pedo."

"Pedo."

"How many times do I have to tell you I'm not a pedo?!"

"Ron. Open tanyao, one thousand points."

"And it's another dogwater hand..."

Wolfe gave a sour look as he mixed up the tiles.

Booze, cigars, and gambling.

All this talk of women was a good side snack for their drinks, and though the games they played weren't completely wholesome, the four young men enjoyed their free time to the fullest as they passed the night together...

That was when it happened. There was a tapping at the door.

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"Hmm?"
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"Who is it?"

The game was put on hold as Cain went up to the door.

Who could it be at this hour? he wondered as he turned the doorknob and slowly swung the door open.

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"Fancy seeing you here, Cain!"
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"Good evening!"

"Whoa!"

He was startled.

Just beyond the doorway, he found a far larger crowd than he'd anticipated: Liz, Remiphinia, Melvy, Sylphie, Rachel, Aina, and Bienvenuta—seven women. Far too many to be dropping by his room so late at night.

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"Wh-What?"
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The four boys were flustered.

What exactly had they come for? With no way to answer that question, they could only stare wide-eyed at this sudden influx of intruders. Cain and Mitter, who both had very strong bonds with their comrades, had a terrible feeling about this.

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"C'mon, Remiphinia. Go! Go! Go!"
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"Yes, ma'am!"

With Aina urging her on, Remiphinia jogged into the room on her short legs. She breezed past Cain before he knew what was going on, and rushed to the side of her beloved Wolfe.

Wolfe swallowed his breath.

Remiphinia was dressed a little strangely. She had donned a so-called gothic Lolita dress—laces, frills, and ribbons to a near excessive degree that gave off a flowery, soft impression. However, the black and dark red base colors made it seem somber and dignified.

And, though no one seemed to press the point, it wasn't just Remiphinia. Melvy was also wearing a similar dress.

Wolfe kept his mouth shut, unsure what was what, but the thought did cross his mind: *It fits you quite well*. The dress drew out Remiphinia's adorable youthfulness but granted her an adultlike dignity as well.

As Bienvenuta had suggested to her only moments before, she'd made good use of all her endearing royal qualities without making an excessive display of her childishness.

It all went down just as the fashion designer had schemed. Wolfe had fallen right for her devilish ploy.

Then, Remiphinia said, "I love you, big brother!"



The air froze over.

A bead of sweat dripped down Wolfe's brow as his body seized up. No, it wasn't just him. Everyone else had also come to a complete stop.

Something about this felt somewhat obscene. Having a little girl dress up in cosplay and call someone "big brother"... There was something incredibly criminal about it. It wasn't Wolfe who had her cosplay, nor was it Wolfe who told her to say it. *I was just dragged into this. I haven't done anything wrong*, he thought to himself. But there was a throbbing, guilty pain in his chest.

The reason for this was that he had suddenly realized the depths of his own depravity. The moment she called him "big brother," something warm welled up within him.

And again, Wolfe wasn't alone. All the other men present felt their hearts skip a beat at those words. And so had all the women.

It was simply inevitable. Every soul in the room had lost their voice at the sheer destructive force that her words possessed.

Wolfe's hands were glued to his tiles, for which no one could fault him. A girl far younger than him had made his heart stir.

He felt an immense sense of guilt.

Perhaps it was a perfectly natural feeling, but being as earnest as he was, Wolfe felt the desperate need to beat himself up and remind himself, "I am not a pedophile."

To maintain his own sanity, he applied more and more pressure to the mahjong tiles in his grasp.

"H-Huh...? He's not reacting. Did I fail...?"

Not noticing his internal struggle, Remiphinia looked around curiously. She looked to her master and her coordinator for advice, but even they weren't reacting. They, too, had lost their words from Remiphinia's adorableness.

Bienvenuta, with blood dripping from her nose, had fallen unconscious while standing.

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"Hmm...?"
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With no one reacting or offering any advice, Remiphinia was left on her own to ponder the scene. Not understanding it, she tried it again.

"Big brother... What do you think about these clothes? Are they cute...?" she asked, striking a simple pose.

Wolfe did not answer. Whether he agreed or not, he felt he would lose something important and so he kept his mouth firmly shut.

"Big brother, I'd love it if we could play together."

She took a step forward. Wolfe remained where he was.

At this point, if he ran from the spot, he would practically be admitting he'd been done in by her charm. That was the one thing he could never do.

"Big brother, I love you..."

Remiphinia wrapped her arm around his and pressed her body against him. It was an innocent act. She was purely trying to show her childish affection. But it was finally starting to come off as degenerate to all those around her.

A young girl in cosplay was glued to a far larger man. The air of criminality grew thicker by the second. This was an image straight from a wanted poster.

Wolfe couldn't stop sweating. The others gulped down their spit. Remiphinia simply wasn't stopping, and the tension had everyone frozen.

She brought her face close to his and whispered in his ear. "I'm feeling so lonely today... Can I sleep in your bed, big brother?"

And it was then—

"Freeze! Police!"

"Wah...?!"

All of a sudden, the door to the room was violently thrown open and someone burst in.

"I felt the presence of a bad man deceiving a little girl! Stand down, and let me tie this rope around you!"

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"Huh? What?!"

"Wh-What just...?"

It was indeed the police.
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The officers possessed robust builds and had wings growing from their backs. They were the Angel Coppers, officers that they'd occasionally spot around town. No one had filed a report, yet the overly proficient boys in blue had picked up on it with their sixth sense for crime.

These were the same men who'd once taken in the minstrel Baron Delfina.

Multiple officers had Wolfe completely surrounded.

"Pervert! You're getting off on having a little girl saying weird things, aren't you?! Lock him up!"

"N-No?! I haven't...!"

"Take him in! Take him in!"

Unable to defy the burly officers, Wolfe was apprehended in no time at all.

"Y-Y-You're wrong—this is a misunderstanding! She did that on her own! I haven't done anything!"

"That's what all pedophiles say!"

"Save your excuses for the slammer."

"This is wrong! It's all wrong! I really haven't done anything...!"

The Angel Coppers hoisted him by the arms and dragged him away.

Everyone watched over the scene dumbfounded.

"It's all a misunderstanding!"

"Give it up!"

Wolfe kicked and screamed, but was powerless before the officers. He was removed from the room, the door heartlessly slamming behind him. Once he and the officers were gone, those inside the room could faintly hear the loud argument taking place outside, but soon, that, too, faded away and the room was enveloped in silence. The storm had passed as quickly as it had come.

Though everyone was taken aback, they'd also finally managed to process what had gone on.

"Umm... What should I do...?" Remiphinia timidly asked.

"It's fine. This was an unfortunate accident. There is nothing left for you to do, Princess Remiphinia," Liz explained while gently patting her on the head.

"H-Hey, what now...?"

"How am I supposed to know?"

Everyone's faces scrunched up as they racked their heads over their next course of action. But it was just as Liz said, there wasn't anything they could do.

And it wasn't like anything significant was going to happen to Wolfe. It wasn't like he'd actually laid a hand on anyone, and he would likely be back after a harsh reprimand.

"Well...whatever." And so, Cain abandoned him for the time being. "So, what's your deal? Did you seriously come here just to catch Wolfe in your despicable trap?"

"Yes, precisely."

"No, no, no! Not at all! I never thought it would come to this...!" Remiphinia vehemently shook her head, having taken Cain's joke way too seriously. "U-Umm... I thought I might be able to make Sir Wolfe fall for me..."

"I guess we can call the game a draw."

"Nah, that's a loss for Wolfe. Socially."

To Wolfe, today was a day of utter misfortune.

Cain turned his eyes to Melvy. "You look pretty snazzy in it too, Melvy. It's a nice dress."

"Ha ha ha, umm, err, seems I got caught in the cross fire again..." She let out a dry laugh.

Like Remiphinia, Melvy was dressed in a goth-loli outfit. The black dress was a wonderful contrast to her white hair.

"Are you sure about that, Cain?" said Sylphie. "If you praise Melvy when she's

dressed like that, the police might be back again."

"Hey, we're probably fine... But just in case, let's leave it at that."

"Ha ha ha ha..."

Everyone let out a dry laugh, still basking in the calm after the storm.

"Hey now... Were you playing mahjong?" Liz asked in a desperate bid to change the subject.

"Hmm? Yeah..."

Liz peered down at the tiles on the table and curiously picked one of them up.

"Do you know how to play, Lisalinde?" Clive joined the conversation.

"Umm, I do at least know the rules. Not that I've ever played before... Er, at least I don't *think* I have..."

"Hmm, that's a surprise. I didn't think an honor student like you would even know the first thing about mahjong."

Not that there was anything bad about that. However, most of the students of the academy considered mahjong to be a game played by their less reputable peers.

For this reason, Liz's words came as a surprise to Clive. There, he got an idea. An awful, horrible idea.

A mischievous smile crossed his face as he said, "Do you want to give it a go? Now that Wolfe's gone, we've got an open seat."

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"Hm? Are you sure?"
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"Huh?!"

"Wha?!"

It was a normal, inoffensive question. But the mood in the room immediately turned tense.

"Stupid...! Wh-What the hell are you saying, Clive?!"

"Huh...?"

Cain was suddenly yelling at him. Seeing the hero look so hopeless and

cornered, Clive's eyes widened.

"Why did you have to invite Liz of all people?! Are you stupid or something?!" Cain shouted.

"He's right, Clive! What do you think you're doing...!"

"Huh?! Was that really that bad?"

It wasn't just Cain either. Now Mitter was yelling too.

All he'd done was invite Lisalinde to play mahjong, so why were they getting on his case like this? He just couldn't understand it.

"Dammit...! Like hell I'm sticking around for this! I'm outta here!"

"I-I'll be taking my leave too...!"

Cain and Mitter hurriedly rose from their seats. They oozed sweat as they swiftly made their escape.

They were like a pair of wild animals who'd sensed their lives were in danger. Just what were the two of them so afraid of? Many of those in the room couldn't understand the situation.

But a few of them did.

And those few—three girls—stood in front of the door to ensure they weren't getting anywhere.

"It's not cool for a man to run with his tail between his legs! Don't you think so, Cain?!"

"Yes, that's right! How could you call yourself a man if you ran here? Right, Mitter!"

"Urgh...!"

Sylphie, Rachel, and Melvy, the members of the hero's party, were blocking the path.

They beamed, cruel smiles on their faces, clearly intent on enjoying the hell that the boys were about to experience.

"What's gotten into the heroes?"

"Who knows? I don't get it either."

Only the heroes had any grasp on how dire the situation had just become; the others simply left with proverbial question marks hanging over their heads.

"C'mon now, Cain, Mitter. Get back here already. I've already got everything set up."

"Sir Cain, Sir Mitter, let's start already."

The game was already laid out on the table behind them. Clive and Liz had taken their seats.

Cain and Mitter both gritted their teeth. They wanted to run. They wanted to be anywhere but here. But the route that led outside had been cut off by their own comrades.

There was silence. Then more silence. Their faces were as pale as convicts on death row as they sat back down.

"I'm gonna hold this one against you, Clive."

"Seriously, what's your problem ...?"

"Umm... I'm new to this. Please go easy on me."

"I don't think you're gonna need to worry about that, Liz..."

"Hmm...?"

And so, the curtain rose on a fun and friendly game of mah-jongg.

"Tsumo! Chinitsu! Haneman, cough up three thousand to six thousand points!"

"Stop it! Someone stop this already!"

"This is cruel! Far too cruel!"

"Someone save me...!"

The room had devolved into utter chaos as Liz declared her win with delight. It was a beautiful full flush, both on her cheeks and on the table. She dominated the round with a high-scoring hand.

The men wept. They were utterly helpless, and thoroughly trounced.

Tragically, this was a betting game. Their money had long since run out, and now they had been stripped down to their underwear. But the reaper before them would show no mercy.

She licked her lips as she prepared for the next round.

"Now, now! On to the next one! No need to dally!"

"No more... I can't take any more..."

"H-How did it come to this...?"

The greater the high Liz experienced, the lower the low that everyone else at the table suffered.

"What's going on here?! Cain! Isn't Lisalinde a beginner?!"

"That's why I told you not to!"

"How was I supposed to know?!"

An argument broke out among them, but this was none of Liz's business. She continued arranging the tiles with practice ease and moving the game along.

"Hey, Liz! I know you're cheating out the ass! Admit it, you're cheating somewhere!"

"Oh, I don't know what you're talking about. Please don't make any baseless accusations. If you're going to say that, you'd better come up with some evidence."

"Dammit...!"

Just as Cain suspected, Liz was using various underhanded techniques. Using a technique called "tsumikomi," she'd stack the wall in an advantageous way for herself. Then came the "bukkonuki," where she would illegally extract a number of tiles from the wall and swap them out with what was in her hand.

She'd keep tiles hidden in her palms and switch them with her hand tiles at just the right moment—the "nigirikomi."

"Caterpillar," "fanpai," "hiroi," and more. If a move existed, she was taking advantage of it to manipulate the game to her advantage.

However, since no one could catch her in the act, they couldn't take control of the situation. Liz's rebuttals were sound so long as they could only speak on pure speculation. They'd lost the opportunity to object.

"Huh?"

But even Liz herself was aware that something was strange. The tiles seemed to stick to her hands, and she found could manipulate them however she wanted, as though she was a cheating natural despite being a complete beginner at the game.

Huh...? How strange... This is actually fun...

"Kan, kan, tsumo! Rinshan kaihou! Six dora! Haneman!"

"Six dora...?!"

"You've gotta be kidding me!"

The men were utterly in despair. They fell prostrate over the table, tears streaming down their faces.

Not a single person could stop her.

"Y-You're amazing...boss..."

"To think Lisalinde was a mahjong demon... I'm astounded..."

"I don't understand this game, but I can tell that something incredible is happening..."

The spectators were wide-eyed. Liz's demonic plays were a far cry from her usual honor student act.

"Man, Liz's mahjong always leaves me in awe."

"That's the Mahjong Master for you. There's a sort of beauty to it."

In the other corner, there were those who weren't the least bit surprised. They actually seemed a bit delighted. It was the women of the hero's party.

They watched Liz's plays, entranced, their eyes sparkling. She was the master who had taught them to play the game themselves, and their respect for her was obvious.

They'd sold Cain and Mitter out for no other reason than to see their master in her element after so long.

"Heh heh heh..."

Liz flashed a fearless smile.

This is fun.

This is exciting.

This should have been her first time playing mahjong, but it was going so well. The anguished cries of the men were nothing but fuel for her excitement.

Heh heh heh, this is fun. Cheating is almost addictive.

She licked her lips.

"Tsumo! Ton, haku, iipeikou, honroutou, honitsu, two dora! Sanbaiman! That's twelve thousand total!"

"Huuuuuuh...?! A dealer's sanbaiman?!"

"What kinda messed-up hand is that ...?!"

"This can't be real...!"

The moon shone brightly in the night sky. Despite the anguished cries below, the stars twinkled beautifully in cruel indifference.

Screams echoed throughout the room.

What was supposed to be a peaceful boys' night had turned into a bloody stomping ground for a mahjong demon.

Chapter 46: Now—How about a Thousand Gold a Pop?

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"Ah, Princess Remiphinia..."
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"Lady Lisalinde? Good day!"

It was a pleasantly breezy early afternoon, the sun shining brightly in the sky. It was the perfect day for an outing, which it just so happened that Liz and Remiphinia were both on when they happened to cross paths at an Academy Town street corner, the alluring smell of freshly baked bread from a nearby bakery wafting through the air.

Liz had been caught right in the middle of stuffing her cheeks with a warm, freshly baked piece of bread, and with a fretful look on her face, she quickly swallowed it down.

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"Ah ha ha."

"Ah ha ha ha."

"Ah ha ha ha ha..."
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The two of them let out dry laughs while awkwardly scratching the backs of their heads. There was nothing wrong with eating on the go, but Liz had her image as a model student to maintain, and it felt just a little awkward being seen like this.

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"Would you...care for a piece of bread, Princess?"

"I'll take one."
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Liz offered up a hot piece of bread to distract from the awkwardness. The maid blending into the background behind her frowned a bit.

"Where are you headed, Princess?" she asked.

"I have some business to attend to at the demon lord's villa..."

According to Remiphinia, she was going to attend a meeting with the demon

lord's household. Peace negotiations were still underway between Bahelgarn royalty and the demon royal house. The talks were mainly being led by Anzel, and Remiphinia was merely supposed to be in attendance.

Liz, meanwhile, was on her way to the academy. Since they were headed in the same general direction, the two decided to walk together for a while.

"Would you like some bread, Sir Brian?"

"No, I am on duty."

"I see."

Remiphinia was being accompanied by her guard Brian. He held a coveted position as captain of the Royal Guard, and rumor had it he was so skilled he had once been considered a possible candidate for the hero's party. Excluding Princess Sylphie (a current member of the hero's party), he was likely the strongest military asset the Bahelgarn royal family could command, and he was also the guard that Remiphinia trusted most.

But still, he had to turn down the bread. He was a man of regulations, after all.

"Have you gotten used to the town yet, Princess?"

"Yes! Everyone is so kind to me, and they've been very helpful!"

They exchanged a casual back and forth as they walked the cobblestone path.

"It has been, let me think...half a month since you arrived here? Have you already transferred into the middle school division? Or are you still working out the details?"

"Oh yes, I just attended my first class the other day. Of all the schools I've seen, this one has the finest facilities! But this is the top in our nation, isn't it?"

"We've got so much stuff that everyone tends not to know what to do with themselves at first."

Remiphinia was set to transfer to the academy's middle school division. When Liz arrived in town a year prior, she had been enrolled in the high school division, so she wasn't very familiar with the middle school. Her friends Satina and Luna had been born and raised in Academy Town, however, and they had

attended the middle school there too. *Maybe I should ask them about it sometime*, thought Liz.

"Oh, and also I managed to make a friend, and get this! My friend turned out to be Lalo's grandchild!"

"What...?! Mr. Lalo has a grandchild in the middle school division?"

Liz let out a gasp of surprise. Lalo the Sorcerer was a member of the hero's party who was currently working as a teacher at the academy. She had never heard anything about his grandchild being at the academy.

"Wh-What sort of person are they? I'm curious."

"Umm...quite straightforward. She bluntly says whatever's on her mind, which is rather refreshing."

"Oh, a girl, then?"

"Oh, yes she is. A girl, that is. Also, she's incredibly smart."

"Well, she is Mr. Lalo's granddaughter."

Lalo had originally been a renowned researcher at the Great Laboratory. *It* makes sense that his descendant would be intelligent too, Liz thought to herself.

And like that, Liz and Remiphinia walked at ease and enjoyed a casual chat. But the time to part was soon upon them.

"I need to go that way."

"Oh, I see. Until next time, then..."

Liz had to head to the academy, while Remiphinia was heading for the transfer circle that would take her to the demon lord's villa.

"Goodbye, Princess Remiphinia."

"Yes, let's talk again sometime, Lady Lisalinde. Good day."

They said their goodbyes and went their separate ways. The sky was clear and calm above.

Each area that Remiphinia and her entourage crossed through was more deserted than the last. The circle to the villa was a closely guarded secret

situated on the desolate outskirts of Academy Town. In order to get there, they would need to stray from the packed crowds of the town center.

Not that it was a dangerous voyage by any account. As princess of the nation, Remiphinia had three guards including Brian, the captain of the Royal Guard. This, on top of two accompanying maids. There was no way anything could happen to her with such protection.

And so, even as she walked the lonesome alleys, Remiphinia was not the least bit concerned. She skipped her way down the narrow, wretched streets that were in much need of maintenance. There was no danger to be found within peaceful Academy Town.

Or at least...there should not have been.

"The people of the demon lord's family are waiting for us. Shall we pick up the pace?"

"My apologies, Princess Remiphinia. Our destination is not the demon lord's villa."

"Huh?"

Brian suddenly came out with something incomprehensible.

Remiphinia tilted her head in confusion. Today was undoubtedly the day of the peace talks. She didn't have anything else scheduled.

What is Brian talking about?

And in her moment of confusion, one of the guards suddenly grabbed her and restrained her.

"Huh?! Wha ... ?! Nggh?!"

The other guard swiftly stuffed a gag between her teeth, preventing her from screaming.

She was bewildered.

The suddenness of the situation had her struggling to keep up with what was happening around her. Before she could even react, her body was tied up with rope.

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"Princess?!"
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"What are you people d—?! Eep!"

The maids cried out at the guards' sudden violence, but they, too, quickly found themselves bound. The princess and her attendants had been incapacitated, all at the hands of the three members of the Royal Guard who were meant to protect her.

Remiphinia was helpless against the treachery of the very guards she had placed her trust in.

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"All right, just as planned. Let's move on to the next step."

"Yes, sir."
```

With Remiphinia and her attendants unable to even scream in their confusion, Brian and his men worked swiftly and methodically, quietly and quickly, as they lifted the princess and her maids.

They stuffed them into a carriage that had surely been prepared in advance to hide them from the public eye.

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"Start moving."
"Yes, sir."
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The door shut; the carriage lurched forward.

They were all outside of Academy Town soon enough, racing through the wide and open plains. They weren't even checked as they left through the gate. The captain of the Royal Guard must have used his authority to make arrangements in advance.

The carriage did not head towards the hut with the transport circle leading to the villa but instead sped off in a completely different direction. It didn't slow down for a second, continuing at a breakneck pace until Academy Town was nothing but a small, distant speck.

Princess Remiphinia had been kidnapped by none other than her own royal guards.

It was only after Academy Town was completely out of sight that Brian finally

removed Remiphinia's gag.

"Phah! What is the meaning of this, Brian?!"

Her first words on her release were a furious shout.

The carriage was a large one with a spacious interior. It housed roughly ten soldiers who were surely all working for Brian.

The maids who had been captured alongside Remiphinia had been tied to the carriage seats. These kidnappers who were splendidly outfitted like knights sneered as they looked over their pathetic prisoners.

"Please calm down, Princess Remiphinia."

"How can you expect me to calm down?! Why are you doing this?! Answer me! Answer me, Brian!"

Why am I being kidnapped? Why have the guards I trusted committed such an atrocity?

Remiphinia couldn't understand what was happening. She screamed and screamed with bloodshot eyes, only for Brian to respond with perfect composure.

"Why am I doing this, you ask? That should be our question for you, Princess Remiphinia."

"Huh...?"

Brian stared straight at her.

"Why are the noble members of our own royal family shaking hands with filthy demons?"

"Huh? Wh-What...?"

Remiphinia was taken aback. And though she had lost her own words, Brian's words grew only more powerful.

"Our proud and dignified human race should never ally with the likes of those demons! Why can you not understand this?! Why are the heroes trying to ally with the demons?! And why is the royal family playing along with this nonsense?!"

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"But...I-I mean..."

"This is an unforgivable betrayal against all of humankind!"

"That's right!"
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As Brian loudly proclaimed it so, cries of agreement rose from the kidnappers around him.

Remiphinia stared, wide-eyed. She never knew that the Royal Guard captain who'd protected her for so long was a man of such beliefs.

"Umm... Are you all opposed to the alliance with the house of the demon lord?"

"Of course!"

"Preach it!"

Brian's eyes shot open. He and everyone else he'd gathered were staunch demon exclusionists. A fervent heat began to fill the carriage.

"I declare here and now! We are the Human Purity Alliance! We shall carry out justice for the pride of humankind!"

"Yeeeaaah!!!"

As Brian raised his fist high, a thunderous cheer erupted throughout the carriage. Their fervor was so intense, it was like the entire vehicle was shaking.

"First, we must correct the thinking of the Bahelgarn royal family. Once their eyes have been opened, they shall see why they need to launch a full-scale attack on the demon lord's villa! It is to this end that we have secured the princess! Justice is on our side!"

"No objections here!"

"We will make them understand our righteousness!"

In other words, they had taken Remiphinia hostage to threaten the royal family.

"Th-There's no way that will ever work out!" Remiphinia shouted through her confusion. Although many pairs of crazed eyes turned towards her, she continued, undeterred. "This kind of kidnapping plot will definitely fall apart! It

will be immediately revealed if you're inspected at the checkpoint! You will never succeed!"

Such cold, silent stares faced her.

"All you are doing is making an enemy of our fine nation! Do not underestimate the power of the national army! You will be caught soon enough!"

Remiphinia raised her voice with courage.

"Heh heh... Heh heh heh..."

But what came out of Brian's mouth was a laugh.

"Heh heh heh... Bwah ha ha hah! Princess Remiphinia, whatever flaw you might imagine in our plan, we have already taken countermeasures. We are not charging into the royal castle on impulse alone!"

"Wh-What are you...?!"

"Have you forgotten my title? 'Captain of the royal guard.' I have enough authority to secure more than sufficient forces to back me!"

"No!"

Tasked with the direct protection of royalty, the royal guard was considered elite within the military. Procuring all sorts of weapons was a simple task for their captain.

And it was then that Remiphinia finally noticed. The carriage she was riding was no ordinary carriage.

"Have you realized it? Yes, that's right, Princess. This carriage itself is a weapon! It is the latest in military technology, our strongest weapon!"

"M-My word!"

"Our precious Chariots—our carriages of war. And this one was modified and armored even further. It is the top of the line!"

A bead of sweat dripped down Remiphinia's brow.

The carriage was a Chariot, named so after the vehicles once ridden into war in the distant past. But it bore little resemblance to its namesake.

Three horses carried it at an incredible speed, and these horses were greatly enhanced with magic. Their bodies were a size or two larger than the average horse, and their physical abilities had been boosted by a significant margin.

All three horses were clad in heavy iron armor, making it unlikely that anyone could put a stop to their charge. The carriage's body was also made of thick plates of metal. It would be hard to even scratch it with any ordinary attack.

Moreover, sharp spikes had been attached to the wheels to increase its lethality, making it a weapon well suited to running people over.

But this was all cleverly hidden away, and Remiphinia could not perceive any of these standard Chariot features with her eyes. She could only tell something was off as she sensed the carriage reach speeds beyond what any ordinary carriage could reach.

To top this all was the magic cannon that was mounted inside the carriage's interior. It was a siege weapon capable of easily destroying a firmly sealed fortress gate with a single shot. To think such a terrifying weapon would be loaded onto the carriage...

Remiphinia was flabbergasted, gasping again as she realized she was riding in the country's latest military marvel. And, as she observed the inside of the carriage, she noticed something else.

"Huh?"

"My, my, have you finally realized?"

She was hearing more than a single set of wheels.

The curtains were drawn over the windows, but from the hoofbeats and wheels she could hear from outside, there had to be five or six carriages nearby.

Before she knew it, several similar carriages—Chariots—were running alongside them.

Her face paled.

Did the captain of the royal guard really intend to incite war against the demons? Her mind went blank as the reality of the situation set in.

"Now, Princess. A moment ago, you asked about what we would do at the

checkpoint..."

She swallowed.

"You are about to get your answer. Allow me to pull back the curtain."

Brian pulled the curtain aside, revealing the view beyond the carriage walls. The checkpoint was looming right ahead of them. Its strong stone wall stood in their path, denying entry anywhere save for the fortified gate.

And the gate was shut, as it should be. It would open only to those who had the right permits and existed to firmly reject any illegal passage.

But the Chariots didn't care about any of that. They carried ahead at full speed, raising tremors as they went.

Realizing this abnormal situation, the guards at the checkpoint were panicking. They poured out of the buildings shouting, "Stop! Stop!"

But despite any brave front they tried to put up, they had already lost their nerve.

It was understandable. A line of powerful Chariots was approaching as one. There was nothing they could do.

"Charge!"

"Hraaaaaah!"

Meanwhile, the soldiers inside the Chariots roared with maddened fervor. With unstoppable momentum, the carriages carried on and collided straight into the checkpoint's gate.

The result was a complete defeat for the checkpoint. The charge of the six Chariots was overwhelming, destroying the stalwart gate, breaking through the barriers and sending soldiers flying in its wake. The revolutionary force violently broke through the checkpoint without losing any speed.

The Chariots suffered little to no damage. The horses were uninjured and the carriages remained intact.

It was almost like they were flaunting the might of their newest weapon.

"Did you see that? There is simply none who can stop us!" Brian proudly

proclaimed.

Morale around him reached a fever pitch. His soldiers were intoxicated by the great power displayed by their weapon, now overcome with a sense of invincibility.

"Do you...intend to start a war like this...?"

"War... Perhaps it will be something similar to that," Brian replied with a light laugh to Remiphinia's quivering voice. "Soon, we will attack the royal capital. Even with their sturdy defenses, we can break through and seize control with these six powerful Chariots."

"That's insane!"

"I foresee a tough battle, yes! But everything is going according to plan! We have taken the princess hostage, prepared the finest weaponry, and have the royal family on the back foot! We must force them to rescind their lily-livered policy of linking hands with the likes of demons!"

Brian clenched his fist tight.

"It is all for the justice of humankind!"

His eyes were filled with a fanatical sense of righteousness.

"After reforming the royal family, we will purge the hero and his ilk! They are the true culprits, the root cause behind this exchange with *demons*! We must judge the corrupt heroes with our own hands!"

"W-Wait! Please wait! You'd even go as far as to attack the heroes...?!"
Remiphinia was shocked. "Are you all utter buffoons?! The heroes are the hope of the world! They are immensely popular among the people! If you make an enemy of them, that essentially means making an enemy of the world itself! Do you not understand that?!"

She wasn't speaking out of any mere concern for the heroes. She simply had to—the heroes were currently receiving massive amounts of support from the people, and to go against them felt so unrealistic, so idiotic. The words naturally came out of her before she'd even given them a second of thought.

"Oh dear, oh dear, are you really so ignorant, Princess?"

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"Huh...?"
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Brian's composure did not crumble.

He smiled slyly and said, "It's become a topic of hushed whispers: word that a brand-new hope has emerged. A new messiah who will save the world anew. The rumors are spreading in some regions you know."

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"H-How could...?"
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"I'm talking about the birth of a new hero."

Remiphinia's eyes widened.

"What...?"

She struggled to process this sudden information.

The birth of a new hero? What could that mean?

She was more confused than anything else.

A hero was supposed to be a unique existence chosen by the holy sword. There could be none other than Cain. This was what she believed, and what was common knowledge in the world.

Yet defying this common sense, a new hero was quietly rising in some corner of the world.

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"A new...hero...?"
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"We will support the new hero! We will oust the current cowardly failure and spread the word of the hero of a new era! That way, instead of being condemned, we will be praised as the wise sages who discerned the true hero!"

"H-Hold on a second! What's this about a new hero?! Who exactly are they?"

"I don't know."

"Umm, what...?"

Remiphinia frowned.

But Brian continued, undeterred. "We don't know the identity of this new hero, nor do we know where they came from. There is little information available, only that this person claims to be the true hero and has demonstrated very curious abilities..."

"The true hero..."

"But I just know that they will accept our ideals! Because the hero exists for the sole purpose of killing monsters! Unlike that insane Cain, they will accept the ideal of eliminating the demons! If necessary, I am willing to become a member of the new hero's party myself!"

Brian was someone who could have been a part of the current hero lineup. Perhaps that would become a reality in a different way.

"Our justice will be realized by the new hero!"

"Wonderful!"

"That's our leader!"

When his speech ended, he received a fiery applause from his comrades. They all watched him ecstatically. Spellbound by their own personal brand of justice, they felt a sense of fulfillment from the depths of their hearts. They did not doubt in their minds that they were to be the saviors of the world, the slaughterers of all demonkind. This was a group driven insane by the depths of their devotion.

So, Remiphinia strove to put a damper on their spirits.

"You are not justice, not by any means."

There was a moment of complete silence.

"The hero does not exist to kill monsters. They exist to protect and to cherish human lives. By forming an alliance with the demon lord's house, Sir Cain and his comrades are trying to save the lives of more people than you can possibly imagine. You have no right to speak of justice!"

"Be silent, Princess..."

"No! I shall not be silenced!"

The soldiers' murderous intent was concentrated on her. Even so, she did not shut her mouth. She managed to suppress her body's tremors and mustered the courage to raise her voice.

"First of all, is it not strange that the first thing you resort to is violence?! If you are confident in your justice, then proclaim it loud and clear! And if it truly is just, then that alone will give you the backing of many! If you have conviction, then speak to my father without turning to blackmail!"

"Princess Remiphinia, do you mean to insult us?"

"And yet, the first thing you did was kidnapping! Intimidation! Violence! Where do you see any justice?! Using harassment just to make others listen to you is what we call childish! Know some shame!"

The faces in the carriage turned a bright red. They clenched their fists, their veins bulging. They all directed murderous eyes at Princess Remiphinia and gritted their teeth. They were livid. But there were other emotions mixed in, such as the realization that they could not refute her. They could only remain put as their faces turned redder and redder.

"An arm should serve as a good warning."

Then, Brian spoke in a low, cold voice.

His face was as red as his comrades'. Within his heart, he desperately refuted her words. He told himself that she was mistaken as he did everything he could to maintain his pride.

"A hostage remains valuable so long as they are kept alive. There is no issue in causing a bit of pain."

"Khh ...! Coward!"

"You brought this upon yourself by talking back."

Brian drew his sword from his hip and approached Remiphinia. Otherwise, he wouldn't be able to protect his pride—the pride of all of them. To clear away his building frustrations, he had to take the very same childish actions that Remiphinia had criticized him for only moments before.

Remiphinia closed her eyes tight. The carriage continued to move. No help was coming. Her body froze at the fear of the pain about to grace her.

But she had no regrets. She had said what needed to be said and stood against evil as a princess of her nation. Her heart alone remained firm.

Brian was right in front of her now. She clenched her teeth and prepared to endure it. The villain, ready to wound a little girl, raised his sword high.

And then.

"Report! A report!"

"Hmm?"

The lookout raised their voice.

"Something... Something is catching up to us at a fearsome speed!"

"What?"

Brian's attention shifted.

"Something? What do you mean?"

"I don't know!"

"Hmm?"

Frowning at the lookout's dubious report, Brian stayed his hand and approached the window to take a look himself. The attention of the carriage's other inhabitants similarly strayed from Remiphinia as they focused on the outside. Needless to say, whatever was approaching them was the greater concern.

"Has the national army caught on to our existence? But it would be impossible for a carriage or Chariot. Our Chariot is the top of the line. A vehicle that can keep up with our speed does not exist."

"I understand that, sir!"

"In which case...the only conceivable option would be a lone rider..."

The Chariot was moving at a tremendous speed. It was pulled by three magically reinforced horses, clearing the road at a speed that far surpassed a standard carriage. The only thing that could catch them would be a similarly enhanced horse; alone, and lightly equipped for greater speed.

Then there was nothing to fear. Even if it caught up, it wouldn't stand a chance against the Chariot's might. They could easily crush it and move on.

```
"Hmm...?"
```

But something was strange. The target—whatever it was—was distant and hard to see. It was indeed hard to see, but it looked to be smaller than a horse. But if it wasn't a horse, then what could it be? Brian furrowed his brow.

```
"What...is that...?"

"A horse?"

"A Chariot...?"
```

The mysterious shadow grew closer and closer, kicking up a large dust cloud behind it. It kicked off the ground with gusto, approaching with tremendous force.

```
"Don't tell me it's some sort of monster?"
And finally, everyone caught sight of what it really was.
"I-It's a human?!"
"There's no way...!"
```

They were all astonished. Their foe was nothing more than a human. There was nothing peculiar at all about their running, yet that plain old running was taking them closer to the Chariots. They raced on two legs, causing thunderous tremors with their feet as they closed in.

No tricks, no gimmicks. A human was matching them on their own two feet.

It was inconceivable. There was no way something so idiotic could ever happen. The common sense they barely clung on to was working overtime in a desperate bid to deny the scene they'd been presented with.

The Chariots had reached speeds of over seventy kilometers per hour—the same if not faster than a nimble horse's top sprint. A normal carriage only moved at roughly ten, which spoke volumes to just how much the horses pulling the Chariots had been enhanced.

Despite this, the human behind them was going to surpass them.

Inconceivable.

Unbelievable.

This human was running faster than any horse ever could.

"What is this?! This has to be some sort of mistake!"

"A mistake... But they really are gaining on us!"

"Then you're telling me there's a human who runs faster than a Chariot?!"

"B-But...!"

As confusion mounted inside the Chariot, the human steadily closed the gap. And, before long, they were close enough to make out their face.

It was a young girl.

"That's...?! Lisalinde?!" Brian's face turned to shock.

"Who the hell's that?!"

"A female student from the academy!"

It was Liz.

Liz was running at full sprint, trying to catch up to the Chariots.

"Hraaaaaah!"

Her pretty blonde hair was whipping violently behind her as she roared. With her back straight and her arms swinging wide, she kicked off the ground with beautiful form. With nothing but her own brute strength, she slowly but surely caught up to the fastest weapon on land.

"Hold it right there, kidnappers!"



Coincidentally, Liz had been there to witness Remiphinia's capture. After parting ways with her in town, she had remembered something else—something minor she needed to ask her—and gave chase, only to stumble upon the scene.

But Brian and his soldiers had acted swiftly. The Chariot was gone before Liz could fully process what it was she'd just witnessed.

She immediately reported what she saw to the city guards. After passing the necessary messages, she left it to the guards to report to the royal entourage and pursued the Chariot alone.

And now, here she was. Sprinting at full speed, Liz was closing in on the kidnappers.

"This is the power of 'Anyone Can Do It! Hero-Style Boot Camp!"

"She's screaming something, boss!"

"Who cares?! Just do something about her...!"

"Hraaaaah!" Liz roared.

She had undergone rigorous training as a member of the hero's party—none other than the "Anyone Can Do It! Hero-Style Boot Camp!"

Originally intended as a healthy fitness routine for general audiences, and written up at a publisher's behest, this was supposed to be a trendy training regimen for easy weight loss under the supervision of the world's saviors.

But the heroes had long since lost touch with reality. What they'd thrown together thinking, *This much is easy. That should just about do it*, turned out to be hell itself. Trained soldiers would attempt the workout and fail. Even adventurers of great renown met the same fate.

Anyone Can Do It! Hero-Style Boot Camp! eventually went out of print. The heroes shed tears over the failure of a book they'd put their heart into, but it was clearly their own fault.

And thus, the book faded away, leaving nothing but a legacy of being a failed product with a caveat of "No one can do it."

Despite all of this—all the bad press and broken dreams—this was the introductory course imposed upon Liz as a newcomer to the team.

"Graaaaaaaah...! Cain, you idioooooooot!" Liz screamed as she chased the Chariots.

She was now catching up to the high-speed vehicle. And she was also well aware that this went against human common sense.

The "Anyone Can Do It! Hero-Style Boot Camp!" had bestowed upon her a robust body that far surpassed the limits of humanity.

A light workout routine? To hell with that. This is complete body modification. Why is a perfectly ordinary girl like myself being forced to pull off an insane training routine that clearly wasn't intended for humans?

Liz cursed in her heart. But her grievances were larger than that; too great to keep to herself. She was vocalizing them before she knew it.

"This...! This isn't something any human should do! I'll get back at you someday!"

"Th-The mystery woman's shouting complaints!"

"What?! What the hell is going on...?!"

Incidentally, the pre-amnesiac Liz had of course been involved with the creation of the workout routine. Her past self's lack of common sense was coming back to torment her in the present.

"Wh-What are you doing?! Shoot her!"

"Y-Yes, sir!"

Opening the rear door of the Chariot, the soldiers within drew their bows and aimed at Liz. There was a whoosh as the arrows sliced through the air towards her. But...

"Hmph!"

"Wh-Whaaaat?!"

The arrows deflected right off of her. She only had to tense up a little bit for the iron arrowheads to collide with the dull sound of iron smacking against iron. "Anyone Can Do It! Hero-Style Boot Camp!" had tempered her body and made it even stronger than steel.

"Wh-What's with this woman?! Is she...not human?!"

"I'm scared... Mommy...!"

Liz hadn't lost any speed. They hadn't even managed to stall her in the slightest. The soldiers shuddered as the distance between them and her shrank.

"The... The cannon! Use the cannon!"

"Huh?! That is a siege weapon. You want us to point it at a human?!"

"Do you see any other option?! Just use it! Now!" Brian gave the command.

The Chariot was equipped with a magic cannon. It was a weapon designed to demolish walls and gates, and if a human were to be hit by its attack, they would likely be blown to bits.

Now, the muzzle of this fearsome weapon was being aimed at the fragile figure of a young girl.

"Fire!"

With a deafening roar and a burst of flames, the magic cannon unleashed its power. The cannonball struck Liz head-on; it erupted into a massive ball of flames, bringing widespread destruction to the surrounding area. The smoke from the explosion billowed high.

The ground was torn apart, kicking dust into the air that obscured everything in sight.

"We did it!"

"We won! We really won!"

Cheers rose within the Chariot.

They'd emerged victorious. They'd managed to exterminate the monster that was able to keep up with a speeding Chariot. So they trembled in joy of victory and shouted in triumph.

The girl's state could not be confirmed. Thick smoke rose from the impact sight, preventing any detailed investigation. But how could she possibly have

survived being hit by that cannonball?

But there was no need to confirm it when the result was self-evident.

"Huh?"

However, reality was cruel.

The girl emerged from amid the flames.

"Aaaaaaah?!"

"She's...alive?! You're kidding me! How is that possible?!"

Screams echoed within the Chariot.

She continued running, unchanged. Her clothes were only slightly singed, without a scratch on her body. She maintained her immaculate running form, each step bursting with power.

The cannonball had undoubtedly hit her. Yet, the girl's explosive sprint continued on. She was stronger than the cannon; a simple fact, but an unbelievable one too.

"This is the power of 'Anyone can do it! Hero-Style Boot Camp!"

"What the ...?! What is she?!"

"She's not h-human!"

Chaos was taking over. An existence beyond their comprehension drew near, and they had no way of stopping it. The Chariot was on the verge of panic.

"Aaaaah!"

"She's here!"

The girl was finally neck and neck with the Chariot at the back of the procession.

She'd caught up.

The soldiers within the Chariot—their faces pale—prepared for combat, holding their weapons at the ready. They were prepared to engage the moment the girl boarded their craft.

With bated breath, they made their resolve to fight the monster.

```
"Huh?"
```

But she did not board them.

The soldiers were puzzled, but in the next moment, the entire chassis began to tilt.

```
"Wait, huh?!"

"Wh-What's happening?!"
```

The tilt was so severe they could no longer remain on their feet. Soldiers toppled over one another as they cried out.

```
"Mmnngh... Gnnnnh...!"
```

The girl was lifting the carriage itself. She'd slipped under the speeding carriage and hoisted it up with nothing but the strength of her arms. It was for this simple reason that they experienced such tilt.

The carriage body was covered in thick iron armor and weighed far more than an ordinary human could lift. Yet it floated, lifted by the slender arms of a delicate girl.

The three horses pulling the carriage collapsed, losing balance and falling to the ground.

It was completely nonsensical; the people in the Chariot couldn't even imagine what was happening to them.

```
"Mmnngh...! Program Number Twelve! Easy Boulder Lifting Exercise...!"

"Wh-What's happening to us...?!"

"Someone save me...!"

"Mamaaa!"

"Take this!"
```

The girl tossed the carriage. It soared higher and higher, its arc spanning several tens of meters. It was almost like she was playing with a miniature toy as she offhandedly threw the latest in military technology like it was nothing.

```
"Gyaaaaaah!"
```

Cries of anguish echoed from within.

The huge carriage crashed into the ground in a massive cloud of dust. The fearsome jolt rendered nearly everyone inside incapable of combat.

```
"I-It's a monster...!"

"It's a gorilla...!"
```

The soldiers in the other Chariots screamed in terror of what they'd just witnessed. Such a heavy, armored carriage flying through the sky; it lacked any sense of reality. From the bottoms of their hearts, they thought, *Maybe this is all just a dream. Maybe I'm trapped in some terrible nightmare.*

Soon, the girl was upon the next Chariot.

```
"Eeeeeek...?!"

"Stop it...! Stop it already...!"

Their pleas wouldn't stop her.

Just like before, she lifted it up.
```

The soldiers were helpless. They cried and screamed, but this demon-like girl didn't hesitate for even an instant.

```
"Easy Boulder Throwing Exercise! Ngraaaah!"

"Graaaaaaah...?!"

"Huh?! Hey, it's coming this way...!"

"We can't dodge in time...!"

"Noooo!"
```

Once again, a Chariot was thrown like a toy, striking another Chariot as it landed. The two war machines collided, the dull sound of iron hitting iron echoing through the area. The thick armor of both vehicles was horridly dented and terribly damaged.

And of course, the people inside couldn't endure such an impact. They were all knocked out.

In a few dozen seconds, three Chariots had been taken out of the equation.

"Sh-She's just one person. We can run her over...!"

"W-We won't run or hide...!"

Instead of fleeing, the remaining three Chariots went on the offensive. They turned around and charged head-on at the girl.

Their horses raced at full sprint to trample her dead in the dirt; their magically enhanced bodies were larger than normal horses, and they were clad in iron armor on top of that.

The wheels of the Chariots were additionally fitted with spikes. These would easily make mincemeat of anyone unfortunate enough to be caught in them.

No tricks, no games. A straightforward collision. Regardless of whether she was trampled by the horses or crushed under the wheels, there was no way for this fragile girl to survive.

"Hraaaah!"

She accepted the challenge. Taking no measures to dodge, she mustered all her strength and foolishly continued her forward dash.

"Die, you monster!"

"Easy Charging into Stone Walls Exercise!"

Three Chariots and one girl collided.

"Uooooooh!"

"Gyaaaaah!"

The winner was Liz. A delicate girl's tackle had sent the three tanks flying.

The iron armor of the horses shattered, the thick plating of the Chariots crumpled, and high and high they danced through the sky. Their prided wheels were pulverized and turned to nothing more than scraps.

Desperate screams overflowed from within. As they were tossed in the air, the soldiers completely gave up on comprehending their reality. All they could do was cry out in despair.

The girl was not hurt at all. The hooves of the massive horses, the sharp spikes of the wheels, none of them could reach her.

Everything was shattered and sent sky-high.

"Kyaaaaaaah...!"

It was at that moment that a handful of women jumped from the Chariot. It was Remiphinia along with her maids. The impact had thrown them out.

"Whoa there!"

Liz took a leap and swiftly caught them. Then, she gently lowered them to the ground and shielded them.

"Are you all right, Princess Remiphinia?"

"L-Lady Lisalinde...?"

Liz smiled at her softly. She had the face of a hero—a hero who had saved a princess.

But Remiphinia's eyes widened.

She never thought anyone would be able to decimate six Chariots with nothing but brute strength. She was deathly grateful for the rescue, but she couldn't keep up with the extraordinary situation.

"Hmph!" Liz snapped the iron chain binding the princess with her bare hands.

She was finally a free maiden. Liz had successfully rescued the hostage.

"Th-Thank you... Lady Lisalinde..."

"You're very welcome."

Liz smiled again, gently and willowy. No matter how Remiphinia looked at her, she couldn't imagine her as the same individual who had blown away six Chariots. She could only stare in disbelief.

"Urgh... Urrrgh..."

As that was going on, a soldier who'd been tossed out of his Chariot let out a groan. He lay on the ground, pain racing throughout his body as he barely maintained consciousness.

He couldn't believe that the Chariots had been bested by the girl, but regardless, he put all his strength into his body to stand however he could.

Liz slowly approached this commendable soldier.

"Mr. Kidnapper, Mr. Kidnapper."

"Eep...?!"

Liz stooped down and peered into his face from above.

He was pale. The girl before him had an endearing, adorable face, but he'd experienced firsthand how devilish she could be.

The girl took a book from her bag.

"Anyone Can Do It! Hero-Style Boot Camp! Yours for just one thousand gold. How does that sound?"

The girl beamed.

The soldier fell unconscious, foaming at the mouth.

Thus, a single innocent girl, trained healthily and wholesomely by the "Anyone Can Do It! Hero-Style Boot Camp!" program, had turned a battlefield into absolute hell.

Chapter 47: Then—The CQC Boot Camp Training!

"Bwah ha ha hah! How does it feel to be unable to use your precious magic, Saint Melvy?!"

"Curses! How cowardly!"

"A saint without magic, how pitiful a sight! Don't you agree?!"

In a dimly lit underground room, a demon cackled.

Saint Melvy was in a dire situation. She was in a dreary stone room far removed from the sun's light, surrounded by numerous demons, all of whom directed their vile smiles her way. A special barrier had been set up in the basement, rendering magic unusable. The demons had managed to lure her to her demise. Magic was her primary weapon, and being cut off from it made for a fatal situation.

It all began when the demons launched an attack on a small village. The village's defenses were no match for the overwhelming might of the demon horde, and it easily fell under their control. They took many villagers hostage and did as they pleased with them.

News of this attack did not leak outside the village. The demons had quietly and swiftly taken over without causing any widespread destruction, and from an outside perspective, the village was the epitome of peace.

They had a plan, however. They intended to lure Saint Melvy.

There was a church in the village, which could request help from the central cathedral or the branches should any issues emerge. The demons invented a problem completely unrelated to their assault and used it to request the presence of the saint.

And when a church was calling for help, Melvy, as the saint, had no choice but to respond.

They prepared the basement for her arrival. Setting up the barrier took a long

time, but as the demons had complete control over the village, time was hardly an issue. They could continue working at it until they were sure that their barrier was absolute.

The villagers could not resist them. Not when their beloved families were held hostage.

Thus, when Saint Melvy visited alone—as part of her church duties, and not as a member of the hero's party—she fell for their ruse and was led to the basement.

Sealed within that underground chamber, she found herself in quite a desperate situation.

"Bwah ha ha hah! Foolish woman! You should have just ignored a request from such a tiny, insignificant village! There's nothing to be gained in helping these worthless peasants!"

The leader of the demons cackled triumphantly. Before him stood a young magician incapable of using magic. She was less than a tiny insect to him.

By contrast, the demon leader was impressively built. He was a tigerlike beastman who towered at nearly three meters tall. His body bulged with powerful muscles, which indicated clearly his overwhelming strength.

His subordinates had all been selected for their prowess in close combat—naturally, since they were setting a trap that barred all magic.

"Guh! You're all cowards!"

Sweat dripped down Melvy's brow.

There was only one door in and out of the room. That door, furthermore, was completely blocked by the demons, and she would have to defeat all in her path if she wanted to reach it.

By any calculation, she was at an extreme disadvantage.

"Bwah ha ha hah! Say what you will! It's nothing but the griping of a loser! I just have to win—that's all that matters!"

The other demons all burst into laughter at their leader's words.

The leader took a step forward. Melvy's back was already pressed against the wall, and she couldn't back away any farther. She could only watch as the enemy closed the distance, leaving no room for her to get away.

"The renowned saint, squashed as simply as a fly!"

The demon leader raised his massive axe.

"And now, I've crushed one of the pillars supporting humanity!" he cried out as he unleashed a powerful strike.

The mass of the axe now striking down upon the small girl was immense. Her body would all too easily be split in two when it struck. Her end was surely near.

And yet—



```
"Flying Spinning Kick!"
```

"Huh?"

She leaped up, her body rotating as she unleashed a fierce kick. In one fluid motion, she dodged the enemy's axe while seamlessly transitioning into an attack.

Her foot embedded itself in the demon leader's face. Her spinning kick had landed a clean hit on her foe's chin.

"Uh?"

For a moment, the demon horde failed to comprehend what had just happened.

The spinning kick was incredibly beautiful. Her small body rose several meters to reach the enemy's head, all while she spun to maximize centrifugal force and enhance the destructive power of the technique.

There wasn't a single wasted movement; it was an awe-inspiringly refined martial art.

"Grah..." The demon leader groaned and fell, his jaw smashed in. His head had been so shaken up he fell unconscious just like that.

"What ...?"

"Wh-What just happened?"

The demons were dumbfounded, unable to register what had just occurred before their eyes. The idea of the saint delivering a spinning kick was simply unheard of.

A technique so immaculate and merciless—how could it have possibly come from someone who specialized in magic?

"Haaaaaaaaah!"

Melvy launched herself at the demons, so frozen in shock.

"Jab! Jab! Uppercut! Iron Mountain Lean! Shoulder Throw!"

"Gyaaaaaah?!"

She unleashed a diverse array of techniques, mowing down all who stood in her way. Each move was executed with flowing elegance. Their precision was honed to perfection with every part of her, up to the tips of her fingers, moving with definite purpose. Every muscle, every neuron worked in conjunction to bring incredible power to every move.

This was a master martial artist. That was what every demon thought as they watched her.

But it just didn't make sense. She was supposed to be but a saint who fought with magic. That was precisely why they'd prepared the barrier in the first place.

"What is this?! What the hell's with that woman?!"

"Wasn't the white-haired girl supposed to be a magician?!"

Screams began to echo from every which way.

The horde was in disarray; communications had broken down. Their leader had been done in by the initial kick and was still motionless. The saint continued to mercilessly beat down the other demons one by one.

"This is the power of *Anyone Can Do It! Hero-Style Boot Camp!* Chapter 4: 'Let's Get in Shape by Studying Martial Arts from around the World! Easy CQC Boot Camp Training Even Mages Can Do!'" Melvy shouted.

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

The heroes had devised a healthy training regimen for the general public, and among the listed programs was yet another *easy* slice of hell called "Let's Get in Shape by Studying Martial Arts from around the World!"

It aimed to promote weight loss and fitness through the mastery of martial arts. Its victims were supposed to feel a sense of joy and accomplishment with each new move they mastered, leading to a fun and healthy workout. What a wholesome offering it was supposed to be.

The book was still being written, and once completed, it was scheduled to be sold in bookstores all across the land.

But, as per usual, the heroes had gone overboard.

Despite the claims of ease and accessibility, these exercises demanded a world-level physique as an entry point. Naturally, most people weren't able to keep up.

The demons in the room had become the unfortunate victims of this plan in progress.

```
"Hi-yah!"
```

"Eeeeeeeek!"

With spirited kihaps, Melvy continued to beat the demons senseless. The refined martial arts of the magic-centric saint were now on full display.

Magicians possessed feeble bodies. That was a widely accepted truth; a selfevident one. Rearguard magicians couldn't hope to keep up with the closecombat abilities of frontline fighters. This was just common sense.

But that common sense was crumbling away. The small, delicate, and cute girl in front of them was beating down the burly demons.

"Heh. You underestimated our little Melvy..."

"Wh-Who are you?!"

Just then, the doors suddenly burst open and someone stepped through. The newcomer crossed their arms and addressed the confused horde.

"Ah, Liz! You followed me?"

Liz had intruded upon the scene.

"Nicely done, Melvy. Are you all right?"

"I'm perfectly fine!"

"That's good to know."

Liz and Melvy shared a lighthearted exchange.

"Allow me to explain! The Melvy you see before you has studied and mastered every martial art, past and present, from every corner of the world in order to write the 'Let's Get in Shape by Studying Martial Arts from around the World! Easy CQC Boot Camp Training Even Mages Can Do!"

```
"Wh-What?!"
"All of them?!"
```

Despite having come to assist, Liz did not engage in battle at all, instead providing commentary.

The demons couldn't grasp what this supposed training truly entailed, but they understood they were in for a world of hurt.

"Yes, to ensure that the segment entrusted to her was absolutely perfect, Melvy diligently studied the martial arts! As a result, she became the third-best in unarmed combat within the hero's party!"

"What?!"

"Third-best in the hero team...?!"

Needless to say, this was an incredible feat.

The demons shuddered in terror.

"I may be a delicate woman, but I put my heart into making this program! I want everyone to understand the fun of exercise!"

"That's my Melvy!"

"What part of you is delicate?!"

A scream echoed through the room. Even as she spoke, Melvy's hands never stopped. Her barrage of punches and kicks continued without pause.

"With this exercise...I'll burn off the calories from the parfait I ate today!"

"Stop! Please stop!"

Melvy shattered bone for the sake of her diet. It was no joke for those on the receiving end of it.

"Melvy! The Clinch Exercise!"

"Okay! The Clinch Exercise~!"

"Whoa?!"

Melvy grappled with the deputy leader of the demons. She wrapped her hand behind his neck, engaging him in incredibly close quarters. The two were near enough for their heads to collide as she prevented her foe from escaping, while also leaving no escape room for herself.

She'd taken on a high-risk position.

```
"One, two! One, two!"
```

"One, two! One, two!"

"Gaaah!"

From this position, Melvy delivered a knee strike. She hammered her knee into the demon's solar plexus.

The deputy leader felt a burning pain course through him, causing him to writhe in agony. But the true terror of the clinch didn't end there.

Accompanying this rhythmic chant, Melvy continued to launch knee strike after knee strike. Her knee rapidly stabbed into his gut, again and again.

```
"One, two! One, two!"
```

"One, two! One, two!"

"Aaaaaah!"

Even if the demon wanted to run, the hand around his head prevented him. He continued taking those blows, unable to escape the hold. The full horror of the clinch was unleashed upon him, turning the demon's abdomen into a battered mess.

```
"Aaaah..."
```

His scream, so faint and distant, was hardly even a sound anymore. Within his hellish agony, he had fainted while standing.

```
"Eeep..."
```

The fear spread, the faces of every demon in sight turning visibly pale.

A monster. There was a monster standing before him. The plan to seal her magic away had proved completely useless.

"How about you all get in shape with martial arts too?"

"Moderate exercise is very good for your health!"

With a cheerful smile, the monster lunged at the demons once more, and this time Liz joined in on the action.

She wasn't as skilled or as strong as Melvy, but she, too, exhibited an exceptional display of martial arts.

```
"Stop! Stop already...!"

"Forgive us... Forgive—!"
```

Confessions echoed through the basement of a church. But the executioners showed not the slightest shred of mercy. Breaking a refreshing, youthful sweat, they continued to pummel their enemies. Two pubescent girls carried out an endless hell to achieve their ideal physique.

And so, a horde of demons was annihilated.

"Let's all have fun exercising together!"

Melvy winked as she preached the joy of exercise, only to be met with silence. There was no one left to respond.

```
"Melvy! Are you okay?!"

"Ah, Cain."
```

Cain and his comrades stormed into the basement only after the enemies were wiped out.

```
"You're too late, Sir Cain."

"Did they do anything to you?"

"I had a good workout!"

"I...see."
```

Cain sympathized with the enemy as he looked at what had become of them.

He closed his eyes. "By the way, I've been thinking... It's about the book..."

```
"What could it be ...?"
```

Gazing out over the battered demons, Cain said, "In chapter 1, you know that barbell squat training... Don't you think two hundred reps of two hundred kilograms is way too low?!"

"Ah! Umm, err! I was thinking the same thing!"

"I know it's intended for general audiences, but you've got to give them something. It's got to be at least three hundred reps of three hundred!"

He and his team chatted away happily. They were in the final stages of writing Anyone Can Do It! Hero-Style Boot Camp! and soon, their magnum opus would be on store shelves.

But they had all lost their common sense. Having fostered an inhuman level of strength and endurance, they had completely lost touch with the capabilities of ordinary people.

"It'd be sad if they said it was ineffective because the workouts were too light!"

"Yeah, anything less than two hundred on a barbell, and it's like you're holding nothing at all."

They smiled brightly and discussed their wildly unrealistic notions.

Unfortunately, there wasn't a soul on their team with enough sense left to put a stop to their madness.

"I hope it sells! We all put our heart into it!" Melvy beamed with an innocent, radiant smile.

"A barbell under two hundred kilograms is almost like holding nothing at all."

And so, the battle ended. Despite falling for the demons' foul trap, Melvy managed to escape thanks to her devotion to a healthy training routine.

She proved once again that a moderate amount of exercise was the key to overcoming all hurdles in life. Or at least, that was how she rationalized it.

Muscles solve everything. I just know this training program will bring joy to so many people, she thought with conviction and felt her heart bouncing with delight at the thought.

Naturally, the book did not sell.

Chapter 48: Now—The Height of the World's Summit

```
"Te kot!"

"Gyaaaaah!"

"Flying Knee! Morote gari!"

"Gwaaaaaaaaah!"
```

My battle with the kidnappers raged on. I'd managed to incapacitate a majority of the soldiers by sending the Chariots flying, but that didn't mean they were entirely taken care of.

In fact, there were still quite a few who could move around. Those with relatively light wounds got to their feet and challenged me in hand-to-hand combat. These well-trained soldiers were putting their strength together to take me down.

There were roughly twenty of them.

I'm in trouble now! There's no way a perfectly ordinary student like me can win when surrounded by so many soldiers!

"Ti sok tong! Apchagi! Crescent Kick!"

"Gyaaaaaaaaah!"

Or so I thought... But surprisingly, I was managing.

The various martial arts techniques I'd honed under Cain and the others were exploding forth, sending soldiers flying one after the next. As expected of the heroes.

Looks like I've become quite strong without even realizing it!

"This is the power of *Anyone Can Do It! Hero-Style Boot Camp!* Chapter 4: 'Let's Get in Shape by Studying Martial Arts from around the World! Easy CQC Boot Camp Training Even Mages Can Do!'"

"Gyaaaaaah?!"

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

I took one of the soldiers out with a German suplex, circling behind him, wrapping my arms around his waist, and slamming him into the ground with a bridge.

It was a beautifully artistic move.

A shock wave erupted as I slammed him, raising a gale that swept away the surrounding soldiers. Many of them fell to the ground unconscious.

"It's working. The training is really working...!"

I clenched my fist. My confidence was beginning to build.

Thinking back, I hadn't felt any sense of accomplishment from my training. I hadn't seen the results for a long time now. After all, the ones training alongside me were none other than the heroes.

"Those were the people I had to compare myself to..."

I couldn't help but feel a touch of nostalgia.

Even if I got a little bit stronger, to them, I was still barely more than a beginner. In our sparring matches, I was as overpowered as a newly born infant.

The training remained as hard as it ever was, and the muscle pain was severe. Seriously, I'd shed tears time and again at the pain, drenching my pillow at night.

"But now! My techniques are working on the soldiers! I've gotten stronger...!"

I've caught up to the Chariots, crushed the Chariots, and saved Remiphinia!
This is what I have to show for my efforts! I've grown stronger!

"It's not just 'working,' girl..."

"This is simply cruel..."

For some reason, however, my enemies were complaining at me.

Their eyes were teary, and they looked far more fearful than they had to be.

You're all making such a big deal of this.

"Princess Remiphinia! Just you wait! I'll defeat more and more of them and get you out of here...!"

"No, umm... You really don't have to..."

For some reason, the princess I saved seemed a bit sympathetic to the enemy. Is it just me, or are they looking at me like I'm some sort of monster? You're all overreacting.

"Good grief, I guess the latest weapons are nothing to write home about."

That was when it happened. A large man emerged from the wreckage of one of the Chariots.

"I didn't think I'd run into such a blunder, but I'll personally defeat you and wipe away this disgrace."

"Sir Brian..."

He was there, standing before me: Brian, captain of the Royal Guard. A tall and imposing man with powerful, bulging muscles. A two-handed greatsword on the right, a massive greatshield on the left. He wielded those enormous weapons with one hand each; that alone indicated his tremendous strength and skill.

Any half-hearted attacks would be powerless against the greatshield, and any shoddy defense would be smashed through by the greatsword.

"With this sword, I will cut you down and resume the plan."

I swallowed my breath. It was time for the final, decisive battle against the leader of the group.

"Sir Brian, the captain, is personally going to fight for us!"

"Please take down that monster!"

The soldiers who had lost their will to fight only moments before were now cheering with glee.

I suppose he is the captain of the Royal Guard.

His overwhelming charisma reignited their fighting spirit just by his decision to fight.

I stared silently.

This was a man who could have been a part of the hero's party. He didn't join, as he was faithful to his duty of protecting the royal family, but if circumstances were different, he could have been one of the heroes admired all around the world. That was what the rumors said.

In other words, he possessed skills equal to Sylphie and Rachel.

Sweat trickled, drop by drop, down my brow.

Can I win against him?

"No wait! Who are you calling a monster?! Who?!"

"Eep! I'm sorry!"

I glared, unable to ignore that rude remark from the soldiers.

Who's the monster?! I am moral, exemplary, and honest—a perfectly ordinary student! I won't let that one slide!

"Ahem."

I pulled myself back together and faced Brian.

As I feared, it felt very different facing him than it did any of the others. The immense pressure radiating from his entire body made me tremble just by standing opposed to him.

I might not be able to win like this.

"If I could just awaken..."

I apparently had a mysterious power buried somewhere within me. However, I did not know the means to awaken it. I still couldn't control it.

I would simply awaken on some reflex, and the battle would all be over by the time I was aware of myself. I didn't have any memories of the time I was awakened, so I was absolutely oblivious to how the transformation worked.

I'm up against a man this time. I can't just force him to submit with a kiss like I did with the gang leader Gaujhel...

"Wait, what am I thinking?! That's crazy! How is a kiss supposed to solve

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anything?!"
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I shook my head.

Something had been wrong with me back then. I was never going to do something so twisted ever again.

I smacked my hands against my cheeks to calm myself.

"I will defeat you with my own abilities."

"A little girl like you is going to beat me?"

I clenched my fists while Sir Brian pointed the tip of his sword.

This would be a fight to the death. I would have to face a formidable foe to protect Princess Remiphinia and thwart the vile plot of these kidnappers.

Tensions rose. The air was pulled thin. Our duel was about to begin.

"Here I come, monster! You'll be nothing but rust on my blade!"

"Don't underestimate me!"

We both screamed. We both took a step towards one another.

And then...

"Huh?"

"Hmm...?"

Feeling an immense force approaching, we both immediately stepped back.

Someone had jumped in between us just before the battle could begin. Someone had gotten in the way.

"Wh-Who do you think you are?!"

The boom of the mysterious intruder's landing was like the crash of a cannon shell. The ground was impacted and a cloud of dust overtook everything in sight.

Presumably, they'd jumped with the incredible strength of their legs and intervened. Otherwise, they wouldn't have made such an explosive entrance.

"Wh-What?"

We all swallowed our breaths as we waited to see who it was. And eventually, they emerged from the billowing clouds of dust.

"S-Sir Wolfe...?!"

The first one to cry out was Princess Remiphinia.

Indeed. Wolfe was the one who had rushed to the battlefield.

After landing, he cautiously and silently surveyed the scene.

"Are you unharmed, Princess Remiphinia? Madam Lisalinde?"

Wolfe didn't look at us as he posed the question; he kept his gaze locked on the enemy.

"Oh... Y-Yes...! I'm all right!"

"I-I'm not too hurt either!"

Startled by his sudden appearance, we hastily stammered out our replies.

In my confusion, I made a slight mistake: we weren't hurt at all, actually.

"Wh-Who's that?"

"What's his deal?"

The soldiers didn't seem to recognize Wolfe. There was palpable confusion on their faces.

Wolfe was a former battalion commander in the demon army and was now an important individual who was cooperating with Team Hero, but he was not a famous figure among humankind. I could see why the soldiers wouldn't know about him.

The princess and I understood well, however.

He was our ally.

"Sir Wolfe! Did you come to save us?!"

"Yes, I heard what happened from the guards and took up the vanguard. I'm glad to see you're both safe."

"Th-Thank you..."

Wolfe was very calm.

Even when surrounded by so many enemies, he did not show the slightest bit of unrest. He looked around, composed as could be, doing his best to grasp the situation.

"Well, if it isn't the princess's dog."

The first to react on the enemy side was Sir Brian.

"A lowly cur wagging its tail for a noble princess. I couldn't stand you from the moment we met."

"I'm not really her dog..."

Brian had met Wolfe during his tour of demon territory. At the time, Wolfe probably came off as a dog trying to butter up the princess. Though Wolfe was aware of the impression he gave, he seemed a little disappointed that this impression still hadn't changed.

"Be careful, Sir Wolfe! That man is the mastermind behind this incident! He kidnapped me and is planning to use me as a hostage to force my family to turn against the demons!"

"All right. I understand, Princess."

Wolfe gave a small nod.

I see, so that's what's going on here? That was the first time I was hearing of his motives too.

I'd attacked them, no questions asked, so I didn't know. Well, what else was I supposed to do?

"Please step back, Lisalinde, Princess Remiphinia. I will take care of him," Wolfe said, turning his back to us and taking a step forward.

I was tagged out. Brian's opponent was no longer me, but Wolfe.

"I-I'll support you!"

"I do not need support, Lisalinde," Wolfe replied with a faint smile.

Then, he took his position a stone's throw away from his powerful foe.

"It looks like I'm being underestimated."

"Are you? Let's see."

Sparks flew as their gazes clashed. That alone seemed to add a great weight to the air around us, the intense pressure pressing down on my body.

"Sir Brian! Mop the floor with him!"

"There's no way Sir Brian would ever lose to that nobody...!"

Jeers came from all around. Unaware of who Wolfe was, the soldiers were certain of Brian's victory.

But...I wasn't sure either way.

It was a former battalion commander of the demon army against the current captain of the Royal Guard. Who was stronger?

Wolfe's abilities rivaled the members of the hero's party. It was no exaggeration to say he was among the pinnacle of humanity.

But Brian was also someone who could have joined the hero's party. It was appropriate to assume he was on a similar level.

So who was going to win in a one-on-one battle?

I really need Wolfe to win here, but...

"I can sense it. You have the vile power of a demon within you. Isn't that right?" Brian began to speak. "They say you were high up in the demon army. How filthy, good grief. It's a wonder a man like you can live so brazenly among humans."

Wolfe lowered his gaze a little.

"I will eradicate all the demons!" Brian went on. "To protect the glory of noble humanity, I will exterminate every last one of those filthy mongrels! First, I'll make an example out of you! Those who ally with demons are equally guilty! I will condemn you in the name of God!"

He puffed out his chest to an excessive degree as he delivered his highhanded address.

The surrounding soldiers listened to his words, spellbound.

"We will destroy all the demons and forge our ideal world!"

There was rapture in Brian's eyes.

Wolfe calmly lifted his face. Softly, he said, "I don't like you."

"What a coincidence! I despise you too!"

That was the signal.

It had finally begun.

Brian took a powerful swing with his greatsword.

We held our breaths. His swordsmanship was honed to perfection. The initiation of his technique was impeccable, the speed of his blade imperceptible. With not a single movement wasted, his sword sliced through the wind and hurtled towards Wolfe.

It all happened in an instant, quicker than the blink of an eye. Brian's sword traced the shortest and fastest path towards severing Wolfe's neck.

Yet...Wolfe did absolutely nothing in response. He neither guarded nor dodged.

"Huh?"

A dull clang filled the air, like the sound of iron striking iron. Brian's sword had smashed into Wolfe's neck. But Wolfe's head stayed exactly where it was. Despite taking Brian's attack directly, Wolfe wasn't dead, not by a long shot.

"What? What just happ—"

Brian's eyes widened in disbelief. His mouth hung vapidly open.

"What?"

And, a beat later, much the same reaction came from the rest of us. The scene we had just witnessed could not have been more bizarre.

Brian's sword had come to a halt against Wolfe's neck, but the man hadn't faltered or flinched. He had not defended himself, nor had he used any magic. The simple fact of the matter was that his neck was harder than Brian's sword. Wolfe had stopped Brian's sword with nothing more than the pure strength of his body.

"No! That's impossible!"

Brian was flustered. The blade of his sword had chipped ever so slightly, no match for the sturdiness of the immovable object it had come up against.

Our eyes all widened. Our mouths hung agape.

Surely such a thing should not have been possible. Sure, training and mana could raise one's physical defenses, but stopping a blade with one's body alone? That just wasn't normal.

It could only be possible if there was an overwhelming difference in their abilities.

"This can't be! Grrr!"

Brian mustered all his strength into his sword. He refused to believe what was happening here, and put all of his might into severing Wolfe's neck, but Wolfe did not budge. His neck remained unscratched, and his feet did not move. He simply stood there like a solid lump of metal.

"They truly thought you were on Cain's level? Someone of *your* abilities?" Wolfe asked, glaring at him. There was a bone-chilling intensity in his eyes. For the first time, we could sense a murderous aura from him.

"Eep?!"

Wolfe launched a punch at Brian's abdomen, which Brian instinctively blocked with his shield. But the sturdy shield shattered, his splendid armor was pulverized, and the upwards-angled blow drove right into his stomach.

"Gah?! Urgh!"

And then, he was blown away. As chunks of shield and armor scattered through the air, Brian's imposing figure flew several meters. His body bent in a painful arc as he collided with the wreckage of a Chariot.

"Ghoooaaahhh!!!" he groaned, writhing from the pain. We were dumbfounded. Remiphinia, her maids, and I, and even the kidnapping soldiers, all held our mouths open in amazement as we watched the scene.

The battle was overwhelmingly one-sided. Brian's attack had achieved nothing, and his defenses were shattered.

Wolfe was the wielder of a massive black spear, but so far it had remained on his back, and he showed no intentions of using it. He took his foe's sword with his bare body and smashed his foe's defenses with his bare fist.

The soldiers who didn't know who Wolfe was were petrified, completely unable to comprehend what was happening. No, even we—who knew Wolfe—were confused. Why was there such a vast difference in power? There was little we could do but watch on in amazement.

"You small-time thug," Wolfe spat as he stalked closer.

Though still trembling from the pain, Brian hurried to his feet. "What the hell are you?!" he screamed as he swung his sword.

But his feeble efforts wouldn't reach Wolfe. His elite swordplay was evaded and parried, failing to inflict even a scratch, as Wolfe's attacks struck Brian head-on. His fists hammered hard into Brian's face and stomach.

"So I suppose it seems that the rumors were merely rumors," Wolfe muttered as he looked down over Brian, who had fallen to his knees.

Upon hearing those words, I finally understood. All that talk about Brian being a potential member of the hero's party—it had all been little more than baseless rumors. The people of the world did not have a proper grasp of the heroes' abilities. They knew they were strong, but they couldn't even begin to comprehend *how* strong they were. It was like knowing a mountain was tall without having any true idea of its height; knowing only that it looked nigh unscalable, its peak so high it couldn't be seen from the ground.

As a result, there was speculation that the strongest military asset in Bahelgarn, the captain of the Royal Guard, might be able to compete with the hero's party. Perhaps it was a matter of national pride. One person's uninformed guess continued evolving until it was almost regarded as fact.

But the strength of the heroes was far beyond that. Their powers were on such a nonsensical level that the ordinary folk couldn't start to comprehend them.

I understood well, though. The heroes themselves couldn't comprehend the abilities of ordinary people. That was why they created something as

maddening as the "Anyone Can Do It! Hero-Style Boot Camp!" But the reverse was also true. Ordinary people had no conception of the power of these heroes.

As I came to this realization, I swallowed my breath. I came to see the incredible prowess of the heroes I associated with daily in a whole new light. If you hung out with them, you'd find them to be a bit clumsy and boneheaded in an endearing way, but beneath that lurked an unimaginable strength.

I knew then just how high the summit truly was.

"I-I can't lose to someone as lowly as you!" Brian yelled in desperation as blood dripped down his body. But no matter how many times he swung his sword, it just wouldn't reach. Their abilities were worlds apart. There was nothing he could do when faced with a gap akin to that between an adult and an infant. "I must expel all the demons! I must restore the greatness of humanity! Why don't you understand that?! Why do you stand in my way?!"

Even so, he couldn't give up. He was possessed by his ideology, unable to abandon his twisted beliefs.

"To think, a traitor who harbors the power of demons would be allowed to obstruct our justice...! It's unforgivable! Indefensible!" he gasped. "For justice! For the sake of justice...!"

With that, Brian swung with all his might.

"I can't afford to looose!"

It was a high, powerful strike; a final, desperate attack. A sense of dread filled the air as the sword came crashing down. This one last attack contained all that he had.

"Quit your yapping! It's pissing me off!"

But that attack, too, fell short.

Unleashing a roar that seemed to hold all the frustration that had built up within him over the course of the battle, Wolfe embedded his fist into Brian's face.

"Graaaaaah!!!"

Brian was sent flying—higher and higher, like a firework. His body flew into

the clear blue sky, the blood spurting from his nose tracing the arc of his flight like a beacon.

"Whoa..." I found myself muttering in admiration. The scene was like something straight out of a comic. Brian's body flew so high it was nothing more than a tiny dot.

But eventually would come the fall—and fall he did, crashing spectacularly into the ground. By then, he had been thrown so far into the distance he was imperceivable to the naked eye, but we could still hear the dull sound. Enemy, ally, we were all at a loss for words. Sir Brian, the kingdom's strongest, had been dealt with as easily as a petulant child.

The enemy soldiers continued to stare wide-eyed, unable to believe their eyes.

Wolfe clenched his fist.

"If you've got something to say, say it after you beat me."

How could anyone argue with that? There was nothing more they could do. With nothing but his fists, Wolfe had crushed any and all arguments. The aggressors had no one—no warrior mighty enough to make the same claims as before.

Wolfe stood silently. Even viewed from behind, his presence was overwhelming.

The rebellion they were plotting had been smashed to pieces by a single man's fists.

"Silencing all opinions with force? That's just plain barbaric," I uttered. Despite the victory, I couldn't help but say what was on my mind.

"L-Lady Lisalinde... You have nerves of steel," the princess whispered.

Everyone around me had broken into a cold sweat.

Apparently, Wolfe had heard it too. He froze up; I could feel a sort of awkwardness emanating from him.

And so, the revolution reached its anticlimactic end.

Chapter 49: Now—Never Take Your Eyes off Me

With the battle over, we moved to a nearby town, where we handed Brian and his men to the guards.

It was grueling work tying every single kidnapper with rope and transporting them to the town, but by the end, we managed to capture every last one of them. We'd successfully thwarted Brian's ambitions, and with that, our job was complete.

"Phew..."

I sank into the sofa, heaving a deep sigh.

We were at the guard station, where I was resting along with Remphie, Wolfe, and Remphie's attendants. I'd asked the guards to contact Academy Town, so Remphie's guards would soon be on their way. But until then, we weren't going anywhere, and frankly, we didn't want to move.

I was exhausted, to be honest. Chasing down the high-speed Chariots in a mad dash from Academy Town and destroying all six of them—it wasn't as hard as my usual training, but it had still been very strenuous exercise. In any case, I was drained.

I would have lain right down on the sofa if there had been no one else there to see me. And yet Wolfe, who had sprinted all the way from Academy Town much like me, seemed perfectly fine. Despite defeating the captain of the Royal Guard of the massive superpower that was Bahelgarn, he didn't look in any way spent. He sat with proper posture, apparently unruffled, as he calmly sipped his tea.

It must be different for someone as well trained as he is, I thought. To him, the battle had surely been but a trifle. The heroes and everyone who could rival them in skill were truly monsters.

And yet... There was someone far more exhausted than me. It was Remphie.

She sat next to Wolfe, her body faintly trembling. Her hands rested on her lap,

her fists clenched as if she was holding something in. Her face was a bit pale, and she had barely said a word for quite some time now.

It was understandable. She had been kidnapped, and by her trusted guard captain, no less. The shock must have been immense. Her body and mind were clearly exhausted as she sat there dejectedly, her head hung. She only sat next to Wolfe because he was the one she trusted more than anyone else.

"Ahem... It must have been scary for you, Princess Remiphinia." Perhaps feeling sorry for her, Wolfe finally spoke up, his voice gentle and comforting.

Of course, he clearly wasn't used to comforting others; he scratched his cheek awkwardly and his voice came out a bit higher pitched than usual.

Remphie lifted her face ever so slightly. She looked exhausted, but as she stared at Wolfe with upturned eyes, there was something sweet and beautiful about her.

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"Umm..."
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"Yes?"

"Could I...please...?" she softly muttered before embracing Wolfe.

His body stiffened in shock. Despite the age difference, Remphie was still a very beautiful princess. Being hugged by such a lovely girl caused every muscle in Wolfe's body to tense up. Even so, he understood the fear she must have gone through, so he couldn't just push her away.

"I was so scared... Could you hold me? For just a little bit...?" she whispered, her voice cracking.

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"Umm... Err..."
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Wolfe was troubled to no end. His brow oozed with sweat while his body moved awkwardly and stiffly. He sincerely didn't know what he was supposed to do. Was it really all right for him to hug a princess? One whose status far outweighed his own?

What's more, there was the age difference. Wouldn't it look inappropriate? Criminal even? It was obvious what he was thinking.

But even as he fretfully looked around, it wasn't like he was going to find the

answer in his surroundings. All he found were our warm gazes as we watched the two of them.

"Won't you please be nice to me...just for a little bit...?" She buried her face in his chest as she whispered to him.

What man could ever refuse when it was laid out to him like that? Wolfe closed his eyes in resignation and gently returned the hug.

"It must have been tough. But it's okay now..."

He spoke comforting words while patting her on the head. Their bodies were pressed closely together as he wrapped his left arm around his back. She seemed to find a sense of security in Wolfe's large frame, letting the tension drain from her shoulders.

His hand moved gently, combing through Remphie's crimson hair. The sensation seemed to soothe her as her eyelids drooped, her gaze serene. It was a heartwarming sight.

I snapped a photo.

"Huh?!"

Wolfe was startled.

"H-Hey! What are you taking pictures for ...?"

"Well, I mean. You know..."

He protested, but I was simply driven by a sense of divine duty to capture the scene in a picture frame. I needed to deliver this adorable image of Remphie to her older sister, Sylphie.

I was but a lone photographer, desperate to preserve this heartwarming moment for future generations, and for perpetuity.

"What are you, the paparazzi?! Are you trying to blackmail me or something?!"

"Oh no, I would never do something so awful. But, I would be very happy if you could listen to a few personal requests of mine later..."

"Stop! Quit it!"

I kept snapping photos. Though not intentionally, I'd obtained irrefutable evidence of this hug shared between Wolfe and Remphie.

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"Princess, you need to get off of me! There's a vile paparazzo here!"

"Hee hee..."

"Huh?"

"Heh heh heh..."
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Wolfe frantically tried to peel away from Remphie, but there was something strange about her. For some reason, she was laughing. And seeing her cackle away as she pressed her face into his chest, Wolfe gave a doubtful frown.

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"Amazing!"
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Her expression was bright as could be, her voice cheerful. Her cheeks were flush, while her eyes were practically sparkling. Her gloomy demeanor from before had completely vanished.

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"It really is exactly how Master said it would be...!"

"Master?"

"Ah."
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That jogged my memory.

It was back during the pajama party. Aina had offered Remphie a bit of advice. Namely, how to purposely show weakness.

If she leveraged her own wounds, she could entice a man to console her. A man could never abandon a wounded woman, so he would be the one taking steps to close the distance.

It was this very advice that had made Remphie look up to Aina as her master. And now, she had put it into practice.

"It's true! It really worked! Thank you so much, Master!"

"I don't really get it, but I feel like I've just been pulled into something incredibly stupid. Please get off of me."

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"I don't want to!"
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Wolfe tried to detach Remphie, but she had both her arms firmly wrapped around his body, and refused to budge. It was clear who had the upper hand here.

"Eh heh heh."

She snuggled close to her beloved, smiling from ear to ear.

Wolfe let out a deep sigh. If he wanted to, he could forcibly tear her away, but he wouldn't. With all his strength, he risked injuring the small girl, and perhaps he was fearful of that. So, the moment she had him within her grasp, Remphie had already won.

"How cunning, Princess Remphie! I'd expect nothing less."

"Oh no, Liz. I've still got a long way to go."

"Hooray!"

"Hooray!"

I approached and lightly high-fived her, celebrating the success of her feminine wiles.

"What even is going on? Good grief..."

"Nothing at all," Remphie said with a mischievous grin.

Then, her smile turned to one of innocent glee. There was no holding back in romance. All was fair in love and war. Before me sat an adorable little temptress.

Wolfe heaved a deep sigh. "When did the two of you start calling one another by nicknames, anyway?"

"Just now, Sir Wolfe."

The conversation shifted a bit as Wolfe voiced his mild curiosity. Until this moment, I had always referred to her by her formal title as Princess Remiphinia. Only those she personally recognized were allowed to call her Remphie, just as it was with her older sister, Sylphie. It was royal custom. However...

"Liz saved my life, after all! I pleaded for her to call me by my nickname!"

"It was as good an opportunity as any, so I asked her to call me Liz as well."

"Heh heh heh!"

I sat next to Remphie and gently patted her on the head. She was still busy hugging Wolfe, but she smiled as I patted her. It seemed I'd earned quite a bit of favor with her.

How adorable.

"I was surprised when you destroyed all those carriages... But you were so very strong and cool! I truly respect you, Liz."

"Oh, I still have a long way to go."

Remphie's gaze sparkled as she looked at me. For some strange reason, I hallucinated Melvy's voice saying, "There goes Liz, the most powerful womanizer," but I ignored it.

Besides, I'm not a womanizer.

"I see, so that's how it is," Wolfe said with a slight nod.

"Why don't you call her Liz too, Sir Wolfe?" Remphie asked, and Wolfe shot her an awkward look.

Indeed, Wolfe would always call me by my full name, Lisalinde. Sure, it hadn't been long since we first met, but still, Wolfe was the only member of the hero's party who didn't use my nickname.

Albeit...the other members just arbitrarily started calling me Liz almost immediately after we met... I'm still not so sure about that approach.

"I think I'll pass," Wolfe nonchalantly refused.

"Aww," Remphie whined. "What's the harm? If we want to get closer, we can start by changing how we address one another. And after that, you can start calling me Remphie too. \equiv "

"I must respectfully decline."

"Eh?" she pouted.

I see, so that's the strategy. Well played, Remphie. She was still in her attack phase.

"I am someone who betrayed the humans," Wolfe said with a wry smile. "It

would be nothing but trouble, growing close to someone who harbors the power of demons." He gave a slight, self-deprecating laugh.

We were at a bit of a loss on how to respond. Remphie had a concerned look on her face. "Umm... Are you worried about what Brian said? Please, don't worry about him. He was incredibly biased."

Brian had relentlessly hurled insults at Wolfe, calling him a traitor to humans and a mongrel possessing the power of lowly demons, among other things. Remphie seemed a little shaken up by the thought that her own guard might have hurt Wolfe with his words.

"No, he didn't bother me." Wolfe's demeanor remained light. He calmly smiled and gently patted her head. "But that doesn't change the fact that I hate humans. It is a fact that I allied with the demons and made an enemy of all humankind, and I have never regretted it. So, in part, what he said was true... I felt very relieved today. I got to beat the stuffing out of someone who epitomized everything I hate about humans..."

Wolfe chuckled. Once upon a time, he brushed up against the ugliness of humanity and came to hate humans. From what I'd heard, a village he adored—one that took good care of him—was destroyed by human hands. This led him to leave the lands of humans and join the demons.

I'd only learned this recently. Remphie had heard the story long before I had. But...

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"Umm, Sir Wolfe?"
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"Why did you quit the demon army and return to human lands, then?" Remphie timidly asked.

I hadn't heard the reason either.

"Because Cain...scolded me."

He heaved another sigh as he began speaking. It didn't seem like he had any intentions of hiding the truth.

"I came to hate humans after seeing the deeds of a handful of villains. So I

[&]quot;What is it?"

joined the demons. And that was what led me to fight Cain. He scolded me about that."

"He scolded you...?"

"'C'mon, dude, then what? If you meet a demon you don't like, are you going to start hating all demons too?' he said."

He let out a soft laugh.

"'You're such an idiot. There's always gonna be good guys and bad guys. Human or demon, doesn't matter. That's just how it works. You hate everyone just because of a few bad eggs? What are you, a brat?' He was stating the obvious. But when he said that to me, I couldn't say anything back."

Wolfe spoke indifferently, matter-of-factly. Despite his mild tone, it had undoubtedly been quite the brutal fight. Leaving the human lands to live among the demons required extraordinary resolve. I could almost see the fierce exchange where this man and the hero traded blows while refuting one another's beliefs.

"Cain told me, 'What you need to do isn't find more people to hate. You should find someone you can trust from the bottom of your heart.'"

"Someone you can trust..."

"'It doesn't matter if they're human or demon,' he said..."

Wolfe closed his eyes as he thought back to bygone days. A refreshing wind breached the room through the window.

"He was speaking truth while knocking me senseless. It was a terrible time. In the end, though, it's just a case of narrow-mindedness. After that, I left the demon army and meandered from place to place. To borrow a cliché, it was a journey of self-discovery. I wandered back and forth between human and demon lands, aimlessly. I lost the argument, lost the fistfight, and lost my purpose too."

"That's not..."

"It was around that time that I got a message from Cain. He told me I should help with guard duty if I had nothing better to do. That's how I ended up in

Academy Town." He sighed, concluding:

"It's an utterly idiotic tale."

And then, he shut his mouth.

The story was over. We didn't know how to react.

The room was overtaken by silence. Though Wolfe spoke casually from beginning to end, it was a story close to his heart; a tale of his core beliefs. To be trapped in hatred and resentment, only to reconsider his standing thanks to the admonishment of a friend. Surely, there had been much pain and conflict he simply hadn't brought up.

And so, I had no idea what I could say back to him. It felt like any trite words of consolation would only be an insult to what he'd been through.

But... No, precisely because of that, *she* was the one who found the right words.

"I'll be that person!" She raised her voice, having found her resolve. "I'll be that person! I'll become a splendid person you can trust from the bottom of your heart!"

Remphie looked straight at Wolfe, her eyes sincere to no end. She leaned in even closer, trying to convey her passion directly. Her expression was calm, collected; she wanted him to know that she was serious, and not just saying it in the heat of the moment.

"E-Err..."

Wolfe was startled and a little troubled. He tried to back away, but Remphie wouldn't let him. The more he backed off, the closer she drew to him.

"I will become a kind and warm person who cherishes both humans and demons!" she pledged.

"So please, don't take your eyes from me."

And then she kissed him. She pressed her small lips against his.

It was a light kiss, just a touch. A kiss just to show her respect and something more.

And swiftly, she took her lips away.

"Heh heh heh..."

Remiphinia beamed, while Wolfe was taken aback. I instinctively found myself hitting the shutter. *Snap, snap,* the flashbulb burst to life again and again.

"Huh? Wait, what?! U-Umm... Wh-What are you taking pictures for ...?!"

Wolfe was in a tizzy now, his mind unable to catch up to what was happening, but the first words he did muster were about my photography.

My hands simply moved on their own. What was I supposed to do about that?

"Someday, I'll be a respectable adult. Please don't forget about me, Sir Wolfe."

But as Remphie opened her mouth, his attention was quickly drawn back to her.

She was blushing. Despite being the one to initiate the kiss, she was still embarrassed. She fidgeted shyly, her smile as sweet as a bud just starting to bloom.

There she was in her truest form, innocent and adorable.

"Don't forget about me!" she shouted as she took off.

She parted from Wolfe, her hands covering her face as she raced for the door.

Kissing him was all well and good, but Remphie soon found herself overwhelmed with embarrassment. Even her hands were flushed red; having said what had to be said, she attempted to make her escape.

"Hey...! W-Wait, Princess Remiphi—" Wolfe tried to stop her. But it was only at that moment that he finally noticed. "Huh?!"

The door was already open, and there was someone in the doorway. Someone had entered the room just as the kiss was occurring. Wolfe had been so distracted by the ordeal that he hadn't noticed this new person's presence.

In short, there was now another witness. There were no two ways about it.

Wolfe was at a loss for words. The newcomer stood there, mouth agape.

It was none other than First Prince Anzel, Remiphinia's older brother.

Both of them were petrified, their eyes wide with shock.

Remphie seemed genuinely surprised to see her brother there. But in the end, her embarrassment won out, and she slipped past him without a word. And with that, she was gone.

"Wh-Wh-Wh... Wh-What do y-you think you're d-d-doing?!" A roar like thunder erupted from Prince Anzel.

An armed force had been dispatched from Academy Town to escort Remphie, but Anzel must have come along with them out of concern for his sister. It was unfortunate that this should have been the scene he entered in on.

"N-No! This isn't what it...! I-I-It's all a misunderstanding! A complete misunderstanding!"

"A-A-And what exactly am I misunderstanding, you bastard?!"

"I-I-It w-wasn't me...! Sh-She was the one who...! The princess just suddenly...!"

He was speaking nothing but the unvarnished truth, but his sputtering excuses were far from manly.

"Wolfe, you... I mean, c'mon. A kiss is going too far."

"C-Cain?! You were watching too?!"

Prince Anzel wasn't the only person who'd entered the room. Cain, Sylphie, and Kuon were there, among many others. These were presumably all the members who were scheduled to take part in the discussions set to happen today. They'd rushed over the moment they'd heard of Remphie's kidnapping.

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"Pedo!"
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"Pedo!"

"Foul pedo!"

"N-No! I'm not like that! It's not like that!"

Wolfe was immediately in a tizzy. The heroes and the (former) demon lord were all teasing him, grins wide across their faces.

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"Oh, Wolfe."
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"S-Sylphonia..."

Remiphinia's own sister Sylphie approached him.

"Take care of my sister, okay?"

"You're wrong! You have it all wrong!" He barely managed to squeeze out his words.

It was no exaggeration to say that Sylphie was enjoying the situation more than anyone else.

"This isn't such a simple matter!" Prince Anzel cut in with a scream. "You all...! Do you really understand?! A k-kiss between the princess of a nation and some nobody...! It's unheard of! Unacceptable!"

"I understand completely!" Wolfe protested. "I am keenly aware! But what do you expect me to do?!"

"Execution! Execution is the only way! Under most circumstances, you'd be executed! You hear me?! You've committed a serious offense!" Anzel wailed, his face bright red. What he was saying was reasonable.

But Sylphie interjected, "Anzel, if you do that, then Remphie will quite literally curse you until the day you die."

"I don't want that!"

Anzel crumbled at the knees. He was quite the dramatic character.

"Wolfe, my man, even if you like little girls, a kiss is too much, y'hear?"

"What became of thy noble 'Yes Lolita, no touch' spirit?"

"Oh Wolfe, you beast."

"Shut up! Just shut up!"

The onlookers continued to heckle him with glee.

"I don't accept this! I don't accept it, you hear!" Anzel yelled from the floor where he lay.

"Damn it! What am I even supposed to do in this situation?!" Wolfe wailed.

This was practically hell for him.

"However. Your achievements during this incident...were outstanding. Truly."

"Hmm?"

The winds suddenly changed. Prince Anzel slowly lifted his head and praised Wolfe.

"I don't want to admit it... Trust me, I don't! But rescuing the princess and suppressing a rebellion headed by the captain of the Royal Guard... They will both be recognized as quite significant deeds..."

"Huh? Wait..."

"These achievements merit direct recognition from the crown... You will be handsomely rewarded. If we do end up publicly disclosing this incident, you will have earned considerable honor..." he continued, a sour look on his face. He was clearly reluctant, but pragmatic about the current situation. "And, if you...continue to accumulate such achievements...you could rise to the point where I could no longer reject your marriage."

"Wait! What are you saying?!"

Wolfe had finally managed to draw a concession out of the prince.

Of course, Wolfe had yet to meet said requirements, but his achievements in this incident were significant enough to even bring the prospect of marriage into consideration. Even if he had no such intentions, he had made the idea of marrying Remphie a plausible reality.

"N-No...! I didn't ask for this!"

"I didn't know you wanted to marry her that badly."

"You were the first to rush to her side in her time of need."

"No! No, no, no!"

"I won't forgive you if you make my sister sad, Wolfe."

"Noooooooooooo...!"

The walls were closing in around him. Their relationship was receiving more and more recognition. More and more approval. With each passing moment, he

was being stripped of his means of escape.

"Why don't you just give in?" I offered.

"You say it like it's none of your business!"

Well, it is none of my business.

But by this point, it felt like he was marching steadily towards this marriage. That was his future, his unchangeable fate.

That's not too bad, is it? Marrying into money.

"Listen up, you pissant!" Anzel bellowed as he stood. "If you seriously want to make Remphie happy, you must achieve feats that all may applaud! Unless you accomplish great things that the royal family and the citizenry can accept, and reach a point where a great many will give their blessing to your union, Remphie will never be happy! If you can't do that, I will never approve of this marriage!"

"But I'm telling you! I don't have any plans of doing that!"

"Dammit all to hell! If you make my sister unhappy, I'll never forgive you! Dammit...!"

"Aah! W-Wait! No, seriously, wait...!"

Ignoring any attempt Wolfe made to stop him, Anzel burst out of the room at a run, crying and sobbing like a child. His blaring wails continued to reach the room we were in.

As the wails faded into the distance, we were left in a state of empty silence.

"Freeze! Police!"

"Nobody move!"

"What is it this time?"

We were all equally in the dark. Then, as if to fill in for Anzel's absence, a group of just as noisy people burst in.

"This is the police! We sensed a man forcing a kiss on a young girl in this room! Come quietly!"

"Dammit! It's the coppers again...!"

Once again, the Angel Coppers were on the scene. No one had filed a report, yet they picked up on the scent of danger and immediately rushed in. It was thanks to their efforts that the peace of numerous towns had been preserved.

"How can you press your lips against an innocent young girl?! Does it not hurt your conscience?!"

"You've got it all wrong! Hear me out!"

"Take him in! Take him in!"

Unable to resist the robust officers, Wolfe was restrained in no time.

"It's a misunderstanding! She did that on her own! I didn't do anything!"

"That's what they all say!"

"We'll hear your excuses at the station!"

With an Angel Copper on each arm, Wolfe was dragged out of the room.

"Stop! I'm innocent!"

"Give it up!"

"See you soon, Wolfe."

"Go ace that interrogation."

"Save me!"

Warm sunlight streamed in through the window. The breeze was gentle. The sky was wide and clear. It was a day far more suited for love stories than revolutions. The uproar that began with peace talks between the royal families of humans and demons was about to blossom into a small romance. The love story of a certain princess and black knight had only just begun.

"I am not a pedophile!" Wolfe screamed.

A scream from the depths of his soul carried fruitlessly through the endless sky.

Epilogue

"A new hero, huh?" Cain listlessly muttered, his hands folded behind his head.

The heroes had returned to Academy Town. The battle with Brian and the subsequent cleanup was over, and everyone had returned to their usual lives in the bustling town.

One member was still in police custody and hadn't returned, but there wasn't anything they could do about that.

And so, with everything taken care of, the heroes shambled along the vibrant shop-lined main street as they made their way home.

"Are you talking about that thing Brian mentioned?"

"Mm, well, I doubt it's anything too important."

Sylphie and Cain chatted back and forth, neither seeming too serious. The topic of the conversation was the new hero that had apparently appeared.

Their information mainly came from Remiphinia, who testified about what she had heard from Brian. Brian seemed to have been plotting to make a comrade of that hero to further his revolution.

"Do you know anything about the new hero?" Liz asked.

Cain casually replied, "Just some rumors. I heard some mysterious person was going around helping people while screaming, 'I'm the real hero!'"

Apparently, they were already aware of this.

However...

"Well, with what little we know, it ain't too different from knowing nothin' at all."

"So it seems."

Just knowing that a mysterious person existed hardly constituted knowledge of said person. There was barely any information about this new hero

anywhere.

Brian seemed confident in his plan to prop up this new hero, but to brazenly raise a rebellion with so little information? *Is he stupid or something?* Cain thought with a scoff.

"So. Cain. As the real hero, what dost thou intendest to do with this new hero?" asked Kuon.

"What do you mean by that?" he scoffed. "Why would I do anything?" "Huh?"

Yawning, Cain went on, "I mean, what's the real harm with calling yourself a hero? It's not like they're tryna go against me or anything. They can do whatever they want, for all I care."

"Art thou not curious as to why they may be claiming heroship?"

"None of my business. I'm more concerned about what's gonna be on tomorrow's quiz."

Cain gave an exaggerated shrug. He seemed uninterested in the matter.

"Oh, but if they're going as far as to call themselves a hero, wouldn't it be more natural to consider them an ally rather than an enemy?" Liz weighed in.

The new hero was an unknown—which raised some concern—but there was no reason to assume they were an enemy. Though information was scarce, they'd heard reports of them going around and helping people.

Couldn't they just be a good person? she thought.

"We might be getting a new ally, then. Cain. Strengthening our forces is an important task," said Sylphie.

"Then what, we're going to go off and search for someone we've got no intel on? That's too much work. If they're calling themselves a hero, they can come and find me."

For a while now, Cain's policy had been remarkably carefree. The feeling that he couldn't be bothered was palpable to everyone present.

"Plus, like, we just don't have enough info. Whatever we do next depends on

whatever info we get. This self-proclaimed hero might not even be anything special. In fact, that's far more likely."

"Hmm... You may be right about that." Sylphie put a hand to her chin as she conceded the point.

On the off-chance the new hero turned out to be their enemy, it was highly unlikely for them to be skilled enough to threaten the hero or his party members. The heroes were the strongest warriors of humanity, their strength beyond the comprehension of most people. Even Brian, who had failed in his rebellion, was touted as a match for the heroes by the general public, and still he had ultimately been unable to lift a finger against Wolfe. Their prowess was transcendent, to the level that ordinary people couldn't even fathom it.

So long as they didn't know the abilities of this new hero, then Cain was right. Gathering information was their first priority.

It looks like this new hero is the next big thing... But are they going to turn out to be like Sir Brian? Liz wondered to herself.

"Well, whatever happens, happens," Cain concluded. "If they're a big shot, then we don't got to do a thing. We'll run into them eventually. It doesn't matter if they're an enemy or an ally. As long as they're calling themselves a hero, they can't just ignore us."

"So we simply hold our ground. Mwah ha ha ha hah! I can't say I'm displeased."

"We'll have the informants gather information. Anyway, there's nothing we can do for now. No point in panicking," Cain boldly declared.

But his confident composure imparted a sense of reassurance to his allies. Had he shown undue panic or concern, it would have spread anxiety among them. He had the stability required of a leader.

"If I'm being honest, I want them to be the real deal. They'll handle all that pain-in-the-ass hero work, won't they? They could just save all of humanity in my place."

"C'mon now."

"I'll even throw them the hero title if they really want it."

He yawned. A part of him really was just that lazy.

"Now, now, Cain. You'll make Wolfe angry if you say that. He's doing his best at prison life as we speak."

The pitiful man was only being questioned by the police. He hadn't yet been shoved into a cell. Remiphinia had been the one who initiated the kiss after all, so he would probably be back after he received a strict reprimand.

"That guy... How many times is he going to get arrested?"

"He's already been in police custody twice in such a short span of time. No, if you count the time our Royal Guard got him, that makes three..."

Everyone looked out into the distance.

They could see it. From now on, he was going to be arrested again and again.

"It's pretty funny," Cain said coldly.

"Saying that about your childhood friend... Don't you feel a bit bad for him...?"

"Umm, err, I'm just trying to approach him normally... The police wouldn't listen to me..." Remiphinia, who was with them, gave a troubled look.

"Give it up, Princess. It doesn't matter how much authority you have. A man's powerless when he's facing down a little girl and the police," Cain told her. "Nothing he can do about it."

"We're only seven years apart..." Remiphinia pouted.

Currently, Wolfe was nineteen, and Remiphinia was twelve. Couples with a seven-year age gap were relatively common across the world.

But they were still in their teens.

At thirty, a seven-year gap wasn't too significant, but at their young age, it was essentially insurmountable.

"You'll just have to wait until you grow up. At the end of the day, the problem is that you're a brat. If you still like him once you've got more height and curves on you, then maybe you can try again."

"Urgh..."

"Cain, that statement could be taken as sexual harassment."

"Shall I call the police, Cain?"

"Please forgive me! I'm sorry!" Cain humbly apologized.

Even as the hero, he was powerless before a little girl and the police.

And so, this casual back-and-forth dragged on as they languidly walked through town.

But during this moment, as unremarkable as any other, a figure was watching them from the rooftop—a human in a red hooded coat, with a white mask covering their face. The fact that they wore a mask made them immediately suspicious, but no one seemed to notice they even existed. They stifled their presence and held their breath as they stood motionless on the roof. The coat billowed in the wind.

The town was at peace. The store-lined streets were bustling with cheer as throngs of lively people meandered their length. The sun was beginning to dip, its red light searing the skies.

Everyone went through their perfectly ordinary lives.

And for yet another day, Academy Town was the epitome of peace.

That is, apart from the mysterious individual whose eyes sharpened as they locked onto something.

Suddenly, they took action. They swayed and then leaped, falling from the tall rooftop towards a certain someone.

Concealing their aura within them to the very limit, they made sure to register their target with nothing but their eyes. To give no other cues.

"Huh?"

It was only at that moment that Cain noticed something was off. He was the only one who noticed.

His animalistic, superhuman instinct alerted him to the vaguest sense of wrongness.

His gaze shifted back over his shoulder. Goose bumps rose on his skin.

"Hm?" He let out what was barely a grunt, the sound causing his comrades to pick up on it too.

But by then, the mysterious individual was already upon them.

They were silent, holding a beautiful sword in hand. Its blade let off a golden glimmer, while the hilt was adorned with magnificent ornamentation. The sword was clad in a faint white light, and all who saw it could feel something divine in its making.

It was a slender, light-looking sword that gave off a powerful sense of presence. A peculiar energy was imbued in that blade, and one look at it was enough to know that it was on a different plane of existence from any run-of-the-mill weaponry.

They all knew in an instant. They knew by instinct.

This was a holy sword.

The new hero.

"Dammit!"

"Hraaaaaah!"

The mysterious figure swung their holy sword at Cain.

Just like that, the heroes of old and new had collided.















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I Could Never Be a Succubus! Volume 4

by Nora Kohigashi

Illustrations by Wasabi

Translated by Roy Nukia Edited by Diana Taylor

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私はサキュバスじゃありません 4

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