

# The Dark Guild Master's Smile

would fit best

# 2

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# CHARACTER INTRODUCTION

*The master of a darkness guild well smiles today. character biography*



## ◆ Master

Real name unknown. He is the leader of the Dark Guild "Yerkchira, the Messianic Legion" and is always seen smiling. He is a kind-hearted young man who cares deeply for his comrades. Unbeknownst to him, the guild members are plotting a "Present the World to Master" plan, something he has no desire for.



## ◆ Laladie

An alraune girl who can control plants. She adores Master and is known for her sharp tongue and loud demeanor within the guild. The nectar from the flower on her head is exceptionally delicious. In the world conquest plan, she is in charge of the "Hero's Party."



## ◆ Soulgros

A slime ninja with the verbal tic "ござる." She loves Master and constantly stalks him. In the world conquest plan, she is responsible for the "Guild."



## ◆ Ritter

A quiet female knight who rarely shows emotion. Naturally loyal to Master, she is respected by the other guild members. In the world conquest plan, she is in charge of the "Kingdom."



## ◆ Vampille

Like Laladie, she is an energetic and noisy young lady. Despite her frequent attempts to attract Master's attention, her usual behavior leads to her being mostly ignored. In the world conquest plan, she is responsible for the "Vampires."





### ◆ *Schwarte*

A quiet maid similar to Ritter. She takes great joy in serving Master and tries to take care of every possible need. In the world conquest plan, she is responsible for the "Elves."



### ◆ *Leiss*

A dignified and reliable woman of great valor. As one of the guild's veterans, she is less inclined towards violence compared to the other members and serves as the guild's conscience. In the world conquest plan, she is responsible for the "Dragons."



### ◆ *Corine*

A well-endowed girl with the best figure among the guild members. Although she tries to seduce Master, her inherent tsundere nature often gets in the way. In the world conquest plan, she is responsible for the "Demon King's Army."



### ◆ *Krankheit*

A gloomy girl who speaks in a timid and hesitant manner. Although she doesn't actively seek out Master, her true nature is... In the world conquest plan, she is responsible for the "Demons."



### ◆ *Anat*

Like Master, she always wears a cheerful smile and serves as the guild's coordinator. She has established the "Church of Master," causing Master considerable stress. In the world conquest plan, she is responsible for the "Angels."



### ◆ *Rimmil*

A beautiful woman with an even better figure than Corine. Although she is not officially a member of the guild, she occasionally outmaneuvers the members to meet Master. Her details are shrouded in mystery.



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# The Dark Guild Master's Smile

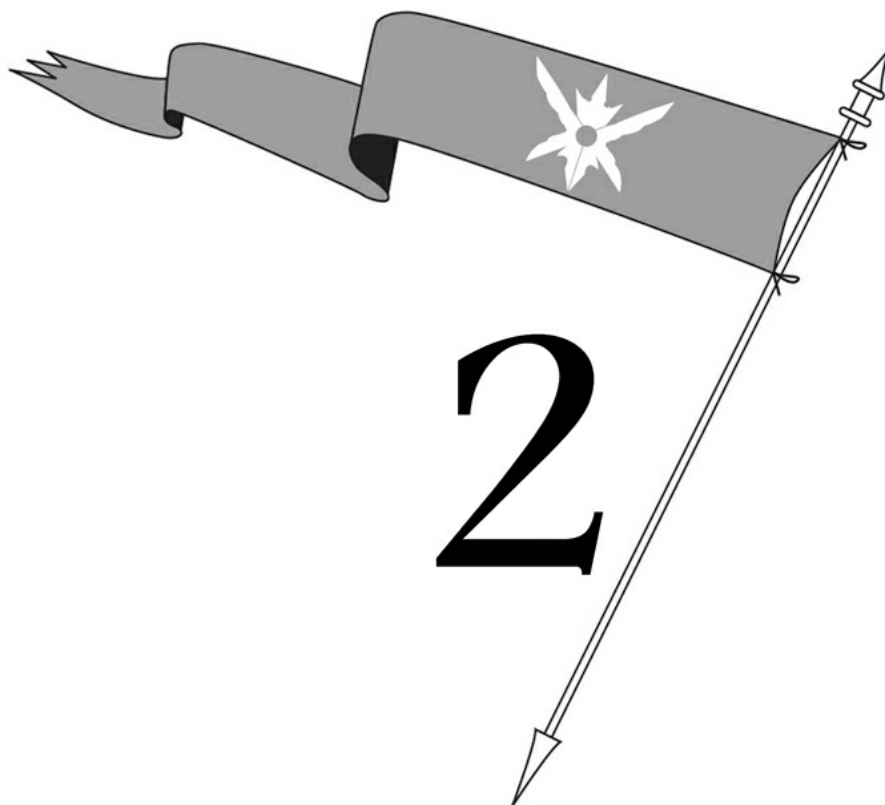
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*The Dark Guildmaster's Smile Would Fit Best*

## ACT 2

### DARK GUILD ARC



## Chapter 1: Hunting in the Sun

Today was another beautiful day. Even from my room in the guild, I could tell the weather felt exceptionally clear and fine. That had to be due to my trip into the outer world with Laladie recently, and having felt the sun on my skin directly for the first time in ages. However, since our return from Laladie's flower garden—and all the unexpected troubles that arose with it—my guildmates were so worried that I confined myself to those halls once again. Granted, the skirmishes with the orcs and ogres could have gone poorly, but with both Laladie and the heroes Yuuto and Maho, I was never in any real danger.

*Er, no... I suppose the Hero's Party was destroyed in the aftermath of that little walk, so I can't say nothing went wrong.*

*"GWEEEEEEEEERGH!"*

Despite that, I found myself in the woods on a monster-hunting mission on this particular day.

*How did this happen...?*

*"Prithee, Master, look to thy right."*

It was a woman's voice, and one I knew well at that, though its owner was nowhere to be seen. I obediently turned to find the rough-hewn blade of our lizardman mark being brought down on my head.

Lizardmen were, in essence, just human-shaped lizards, hunched over in their awkward stance on their hind legs. This specimen had glossy red scales and large, piercing eyes, and its tongue flicked out between its rough "lips" at me.

In an effort to save myself from this predicament, I unleashed a short blast of mana into the monster's chest. The fiend was reduced to ash before it could even scream, disappearing without a trace.

*"Excellent, Master. A kill worthy of thine name."*



It wasn't any decent measure of my personal strength, as lizardmen were simply that underwhelming, but my guildmates always praised me to an embarrassing degree. Case in point, Soulgros had appeared out of nowhere and was applauding me politely. I could tell from the joyous gleam in her eyes that she wasn't being sarcastic—no, those were the eyes of intense and whole-hearted admiration.

“I'm supposed to be helping you on your commissions, though, so what's the point in making me do all the fighting?”

As the leader of our dark guild, I couldn't infiltrate other guilds, much less the legal ones. That was why Soulgros had accepted the quest, and I was supposed to be her civilian guide to the area.

“Of course there is a point, Master. Witnessing thy heroic visage as thou slayest foul creatures fills my heart with joy.”

I wasn't sure what she meant by that, exactly, but it wasn't as though there was anyone from the guild she'd infiltrated to watch her, so it didn't make a difference either way. I'd be dead weight otherwise.

Soulgros's aid was instrumental in making sure the task went so smoothly, after all. She could stay undetected and tell me where the targets were coming from, or snipe them with her throwing knives should they attempt to flee. I was genuinely impressed that she could hide from their superior senses as well.

“You're doing too much to support me; I only wish there were something I could do for you.”

“F-For me?!” the kunoichi stammered. “B-But observing thine fight is all the reward I could possibly require... Though perhaps I could ask thee to accompany me on seduction training...?”

“I appreciate your humbleness... but stop that. You're like a daughter to me.”

She was fidgeting restlessly, her full-body black garb rustling and shifting without a sound as she looked at me with some unknown emotion.

I sighed. “It's been ages since I've hunted monsters like this...”



She froze. “I-Is it not to thy liking? I invited thou thinking thou hadst thy fill of paperwork...”

I hurriedly shook my head *no*. I was genuinely grateful for the chance to get some air, what with how little I’d seen of the outdoors lately. Desk work was still my task of choice, as I didn’t want any of my lovely guild members to struggle with such tedious work, but sometimes I felt guilty that I was the only one not risking my life. I’d love to take on more dangerous tasks if possible.

“I’m surprised you could tell I wanted to come out so badly. And here I thought I’d be hard to read, given that I’m always smiling.”

She chuckled, hints of a delirious smile peering out from beneath her mouth scarf. “How could I not? I am always watching thee... Always.”

That made sense... though the way she said it sent a chill down my spine.

“Now, Master, we have yet to slay all the monsters we need. Let us locate the next warband.”

She smiled, the bloody, freshly-plucked scales of our foes in her hands, though I never saw her take them.

Soulgros was right in that we still had work to do. We were at the mercy of the guilds, and if they discovered that we were from a dark guild—much less that I was the guildmaster—they would try to kill us outright. Our Messianic Legion of Yerkchira almost never accepted monster-hunting quests, after all. Such things were saved for the legal guilds, mainly as a means of letting their newer members gain experience in the field. Instead, we were often assigned crimes such as assassinations, the slaying of especially dangerous monsters, or even capturing dangerous criminals. Our very organization was illegal, after all, and the work was nothing to be proud of.

Because I rejected the more unsavory tasks, however, it tended to limit the work we took on. Gray guilds were better at petty crimes in general, and there were fewer risks involved in contracting them. That was why I had some of my members pose as newbies at the proper, legal guilds. They tended to be quite lenient in giving prospective adventurers trial periods, and it was as simple as satisfying performance from there. Very few of Yerkchira’s members were



willing to do such a thing, unfortunately, so most of our income came from slaying powerful monsters—hence my rising guilt at staying home all the time.

*I could never let them do something as foul as murder, though... Never.*

“Master?”

Soulgros shot me an inquisitive look, puzzled by my silence. I simply smiled and tousled her hair, telling her that today, of all days, I wouldn't be hanging back.

“M-M-Master?! Hast thou lost thy mind?!” Her hands flew to her head, panicking just as I'd expect her guildmate Krankheit to. “Hath I done something to warrant such a boon?! No... hast thou finally awoken to my womanly charms?!”

My smile strained. She was charming, no doubt about that, but it'd feel wrong to lay so much as a finger on her. With that, I suggested we return to the task at hand.

“As thou wilt, Master.”

The two of us returned to our quest with renewed vigor.



## Chapter 2: The Outing's Ulterior Motives

Soulgros had fought long and hard to secure her private outing with Master. Every member of Yerkchira worshipped the very ground he walked on and clung to him every chance they had, meaning that none of them could flirt with him without interference. Should they learn of her current outing with him, they would do everything in their power to sabotage her. She'd do the same in their shoes, after all, which was why it proved impossible to get him alone before now.

The rules had changed when that bratty, deceitful little loli-alraune bitch Laladie abducted him. She'd finished her work ahead of the others and returned to find the other members were all out. That coincidence was all she needed to take him outside and spend a worrying amount of time alone with him. Granted, they ran into the Hero's Party soon enough, so they weren't truly alone for long, but had they been truly alone, Laladie would surely have lost control.

*I must slay her*, Soulgros thought with a grim nod. Guildmates or no, her hatred of the girl was genuine. None of the women in Yerkchira cared for the others, and they had every intention of murdering the others sooner or later.

Soulgros had underestimated the alraune's feelings for their Master, let alone her desire to abduct him, and the episode had only deepened her hatred for the little liar—but perhaps more importantly, it gave her an opportunity. There was now a precedent for leaving the guild alone with Master, which meant that she could finally have the hot date she'd always plotted with him.

“Like fucking hell Lala will let you!” Laladie had spat when she caught wind of Soulgros's plans, her fluffy green hair bristling with rage. Soulgros might've stopped to admire how undeniably cute she was if she was any less inclined to kill the brat where she stood. All she could see was the guild's crest emblazoned on the girl's cheek, filthy slut that she was.

“Didst thou not abduct him first, Laladie-dono?”

“Yeah, but that was because Lala was smart and capable, unlike *some* bitches! She deserved that reward!”

The alraune puffed her flat chest out with pride—an odd move, considering how insecure she felt about her lack of endowment. Soulghros shook her head in confusion, as she possessed thoroughly average breasts herself.

“If that’s true, Soulghros deserves a turn,” came a voice from beside them.

“What?!”

They both whipped about to see a young woman with short black hair in knight’s armor—Ritter, as expressionless as always.

“Th-This isn’t fair!” Laladie huffed. “Why’re you siding with Soulghros?! You’re always following Master around like a cat in heat!”

*Thou art scarcely better thyself*, Soulghros thought.

The ninja shot a wary glance at her unexpected ally. “Hast thou lost thy mind? Thy words do naught but sicken me.”

The petite knight shook her head. “You gathered the Hero’s Party, the gray guilds, and the Royal Knights together... You did okay.”

“Well, I must admit I am flattered.”

She narrowed her eyes. Ritter never showed emotion for anyone except Master—something was afoot. For now, though, there would be no harm in taking the girl’s aid at face value.

“Ngh... No fair!” Laladie stomped her feet. “You won’t get the others to agree so easily!”

Coline and Vampille had plenty to say on the topic, granted, and Schwarte had already chewed her out in her taciturn way. Soulghros had her answer, however, and she wasn’t about to spare Laladie from it.

“Anat-dono hath given me permission,” she declared.

“Whaaat?!”



Anat was their leader, in a sense, and her word was final. Soulgros loathed having to go to her for permission, but Laladie had no means of protesting now. Perhaps more importantly, Anat's decree meant that she had the consent of half of the guild members, making Soulgros's sojourn with Master as official as possible.

"L-Lala always knew everyone was stupid except her and Master, but she never thought you were *this* stupid!" She fell to her knees, hands grasping toward the heavens as if she were already at Master's feet. "Ahh, Master... Lala will save you from these bimbos, she promises!"

"Truly, thou art a vile soul." Soulgros shook her head before turning to Ritter. "I must thank thee for thy aid. Laladie-dono would never have accepted this willingly."

The knight had already turned to wander out into the hallway by then, and she turned disinterestedly back at Soulgros's words. She noticed Soulgros was insincere, but she curtly nodded regardless.

"Don't mention it... Just remember this when it's my turn."

Soulgros smirked from behind her face scarf. Of course Ritter didn't help her out of the goodness of her heart—nobody in Yerkchira would. They needed something more personal as motivation, and in this case, Ritter was plotting a trip or two of her own with Master.

"Very well," Soulgros conceded with a nod.

Ritter was a great help, but of course that didn't mean she had to support the knight when the time came.

"I suppose the time hath come." Soulgros grunted with a stretch before leaving for Master's study.

A minute later, Laladie finally managed to climb to her feet and trotted into the corridors herself.

※ ※ ※

Soulgros was more cheerful than she'd been in ages. Normally, she was forced to derive what paltry pleasure she could by shadowing her beloved Master—and while that was ostensibly what she was planning to do on their outing, she knew Master would soon be hers and hers alone. She even found herself humming as she slipped down the corridor toward his room.

That only made the interloper's presence more bitingly obvious.

"Curses!"

This intruder was far more troubling than that brat Laladie could ever be. Without so much as a thought, she flung a kunai in her rival's direction. Sadly, she was not met with the sound of a blade biting into flesh.

"Wha?! A-Are you trying to scare me to death?!"

The returning voice was crisp and clear, with a charming inflection that could make lesser minds melt with elation. Soulgros was, of course, above such cheap tricks.

"Thou art no affiliate of Yerkchira," Soulgros spat back. "Thou should expect no less of a greeting."

The intruder strode closer and rubbed her elbow into Soulgros's side jokingly. "Oh, but you knew it was me, didn't you?"

"Hahh... Enough of these games..."

She—Rimmil—had a tendency to take over any conversation she butted into, and worse, she had no appreciation for personal space. In fact, Soulgros doubted the woman would know personal space if it came up and bit her, though her... "personalities" were significant enough that few would care. She had long, silken, black hair, and the way her locks swayed when she walked made even women look twice—though Soulgros wanted nothing more than to yank it all out by the roots. Her eyes were large and opalescent, which only made the way she wore her heart on her sleeve all the more charming. On top of that, there was a maturity to her face that Laladie could only try to imitate with her saccharine facades. What truly pushed Rimmil over the top, however, was the ampleness of her bosom, which could easily drive the likes of Laladie or Krankheit insane. Even Soulgros was vexed by them, as despite her general



disinterest in breasts, she was shamefully jealous. They even eclipsed Coline's in sheer mass, and she had the curves to support such monsters without seeming unnatural.

"Hm?" Rimmil's eyes went from Soulgros's face down to her chest, then back up. "Don't tell me you're into me?"

"My thoughts are for Master, and Master alone."

"Of course they are," the invader sniggered knowingly.

"Pray tell, Rimmil-dono, what bringest thou here? Only guild members are permitted within these halls. Did I not warn thee the next time I caught thou skulking about would be thine last?"

"Hehe, don't worry about it! I just dropped by to say hi to Master. He's pretty great, isn't he? He's funny *and* warm."

"Of course! How could he not be?"

That was frankly all it took to put Soulgros into higher spirits. She smoothly stowed the half-dozen kunai she'd retrieved during their conversation, her eyes glossing over with joy.

"Great!" Rimmil grinned. "In that case, I'll be back soo—"

"... And that is but one of his many charms! Best of all, naturally, is the stoic strength of his back. Simply standing behind him fills me with comfort beyond compare, as though he could truly take on the entire world single-handedly and emerge victorious!"

Rimmil smirked just once more before vanishing. It was only a matter of time before other Yerkchira members would sniff her out, after all, and Soulgros was left alone to enthuse about her love of Master for hours.

## Chapter 3: The Other Adventurers

**“G**ah... Rimmil-dono, that miserable wretch! To think she would use such a craven trick to distract me... I should have expected as much from our habitual infiltrator.”

Soulgros gritted her teeth with frustration as she remembered her failure preceding her visit to Master’s study. Yerkchira possessed world-class firepower, and few had successfully infiltrated their halls. Rimmil was the only one who lived not only to tell the tale, but to do so multiple times. The guild had embarked on multiple search-and-destroy missions aimed at tracking her down, but she had evaded death time and time again. Soulgros’s failure, then, was hardly exceptional, but it still stung. Huffily, she turned her thoughts away from the intruder altogether.

“Oh, Master!”

She fixed her gaze on Master, who stood a short distance ahead, his back turned coolly to her as he fought the lizardman before him. His pose resonated deeply with the womanhood within her.

“No words could describe the rugged beauty of his combat... Ah, the ease with which he plougheth through every soul in his path!”

Nothing could be more manly than obliterating one reptilian beast after another. If he were using nothing but brute force, she’d hardly glance twice at him—no, it was the cool smile that tickled his lips even in the throes of combat that sent her quivering. The heavy throbbing of her heart was nearly too intense to bear.

“That smile... The nobility of that smile tempts me to his front, in hopes of catching a glimpse!”

Soulgros didn’t move so much as a muscle, however, her eyes firmly glued to his back. She possessed the jumping strength to circle around him in a



heartbeat if she so chose—but no, she was sworn to watch his most vulnerable point. That, and she was far more aroused by his back in general.

“Hehehe... I shall watch thee forever, Master, until the end of time itself!”





Soulgros, in a word, had a fetishistic love for watching him from the shadows. It was far better to watch him at his most vulnerable and unsuspecting than it was to talk to him face-to-face. The less aware he was of her gaze, the more aroused she became—to the point she was becoming a stalker to her very core. She was always watching him, always. Even though she had her observational duties like her guildmates and was forced from his “side” far too often, she’d gone so far as to develop a unique means of always watching him.

“Hehe... Much as I enjoy observing him from behind, there exists no angle from which he does not appear divine...”

She put her hand to her face and chuckled. Her other hand was gone, missing at the wrist, though not from any feat of the lizardmen’s doing. She’d cut it off herself and planted it on him, such that it could always send her detailed information on his exact whereabouts. In short, she mastered self-replication.

“What a magnificent sight from his right... Oh, but his left is every bit as appealing!”

Soulgros had replicated her right hand several times, situating them all about him so that she could view him from every angle. A low, contented chuckle escaped her lips, and if not for her face scarf, the drool escaping the corner of her mouth would’ve been painfully obvious.

“Ah, no—not that way. Not from that angle...”

Her observations were for more than personal pleasure, however, as she was constantly alert to particularly large warbands or threats that went undetected by him. It was up to her to detect such threats and dispose of them. Case in point, one was creeping up behind him. She swiftly robbed the beast of its vision with a kunai to each eye, and as it flailed about blindly, her third knife embedded itself deep in its throat. It was a tad overkill, granted, but such was the price of threatening her Master.

“Hm?!”

Just as she released a sigh of relief at a job well done, Master shot her a sidelong look as he dispatched a lizardman of his own. His smile parted only briefly to utter a curt thank-you.

“Heh... hehe...” She froze for only a moment before half-melting with pleasure. It took her a while to notice the state of the forest floor around them. “Ah, Master! Another warband slain, I see. What efficient work!”

There were precious few bodies left intact, despite the number they’d slain. Only those slain by Soulghros’s kunai remained; Master’s mana-bullets left no remains.

“Nonetheless, this shall be enough for my mission,” she muttered to herself after the scales were harvested and counted. “Now, if only I might be permitted to spend the remainder of my time with him...”

Her primary objective in accepting the quest was to have an excuse to take a walk with Master and to help him ward off the cabin fever he’d been experiencing. Her second objective was, of course, to watch him in action. Both tasks had been fulfilled to appreciable extents, and she considered inviting him for a walk about the nearby town. If she were lucky, she might even persuade him to “rest” for a spell at a nearby hotel. Her guildmates were watching her however they could, no doubt, but Soulghros was the uncontested best covert operative amongst them. She could shake their pitiful surveillance tactics in a heartbeat if she needed to.

“Hehehehe... Master...” A delusional grin spread across her face. She was getting lightheaded at the mere thought of what was to come. She was so infatuated with her thoughts that she failed to realize the approaching figures until they were nearly upon them.

“D-Drat!”

There were four of them, all with uncertain strides upon the forest floor, and that alone was proof the newcomers would pose little threat to Soulghros. She let out the breath she’d been holding—even if the group was hostile, she could slay them all before they posed any real threat to Master. He also seemed to notice their approach, turning to peer into the underbrush they were stumbling through.

“Uwah!”

With cacophonous rustlings, four men stumbled out of the trees and into the open. Each was armed and clad in full armor, marking them as adventurers of



some as-yet-unknown guild. At their head was a young man with bright red hair.

“Hey, you!”

He stormed up to Master, his face a mask of rage. Master simply smiled, a little confused.

*I mustn't allow this.*

Soulgros dropped from the tree she was perching in, landing immediately behind the transgressor. She pressed the edge of the knife into the boy's throat.

“Halt.”

His eyes widened. “The shit?!”

“Lucil!” one of his companions shouted from behind.

Soulgros saw one of the boy's—Lucil's—comrades start toward her, but he stopped. She was too close to him for anyone to stop her; even if he should try to rush them, Soulgros would slit Lucil's throat in a heartbeat.

“Thou had best stay put,” Soulgros hissed. “All of you—not one step.”

Lucil swallowed hard as she emphatically pressed her knife into his throat, a thin trail of blood creeping down and into his shirt.

“Y-You got it all wrong!” shouted one of the adventurers, a man visibly older than the rest. “We mean you no harm!”

The kunoichi's eyes narrowed lethally. “No harm? Thou attempteth to assault Master with fury in thine eyes, and even now thou wouldst lie?”

Soulgros had already decided the adventurers were dead. Only Master himself could change their fates.

“Please!” Lucil begged. “We don't want to hurt anyone!”

Despite how close they were, his pleas never reached Soulgros's ears. The second she tightened her grip to slit his throat, however, Master gestured to her.

“Mm. As thou willst.”

She obediently withdrew her blade, and in a blur of movement, she took her place behind Master once more.

“Sh-She’s fast,” said the last adventurer, a young boy with long, trailing sleeves who had been silent until then.

Lucil only gasped, eyes spinning as he felt for his neck and confirmed he was still alive.

Master approached the boy, addressing him with great kindness and asking what the matter was.

The youth snapped back to attention. “Uh... Right.”

Soulgros felt her heart swell with renewed affection for him. Adventurers never interacted with each other out of town as a matter of policy, barring extreme or unusual circumstances. Anyone out in the wilds was on a quest, and it was rude to interfere—and if one was actively approached by other adventurers, they were brigands and highwaymen from a gray guild most of the time.

This time, however, Soulgros’s expectations were utterly betrayed.

“Please!” Lucil cried, his head bowing deeply. “You’ve got to help us!”



## Chapter 4: A Helping Hand

**“P**lease, you’ve got to help us!”

The party’s leader, Lucil, bowed deeply.

*Help them?*

I sized up his party carefully. None of them were visibly injured, which meant this wasn’t a plea for healing. That was the only kind of support I could possibly imagine one party asking another for in the field. I would have to ask them more about their exact situation.

“We refuse,” Soulgros announced, cutting me off. I wasn’t expecting her to be so blunt with them. “The obscurity of thy plea aside, that is not how you ask a man as powerful as my lord. Do not return until thou hast paid for thy insolence with thy lives.”

I had asked my guildmates not to call me Master on the grounds that my identity as a dark guild’s master may be revealed, but “my lord” grated on my ears all the same. Lucil and his companions were likewise flustered by her words. I didn’t mind that, of course—Lucil himself was a good deal shorter than Yuuto, and I assumed he was still a child, or at least a race that aged differently from humans.

I told Soulgros there was no harm in at least hearing them out, as long as she didn’t mind.

“Should thou insist, my lord, I shall not defy thee.”

Her expression was masklike as she stepped behind me to the side once more. I noticed that she was poised to react should anything untoward happen. While I seriously doubted the strangers meant any harm, I appreciated her vigilance.

“Well?” Soulgros urged. “State thy business.”

At that, I noticed the party glance about uneasily. Only after ensuring we were alone did they begin to speak in hushed voices.

“Anyone could be listening to us here,” Lucil whispered. “Come on back to our guild, we’ll talk there.”

Soulgros’s gaze hardened. “Watch thy tone, child.”

Her hostility aside, I wasn’t keen on following an unknown guild into the heart of their base.

“Whatever business thou hast with my lord’s power,” Soulgros continued, “we would be loath to follow strangers such as yourselves anywhere.”

Until we knew what they were after, we wouldn’t be following them anywhere. I wasn’t about to run the risk of an ambush, even if the group didn’t seem the type at first blush. Being dark guild members made us especially appealing targets, as the law would do nothing to cover for us should the worst come to pass.

“Y-You’ve got it all wrong!” Lucil pleaded. “We just—”

“Lucil.”

The oldest member of their party laid a hand on the youth’s shoulder and shook his head firmly. The latest exchange had not only him but the other two guildsmen fidgeting uneasily, eager to leave. Before they could talk him down, Lucil shrugged off his guildmate.

“No, you have to—er, please! I’m begging you, at least hear us out!”

Then, Lucil dropped to his knees and bowed so deeply that I could hear the dull thud of his forehead hitting the mud.

“L-Lucil?!” his companions cried.

I began to question the boy’s sanity in earnest.

“No,” Soulgros gasped. “Could it be?!”

Something about her reaction was too grave to ignore, and I hurriedly asked her what was amiss.



“Look, my lord, he hath prostrated himself! The technique originated in the Far East as a means of showing utmost humility. While I knew it existed, never did I think I would meet a user!” She furrowed her brow as she stared down at the boy.

I wasn’t sure it was worth all that—and more importantly, I’d assume her ninja-inspired garb spoke to origins in the East. Either way, it made the boy that much harder to turn away.

“Thou must remain cautious,” Soulgros added with a sidelong look. “Something is amiss.”

That was obvious. He hadn’t dispelled any suspicion from himself yet, especially since he hadn’t breathed so much as a word about his objective. They could easily be a gray guild of brigands. Something about his manner, however, told me that wasn’t the case, and finally I conceded.

“Really? You’ll come with us?!”

All four adventurers seemed beside themselves with glee, though Lucil was clearly the happiest from his place in the muck. The glee in his eyes had a distinctly childish quality to it.

I smiled a little to myself. Not too long ago, I would have prioritized my guildmates’ wellbeing above all else and gladly abandoned the boy at any hint of danger to Soulgros. Yuuto’s determination to bring happiness to all must have rubbed off on me somehow.

Soulgros shot me a stern look. “My lord...”

It was odd seeing her so clearly since she spent so much time in the shadows, but I assured her it would be fine. Should any danger arise, I would protect her at any cost.

“M-My lord!”

It would be fine; I was sure of it. I could simply send her back to the guild should the need arise. In fact, I was already starting to worry about her—tears were welling in her eyes, and even through her face scarf I could tell her mouth was open and she was panting desperately. She clung to my arm, grasping it tightly as if to prevent me from moving.

“M-My lord,” she breathed in my ear. “I am unable to contain myself any longer.”

I had no idea what that meant.

“Hey!” Lucil called from the path ahead, waving to get our attention. “You coming or not?”

“Damn!” Soulgros swore under her breath. “If not for them, I would surely have pushed Master down by now!”

That didn’t make much sense to me, but at the moment, we had something far more pressing to deal with.

## Chapter 5: The Girl's Curse

The party of four led us into the nearest town, the same one that housed the guild Soulghros was infiltrating. That was a coincidence, no doubt.

Most guilds had their bases of operation within the safety of civilization, and guilds like ours that openly risked assault from brigands or monsters were fairly rare. Most were dark or gray guilds, the kind that would be raided by the Royal Knights in a heartbeat. If Lucil's guild was in a town, then we could reasonably assume they weren't an organized crime guild, and I was relieved that we'd already avoided the worst-case scenario. We needed to exercise caution, of course, but I didn't want to have to kill them all. I wasn't a fan of murder, despite my occupation.

"Our place's on the edge of town," Lucil explained as we walked. "No way we're rich enough to afford the town center."

I told him that wasn't an issue. Even if I didn't get out much, I could still handle a little walking, and Soulghros was in excellent physical condition. Unlike Laladie, whom I would've had to carry, my partner matched my stride with perfect precision, her very breathing in sync with my own as she followed me from exactly one step behind.

Her actions were making the hair on the back of my neck rise, so I turned and asked her if she'd rather walk beside me.

"No. I shall remain here."

The speed and firmness of her response was only more disconcerting, and I could feel her eyes burrowing into my back as we walked.

"We're here!" Lucil finally announced after an extremely awkward stroll. "This is it, our guild!"

I refocused my attention ahead, and I felt the stiffness leave my shoulders as Soulghros peered around me. We stared at the building before us for a long



moment. It was all I could do to keep smiling, let alone reply—and before I could muster the words, Soulgros interceded.

“It looks like shit,” she announced.

Lucil glared at her, stalking back to her angrily. “The hell’d you say?!”

I sighed. My hopes that she’d exercise some tact were for naught, it seemed. More importantly, somebody had best stop the boy before he aggravated Soulgros any further.

“Hold on there, Lucil.” A young man with a lax smile put a hand on the boy’s shoulder, stopping him in his tracks before Soulgros could draw any weapons. “It’s the truth, no need to get upset.”

Luckily, the lax man—Pelorro, if I remembered correctly—had a better head on his shoulders. If he’d been any later, we’d have a dead child on our hands, and I was glad to avoid that.

The middle-aged man, Apollo, grimaced at us. “It may be a wreck, but it won’t fall apart on you, promise.”

I turned back to Soulgros and swatted her on the head, sternly whispering that she shouldn’t bring it up again.

“Ow... Thou art so cruel!”

And yet, I wasn’t the one who had insulted our hosts.

“Hey, um, are you coming?” I turned to find Ligg, the lanky, bespectacled man, looking back at us curiously. “Why don’t you come inside?”

For the first time, I noticed the ornate pendant hanging from his neck, marking him as an adherent to the Church of Angels. We’d have to avoid him as much as possible; if he found out our guild had cult fanatics in it, he would no doubt attack us with the same zealous fervor Yuuto’s late companion Mary had. He wasn’t a bad person, from the looks of it—he simply put his faith in the wrong gods.

“Come on in,” Apollo called as he held the door open for us.

Looking about, I realized the other three had already stepped inside. This was the moment of truth. His companions could be waiting with weapons drawn in

the passage beyond. Should that happen, I would have to bar their way for Soulghros to flee.

“Rest assured,” the ninja said with a hint of joy in her voice. “I swear upon my life that I shall protect thee.”

I was touched by her words, but I couldn’t accept them. I told her that I’d be protecting her instead.

“Wha?!”

With a smile, I lead the way into the depths of the building before us.

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Their guild was cramped to the extreme and far older than Yerkchira’s guild hall to boot. It would have been a little large for an average dwelling, but I still couldn’t believe any guild could make do with so little space.

More important, however, was taking stock of how many members they had. I peered about, looking for any indicator of their numbers, and came to my conclusion almost immediately.

“Rather small, are they not?” Soulghros muttered from behind me.

She was right. Aside from the party of four we’d already met, there were signs of only one other person here.

“Not many of us, right?”

Apollo chuckled without so much as glancing at us. That would have done him no good, of course—I was smiling as always, and only Soulghros’s eyes were visible, making her expression all but unreadable. The elder must have thought it odd himself.

Officially speaking, a guild needed at least five members in order to be recognized. Yerkchira was incredibly small as well, but we totaled ten members, including myself.

“We’ve got a fifth, of course,” he continued, “so I promise we’re legal.”

“Rest assured, we are aware,” Soulgros replied brusquely. “More importantly, thou hast best explain our presence here.”

“Right.” Something in Lucil’s expression strained with unease. “Before that, you’d better see our last member.”

I glanced at one of the doors in the room, from behind which I could feel the only other person in the building. There was something off about it now that I focused on it, however, something that was unfortunately very familiar.

Pelorro caught Lucil by the shoulder and peered worriedly down at him. “You sure?”

The boy nodded. “If they’re gonna help us, we can’t go keeping secrets. ‘Sides, they’ve gotta see her for anything to make sense.” With that, he turned back to us. “Follow me.”

Sure enough, Lucil strode up to the door. What I sensed wasn’t directly harmful, so I obediently followed him.

He paused, hand on the knob as he looked me square in the eyes. “I’m gonna warn you, it’s surprising, but don’t let it show. Can you do that?”

That confirmed my suspicions, and I nodded firmly. That meant I would likely be able to help the person in question.

He ignored Soulgros’s muttered discontent about my being ordered about, as she also nodded. Lucil smiled, but only a moment later, as if mentally preparing himself for what would happen next.

He let out the breath he’d been holding and pushed the door open with a noisy squeaking. “All right, then. In you go.”

The room inside was impeccably neat, such that I doubted this was the same old guild hall. There was virtually no furniture, aside from the rough wooden shelf beside the ancient bed. A girl was lying in said bed, sleeping on her back, and showing that she looked virtually identical to Lucil, save for her longer hair. They were siblings; that was normal enough.

“Ngh...” she moaned.



The girl rolled over, her body and sheets alike drenched in sweat, and I caught a glance of the problem as she did so. The left side of her face was inflamed with a twisted sigil of some kind.

Soulgros glanced at me. “My lord, she...”

She didn’t even have to say it. To me, it was clear as day that the poor girl had been cursed.

## Chapter 6: The Elixir

**“H**ahh... hahh...”

The girl squirmed in discomfort atop the bed, her curse growing more apparent by the moment. That no doubt explained the odd presence I felt from outside.

She blinked up at us as we entered. “Huh... Oniichan?”

“Lucika!” Lucil rushed over to her side. “You okay?! I’m sorry, we’ll leave right away!”



She shook her head, sweat beading on her face. "I'm okay... Wait, who are they?"

When she noticed us, I approached and smiled even more gently than usual. Then, I told her I was a doctor.

Her eyes widened. "R-Really?"

Lucil started in surprise. "What'd you say?!"

I glanced at Soulgros. If Lucil revealed my lie, I wouldn't be able to do anything. Luckily, she understood and nodded.

"Lucil-dono, this way." She grabbed the boy and dragged him to a far corner of the room.

"H-Hey, what the hell?!"

Hopefully, she could explain my intentions by the time my work was done. I smiled at Lucika, who was growing steadily more unnerved by my presence, and told her I needed to check her health. The expression on her face as she replied spoke to wisdom beyond her young years.

"I know you're a good person 'cause Oniichan brought you here, but I don't think you can help me... He's brought tons of doctors, but none of them could help."

Lucil clearly cared about her a great deal, and I became sure he intended to ask me about her. Clearly, though, Lucika herself had all but given up, and I told her I'd have to fix that.

"Really?"

I lied a little more about what a great doctor I was, but when I assured her that I could help, she just smiled amusedly, her eyes informing me that she'd already lost all hope. Clearly, only tangible results would convince her.

From behind me, Lucil let out an irritated sigh. "Look, I don't care what this weird lady said. Can you really do anything?"

"Watch your tongue!" Soulgros snapped, completely forgetting her thee's, thine's, and thou's in her anger.



I was patient in assuring him she would be fine, then turned back to Lucika and asked her if I could take a closer look.

She nodded, then clamped her eyes shut and swallowed hard. "Please do."

I rested a hand on her crimson hair, letting the flow of mana through her body tell me how she was doing. The strength of her curse came through even more potently than before, as well as how deeply it was hurting her.

*I feared as much.*

I began to pour my mana inside her, careful to dilute it to the point where she wouldn't go into shock.

Lucika gasped almost immediately, looking up at me with wide eyes, and I could hear Lucil's chair clatter to the ground as he stood up.

"Lucika?! Hey, what the hell're you doing?!"

He started toward me, but Soulgros cut him off. Any trace of kindness was gone from her eyes, replaced by frosty malice. That was enough to stop him, and I used the opportunity to assure him I wouldn't harm a hair on her head.

"It's okay, Oniichan. Something about the way the doctor's touching me is making me feel a lot better."

Lucil shot her a confused look. He must have noticed that her sweating was beginning to subside, and she wasn't quite as pale now. "Lucika?"

"Thank you, Mr. Doctor," she breathed.

She fell asleep a few moments later, finally unperturbed by the curse. My mana was doing its part to suppress her pain.

"I haven't seen her sleep this well in ages," Lucil muttered, clasping his sister's hand tightly. "So, what, are you actually a doctor or something?"

I shook my head, assuring him that I was nothing more than a common adventurer.

"Though he doth possess powers far outstripping any ordinary wanderer," Soulgros added boastfully, though I didn't understand why she had to be quite so proud about it.

More importantly, I took the time to explain to Lucil what I'd done to help her. It was as simple as channeling my mana within her.

He blinked. "Seriously? And just like that, she's all better? None of the other doctors did that... Did those assholes lie to me?!"

He realized a moment later that we were still at Lucika's bedside, however, and clamped a hand over his mouth. It was heartening to see him care for his sister so deeply, but that was all the more reason we shouldn't continue the conversation at her bedside. I suggested we continue our conversation outside.

"Yeah... Yeah, let's do that."

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The three of us returned to the guild commons, where the other three men awaited us, gathered around a beaten-up—er—old table. Once there, I confirmed that channeling mana into Lucika's body was all it took to alleviate her pain.

"But you can't cure her?" Lucil asked.

I shook my head. That was beyond my abilities—if I tried to give her enough mana to cancel out the curse altogether, it would be too much for her weakened body to bear. One of the other Yerkchira members might be able to pull it off, or there was a chance Anat had means of dispelling the affliction altogether, but she was busy elsewhere. Calling her here wasn't an option.

Lucil slumped dejectedly in his chair. "Oh."

"Still, I didn't think you'd be able to numb her curse," Apollo added. "As the guildmaster, allow me to thank you for your efforts."

I shook my head, politely declining. I wasn't able to cure her, after all, though her pain shouldn't return for a while yet.

"Thanks," Lucil finally said with an awkward bow of his head.

More importantly, I asked them why they were so desperate to enlist Soulgrös's and my help in the first place—though by this point, I was fairly sure of what they wanted to ask me.

“Yeah... We have a quest for you,” Apollo said.

“How rude!” Soulgros bristled beside me, but I ignored her. I frankly didn’t care and shot her a chastising look as she reached for a kunai.

Apollo nodded. “You see, we need you to retrieve a medicine that can cure any wound and dispel even the most fatal of illnesses. In the old legends, it’s referred to by one name alone—the Elixir.”

## Chapter 7: Coming Out

There wasn't a person alive who hadn't heard of the Elixir—but more importantly, the fact that it was a fetch quest means they needed a *natural* one.

Ligg nodded at me, arms and legs languidly trailing off the chair in all directions. “Yeah, that’s right.”

That was quite the tall order, then.

There were two forms of Elixir—the naturally occurring variety and the man-made replica. The former was extremely rare and hard to come by, so a famous league of wizards collaborated to create a synthetic one to match the demand. Not even the synthetic one could be mass-produced, however, and while its healing properties were famous, they couldn't hold a candle to the real thing. Natural Elixirs could heal any malady and could even revive the recently deceased. While I'd run across synthetic ones in the past, I'd never seen a true Elixir with my own eyes. That meant these adventurers must have found a lead.

“We got the World’s Eye to tell us,” Pelorro explained with a grimace. “It took half the guild’s furniture, but we managed to pay in full.”

Even I had heard of the World’s Eye. Supposedly, they knew everything in the world, but even the smallest kernel of knowledge came at an exorbitant price. The knowledge of a true Elixir would have entire empires chomping at the bit, so I could only imagine how much they paid for that knowledge. Lucika was lucky to have people like them by her side.

Apollo nodded. “Now, though, we’ve got a different problem. We can’t get to the Elixir where it’s at.”

I wasn't surprised. It was a legendary medicine, after all, so of course it would be somewhere far off the beaten path. I wanted to know where it was exactly, but Apollo wouldn't be foolish enough to tell us anything unless we'd promised to help.



Realization lit in Soulgros's eyes, and she began muttering to herself. "Ahh... I knew I had seen them before..."

More importantly, I asked them how Lucika had been cursed in the first place. It was a nasty piece of work that slowly and painfully drained its victim until they died—definitely not the kind of curse one ran into often.

"We slew a monster like a giant jellyfish, but a bunch of strange black smoke came out of its body," Ligg explained. "The cloud rushed at Lucil, but Lucika jumped in its path."

Lucil gritted his teeth in frustration as Ligg talked. He assumed it was his fault she was cursed, then, and I couldn't imagine how he must've been beating himself up.

From Ligg's explanation, however, I had a good idea of what had happened, and I told the group my hypothesis. The monster was likely a Ragel, a monster that was incredibly rare here in the middle of the kingdom. They lived in isolated patches of wilderness, and while they were close to helpless in a fight, they had the ability to curse anyone who attacked or slew them. A simple injury would've occurred a light but painful curse, but killing it had amplified it many times over.

"Shit!" Lucil cursed, slamming his fist into the table. "I knew it! It's all my fault she got hit by it!"

Apollo shot him a stern look. "If you hadn't killed it, Pelorro or I would have. Lucika wouldn't want you to beat yourself up like this."

Lucil turned to Soulgros and me. It was clear from his quivering lip that he had failed as his sister's protector and was desperate to make it right. "That's why you're gonna enter our guild for a little while and help us get that Elixir together! I'll do whatever you want when she's healthy—just promise me you'll save her!"

I could understand the boy's feelings well, especially his willingness to sacrifice himself for Lucika. Similarly, I was touched that the other guild members were just as desperate to heal the girl. That was why I looked them squarely in the eyes, each one in turn, as I told them we couldn't help—that Soulgros and I were agents of a dark guild.

Lucil stared at me blankly. “You what?”

“A d-dark guild?!”

Apollo and Pelorro both stood up in an instant, drawing their weapons and leveling them at us. It was an unpleasant reaction, albeit the expected one. Even hardened groups of criminals were merely considered gray guilds; it took a special kind of evil to be a true dark guild. Personally, I didn’t believe we were that evil, but that was beside the point.

“Shit!” The tip of Apollo’s sword quivered in the air at us. “I knew you were strong, but I never thought you were dark-guilders!”

Soulgros rolled her eyes. “Cease thy whimpering. We have no interest in thy petty guild.”

I grimaced a little, wondering aloud if it was truly worth all this nonsense.

“Hah, don’t give us that shit!” Apollo spat. “How could we trust you Aichnen goons?!”

I blinked. I’d never heard of a guild of that name.

Soulgros shook her head. “We are not of that wretched mass of imbeciles. No, we are of the Messianic Legion, Yerkchira, a mighty dark guild forged in service of our all-powerful Master.”

Apollo’s eyes darted between us. “Uhh... Yerkchira?”

That wasn’t surprising. We weren’t that well-known, partially by design, and it seemed natural we would be conflated with this other, apparently more infamous guild.

“Rest easy now, and lower thy weapons,” Soulgros commanded. “I shall not slay thee unless Master relays the command.”

While that was an admirable attempt to defuse the situation, there was also the implication that she would kill them all in a heartbeat if she had reason to. Apollo and Pelorro exchanged uneasy glances and made no move to sheath their blades.

At this rate, there would be no way for us to help them, though the curse’s progression would be stalled as long as my mana remained within Lucika’s

system. I reminded them that the curse had not yet left her body, advised them to retrieve the Elixir as soon as possible, and turned to leave. Soulgros moved to follow me.

“Wait!”

I turned at Lucil’s call. His guildmates looked at him in horror, but the boy’s eyes were fixed on the table before him.

“I don’t care who you are or where you’re from,” he muttered. “If you can save Lucika, we need your help.”

“Are you insane?!” Pelorro shouted. “I know you wanna save Lucika, but this is too far!”

That was the obvious reaction. Dark guilds were the enemies of decent society at large, and any legal guild caught dealing with them would see no end of trouble.

Lucil turned calmly to his guildmates. “I don’t wanna cause trouble for you, so you can kick us out of the guild or whatever when this is over. Right now, I’m getting their help.”

Pelorro swallowed hard. “L-Lucil?”

I never thought such a young boy could be so determined. Brotherly love was truly something.

“Dumbass!”

“Ow!”

Apollo smacked Lucil hard on the back of his head, sending tears welling up in the boy’s eyes.

“We’re guildmates. We’re *family*. I’d do anything and everything for you, no danger’s too great.” The old guildmaster looked up at Soulgros and I with a wry smile. “Besides, these two don’t seem like Aichnen.”

Ligg sighed. “If you two left the guild, we’d be down to three members. We’d have to disband anyway.”

Lucil looked at the pair in surprise. “Apollo, Ligg...”

The love that they had for each other was nothing short of inspiring. I looked to Soulghros, announcing that no guild cared as much about each other as we did at Yerkchira.

She stiffened. “Er. I could not say.”

She was being humble, no doubt. I’d never felt as at home anywhere as I did in Yerkchira.

Apollo bowed to us. “Sorry for giving you such a runaround, but we’d be honored to have your help if you’re still offering it.”

Ligg followed suit. “Please, we beg of you.”

“Please save Lucika!” Lucil echoed.

I hesitated. Surely they knew the risks—that if it was ever discovered that they had made such a deal with us, they’d be marked as a gray guild overnight. While their situation wouldn’t be as bad as a proper dark guild’s, I doubted they could get above-board work after that. With a mere five members, they would struggle to survive without stooping to such crimes. I had to know if they were prepared for everything our aid would entail.

Lucil nodded firmly. “Yeah, I know.”

Looking at Apollo and Ligg, they were of the same mind. I nodded—in that case, I would gladly aid them.

“Yeah!” Lucil cheered.

Finally, I turned to Soulghros. We would still have to join under Apollo temporarily, and I needed to know if she could accept that.

Soulghros nodded. “As thou wilt, Master. Thy wish is my command.”

That felt a little extreme, to be frank, but I was glad to have her cooperation. The likes of Laladie or Vampille would have refused my request outright, as they had a profound hatred of everything outside of Yerkchira. There were precious few guild members who had the level-headedness to accept such terms, if only temporarily. They overreacted so easily, over so little.

At any rate, we were officially on the trail of a natural Elixir from that moment on.



## Chapter 8: The Gray Guilds' Way

If we were going to save Lucika, we would need to temporarily join Lucil's guild—or rather, Soulgros would have to. Since I was Yerkchira's guildmaster, I was unable to leave without risking open revolt from the other members. I was soft on my daughters, if nothing else.

At first, I was somewhat guilty about forcing Soulgros into such an awkward position, but after promising I'd do whatever she asked, her attitude took a sharp turn.

"What?! Ah, such glorious words! I shall hunt the Elixir by any means necessary for those humans!"

I hastily apologized for saying so much, since there were very real limits on what I could realistically do.

With that squared away, we returned to the guild Soulgros was provisionally registered at before. As soon as we entered, however, she was greeted by cries and catcalls from all sides.

"Hey, Soulgros-chan! You done with that quest yet?!"

"Damn, you can barely see anything of her, but you know she's got a dynamite bod under there!"

"I got a new quest for you, baby! There's a raging serpent in my pants I need you to put down!"

Beside me, Soulgros sighed. "Fools, all of them. I couldn't care less for their childish insults."

It was a horrible place, for sure. Lanky, scarred warriors were stooping over filthy tables left and right and chugging cheap-smelling booze, cackling madly. The second catcaller was right, however—Soulgros was indeed incredibly cute.

That last comment, however, was outright harassment, and I felt I needed a word with that wretch. I smiled coolly at him, and he instantly broke out in a

cold sweat.

“G-Geh?!”

That seemed like a bit of an overreaction, as I really did want nothing more than to talk to the man.

Soulgros’s eyes grew wide with admiration. “Oh, to think thou wouldst cover for me... What bliss! I was overcome with jealousy for Laladie-dono before, but now I realize the true extent of her ecstasy...”

This group of ruffians were all members of the gray guild I had requested Soulgros infiltrate. While legal guilds tended to have thorough vetting processes for new members, gray guilds played their membership fast and loose by design. They’d barely looked into Soulgros’s past at all when she attempted to join. What I wasn’t expecting, however, was that it would be such a den of ruffians and depravity. If their crudeness or cruelty rubbed off on Soulgros even a little, I’d have to get angry. Even now, she looked up at me with warmth. I needed to protect her.

She tugged on my sleeve. “Now, Master, let us attend to our business here.”

I blinked. It seemed rather like she expected me to lead the way.

“Naturally.” She nodded firmly when I asked. “How else could I watch thy back?”

I didn’t think it was that obvious myself, but it wasn’t worth arguing over. I made for the back of the building, where I vaguely recalled the reception desk was located. It wasn’t a large building by any measure, but there were catcallers and ruffians everywhere we looked intent on getting in Soulgros’s way, so it took an annoyingly long time to reach the back. My smile was feeling significantly less genuine by the time we arrived, and I was surprised Soulgros still had a spring in her step. She was likely used to it, having infiltrated several such guilds already, but that only made me worry for her more.

Soulgros stepped up to the counter. “I have slain the lizardmen, as requested.”

“Oh yeah?” the filthy man behind the counter sneered at her. I had no doubt the standard pretty receptionist wouldn’t last a day in a pigsty like this. “You’d

better have some proof for that, girly. If not... well, we could put the light out, and if I like what I see, we'll call it even."

"I have thy proof and will not be accompanying thee anywhere." She held out a bloody pouch, the scales within clacking together metallically. "Wouldst thou care to see the scales now?"

He scowled and waved her off. "I don't wanna see a bunch of monster blood. You'll get my desk all fucked up. I'll check 'em later or something." He grabbed a small purse of coin from under the table. "Here's your money. Don't be afraid to share, sweets."

"Thank thee kindly."

She gave the bag a quick shake to confirm the number of coins within, no doubt to make sure the receptionist hadn't helped himself to her winnings already. She nodded with satisfaction at the sound before passing the bag to me.

I hesitated. It was her reward, I told her, and it didn't feel right to take it from her.

"My accomplishments are thine," she asserted, with a look not unlike a loyal dog.

I wasn't sure what to say to that, so I simply thanked her and stroked her hair. She let out a pleased little growl before turning back to the receptionist.

"Ah, one more thing. I shall be quitting thy guild, effective immediately. Farewell."

With that, she gave him an offhanded wave before making me lead the way out. It felt a tad too brief, however, and I was surprised it was so easy to quit.

There was a long moment of silence before the guild erupted.

"Huh?!"

"You can't quit! You haven't let me hit it yet!"

"Yeah, me neither!"

"At least go out with me once before you go!"

The men sounded more horny than sad, and I felt an odd twinge of parental pride that she was so popular. Of course, that was only superficial, and I was prepared to beat back anyone stupid enough to lay so much as a hand on her. Luckily, they let us pass without trying to physically interfere.

“It seems I was right to murd—er, slap the most persistent of them on the wrist upon my first visit,” Soulgros remarked. “No man shall ever be allowed to approach me save thee thyself, Master.”

It was good to see her stand up for herself. I was a tad concerned she’d kill them, but that would’ve been a step too far, and she knew better than to cause such a scene. I’d also have to remind her later not to call me “Master” in public. All that really mattered was that she’d demonstrated her strength to the point that none of them would try to stop her now. It’d take a special kind of cruelty to try to retain its members by force, anyway, and surely not even a gray guild would do such a thing.

“Hold it right there.”

No sooner than I’d thought that, however, our path cut off by someone intent on just that.

## Chapter 9: Hostage

It seemed Soulgros wouldn't be allowed to walk out after all. No, there was one person who was either brave or idiotic enough to cut off her retreat, and they had finally made themselves known.

"Wouldst thou care to take a more roundabout path back to the boy's guild?" Soulgros asked me offhandedly, eye blissfully aimed at me as she walked. "I would gladly follow thee anywhere."

I was hit with a moment's confusion, as I was sure the interloper was referring to her, but clearly not. I shrugged, replying that I was in no particular rush to return myself.

"Wait!" came the thundering voice again, and a massive man stepped forth to bar the doorway.

Every man in the guild was muscular and used to fighting, but this man was in a whole different league, a true master of violence. He was nearly twice the size of the other men as well, and his muscles rippled with a hardness that seemed as though they could best steel. The criminals around us erupted into hoots and hollers.

"There he is!"

"I knew she couldn't just walk out!"

Soulgros rolled her eyes beside me and sighed. From the look of it, the man was infamous.

"Hey, Soulgros," the mountain rumbled. "First you turn me down, and now you're walkin' out on me? What gives?"

"I shall refuse or accept thee as I please, and I hath no interest in any man save my lord," the ninja snapped. "And am I not yet a provisional member? Am I not free to leave should the fancy strike me?"

"Don't you give me that shit, you little bitch. I'm a Rank B adventurer!"



“It matters not. Master far surpasses thee by all measures.”

From the sound of it, he'd been bothering Soulgnos for some time now, and had yet to understand she wasn't interested in whatever he was offering.

“His name is Liel,” Soulgnos explained quietly. “A true fool who hath propositioned me no small number of times. He is appreciably famous, and regrettably, the chance to kill him hath eluded me until now.”

That made some sense. Rank B was decently high, and because gray guilds tended to collect people especially suited to violence and interhuman combat, their members had a higher average strength than legal guilds did despite their smaller numbers. While that difference was not significant enough to allow gray guilds to openly defy their more legal counterparts, this Liel man in particular was evidently a force to be reckoned with. More troubling, however, was Soulgnos's admission that she'd killed her fellow guildsmen in the past.

“Damn, you're boring.” He scowled. “So, who is this ass that you keep simping over?”

“None other than the beautiful man before thee!” Soulgnos boasted. “Kneel before his glory!”

Something about their interaction struck me as familiar—Laladie and Maho. Laladie had a lion's share of compliments for the mage, but I'd never known her to be so open with anyone outside the guild before. Perhaps Soulgnos had a similar kind of kinship with Liel.

“Cretin.” The ninja's eyes narrowed at him. “Dost thou see how he looketh at me now, with such warmth? 'Tis not my place to be perceived!”

“The fuck should I care?”

A shiver ran down my spine. Raw malice was coming off Soulgnos's slender body now, but oddly enough, nobody in the room so much as batted an eye. Not even Liel seemed to notice the imminent danger he was in, and I began to doubt that any of these so-called professionals were worth their salt.

Liel turned to look at me for the first time. “So, you're the guy Soulgnos is always mutterin' about?”

His eyes had been firmly fixed on Soulgros until now, to the point that I doubted he recognized I existed. After a long moment of sizing me up, he shook his head with a filthy smirk, his eyes going from my face to Soulgros's and back. I had a bad feeling about it. I could see the thoughts forming in his head—*This is Soulgros's Master guy, huh? What a weak little piece of shit.*

"Soulgros!" he suddenly bellowed. "You really not gonna take me up on my offer?!"

She sighed in irritation. "Do not make me repeat myself. I have no intention of tolerating thee any longer."

The smirk on Liel's face only grew wider. "Figured as much. Why don't we settle this as adventurers? We fight, and if you win, I'll never lay a hand on you. If I win, you're mine, and I get to do whatever the hell I want to you—all night long."

"What?!"

Soulgros bristled with rage as the guild erupted into cheers.

"Yeah, pin 'er and beat 'er!"

"Liel! When you're done with Soulgros-chan, you'd better give me a turn!"

It was in-character for a gray guild, but that didn't make it any less unpleasant.

"Even should he lose, I would rather perish than acquiesce to thy whims. What merit, pray tell, would be gained through our victory?"

She was right, of course. The result was either a miserable forced relationship, or a flimsy promise with no means of backing it. Nobody in their right mind would agree to such terms. There were plenty of emotional girls in the guild that would leap on the opportunity and kill him where he stood, but luckily Soulgros was cool and collected. Even now, she was maintaining a level head.

"Figured you'd say that," he scoffed. "Let's make things more interestin', then."

Liel glanced behind me. I got a bad feeling about it, but I was too late to react. A pair of burly hands grabbed me from behind, twisting my arms at an

unpleasant angle and yanking me back.

“Gotcha!”

“You’re with us, twink!”

My premonition was right. The one saving grace was that the men weren’t strong enough for their attack to hurt much.

“Gahaha!” Liel guffawed. “Whatcha gonna do with your little boytoy in a bind? You gotta fight now! Nah... forget that. If you want him to keep his arms, you’d better roll over and spread your fucking thighs! Those men’ve got enough raw muscle to tear him in half!”

While I seriously doubted the strength of these goons, this was an interesting development. I didn’t know how Soulgros would react to my being taken hostage in such a manner. I couldn’t allow her to give in—as her guildmaster and parent of sorts, she could’ve sacrificed herself for me. Getting my arms ripped off would be a hundred times less painful, and I could ask Anat for healing later if it came to that.

Just as I was about to cast a spell to sever my arms, however, Soulgros finally reacted.

“... Ough.”

“Louder!” Liel bellowed. “Tell me you’re my bitch!”

There wasn’t a shred of doubt of his coming victory in his mind, but it would never come to him. I’d shed my arms for her freedom. I would—

“Enough, I said.” Soulgros intoned darkly. “Thou shall not lay a hand on Master, miserable worm!”

She whipped about to look at me—no, the men holding me hostage. There was something dark in her eyes that I’d never seen before, a color that defied any human explanation. I could never be scared of her, but the men behind me possessed no such immunity. They squealed and lessened their grip, enabling me to break free with no effort. A blink of an eye later, the heads of the men behind me leapt from their shoulders.

“Huh?”

Liel was the only one to react, but the sentiment was echoed through the dank hall. None of them had registered what happened to the pair, no doubt. Even I could only barely catch her leg warp and extend like a whip, severing both heads in a sonic kick.

“Master! Master!”

Soulgros leapt forward and cradled me in her arms with the same blinding speed, sparing me from the great fountains of gore the men’s empty necks had become. While I was grateful for the consideration, my face was pressed tightly into her chest, making it hard to breathe. The single saving grace was that she lacked the sheer smothering power of Anat’s bosom, as the priestess had nearly killed me on several prior occasions. While she was not as conscious of her bust as Laladie, I decided not to mention the difference.

“Rats, all of thee! What gall to lay hands on Master, in light of the grace I’ve shown thee in permitting thee to live! Enough slaying thee one by one—every one of thee deserves death!”

I had no way of telling what was on her face through her face scarf—and yet, in that moment, a current of primal fear ran through every man in the guild. Her face was that of a true demon, no doubt.

## Chapter 10: The Gray Guild's Fervor

**“H**-Haha... You’re fuckin’ kidding me!”

Those were the first words from Liel’s mouth, eyes cemented on the demon in a woman’s clothing in front of him. She was a new addition to the guild, and as there were precious few women in the guild by virtue of their work, half his guildmates had openly lusted over her.

Liel himself was the same. She never showed so much as a glimpse of skin, and her eyes had an almost dead quality to them. That was no doubt out of caution for her male guildmates—if she wore the same light armor as the average woman adventurer from a legal guild, she would’ve been defiled on the spot. Even so, she was an ample target, as it was clear even through her clothing that she had an ample chest and a well-shaped bottom, testament to her physical prowess.

They were all criminals, and the bait was too tempting for some. Many men followed her, but none were seen again. Liel didn’t understand at all, assuming they had been turned down so harshly they lost all hope. The thought that such strong, competent men could be slain by that twig of a woman never occurred to him.

*No...*

Now, it was clear he was painfully mistaken. The comrades who had taken Soulgros’s man—her Master, or whatever she called him—were somehow dead, and not even Liel himself could follow how it happened. Looking at her now, with the conflicted mix of joy and sorrow through the tears in her eyes, it was clear she was their murderer. She murdered them, and with such speed and accuracy that not even he, the single strongest man in the guild, could understand her actions. A chill ran down his spine.

“Fuck you!”



Despite yelling at her, his anger was aimed inward. He couldn't believe that he was afraid of a *girl*.

"'Tis my line, fool." Soulgros finally released her man, a solemn determination dwelling in her eyes. Her gaze passed over everyone in the guild. "I was prepared to forgive thy transgressions to a degree, but thou hast committed the greatest of sins to Master himself. None of thee shall leave this accursed place alive!"

Liel hurriedly unsheathed his sword. There was no hope of fighting the beast before him—no, he relied on the comfort of cold steel as a shield, a feeble last bastion against the horror.

"Doth thou believe such a trifle shall save thee?" she sneered. There was mockery in her eyes as she looked at him.

Around them, the most foolhardy of the spectators began to stir.

"The bitch's got a mouth on her!"

She shook her head. "For what reason should I fear? Slaying thee shall take but a breath."

"Hah, cocky bitch!"

"You sure you wanna piss us all off?!"

The adventurers finally stood, having recovered from their allies' deaths to the point where they could draw their weapons.

"What say we kill the man an' have some fun with the whore when we're done?!"

"Haha, you got that right!"

From the joviality in their voices, neither man had any intention of revenge. Even if they had, it was the excuse they'd been waiting for to put the woman in her place. They were only scarcely better than Yerkchira itself.

Soulgros's glare passed over them once more, though there was still no anger in her eyes. They had committed blasphemy in the truest sense in declaring their intent to harm her Master. For that, they would beg for the sweet release of death.

“Funny you care so much 'bout that asshole,” Liel sneered, attempting to regain his composure. “You sure didn’t seem to when you let him get grabbed.”

She twitched. Then, finally, she let out a single long sigh.

“’Tis as thou sayest. I shall submit myself to him for whatever punishment he conceiveth once thou liest dead.”

The so-called Master outright refused to do so with a smile, a trickle of sweat running down his cheek. She poked him jovially in the side, as if to insist, but Liel found him even more confused as to the pair’s relationship than before.

“At any rate, I deserveth his forgiveness not,” she continued. “I shall atone once my business here is at an end.”

“Hah!” Liel laughed. “Like you could kill all us!”

Finally, he could muster a genuine laugh. There was a whole room full of hardened veterans around them, each a master of slaying their fellow man. Even if she could kill two with such speed, their numbers were too great. Surely they would win. Surely, she would—

“It shall scarce take five minutes to slay all of thee.”

## Chapter 11: Carnage

Two more heads flew free of their owners—a pair of adventurers who lost their patience and charged her ahead of their comrades. They were likely the pair that planned to claim their reward in her body, and as such, they were the first to die.

“Wha?!”

Finally, the men realized the horror of the woman standing before them. They stepped back, trying to distance themselves from her, but it was far too late.

“Gyhhh!”

As fast as thought, she appeared before one other man, and in the blink of an eye she slashed his throat open with a hidden knife.

“Wargh?!”

She spun about to slip through a blade aimed at her head, lashing out and slicing off one attacker’s arm in the process while delivering a sharp kick to another’s neck, snapping it at an inconceivable angle.

“Hyaaaaah!”

A man rushed at her with a desperate scream, grasping at her. She had failed to account for such a sudden grab, and he succeeded in pinning her arms behind her back.

“Hmph.”

“Haha, gotcha! Now get ready for a beating!”

“Yeah!”

Several more men lunged forward to attack her, desperate to render her powerless. They’d scar her arms and legs alike and render her powerless against their next onslaught—but before any of their blades could reach, a blast of mana caught them from the side and vaporized them.

“The fuck?!”

The survivors of the attack spun about to find the pretty boy she’d been with standing there with a smile, hand outstretched. Before, they had read that look on his face as weakness, but there was a chilling strength behind his expression now. A ripple of fear tore through the crowd.

“Th-The fuck are you doing?!” the man holding Soulgros spat, eyes wild. It was bad enough that the first few men were decapitated, but the newly deceased were missing over half their bodies with no trace of where they went.

“I hath troubled Master with my inadequacy once again,” Soulgros muttered darkly. “I had best end this quickly.”

Her captor began to quiver. If anyone was to die now, it would surely be him first. He tightened his grip desperately. “Y-Yeah, right! You can’t do a gods-damn thing, long as I’ve got hold of you!”

Not even Liel could shake his hold quickly, but it made no difference.

“Ah, I need but do this.”

With those words, Soulgros’s head *spun about a full 180 degrees to face him*.

“Guh?!”

Their eyes met, and the man couldn’t so much as scream. His grip slackened in horror, and she was released. A split-second later, her arm blossomed through his back, slaying him almost instantly.

“Gwugh!”

Soulgros spun her head about to its proper orientation, rolling her shoulders as she did so. The action barely seemed to make her uncomfortable. “Serveth me right, for such a miserable display of concentration.”

Intent on avoiding any further inconvenience to her Master, she lunged at the surviving gray guild’s members with renewed hunger. The battle ended soon afterward—the braver of the men who still held their ground were met with swift decapitation, and those that tried to run were struck in the back with swathes of thrown kunai. The indecisive fools who could do naught but stand

and stare in horror were stabbed clean through the heart. Each and every one of them was slain with the same brutal accuracy.

With her bloody work done, she turned to meet Liel's eyes. "Thou art the only man standing, now."

It took him a long moment to process the deaths of so many men before his very eyes. "You're fucking kidding me... They all...?"

"I suppose no lowly human could manage such a feat," she continued. "Gray guilds such as thyself are rather more talented at slaying humans than monsters."

That was precisely why Liel had chosen to fight her, even in the face of two of his comrades' deaths. Surely they were careless, and if the rest were careful, they had the sheer numbers needed to best her. It was finally clear just how naïve he was.

"Why're you talkin' like you're no ordinary human?"

"Because, quite frankly, I am not."

With that, she slipped off the right side of her robes to reveal a symbol emblazoned on her right shoulder.

"The hell? What guild is that?"

She froze, having not expected such a blank response. Master's smile quivered as though he were suppressing a laugh.

"We are of the dark guild, Yerkchira," she intoned gravely.

"The fuck? Dark guild? Like those Aichnen freaks?!"

The name of the guild itself was lost on him, but he knew that dark guilds were far more troublesome than anything his gray guild could muster. It would explain the horror of his companions' deaths if nothing else.

"At ease, Master. One cannot expect such an uncultured swine to know of us." Soulgrös had stopped to stroke her male companion's hair. There was an awkward grimace frozen on his face. Finally, she snapped back up to peer darkly into his eyes. "How darest thou upset Master?!"



“H-Huh?!”

He blinked, and she was gone. He noticed only at the last second that she was above him, swooping down upon him as a bird of prey might.

“Hahh!”

It was the same blazing-fast attack that slew his allies, but Liel wasn’t a Rank B adventurer for nothing. He swung his blade at her instead of dodging, banking his odds on a counterattack while she was unable to dodge in the air.

“Huh?!”

His blade met only air, however—she had somehow dropped to the ground with unnatural speed. Her arm was unnaturally extended, almost serpentine, with no regard for bone or sinew.

“Thou hast lost.”

“G-Gehh...”

Her arm warped and shifted, and whatever her arm was composed of hardened into a new form altogether. Countless needles tore through Liel’s chest and gut, shredding his organs into worthless scraps of flesh. The titan of a man spewed blood desperately from his mouth, slumping weakly to the ground.

Soulgros sighed, shaking her “arm” free of the man’s gore and returning it to a more human shape. “’Tis thy just desserts for subjecting Master to such sorrow.”

With the last man dead, she looked across the sea of blood and smiled at her handiwork. Her dark work was finally done.

## Chapter 12: Sometimes From His Side

**“M**aster, my work is done.”

As soon as the last guildsman had fallen dead, Soulgros rushed to her beloved Master’s side. She belonged at his side in the truest sense. The sticky splashing of fresh blood at the soles of her boots hardly bothered her as she ran and peered up into his face.

*Ah, what a handsome visage... Verily, there is no better remedy.*

She clutched her hand to her chest. Her people weren’t supposed to have any body heat at all, yet she could swear she felt warmth spread out from her heart. When Master smiled down at her, she could feel her chest tighten and pulse. It took all her restraint to maintain her composure—that slut Laladie surely would’ve thrown herself at him then and there.

Master smiled at her and placed a hand on her hand, congratulating her on a job well done as he did so.

“Ahh...”

She could feel her legs turn to jelly, and she half-melted on the spot—not that liquefying was unusual, given her unique constitution. None of the Yerkchiran girls could withstand such an onslaught, save perhaps Corine or Leiss and their stony dispositions. Before she could hit the ground, however, Master tenderly supported her.

“M-My apologies, Master.”

Despite the composure in her voice, she noted that her body was quivering in his arms. She would never mention it to him—that was one secret she would keep. Master questioned if she was hurt, to which she swiftly shook her head and stood on her own two feet.

“I am unhurt, Master. Such rabble could not possibly lay hands on me.”

She failed to keep the joy from her voice—he was worried about *her*.

She wasn't lying in saying that none of the gray guild members had hurt her, of course. Her head had spun about in full rotation on her neck, and she moved her limbs with all the power and boneless grace of a gigantic octopus. Her every finger was honed into an instrument of gruesome murder, even, meaning the guild posed close to no threat whatsoever.

As Master stroked her hair, however, she heard him apologize.

"Hm? Whatever couldst thou be sorry for, Master?"

He continued, explaining how guilty he was about making her kill her comrades.

"Er. Of course."

She put a hand to her chin in contemplation. Evidently, he was under the impression that she'd been struggling with her feelings for the men she'd fought alongside. She frankly couldn't care less who killed the bastards and felt nothing at ending them. There was still one thing preventing her from denying Master's words outright.

*Mayhaps this is an opportunity to have Master granteth my wish?*

Soulgros already had Master's promise that he would do any one thing she asked. Any of her guildmates would gladly kill for such a prize, but she wanted more.

*Is it not better to have two desires granted instead of one?*

She nodded to herself, her face scarf hiding her grin.

Soulgros made a show of falling to her knees. "Ohh, Leiss-dono... He was such a good man..."

She couldn't remember what the last man's name was, and she realized a moment too late that Leiss was the name of Yerkchira's resident muscle-headed bimbo, but luckily Master was too worried for her well-being to notice the slip-up. She had even kicked away a chunk of guildsman before "collapsing" since she didn't want to dirty her clothes with blood, but that similarly went unnoticed. Master only had eyes for her and was intent on consoling her.

She grinned. All according to plan. If that bitch Schwarte knew about this delicious situation, the same one the maid had been dreaming of for ages, she would've no doubt tried to kill Soulgros on the spot. She felt a pang of guilt at tricking him, but the reward was too tempting to pass up.

Finally, those words passed his lips. *"I'll do anything."*

"T-Truly...? Thou wouldst do anything?"

Once again, she found herself grateful that he couldn't see the grin splitting across her face. The only thing left to do was cash in on the golden opportunity before her—save for one small remaining obstacle.

"Er. But what shall I do?"

In all her planning, she'd failed to consider what, exactly, she would ask of him. She was his loyal servant to a fault, and she'd never stopped to fantasize about anything more with him. She didn't have any particular desire to keep Master all for herself, either, unlike Laladie. All she wanted was to watch the proud man's back, and to that end, she didn't care if Master was the thrall of some other woman—provided he consented to it, of course.

That meant that she already had all she wanted from Master. No matter where he went or what he did, she would be happy as long as she could be with him. Even if Laladie did go forward with her twisted plan to abduct Master, Soulgros would've gladly gone along with her—not that the alraune would allow that, of course.

"Hmm... Let us leave this place first, shall we?"

Master forced a smile and nodded. It was odd to be chatting in the middle of so much blood and gore.

"Oh... Rain..."

Upon leaving the gray guild, they found that the sky had clouded over and fat raindrops had begun to fall. The street was all but empty, save for a scant few townsfolk hurrying home under the shelter of their umbrella. None of them seemed to notice Soulgros or Master leave the building. That would prevent the death toll from rising any further, at least for the moment.

“Hrm.” Soulgros looked up at the sky with a furrowed brow.

She didn’t hate the rain—rather, she loved it. She never minded getting wet, and she was physically incapable of catching a cold. Master, however, was different. Though there were times she questioned his true identity, he was at least human enough to get sick, she thought. She found the idea of nursing him back to health appealing indeed, but she knew the entire guild would be at her throat if she did such a thing. That presented a problem.

As she thought, however, Master procured an umbrella from the stand by the door.

“Oh, what brilliance, Master! ’Tis not even stealing, given its owner already lies dead.”

Master’s brow twitched at that, but he didn’t say anything. More importantly, the problem was solved—the umbrella was only large enough to comfortably fit one, but she didn’t mind the rain, and in fact, her people loved moisture.

That made it all the more surprising when Master offered her a place under the umbrella.

“Wh-What...? Fret not, Master. I shan’t catch a cold over such a pittance.”

His smile remained unchanged, despite her continued protests. The last straw came when he insisted he’d walk without an umbrella himself if she refused.

“Fine, as thou wishest. Allow me to accompany thee.”

She slipped under the umbrella beside him. Master nodded contentedly, and the pair strode together into the rain.

*Hrk...*

With every step, Soulgros found herself growing increasingly uneasy. She was supposed to be watching him from behind, not from his side. Now, however, she could see the side of his face with startling clarity. It was far from the sheer bliss of following him, but she found her chest growing warmer nonetheless. It was, frankly, somewhat unsettling.

*To think I would derive such pleasure from this...*

She could feel her mouth shift into a bemused grin.



*B-But this cannot be! I must follow him!*

She was a stalker to the core, and on her pride as a stalker, she could not let this stand. Years upon years of following him were at stake, and she pointedly looked up at him to steel her resolve. He looked back at her curiously, however, forcing her to look away in an uncharacteristic bout of shyness.

“Mrgh...”

Her gaze landed on his rain-soaked shoulder. As a member of Yerkchira, it would only be proper to leave the umbrella immediately and let him cover himself properly. If she was stalking him and one of the guildmates were at his side now, she would expect her to do just that. Something odd came over her, however.

“’Tis nothing.”

Soulgros stayed resolutely at his side. Instead of leaving, she pushed closer into his side, allowing more cover for his shoulder. He asked again what was amiss, but she said nothing, pressing herself even closer. Her respectable breasts were pressed against his arm, not in an attempt to seduce him, but in order to feel even more of his warmth.

“Perhaps I could be bothered to walk at his side more often,” Soulgros mused.

As the pair walked through the rain-soaked town, huddled tightly beneath a single umbrella, they could almost be mistaken for lovers.

## Chapter 13: Bug Food

**“H**eeheehee! They fuckin’ killed everyone!” A pair of men were standing in the corpse field of the gray guild, taking in the carnage. “This was Liel’s place, wasn’t it?”

The speaker surveyed the room, a jovial smile twisting his lips. Death was everywhere he looked. Some guilders had been cleanly decapitated, while others seemed partially crushed to death. Others were skewered by so many kunai, they seemed more cactus than man. The only constant between them all was the expression of terror on their faces and the great spatters of gore that surrounded them. It was hard to tell how many the dead numbered, given the state of many of the bodies.

One of the men doubled over. “Ugh... I’m gonna be sick.”

“Wimp!” The first man sighed in irritation. “Is that any way for agents of the Steel Matriarch, Heinichen, to act?!”

He himself was more than a member of the infamous dark guild—his name was Luscelt, Heinichen’s own guildmaster. He was pale and lanky, and something about the way he held himself could make any observer feel unclean. There were such dark circles beneath his eyes that it seemed nearly inhuman.

The guildmaster tried hard to swallow his bile. “B-But sir... It’s not every day I see so many men t-torn apart like... uegh...”

“Are you a killer, or aren’t you?” one of his guildmates jeered.

The man on the verge of losing his lunch was young—in his early twenties, if that. His passably handsome face was twisted and pale. He—Yild was his name—had killed his share of people during his time with the guild, much like the other men assembled there. He only differed in that he didn’t play with his marks before or even after the kill, and his resistance to such gore was significantly lower as a result. Nonetheless, Heinichen as a guild delighted in all

manner of horrific crimes, and his weak stomach in the face of a few corpses was nothing short of laughable.

Luscelt bared his teeth in a “smile.” “Look, Yild, you’re useful, and I wanna keep you around. If you keep on bitchin’ like this, though, I’m gonna fuckin’ murder you. Capiche?!”

“Y-Yes!” Yild yelped.

Under Luscelt, Heinichen had one goal—to become the single strongest, most ruthless guild in the world. Yild was strong enough to earn a prime spot in their ranks, but his fragile constitution was nothing short of infuriating.

Luscelt turned back toward the piles of bodies. “Damn that dark guild! And here I thought those idiots were useless since they never show themselves... This’s a great surprise!”

The sight was still grotesque, however, and it made Luscelt’s heart soar. If Yerkchira could kill so many adventurers so easily, they would be worthy opponents indeed. He wouldn’t underestimate them now—even if going against the other dark guild at all was a mistake.

Yild finally nodded. “Yeah... They must be really strong.”

Luscelt felt another wave of anger since Yild had forgotten the threat against his life already, but the guildmaster calmed himself moments later. He’d far prefer insubordination to listening to the man continue to whine—not to mention that the youth was right.

One of the other guilders, a tall man with large muscles, scratched his head. “So, uh, who did this shit again?”

“C’mon, the master just said so,” Yild replied with a sigh. “Yerkchira, remember?”

Heinichen’s current target and greatest perceived enemy was the other dark guild local to their kingdom, the Messianic Legion Yerkchira. They were far older than Heinichen and were rumored to have a storied history that rivaled even the most respectable of legal guilds. Nowadays, they almost never showed themselves—especially compared to in the past.

“Right.” The muscled man nodded in recognition. “Ain’t never heard of those clowns before.”

At his side, a scrawny man shrugged, the long katana in his belt jangling. “I hate to agree with the gorilla, but I don’t know ’em either.”

Instead of being furious at them, Luscelt found himself sympathizing with them. It wasn’t surprising. Yerkchira had barely done a thing in ages; while they weren’t as committed to secrecy in the past, they had all but disappeared since. Most people wouldn’t even know the name these days, save those who lived in the shadows like him and the country’s ruling elites. It was his duty as guildmaster, however, to ensure his men stayed on their toes.

“Heehee, don’t get too careless, boys! We’ll be dukin’ it out with them to prove who’s the top dog sooner or later!”

Yild grimaced. “Great... Of course we’re fighting them.” Luscelt turned to glare at him, prompting the youth to sweat. “I-I mean, I’ve read about them, y’know?! Look, it’s here in this book!”

He held out a battered old book with trembling hands. The guildmaster took it, examining the battered cover. The title was weathered to the point it was unreadable.

The biggest of the men peered over his boss’s shoulder. “The fuck? What’s with this junk?”

Beside him, the scrawny man started cackling at the sight.

Luscelt sneered at Yild. “Heeheehee! You think I’m some kinda trash can? You really wanna get it, don’t ya?!”

“I-I don’t, honest!” Yild hurriedly shook his head. “That’s a history book from the Rael Empire.”

“Never heard of it.”

“I’m not surprised. It doesn’t exist anymore—and supposedly, Yerkchira’s the ones who destroyed it.”

“Huh?”

Luscelt blinked vacantly. Villages disappeared every other week, for one reason or another, with the most common reason being monster attacks. Larger towns were exponentially more resilient, since they had at least a militia to protect themselves. Even if the monsters posed too great a threat, they could almost always buy enough time for the capital to send reinforcements, and the country's elites were always enough to hold the line. That meant towns were shockingly resilient—the thought of an *entire country* getting destroyed was ridiculous. That was the work of entire rival armies. No guild could possibly manage such a feat.

“Don’t fuckin’ lie to me!”

“Ow?!”

Luscelt smacked the younger man hard across the face, his eyes shifting a little more uneasily than usual.

Tears gathered in the corners of Yild’s eyes. “B-But the book says—”

“Heehee, it’s all lies, idiot! Like hell any dark guild could pull off shit like that!”

“Well... um...”

Yild had no reply for that. A village or two was one thing, as the country frankly couldn’t afford to kick up a fuss over every little settlement, but even targeting a town was a serious infraction. Such a loss of resources would force the country to come down on the guild with all their might. Even if the guild managed to take down the country itself, they would instantly make enemies of all their neighbors—politics be damned, no nation would let a crime syndicate with such power have free rein. If Yerkchira had truly destroyed the Rael Empire, they would’ve been wiped out themselves by the combined might of every nearby country. Heinichen itself had destroyed many villages and even two full towns, but they were far from able to take down a country.

Luscelt scowled. “C’mon, enough bullshit. Let’s get on back to the guild.”

“It’s not bull!” Yild protested.

“Shut the fuck up already! One more word and you’re dead.” He emphatically crushed Liel’s decapitated head under his boot, causing Yild to freeze in fear. Luscelt made a show of throwing aside Yild’s book before turning for the door.

“All that matters is that their guildmaster and some girl infiltrated some tiny-ass legal guild. For now, we sit pretty and wait ‘til we hear more from our spy.”

“Roger that.”

The buff man and the lanky swordsman followed him obediently, and the three left together.

Yild’s eyes drifted to the discarded book. “It’s not just lies... is it?”

Blood had already begun to seep through its pages, and he had no desire to retrieve it to check.

“Hey!” Luscelt shouted from the door. “Get your ass over here!”

“R-Right!”

Yild hurried out of the room after his comrades like a startled hare, leaving the musty tome alone with the piles of bodies. In his haste, he failed to notice the old note that had fallen from its pages and was now ruining itself in the blood.

*In our hubris, we... what must not be... paid the price. The Rael Empire has... nster... alliance has fallen... no survivor... Soon I will follow... heed this last...*

*Do not touch that man.*



## Chapter 14: Those Without Restraint

“Oh, I can’t take it anymore!”

“Wh-What? You don’t need to sh-shout like that...”

A voice broke the peaceful silence of the guild, prompting Krankheit to jump in surprise. She didn’t even try to hide her discomfort as she glared at the source of the voice, Vampille—a noblewoman well-known for her stupidity. Krankheit generally hated everyone at Yerkchira except for Master, but the noble was by far the worst of the bunch.

Vampille spun about to face the gloomy girl. “Soulgros, that’s what! How dare she go on a *date* with Master?! I won’t stand for it!”

*Of course she won’t*, Krankheit thought with a sigh. Vampille never needed an excuse to start shouting, but she was exceptionally loud and empty-headed whenever Master was involved.

“B-But... we all decided that Soulgros would have her date with Master next...”

When Laladie had abducted Master, the ninja went above and beyond to stop the alraune. She was awarded the second date in recognition of her service. There was nothing but vapid incredulity in Vampille’s eyes as she glared back, however.

“Who cares about that? I don’t like it, and that’s that. I’m going to ruin their outing.”

“What a bitch,” Krankheit muttered.

The girl broke out in a cold sweat. She knew she couldn’t possibly talk Vampille out of her insanity, and she turned to Anat, the guild’s surrogate leader, for aid.

“T-Tell her she can’t.”

“Hmm.” Anat pursed her lips in thought. “Why not?”

Krankheit wasn't expecting that reply. “B-But you're the one who said Soulghros could date Master in the first place...”

Anat smiled warmly. “Yes, but did I say I wouldn't interfere? Did I promise not to ruin their time together?”

Krankheit paled. *I thought she was supposed to keep the peace...*

Vampille grinned proudly at her ally. “I wasn't expecting sense from you, but I welcome it wholeheartedly!”

“O-Oh, no... H-How are you even going to find out where Soulghros and Master are, though? We only figured it out when L-Laladie abducted him because we had Soulghros to help... You can't rely on her this time; she's the enemy.”

Now that their interference was a foregone conclusion, Krankheit was fully prepared to throw in her lot with the pair. She hated the thought of Soulghros getting flirty with Master as much as they did. The issue of how to track down their opponent remained, however, as Soulghros was by far the most skilled tracker in Yerkchira.

“Hmm... Excellent question.” Anat paused to consider her question.

“Can't you just track them?!” Vampille whined.

“O-Of course she can't,” Krankheit muttered.

A moment later, however, they heard the ringing of approaching footsteps behind them.

“I can.”

The trio whipped about to find Ritter standing there, as expressionless as always.

“Ritter?” Vampille raised an incredulous eyebrow. “Are you quite certain?”

She nodded firmly. “I'll follow the scent to Master.”

“I-Is she a dog...?” Krankheit wondered aloud.

It was a downright inhuman tracking method, but apparently the petite knight was convinced that following the most pleasant smell would take her to Master.

Anat shook her head. “Thank you, but I don’t think any of us will need to leave just yet.”

“Why?”

Ritter’s eye filled with confusion. She would kill Anat on the spot if she was suggesting they allow Soulgrös to roam free, and yet Krankheit knew the priestess would rather die than give another woman the edge in winning over Master.

“Laladie and Leiss are already gone,” Anat replied matter-of-factly.

In other words, they had two guildmates running interference already. If nothing else, the women of Yerkchira could rely on each other to be treacherous to no end.



## Chapter 15: The Observer

“Huh... So, they let you quit, just like that? You’re strong enough that I thought they’d kick up a fuss or somethin’.”

Soulgros nodded at Lucil’s words. “Our former guild was quite reasonable, and it hardly took a moment to convince them. I must remind thee, Lucil-dono, to address us with proper respect.”

There was levity in her voice, which was frankly a relief. We’d headed straight from the gray guild to here, ready to begin aiding Lucil’s guild in their task immediately. It was hard to maintain my smile in the face of Soulgros’s bald-faced lies, however, and I resisted the urge to correct her.

Apollo strode up to me. “According to our information, the Elixir’s in the depths of some forest.”

That was a bit of a surprise. Artificial Elixirs were a miracle of modern magic, and they were held without exception in royal vaults, cathedrals of the Church of Angels, or other similarly fortified locations. Even they could cure almost any injury or illness, however, and were likely saved for serious threats to important individuals’ lives.

Lucil stared intently at Soulgros. “Y’know what, you look like you’re in a good mood.”

“Me? Rest assured, nothing of note hath happened to me.”

“Liar. You’ve never *not* sounded pissed when talking to me before.”

“Because thou art all a true displeasure to talk to,” I barely heard Soulgros mutter.

He was right, however—Soulgros was in an exceptionally good mood, it seemed, and her usual gravity was now broken by such joy that I wouldn’t be surprised if she started skipping everywhere. I was a tad worried her happiness

would lead to carelessness, but even if that came to pass, I felt confident I could support her.

Lucil shot Soulgros a curious look. “So, uh, something up?”

Ligg put a hand on Lucil’s shoulder, giving him a quick shake of his head. “There are some things you should never ask a woman, and that’s one of them.”

That only seemed to deepen the boy’s confusion, but I was impressed at the softness of Ligg’s words—just as I’d expected from the gentle-seeming man. I was grateful for the care he showed for Soulgros’s privacy. The only thing that bothered me was that he believed in the Church of Angels. I sighed under my breath. He seemed nice enough, but then again, Mary had as well before she attacked us. No, I couldn’t afford to relax my guard around him. There was a very real possibility he would attack us if he knew we weren’t believers, and I didn’t want to go through that again.

“You’re really gonna leave me to watch for monsters alone?” Pelorro called from his post a short distance away. “I’m getting lonely over here! Somebody come talk to me!”

Pelorro seemed to be the guild’s scout and the one principally in charge of spotting threats. That was something unfamiliar to Yerkchira—each of our members had their own means of detecting threats, and we had no such specialization. It was assuring to have an expert taking the lead, even if said expert was looking back at us like a kicked puppy.

“God,” Lucil muttered, puffing himself up in an effort to look mature. “I guess I’ll go walk with him.”

Pelorro greeted Lucil with genuine glee. At this point, I was beginning to wonder if their youngest member was their most mature after all.

So far, our joint operation with Lucil’s guild was going smoothly, with no friction to speak of. I had Soulgros to thank for that, as any of the other guild members would have caused trouble for certain. She was broad-minded in ways that Laladie and the others weren’t. Similarly, Lucil’s guild hardly antagonized us at all, aside from general wariness, which they made an active



effort to conceal. The resulting peace filled me with a genuine desire to help Lucika as well. We'd certainly find the Elixir she needed at this rate.

"..."

At the time, I hadn't even noticed that Soulgros and I had been watched the entire time.

"Why do they stareth so?" Soulgros muttered, though I would not realize the gravity of her musing until much later.

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"This is it," Apollo announced. "This is the place the World's Eye said the Elixir is."

He pointed into the dense, overgrown forest before us. It was familiar, to say the least, and I had to ask him to confirm he had the right place.

"That's what we heard," Lucil confirmed.

"It had better be here," Pelorro grumbled. "We paid out the ass for that intel."

Ligg nodded. "You can say that again."

From the state of their guild headquarters, it was clear they'd sold nearly everything they had. The building itself was little more than a ruin, save Lucika's room, and they lacked the funds to change that now. I doubted this World's Eye person knew the finer points of their predicament, but I had a hard time rationalizing charging such a sum in the first place.

"Gh..."

Beside me, Soulgros twitched. I cast her an expectant look, thinking she had some insight on the situation, but she barely seemed to register Pelorro as he voiced the same criticism of World's Eye that I had myself. In a few minutes, I convinced myself I was mistaken.

"I do not believe World's Eye lied," she finally said. "No informant worth their salt would lie to a paying client."

Ligg nodded thoughtfully. “I guess you’re right.”

I didn’t use informants much myself, but her claim made logical sense. The only thing still on my mind was that she seemed to know this World’s Eye somehow—but as none of the others seemed to notice, it must have been my imagination.

## Chapter 16: The Hunt for the Elixir Begins

**A**ccording to World's Eye, there was a natural Elixir somewhere within the woods. It was entirely possible that I'd passed it on a walk, even.

"Hey, Soulghros's boss. Do you know these woods or something?" Lucil asked me curiously.

I nodded. I'd do my paperwork in these woods from time to time and took walks here on my time off. That was after my adventure with Laladie, of course, as the others had only let me leave our headquarters after that. The thought was troubling, as it made it seem as though I had no true freedom at Yerkchira—though surely that couldn't be the case. It was also the forest in which Laladie and I had done her walking practice all that time ago, and there was a chance the corpses of the orcs Yuuto and his comrades slew were still there. I made a mental note to avoid that clearing.

More importantly, however, I asked Lucil why he referred to me as "Soulghros's boss," of all things. "Master" was a far easier and more comfortable form of address.

Lucil blinked at me. "Huh? I mean, you haven't told me your name. I thought about calling you Master like Soulghros does, but Apollo's my master. Doesn't that make it close enough?"

"Aw, Lucil!" Apollo tossed an arm around the boy's shoulders, tears brimming in his eyes. "You can be real cute sometimes, y'know?"

"Dammit, get your hands off me!"

Despite his protests, he didn't seem too offended by the show of affection. They were a close-knit bunch all right.

The way he addressed me still bothered me, though. It didn't seem like something you'd call a person to their face, and it seemed a little rude to Soulghros herself.

When I voiced my concern to Soulgros, she firmly shook her head. “I rather enjoy it—no, I prefer it.” She continued in a barely audible whisper with a hint of a grin, “It makes me feel as though I am naught but your possession.”

I was unsure how to react to that. Most people would take offense to it for that precise reason, but if she was fine with it, I wasn’t about to argue.

Apollo turned to me. “By the way, you said you knew these woods, right? Any chance you could show us through?”

He moved to put a hand on my shoulder, but Soulgros slapped him away before he could make contact. The other guildmaster staggered back, eyes spinning.

Clearly, I was wrong about Soulgros being more level-headed. We’d lose all the good will we’d accumulated at this point, so I hurried to answer Apollo’s question. I explained that while I knew the forest, I had no idea where we were going, and I didn’t know the place that well.

Pelorro sighed. “Great... Should’ve guessed.”

I apologized, but Soulgros shook her head at me.

“Fret not, Master, thou hast not wronged. If anything, the blame lies with Pelorro and his miserable attitude.”

The scout did a double take. “It what?!”

Ligg shrugged. “Sorry, Pelorro. I’m with her on this one.”

“Yep.” Lucil nodded.

“Guh.” Pelorro drooped.

Soulgros grew closer in an attempt to reassure me. Pelorro seemed resigned, despite his earlier flare of anger. The mood had worsened tangibly, but I felt I had to thank Soulgros for her reassurance nonetheless.

“Perhaps we should focus our search on places Soulgros’s Master hasn’t been yet?” Ligg suggested.

“That’s what I was thinking!” Lucil eagerly seconded.

Soulgros giggled, but in response to my stroking her hair instead of their conversation.

While I doubted Lucil had come to the same solution, Ligg's suggestion made a lot of logical sense. If I hadn't seen the Elixir, we should logically explore areas I'd never been to—assuming this World's Eye individual could be trusted.

Lucil clapped his hands together. "All right, let's go get that Elixir!"

With that, he headed right into the woods. That was a little concerning, so I checked with Apollo to make sure he'd be okay.

The leader nodded. "Haha! Believe it or not, the kid's pretty strong."

That did little to allay my doubts, and I decided to come clean as to the forest's dangers. I'd seen groups of orcs here in the past, and while they were fairly weak on their own, they could be quite threatening in groups. I also felt I had to mention the ogres Laladie and I had fought during our last visit. While they weren't as overwhelmingly dangerous as dragons, they were respectably powerful, and I was unsure Lucil could handle such opponents on his own. Furthermore, I was under the impression that Soulgros and I had been commissioned specifically because of the danger in these woods, and letting Lucil go off alone seemed to contradict that.

With every word, Apollo grew increasingly pale before finally shouting after the boy. "Get back here, Lucil! This place's dangerous as hell!"

Soulgros snorted. "What fuss over mere orcs and ogres... I see little reason to exercise caution."

"W-We're not like you!" Ligg protested. "Orcs are plenty tough for us, let alone ogres!"

Soulgros and I exchanged glances. Surely he was overreacting. I could understand the issue with ogres, but even I could slay the likes of orcs, and Soulgros would barely recognize them as a threat. Nonetheless, Apollo and the rest of their guild hurried into the undergrowth after their youngest member, leaving the two of us alone.

"What an unexpected turn, indeed," Soulgros mused. "Alone with Master... A kunoichi and a virile young man, shielded from prying eyes by the darkness of

the woods...”

She cast me a hopeful glance, but I told her as firmly as I could that nothing would be happening between us. She was like a daughter to me, and I’d long since disposed of my libido. I reminded her that we were there to save poor Lucika’s life, first and foremost. I also asked her to drop the ninja dialect, because her pompous air was negatively affecting our teamwork with the group. The last thing we needed was to appear unapproachable in our quest for help.

“As thou wishe—As you wish.”

Soulgros sighed before continuing under her breath, speaking her thoughts aloud. “I can at least rest assured that he will not lay a finger on those sluts, then. Perhaps a powerful aphrodisiac is in order? I have time, and I doubt we shall find the Elixir by nightfall—rather, that would mean returning to headquarters, and I would like to avoid that. I will devote myself to enjoying this time, then...”

The entire time she muttered, I did nothing but watch her in confusion, unable to figure out what the ninja had in store for our expedition.



## Chapter 17: The Intruder on Our Way Back

“Nothing here...”

“Yeah, nothing...”

“Doesn’t seem like it...”

“Nope, nothing...”

One by one, Lucil, Apollo, Pelorro, and Ligg sighed in frustration. Watching them, I couldn’t help but smile wryly. Meanwhile, Soulghros seemed utterly uninterested in them and was staring at my back with intense focus.

“Hey, you know you can come up next to me, right?”

“The view of Master from behind is just splendid...” Soulghros murmured dreamily.

*Yup, she’s definitely not hearing a word I say.*

It had been about two hours since we—well, mostly Lucil and his team—had entered the forest with high hopes. Now, worn out, they had requested a break, and we were resting in a small clearing. Apart from Soulghros and me, everyone else was sitting on the ground, drenched in sweat.

“Honestly... Even Master, who usually stays indoors, is still going strong. How come you guys from a proper guild are so exhausted?” Soulghros remarked, her voice tinged with sarcasm.

*You do realize that you, along with the other members, are the reason I was cooped up in the guild, right?* I thought, chuckling despite myself. Though, to be fair, they’d eased up on that recently.

Lucil and his guildmates weren’t lacking in stamina. The problem was that we’d been exploring parts of the forest I didn’t know, focusing on areas I’d never walked before. Unlike my usual routes, which were mostly devoid of

monsters, the new paths were crawling with them. I'd always thought of this forest as a relatively peaceful place, but it seemed I was mistaken.

Even so, the monsters we encountered—goblins and lizardmen—weren't particularly dangerous. There was no need to panic.

If we had encountered ogres like the ones Laladie, Maho, and Yuuto faced, the situation would have been different. After repeatedly fighting off monsters while continuing our search, Lucil and his team were utterly exhausted.

"How can you be so calm after dealing with lizardmen, let alone goblins?" Lucil asked, glaring at us resentfully.

"Yeah, you fought more than we did," Apollo added with a resigned smile.

"Are all members of the dark guild this formidable?" Ligg muttered, spreading some rather harsh rumors.

Well, to be fair, I didn't do much. It was Soulghros who did most of the fighting. She would disappear and then reappear, accurately throwing kunai that struck the monsters with deadly precision. It was impressive.

*Sorry to say, Ligg, but our guild is full of members like Soulghros. Although she isn't even our most combat-specialized member—Leiss, for example, surpasses her. Every member is someone I take great pride in.*

"How are you so strong?" Lucil asked.

"Simple. Master promised me a reward afterward," Soulghros declared proudly, her chest puffed out.

*A reward?* That was news to me, and my smile probably looked a bit strained. Soulghros gazed at me with sparkling eyes full of anticipation. The intensity of her expectations was such that I almost imagined a tail wagging furiously behind her.

*Soulghros isn't a beastkin, right?*

"Ah... Maybe we should call it a day?" Pelorro muttered tiredly.

It had only been about two hours since we entered the forest. Normally, that wouldn't be enough to tire anyone out, and we could easily continue our search.

Given the number of battles we've fought in the short time since entering this forest, it was understandable that Lucil and his team were exhausted. While Soulghros handled most of the latter fights, Lucil, Apollo, and the others bravely faced off against lizardmen and goblins. It would be unwise to push them any further.

"But... Lucika..." Lucil murmured, worried about his sister, who was suffering from a curse.

A Ragel's curse was indeed powerful and malevolent, and it must have been hard for Lucil to watch his sister suffer. But he could rest assured. I had infused Lucika with my mana—albeit heavily diluted.

"The curse was strong, but with my mana, its progress should be halted for a while, sparing her from pain and suffering in the meantime."

"I see... Thank you," Lucil sighed in relief.

"Master's mana truly is all-encompassing," Soulghros said, her voice a mix of admiration and disbelief.

*It's not really all-encompassing. Though it is quite versatile.*

In any case, it had been less than a day since I infused Lucika with my mana and began our search for the Elixir. It was not something we'd find easily, so it might be best to call it a day.

"Yeah, there's no need to push ourselves now. Let's wrap it up for today," Apollo, their guildmaster, decided.

*Which means our work here is done for today...*

"All right, Soulghros, let's head back to the guild."

"Hah! So, it comes to this, after all..." Soulghros exclaimed, her eyes wide with frustration as she stomped the ground.

"Wait, could it be that you dislike Yerkchira?"

"N-No, that's not it... I just dislike the other members, except for you, Master. But seeing you smile so sadly, I couldn't say it..." Soulghros twisted her body in apparent agony.

Sometimes, my guild members react like this, leaving me puzzled about their meaning.

“You guys heading back already? I was thinking we could have a little drinking party to get to know each other better,” Apollo suggested.

*A drinking party, huh... But we have everyone back at the guild waiting for us—or so I hope...*

“Well, it’s a generous offer. It’s wise to accept such goodwill (*though the members may be eagerly awaiting Master’s return, they probably wouldn’t mind if I stayed out all night*),” Soulgros chimed in, surprisingly siding with Apollo.

“Yeah, it wouldn’t hurt to let loose for a day,” she added.

I was taken aback as Soulgros, who usually would be more reserved, eagerly agreed with Apollo. He looked at me with a hopeful smile.

*Well, if Soulgros wants to join, I guess we could accept their hospitality.*

“That’s the spirit!” Apollo exclaimed.

“An excellent decision! For a while, Master will be all mine!” Soulgros cheered, clinging to me as Apollo clapped my shoulder, only for Soulgros to swat his hand away.

A drinking party would mean a late return. Apollo seemed like the type to get overly friendly and troublesome at such gatherings. *I should notify the Messianic Legion of Yerkchira’s headquarters about the delay, but how should I go about it?*

“Leave that to me,” Soulgros said, sensing my hesitation.

*Really? That would be helpful.* I didn’t have any means of communication on me, but as a ninja, Soulgros likely had her methods.

“Consider it done (*I definitely won’t report it*),” she said with a smile.

“All right, let’s head out of this forest,” Apollo said.

“Let’s hope we don’t get attacked by monsters,” Ligg muttered pessimistically.

With Soulgros nodding, Apollo stood up. Pelorro and Lucil followed, and we began making our way out of the forest.

Well, it seemed like Lucil and the others had recovered a bit, and with goblins and lizardmen as the only threats, we should be fine. Just as everyone stood up and started to walk, a commanding voice echoed through the forest.

“Wait a moment!”

The voice, filled with resolve and authority, was enough to make us stop in our tracks. Turning toward the source, we saw several armed men approaching. The man at the front had a particularly sharp gaze fixed on us.

*This is going to be troublesome.*

## Chapter 18: The Legal Guild: Praeshield the Pride Shield

The men approaching us stopped at a cautious distance.

“Uh... what do you want?” Apollo asked, representing Lucil and the rest of our group. Judging by their appearance, these men were likely adventurers affiliated with a guild, much like us.

It was unusual for adventurers to engage with each other outside the city. Randomly approaching a new team like this was practically unheard of, which made Apollo quite curious.

“First, let’s introduce ourselves. My name is Rast. I’m a member of the legal guild, Praeshield the Pride Shield,” the leader stated.

“O-Oh... I’m Apollo, the master of this guild,” Apollo stammered, hurriedly introducing himself. While the introduction was civil, Rast’s expression suggested anything but friendliness.

“And what brings you here?” Ligg asked, wanting to get straight to the point. Rast’s eyes narrowed sharply at the question.

“What brings us here? You should be well aware of that,” Rast replied.

“Wh-What...?” Apollo stammered, taken aback by the intensity of Rast’s words.

Indeed, there was a hint of guilt within Apollo, as if he knew they were hiding something.

*Please let this be a misunderstanding,* Apollo silently prayed, but Rast’s unyielding gaze was fixed on me and Soulgros.

“You two are members of a dark guild, aren’t you?” Rast accused.

“Haa, haa. Master’s back...” Soulgros muttered, her focus unwavering.



Neither Soulghros nor I responded directly to Rast's pointed question. I met Rast's gaze with a strained smile, aware that saying anything careless could jeopardize Lucil and his team.

Soulghros stood right behind me, her eyes darting around nervously, her body fidgeting. Apparently, she hadn't heard Rast's words.

"Wh-What? How did they find out?" Lucil exclaimed.

"You idiot!" Apollo hissed.

If Lucil had kept quiet, we might have been able to bluff our way through. Despite his bravery in close combat with monsters, Lucil was still a kid. He quickly covered his mouth with his hand, but it was too late.

"We received a tip-off from a good citizen. They reported that members of a dark guild had infiltrated our territory," Rast explained.

"A good citizen...?" Soulghros muttered, finally paying attention to Rast's words while sticking close to me. It seemed our information had been sold to Rast and his men.

Who was this so-called good citizen? The first candidates that came to Soulghros's mind were members of the Messianic Legion of Yerkchira. It was possible they were unhappy with her and my close, loving adventurer life—from her perspective—and decided to sabotage us. It seemed plausible. Soulghros herself would definitely interfere if another member were alone with me.

However, this time, that possibility seemed unlikely. The informant had contacted Rast, a member of a legal guild.

If it were someone from a gray guild or similar, they might sell information to anyone without hesitation. But a legal guild like Rast's would be different. They would definitely verify any dangerous or suspicious information. As the guild's observer, Soulghros was aware of Praeshield the Pride Shield's reputation. It was a mid-tier guild with the strength to rival even some of the larger guilds. An organization like that would surely ensure their information was accurate.

*That rules out most of our suspicious guild members,* Soulghros thought. The Messianic Legion of Yerkchira had members like Laladie, who weren't

embedded in any specific organization, and Corine, who was infiltrating the Demon King's army, currently in conflict with humanity. Any information from these individuals would likely be dismissed outright by a legal guild.

Of course, there were members of Yerkchira who had infiltrated reputable organizations.

"Ritter..." Soulgnos recalled the stern, expressionless female knight with the bob-cut black hair.

She had the motivation and capability to leak information. However, Soulgnos doubted Ritter's involvement this time. Right before this adventure with Master, Ritter had unexpectedly defended Soulgnos against Laladie's fierce objections at the guild headquarters. Although Ritter's support wasn't out of goodwill—she was clearly banking favors for her own benefit—Soulgnos believed Ritter wouldn't jeopardize her investment now.

*If she interfered now, her previous efforts would be wasted,* Soulgnos reasoned. While Ritter was typically expressionless and hard to read, Soulgnos thought she wasn't foolish enough to sabotage her own plans. This led Soulgnos to exclude Yerkchira members from the list of suspects.

*So, who could it be?* Soulgnos still didn't know.

"Now, explain yourself, Apollo. Why are you harboring members of a dark guild in your guild? According to our information, you were aware of their affiliations," Rast demanded.

"Damn!" Apollo grunted.

*Fast information... I've narrowed it down,* Soulgnos thought.

Rast's stern words cornered Apollo, who struggled to respond. Meanwhile, Soulgnos stood close to Master, nodding thoughtfully as she pieced things together in her mind.

It seemed the culprit was not from Yerkchira. Soulgnos had significantly narrowed down the suspects in her mind.

"Hmph. Can't answer, can you? You're no longer fit to be a legal guild. By knowingly inviting members of a dark guild, the kingdom's sworn enemies,

you've forfeited that right. At best, you'll fall to a gray guild. At worst, your guild will be disbanded," Rast declared.

"No!" Lucil cried out in despair.

Originally, Lucil had welcomed Master and Soulghros into their guild to save his sister, Lucika. He had also suggested bringing them in, so he felt responsible for causing trouble for Apollo and the others. The weight of his mistake made him feel faint.

Seeing Lucil's reaction, Soulghros tilted her head in confusion. "Hm? Why do you look like it's the end of the world?"

"You might not understand, but if a small, weak guild like ours loses its credibility and gets demoted from a legal guild, we can't survive," Pelorro said bitterly, glaring at Rast and his men.

True, requests handled by gray guilds were often more dangerous and less rewarding than those for legal guilds. Gray guilds might resort to extortion to increase their rewards, but Lucil's guild wasn't in a position to do that. However, this wasn't Soulghros's main point.

"The punishment of being demoted to a gray guild or worse is something that happens if Rast and his men report us, correct?" Soulghros asked.

"Exactly!" Apollo understood what Soulghros was getting at. They needed to convince Rast and his men not to report them.

"What? We are members of Praeshield the Pride Shield. We do not overlook evil," Rast said firmly.

"Please hear us out! We have our reasons!" Apollo pleaded.

"Reasons?" Rast echoed.

Rast's sharp eyes bore into Lucil as the boy began to speak. Perhaps because Lucil was just a child, Rast seemed willing to listen. Sensing this opportunity, Lucil desperately explained their dire situation: a guild member was afflicted by Ragel's deadly curse, they needed a natural Elixir to break it, and they had no choice but to seek the dark guild's help due to their inability to handle the situation alone.

“...”

Even after hearing everything, Rast remained silent, his expression unreadable. Lucil and his comrades waited with bated breath for his judgment. I maintained a composed, enigmatic smile, while Soulgros seemed lost in her own thoughts, pleased to be near me. Finally, Rast’s eyes opened, and he spoke.

“Unfortunately, I must report this.”

“———!”

It was something they had feared. While Apollo and Ligg had expected it, Lucil couldn’t stay silent.

“Wh-Why?!”

Rast spoke to Lucil as if addressing a failing student. “No matter the reason, allying with a dark guild can never be condoned. If you needed help, you should have requested it from our guild or another legal guild.”

“B-But—” Lucil began to protest.

Even if they had sought help from another guild, they would have likely been ignored. The existence of natural Elixirs was nearly mythical, and no guild would take a weak guild’s claims seriously. If they had offered a substantial reward, they might have gotten a hearing, but Lucil’s guild had already spent nearly all their funds on World’s Eye’s information.

“It’s admirable that you care for your guildmates, but you should regret turning to a dark guild for help. Given your circumstances, you might get away with a demotion to a gray guild. Then you can start your search for the Elixir anew,” Rast said, his words seemingly logical. Yerkchira, while not as infamous as Heinichen, was still a known enemy of the kingdom. Seeking their help was a grave mistake.

“But... that will be too late!” Lucil shouted, his voice filled with anguish.

Lucika had been suffering from a Ragel’s curse for some time now. While Master’s mana was currently suppressing it, there was no telling when the

curse might start progressing again. Lucil couldn't bear to see his sister in such pain any longer.

No matter how much Lucil pleaded, it was clear that Rast's determination to report wouldn't waver. He was committed to his sense of justice and couldn't be swayed by emotional pleas.

"Isn't it quite simple, though?" Soulgros sighed in exasperation at the tense silence.

While she didn't mind the prolonged standoff—more time to admire Master's back—the hostile glares from Rast and his men were becoming annoying. When Soulgros admired Master, she wanted no distractions, especially not the threat-laden stares from others.

"Uh... so you're saying we should talk..." Apollo stammered, trying to understand Soulgros's point.

"No, that's not it at all," Soulgros replied, tilting her head.

As the guild observer, Soulgros knew well the nature of Praeshield. They were a mid-tier guild with notable strength and an unwavering dedication to justice. Given their rigid adherence to these principles, compromising with them was out of the question.

For Soulgros, where Master stood was where justice lay. She had been misconstrued in many ways, but finally, she expressed her true intention.

"We should just kill them all here and now," she said bluntly.

## Chapter 19: Laladie and Leiss's Interference

**W**hile Soulgros and Rast's group were on the brink of a clash, two figures watched from the treetops above. These were Laladie and Leiss, members of the same guild as Soulgros. Laladie, her eyes sparkling with excitement, observed the scene below.

Due to her disability, the alraune Laladie couldn't climb trees on her own and had been brought up by Leiss.

"Ooh! I don't really get what's happening, but I hope this Praeshield or whatever kills Soulgros!" Laladie exclaimed eagerly.

"She's still our guildmate, you know..." lamented Leiss, often considered the sole conscience of Yerkchira. The word "still" reflected her sentiments toward her guildmates—essentially, she wouldn't mind if they were killed. Seeing through this, Laladie looked up at Leiss with a mocking grin.

"Don't pretend to be all righteous, Leiss. You'd be thrilled if Soulgros accidentally died."

"I wouldn't be thrilled!" Leiss retorted, though a hint of truth lay in her words.

"You walked out with Master alone once, yet you're interfering with Soulgros doing the same," Leiss said, not just surprised but giving Laladie a judgmental look. It wasn't that she had a problem with disrupting Soulgros, but she knew she would be furious if someone did the same to her when she was with Master. In that case, she'd unleash her full wrath.

"Of course! It's fine when Lala does it, but not when someone else does," Laladie replied confidently.

"That's completely unreasonable," Leiss remarked, her expression twisting as she looked at Laladie puffing out her flat chest with pride.

To Laladie, Leiss seemed just as unreasonable.

“Well, from Lala’s perspective, you’re the one being unreasonable, Leiss,” Laladie countered.

Leiss couldn’t help but feel a mixture of frustration and bemusement as Laladie’s absurdly self-assured stance irritated her.

“Huh? What are you talking about?” Leiss tilted her head in confusion. Known as the sole conscience of the guild, she rarely openly antagonized or fought with the other members, though she had her own internal judgments. Thus, she didn’t understand why she was being called unreasonable.

“Normal people can’t find someone just by their scent. Are you a dog or something?” Laladie retorted, referring to how Leiss had located Master and Soulghros. While Soulghros, with her investigative skills, was a formidable enemy, Laladie had found Leiss’s tracking ability quite disturbing. Locating someone by their scent alone was borderline creepy, even if her species had heightened senses.

“Is that so? I think Ritter could do it too,” Leiss replied nonchalantly.

“You guys are just weird...” Laladie said, giving Leiss a judgmental look. Oddly, Leiss seemed pleased, her body starting to sway bashfully under Laladie’s scrutiny.

“I see... I guess I’m like a dog. I’d kill anyone else who treated me like one, but if it’s Master... being his dog wouldn’t be so bad,” Leiss said, chuckling. In her mind, she imagined herself playing with Master while on all fours, wearing dog ears near her proud horns and a tail attached to her rear. She saw herself pressing her curvaceous body against Master, panting as he petted her.

“Wait, what?! The pet spot is Lala’s!” Laladie interjected hastily.

“Are you okay with this...?” Leiss mused, even though she hadn’t initially thought of herself as a pet. Laladie, however, was way ahead, fully embracing the role despite her possessive tendencies.

“Well, if Master pets me and pays attention to me, I’m fine with it,” Laladie said.

“Wh-What?! In that case, I want that too!” Leiss blurted out.



“Ah, too bad. Lala called it first. First come, first served,” Laladie declared triumphantly.

“That’s unfair!” Leiss shouted. In her happy daydream of being cherished by Master, an image of Laladie in a cat costume suddenly appeared, shoving Leiss’s dog costume self aside and cuddling up to Master. Seeing this in her mind made Leiss almost tear up in frustration.

“Anyway, that’s not important right now. I’m going to support this Rast guy and get rid of Soulgros,” Laladie declared.

“What? Are you serious?” Leiss’s expression changed as she looked down at Soulgros and the others below. It was almost unheard of for a guild, even a dark one like Yerkchira, to ally with an enemy to eliminate a guildmate. Leiss hesitated but knew Laladie’s resolve.

“Of course, I’m serious. If Rast kills Soulgros, then turns on Master, I’ll swoop in and kill Rast. Master’s gratitude toward me will skyrocket!” Laladie explained with a grin.

“It might not go that smoothly... but it’s not a bad plan,” Leiss admitted, her lips curling into a smile.

The two shared a conspiratorial grin, completely disregarding Soulgros. Ironically, Soulgros had once planned to assassinate Laladie under similar circumstances, making them even.

“All right! Let’s get started!” Laladie exclaimed.

And so, their mischief began.

## Chapter 20: Lucil and His Team's Choice

Soulgros's words left everyone stunned, unable to articulate their emotions. The air was thick with various feelings: Lucil and his team's pure shock and fear, Rast and his group's anger and confusion, and Master's bemused smile.

Rast was the first to make a sound, as expected. He snorted, looking at Soulgros with disgust. "Typical of a dark guild, crawling in the dirt with such vile thoughts. Have you no shame?"

"Well, I can't help it if you see it that way. Even if Lucil-dono and his team are demoted to a gray guild, Master and I would face far worse punishments. We have no choice but to resist," Soulgros responded nonchalantly, unfazed by Rast's condescending tone. If it had been the prideful Laladie or Vampille, Rast would likely have been slaughtered by now.

Soulgros's concern was valid. Demotion to a gray guild would indeed be a punishment for Lucil's guild. But what about Soulgros and Master? As members of a dark guild, they already operated deeper in the shadows than a gray guild. A demotion would ironically elevate them.

Knowing what the answer would be, Soulgros asked anyway, "And what would happen to us?"

"Obviously, you'll be taken to the capital, tortured for every bit of information about your dark guild, and then publicly executed for the citizens of the kingdom to witness," Rast said with a cold smile.

"Of course, I expected as much." Soulgros nodded calmly, unfazed by the gruesome fate described.

Even with the grim prospect of torture and execution, Soulgros remained composed. She knew that she wouldn't divulge any information about Master under torture—though she might spill about other members without much persuasion—and she wasn't someone who could be killed easily. *How many members of Yerkchira could be truly killed after just one execution?*

“Well, I don’t care what happens to anyone else as long as it’s not Master and me being executed. But if Master is to be executed, that’s a different story,” Soulgros said nonchalantly.

Master was—at least apparently—human. Unlike Soulgros and Laladie, who belonged to species with extraordinary vitality, Master didn’t have such resilience. Soulgros was prepared to fight anyone to protect him.

“Hah, fool!” Rast sneered at her, strapping the large shield from his back onto his arm. “Normally, adventurers who commit crimes are judged and punished through a trial... but you are from a vile dark guild. No one will question me for dispensing justice here and now.”

He drew a sword hidden within the shield, the blade gleaming ominously in the dwindling sunlight. Following Rast’s lead, the other members of Praeshield also drew their weapons. Soulgros remained unfazed, her expression hidden by the cloth covering her face, revealing only her eyes.

“If you won’t come quietly, you might get hurt,” Soulgros warned.

“That’s my line,” Rast retorted, locking eyes with her.

In the next moment, Soulgros lowered herself close to the ground and launched a fierce attack at Rast. She drew a small blade from nowhere and slashed at him... only to trip on a grass loop that seemed to have tied itself into a ring around her foot, slamming her face-first into the ground.

“Bwuh!”

“...”

A loud groan escaped her lips, but everyone else fell silent as if they were attending a funeral. Lucil and his comrades, along with Rast and his men, stared in stunned silence. After all her grandstanding, Soulgros had ended up face-planting into the dirt. Even Master, who was supposed to be her unwavering ally, awkwardly averted his eyes.



“Wait! It’s not my fault! I didn’t just trip on my own!” Soulgros protested, frantically waving her hands and shaking her head.

“But... nobody did anything.”

“Yeah, it just looked like you fell...”

Feeling the disdainful stares, Soulgros became even more frantic. “How did it... a loop... plants! Laladie! This must be Laladie-dono’s doing!”

The fact that her first suspect was a guildmate rather than an enemy highlighted the unique dysfunction within Yerkchira. Worse still, she was right. Soulgros, with her acute sense of perception, sensed familiar presences in the treetops. Looking up, she saw Laladie clutching her sides in laughter and Leiss trying hard to stifle her own giggles. It was infuriating.

*Of all times, you choose now to sabotage me?!* she fumed internally.

Soulgros had anticipated interference—she herself had meddled during Laladie’s moments—but to do so in such a tense situation was especially vicious. Although, if she were honest, she might have chosen a similar moment to strike.

“Are you mocking us?” Rast’s voice broke through her thoughts, dripping with anger. He stood before her, clearly enraged. The situation had turned critically unfavorable.

“No, no, that’s not it... I was betrayed by my own comrade...” Soulgros tried to explain.

“Enough of your nonsense!” Rast roared, shoving his shield forcefully into her. She blocked with her small blade but was sent flying into the forest by his sheer strength.

“She’s lighter than I thought,” Rast muttered, a bit surprised by how far she flew. It was partly because she had let herself be thrown to create distance.

“I’ll go after her. The rest of you, keep an eye on these ones,” Rast ordered his men.

“Yes, sir!” Rast’s subordinates responded promptly to his brief command before he disappeared into the forest after Soulgros. These adventurers were

well-trained, even more so than the royal knights who supported the prince. Unbeknownst to them, Master had also vanished. This left only Lucil's group and the remaining members of Praeshield.

"What do we do?" Pelorro asked nervously, sweat trickling down his face as he looked at Apollo and the others. What was the best course of action? Should they abandon Master and Soulgros and stay put to avoid further trouble?

Indeed, this would be the wisest choice for their survival. If they believed Rast, demotion to a gray guild would be their punishment. It would be challenging for a while, but if they managed to carry out missions without further issues, they might eventually be reinstated as a proper guild.

However, what would become of Lucika? The powerful curse afflicting her was only being suppressed by Master's magic. It was hard to believe the curse would remain dormant if they abandoned Master. Furthermore, if Master and Soulgros were executed, Master's magic within Lucika would dissipate, and the curse might resume its progression immediately.

"Then...!" Lucil shouted, drawing his sword and charging at the members of the Pride Shield. Though his speed was nowhere near Soulgros's, the adventurers were caught off guard by the unexpected attack. One of them hastily blocked Lucil's strike with a small shield, but it was clear they hadn't anticipated such an assault.

"What the hell are you doing, Lucil?!" Pelorro yelled in shock.

"Apollo!" Ligg called out, his eyes full of anxiety as he looked to their guildmaster for direction.

"Grr!" Apollo's mind raced. The decision to ally with the dark guild or submit to punishment had been a tough one, but Lucil's sudden action had forced his hand. There was no longer any room for hesitation.

"We're going to support Lucil!"

"Yes!" Ligg responded, sweat dripping down his face as he saw the determined look on Apollo's face. Pelorro, however, still looked reluctant.

"Wouldn't it be smarter to just stay put?!"

“Of course it would! But what about Lucika?!” Apollo roared back.

“Th-That’s—” Pelorro stammered, hesitating but eventually steeling himself.

“So what? We’re going to kill them?! If we do that—” Pelorro’s voice was filled with uncertainty.

“No, we don’t need to go that far. Just beat them up enough so they forget what happened here,” Apollo said, sweat pouring from his face as he tried to justify his decision.

“That’s pretty vague...” Pelorro muttered.

“I know it’s not a perfect plan, but it’s the best we can do right now. Thankfully, we have Ligg, who can use healing magic. If we go too far, we’ll rely on him,” Apollo added, glancing at the man with a hopeful smile.

“You’re relying on me...?” Ligg sighed, stepping back a few paces. As a follower of the Church of Angels, he wasn’t a high-ranking member who could use healing magic without limit. However, realizing the necessity of protecting their guild, he reluctantly accepted the role.

“Fine! I get it! Let’s do this!” Pelorro finally agreed, charging at the members of Praeshield. He rammed into the man threatening Lucil, catching him off guard.

“Pelorro!” Lucil gasped, looking up in surprise.

“Don’t go running off on your own!” Pelorro snapped.

Lucil, initially shocked, quickly regained his composure. He hadn’t expected to be rescued after acting on his own.

“Get up! We’ve got to make them forget everything that happened here!” Pelorro urged.

“O-Okay!” Lucil replied, standing up once more.

The two exchanged brief smiles before charging at the members of Praeshield together. The battle quickly intensified, with both sides clashing fiercely.



## Chapter 21: Fanaticism for Justice

“Oh, no...” Soulgros muttered.

With a final shove from Rast’s shield, she was sent flying through the trees. She skillfully adjusted her position mid-air, landing gracefully on her feet.

“Well, I didn’t expect to be sent this far. It’s not like I needed to come all the way out here, though...” she mused, glancing around.

Fortunately, the trees weren’t densely packed, so fighting here wouldn’t be too troublesome. Soulgros wasn’t particularly fond of combat like Leiss, she would have preferred to avoid a fight altogether.

“But I suppose that’s not going to happen, is it?” She sighed, hearing the heavy clanking of metal approaching.

It was likely Rast, pursuing her with his massive shield. Though Soulgros wasn’t a naturally combative person, she believed in facing challenges head-on.

“Oh, Master,” she exclaimed, sensing a presence and turning to see Master standing there with a smile.

She had hoped he would stay in the safer area, but if he had come to check on her out of concern, she couldn’t help but feel delighted.

“If Master is watching, I have to give it my all,” she said, clenching her fists with determination.

Soulgros, though not a combat specialist, was eager to impress. Just then, Rast emerged from the trees. He seemed surprised to see Master already there, but quickly shook it off.

“You were over there just a moment ago... Well, no matter. This makes it easier to deal with you all at once.”

“I’ve noticed something, Rast-dono. You seem awfully confident. You do realize we are from the dark guild, don’t you?” Soulgros replied, her tone

challenging.

“Hmph. And why should that matter?” Rast sneered, dismissing her words.

Did she really think being part of a dark guild would mean he, a champion of justice, would falter?

*Such a thing is impossible. Justice will never lose to evil*, he reasoned. “Now, if you behave, I’ll make your death quick and painless.”

“Well, if Master is watching, I’ll have to decline that offer,” Soulgnos replied, shaking her head.

It was a deal that could never be made. Rast knew Soulgnos would never accept his terms. He wasn’t genuinely offering her a chance to surrender; as a champion of justice, he had to at least make a token effort at a peaceful resolution.

“Then it can’t be helped!” Rast shouted, charging forward with his shield raised.

“Such impatience...” Soulgnos sighed, preparing for battle.

Rast charged at her with his shield, and Soulgnos let out a small sigh. She was equally eager to finish this quickly. She slipped several kunai between her fingers and hurled them at the oncoming warrior.

“Ha! That won’t work on me!” Rast bellowed, taking cover behind his massive shield.

“Hmm...” Soulgnos muttered.

The kunai, capable of piercing soft iron, couldn’t penetrate Rast’s shield. It remained unscathed.

“Oh!” Rast exclaimed.

“Whoa...” Soulgnos gasped, dodging nimbly.

Rast had closed the distance and swung his shield at her. It transformed from a defensive tool into a brutal bludgeon in an instant. Soulgnos deftly evaded the attack, knowing it would be disastrous to get hit.

“Damn! You’re quick, aren’t you?”

“Ha! Even I can’t afford to take a hit from that,” Soulgros said, chuckling.

Rast, though annoyed, wore a confident smirk. He believed he had the upper hand. Soulgros, on the other hand, scratched her head and sighed.

Of course, even if he hit her with that shield, she wouldn’t die.

*She’s not particularly good at taking hits. If she doesn’t avoid them well, her secret will be exposed.*

“Now, it’s my turn,” she declared.

Soulgros drew her short sword and dashed toward Rast with such speed that she seemed to vanish. Her attack was quick enough to slice through an ordinary adventurer’s neck without them even realizing it. Rast, however, reacted just in time, blocking the gleaming blade with his massive shield.

“Guh?!” Rast grunted, struggling to withstand the force behind her strike.

Unlike their previous encounter, this attack carried significant power. Rast, who had intended to knock her back again, quickly realized he couldn’t. Instead, he drew a thin sword from his shield and slashed at Soulgros, aiming to make her lose balance by slightly loosening the pressure on his shield.

“Hmph!” Soulgros exclaimed, deftly parrying the sword with another kunai.

The two were now locked in a stalemate, pressing against each other with all their might, glaring into each other’s eyes from close range.

“With such strength, why do you ally yourself with an evil dark guild?!” Rast demanded.

“Hm?” Soulgros was taken aback by Rast’s sudden question. She had assumed he despised her, so his words caught her off guard.

“As long as vile entities like Heinichen the Steel Matriarch and other dark guilds run rampant, the suffering of the people will never end! Even the knights, who are supposed to protect the people, cower in fear and refuse to fight the dark guilds!” Rast’s voice was filled with anger and frustration as his face twisted with regret.

“Oh...” Soulgros responded, unable to provide anything more than a vague reply to his sudden outpouring of emotions.

“That’s why I’ve decided to fight against evil, against the dark guilds! I joined Praeshield to stand for justice!” Rast declared passionately.

“I see...”

Rast’s eyes gleamed with intensity. He was undeniably a commendable man who had honed his skills to crush evil. His ideals were ones that many would agree with. However, his words did not reach Soulgros at all. In fact, she was only half-listening.

“This is your final warning. Surrender quietly. With your strength, you can serve justice instead of being killed. Join us and fight against the vile dark guilds.”

“I refuse,” Soulgros replied instantly, her voice cutting through Rast’s words.

There was no room for negotiation.

“My allegiance lies solely with Master, the one and only in this world. Besides, this power was given to me by Master,” Soulgros declared, her eyes growing cold and murky.

Although not as fanatical as Anat, Soulgros’s devotion to Master was still intense. This unwavering loyalty had been present since the day she first met Master on that vast plain.

“I see... That’s a shame!”

“Oh no...” Soulgros muttered as Rast pushed forward with all his might, shield and sword aimed to crush her.

Realizing the danger, she gracefully leaped into the air, landing a short distance away.

“It can’t be helped... Truly, it can’t be helped...” Rast mumbled to himself, his voice filled with a strange resolve.

“There’s something off about you,” Soulgros said, tilting her head in confusion.

“It really can’t be helped!” Rast screamed, his face contorted into a ghastly smile.

Soulgros was startled by the abnormal look in his eyes, which were now a murky reflection of his fanatical belief in justice. It was reminiscent of the fervent devotion of the Church of Angels' followers or the members of Yerkchira toward Master.

"What?" Soulgros gasped.

Ignoring her, Rast dashed toward Master, who was calmly watching the battle with a serene smile.

"You're a tough opponent, so I'll deal with you later! First, I'll take care of this precious man of yours!" Rast shouted, raising his sword.

Rast's sinister grin widened as he prepared to strike. Soulgros, who had landed far away from their initial clash, couldn't react in time to his sudden movement.

"A man who speaks of justice resorts to such cowardly tactics..." Soulgros muttered, her voice laced with anger.

But Rast had anticipated this. As expected, Soulgros intercepted him, placing herself between Rast and Master.

"I knew you'd do that!" Rast exclaimed, his eyes gleaming with triumph.

Rast's true target was not Master, whose abilities were still unclear, but the dangerous Soulgros. She moved to block the attack, her primary concern being Master's safety. This hesitation cost her, and Rast's sword severed her arm in a swift motion.

Soulgros's arm flew through the air, a grim testament to Rast's calculated strategy.

## Chapter 22: Justice Does Not Always Prevail

**B**lood gushed from the severed stump of Soulgros's arm. The crimson spray splattered onto Rast's body, even landing on his cheek. He twisted his face into a wide, manic grin.

"Ugh?!" Rast grunted, aiming to push her back with his shield, but his attempt was cut short by a powerful kick to his abdomen from Soulgros.

"Haha! You fell for it!" Rast laughed, though the kick had dealt him considerable damage. The thrill of severing the arm of a dark guild member filled him with near-madness. Soulgros, struggling to maintain her balance, staggered unsteadily.

"Oh... Well, this is quite the mess," Soulgros commented nonchalantly, gazing at her severed arm.

Rast was taken aback, speechless. He had expected screams of pain and anguish, not this calm, detached reaction. It was anticlimactic for someone so eager to see her suffer. What Rast didn't know, however, was that Soulgros lacked any sense of pain.

"You seem rather carefree for someone who's just lost an arm. You can't fight me now," Rast declared.

"Hm?" Soulgros responded, her tone almost questioning.

"You were my equal when you were unscathed. Now, with one arm missing, your ability to fight is drastically reduced. How long can you possibly hold out against me in this state?" Rast's confidence surged. He was already certain of his victory, but now he felt it was guaranteed. He grinned savagely and licked Soulgros's blood from his sword. This was out of character for a champion of justice like him, but the thought of vanquishing a dark guild member made him giddy with excitement.

Soulgros watched this display, her eyes widening slightly. Rast mistook this for fear and smirked, relishing what he believed was her terror.

“Now, let’s end this...” Rast began, his voice dripping with anticipation.

Rast, who had been speaking so confidently to Soulgros, found his voice growing softer and weaker until it faded completely. The reason was simple: an overwhelming, paralyzing killing intent bore down on him, making it impossible to speak.

“Wh-What...?” Rast stammered.

This killing intent did not come from Soulgros, who had lost her arm. Instead, it emanated from the man standing behind her, wearing a gentle smile. This man, whom Soulgros revered as Master, did nothing overt. He neither brandished a weapon nor gathered magical energy for an attack. He simply stood there, smiling.

Yet, the sheer force of his presence was enough to freeze Rast, a warrior of justice, in his tracks and render him speechless.

“Oh, Master’s anger on my behalf excites me, but this killing intent is really intense. I almost want to be hit by it,” Soulgros murmured, her voice dripping with adoration as she gazed at Master with a blissful expression.

Rast, however, had no room to pay attention to her words. The immense killing intent made his head swim, and even standing firm on the ground became a struggle.

“Ha... ha...” Rast panted, his breathing ragged. His blurry vision caught a glimpse of Soulgros, who was now practically fawning over Master, asking him to direct his killing intent at her.

Master, however, had already shifted his attention away from Rast. He was now looking at Soulgros with a slight, amused smile, gently rebuffing her advances.

*Something is wrong,* Rast thought. Why am I still suffering from this oppressive force?



“Um? Rast-dono, Master’s killing intent isn’t directed at you anymore. If it were, you’d be dead within ten seconds,” Soulgros explained, glancing back at him.

“What...? No way...” Rast gasped.

Indeed, Master was no longer directing his killing intent at Rast. However, Rast’s torment showed no sign of abating.

Finally, Rast collapsed to the ground.

“Wh-Why...?” he murmured weakly, utterly confused as to why he was lying on the ground. The confident expression he had worn moments ago was now replaced with one of pure doubt and anxiety.

“Well, if you’re going to carelessly get covered in my blood, this is bound to happen,” Soulgros remarked casually.

“Blood...?” Rast echoed, his mind struggling to process her words.

Soulgros reluctantly tore her gaze away from Master and explained to Rast.

“That’s right. You see, I’m not exactly an ordinary human, and my blood is quite special. Well, it’s more of a liquid that mimics blood,” she said, holding up her severed arm as if to show it off. “I can change my blood into various liquids at will. The blood you got drenched in is a powerful paralytic toxin.”

“P-Paralytic?!” Rast tried to move, panic setting in, but his body wouldn’t respond. Only his eyes and mouth retained some mobility.

“Don’t worry,” Soulgros reassured him. “It’s not a toxin that stops all muscle activity, so it won’t affect your breathing or anything like that.”

Rast felt a brief moment of relief wash over him, but this soon turned to anger at his own vulnerability.

“Damn it!” he cursed.

“So, Master, what should we do with him?” Soulgros asked, casting a sidelong glance at the incapacitated Rast before turning her attention back to her Master.

Master, who was typically the one to stop his guild members from going too far, simply smiled wryly this time. It was clear he had no intention of intervening.

Soulgros was certain that Master's unusual stance was because Rast had cut off her arm. Master, who thought of his guild members as daughters—much to their mixed feelings of gratitude and occasional frustration—was undoubtedly furious with Rast for harming her.

"Hehe, you're making me blush, Master," Soulgros said, grinning foolishly beneath her mask. Master tilted his head, watching her with a bemused expression.

"Just heal me already!" Rast shouted at them.

*Yeah, like I'm really going to do that,* Soulgros thought to herself, reverting to her true thoughts.

"Hmm... Killing you outright doesn't sit well with me, but I also can't forgive you for targeting Master, even if it was part of your plan..." she mused, scratching her chin.

Though Soulgros was generally amicable to those who didn't threaten Master, anyone who did would find her a relentless adversary. Master had already left Rast's fate in her hands. After pondering for a moment, Soulgros finally seemed to settle on an idea, clapping her hands together with a cheerful expression.

"All right, here's what we'll do. Rast-dono, you'll forget everything about us. After that, you'll be free to go," she declared.

"What...?" Rast looked up at her in disbelief. Could it really be that simple? He had come to kill them, and yet they were offering him such lenient treatment?

"Is that... all?" he asked, still stunned.

"Of course. You will forget about me and Master. Now, let's get started," Soulgros replied, moving closer to him with a bright smile.

"Fine! Just do it quickly!" Rast snarled, still glaring at her.

Soulgros nodded, her smile unwavering, as she approached him with light, carefree steps. As Rast watched her, a sense of disbelief and a strange

amusement filled his mind. He couldn't help but feel a bitter laugh bubbling up inside him at the absurdity of it all.

*Fools! Rast seethed internally. I don't know what kind of drug they plan to use, but our guild's healers can easily counter it. Once my memories are restored, I'll hunt you down and kill you! Justice will prevail, this time for sure!*

He wanted to shout his thoughts out loud but knew that doing so might get him killed. For now, he would endure this humiliation in silence. Even if the poison was beyond what Praeshield could handle, they had connections with high-ranking healers who could help. Comforted by this thought, Rast allowed himself a slight smirk—until Soulgnos's next words wiped it off his face.

"Since Rast-dono seems ready, let's start tampering with your brain!" she announced cheerfully.

"Wh... What?" Rast stared up at her in shock, his earlier confidence crumbling.

Soulgnos reached out toward his head, her demeanor unsettlingly gleeful.

"W-Wait! What do you mean? Aren't you going to use some drug on me?" Rast protested.

"Huh? No, no. If we did that, you wouldn't feel any pain, would you? This is your punishment for targeting Master, so you need to experience some pain," Soulgnos replied, shaking her head as if the answer was obvious.

*Tampering with my brain?* Rast's thoughts raced, panic setting in. The mere idea of the pain he was about to endure sent shivers down his spine.

"However, I must warn you, I'm not very good at tampering with brains. Sometimes I mess with things other than memories, so please bear with me," Soulgnos said, her tone casual as she extended a finger toward Rast.

Her finger melted into a viscous liquid, writhing and undulating as if seeking a target. Rast let out a strangled cry, unable to contain his terror any longer.

"Y-You've got to be kidding me! Why do I have to go through this?! You're evil! You torture, manipulate, and kill innocent people! You're a vile dark guild!

So why is it that I, a champion of justice, have to suffer and endure this pain?! Why?!" Rast roared, his eyes bloodshot and spittle flying from his mouth.

Yes, he had come here to defeat the dark guild for the sake of the kingdom for the sake of justice. Yet here he was, lying on the ground, about to endure something far worse than death.

"It seems you're misunderstanding something," Soulgros said, watching him with a calm gaze as he panted heavily, his paralyzed body pressed against the ground, eyes full of murderous intent.

"Yerkchira the Messianic Legion does not commit crimes or massacres without reason," she explained.

Which, of course, implied they would do so with a reason.

"You probably think we're just like Steel Scraps... or rather, the Steel Matriarch," Soulgros continued. "No wonder you're so determined to see us as enemies. How troublesome."

Soulgros was certain that Rast's intense hatred for the dark guild was largely due to Heinichen the Steel Matriarch. Unlike the secretive Yerkchira, Heinichen frequently committed blatant crimes in the public eye. They were an irritating nuisance.

"Well, be that as it may..." Soulgros knelt beside Rast, her voice clear and melodic.

"Attempting to harm Master is more than enough reason for Yerkchira's retribution. Are you ready to have your brain scrambled?" she asked.

"H-h-hick!" Tears welled up in Rast's eyes.

*This wasn't how it was supposed to be. This wasn't how it was supposed to end.*

Those were his final coherent thoughts before his screams echoed through the forest.

## Chapter 23: The Conclusion of the Praeshield Incident

**S**oulgros and I returned to the place where she had been sent flying by Rast. To my surprise, Lucil and the other members of the guild we had temporarily joined were still there. I had assumed they would have abandoned us, as aligning with the legal guild seemed the more strategic choice.

After all, staying loyal to us, a dark guild, would distance them from the Elixir needed to save Lucika from her curse. But with my magic, I could keep her stable for a few more years.

*Oh, I forgot to mention that to them.*

In any case, we came back without much hope, but...

“Oh! Soulgros and Master! You’re safe!” exclaimed Lucil, a red-haired boy, running toward us with a joyful smile. He had a few injuries but seemed otherwise able to move.

*Lucil... You stayed with us?*

“Huh? What are you talking about? Everyone’s still here,” Lucil said, turning to guide my gaze behind him.

“Hey, you’re late,” Apollo called out.

“Man, I’m exhausted...” Pelorro muttered.

Ligg remained silent, his face buried in the ground.

To my astonishment, the entire guild was there. Apollo and Pelorro were sitting on the ground, looking weary, while Ligg lay face-down, appearing dead. It was a stark contrast to his usually composed demeanor.

But they had all stayed.

Oh... I felt a surge of emotion. We were a dark guild, shunned and despised by society. Yet, they had chosen to stand by us.

This is wonderful news for Soulgros and the rest of our guild members. Having more allies than enemies is always better. Maho and Yuuto seemed like they would have sided with us too, but they had returned to their own world...

“Huh?”

When I turned to look at Soulgros, she was gazing back at me with pure, innocent eyes, as if she truly didn't understand what had happened. “What do you mean?” she asked.

*Well, they'll understand eventually.*

“Looks like the most exhausted one is Ligg,” Pelorro commented with a wry smile, glancing at Ligg, who was still twitching with his face planted in the ground.

*Is he actually dead?* I had wondered, but on closer inspection, it seemed to be a symptom of mana depletion.

“Well, he took care of these guys as well as us. Let him sleep it off for a bit,” Apollo suggested with a laugh. Although, if he felt that way, maybe he should move Ligg's face off the ground. It was an oddly surreal sight.

I followed Apollo's gesture to see the remaining members of Praeshield tied up together with a single rope. They all had their heads bowed, apparently unconscious.

“Man, it was tough knocking them out to the point where they'd lose their memories!” Lucil boasted, “The real challenge was healing them afterward.”

Ah, that explains the numerous lumps on their heads. Ligg, now awake, was brushing the dirt off his face with a deeply unhappy expression.

“So, did you manage to take down that Praeshield guy? Well, you must have, since you're here. I heard he was the strongest of them all,” Pelorro asked.

“Yeah, thanks to Soulgros's efforts, we managed to defeat him.”

“Feel free to praise me more,” Soulgros said, appearing before me and looking up with a satisfied smile.

Her severed arm had already reattached itself. Initially, I had panicked, fearing the worst, but she had calmly reattached it as if it were no big deal.

During the chaos, I tried to help by amplifying my magic, but Soulgros's reaction—letting out a sultry moan—was rather distracting.

"Oh, right. We were dealing with Rast," Soulgros said, tossing a rope she was holding.

Rast, tied to the end of the rope, was flung toward us. Pelorro peered at his face.

"Hey... This guy's eyes are rolled back," Pelorro noted.

"That happens a lot when someone faints," Soulgros replied calmly.

"His tongue is sticking out," the man added.

"That happens a lot," the ninja reiterated.

"There's fluid coming out of every orifice." His voice was growing more alarmed.

"That happens a lot."

Pelorro's escalating concern was met with Soulgros's increasingly nonchalant responses.

"Hey! We worked so hard to keep things under control, and you've practically killed him!" Apollo cried, almost in tears—or rather, actually crying as he clung to Soulgros.

"Don't be ridiculous. He's still alive. See?" Soulgros said, annoyed, and kicked Rast to demonstrate.

All eyes turned to Rast.

"\_\_\_\_\_"

He didn't move. Soulgros sighed and shook her head.

"Look closer. He's twitching, isn't he?"

"That just means he's barely alive!" Pelorro shouted.

"Ligg! Use your healing magic, quickly!"

"Again...?" Ligg, already exhausted, staggered over to cast healing magic on Rast.



Slowly, Rast's external wounds began to heal, though he hadn't sustained many to begin with.

"Unfortunately, a healer of Ligg-dono's caliber can't restore lost senses, nerves, or memories," Soulgros commented, watching dispassionately as Ligg struggled to heal Rast.

Soulgros watched with a detached gaze as Lucil and the others worked tirelessly to heal Rast. She seemed utterly indifferent to his fate now, having lost all interest in him. Though Rast's situation was largely his own doing, there was a small part of me that felt sorry for him.

"It's gotten pretty late," Apollo remarked, looking up at the sky as Ligg finished his healing. The sun had long since set, and the darkness of night had enveloped us. When we fought the members of the Pride Shield, the sun was still up, but the aftermath and Soulgros's distractions had extended our stay.

"Hey, Master and Soulgros; if you don't mind, how about staying at our guild tonight?" Lucil suggested.

"Oh, that sounds great! We overcame a tough battle! Let's celebrate!" Apollo added enthusiastically.

"I agree; it would be nice," Pelorro chimed in.

*Stay at their guild?* I hesitated. There were others waiting for my return, or at least I hoped there were. Besides, Apollo, who seemed like a heavy drinker, didn't appeal to me. His eyes sparkled as he looked at us, already seeming tipsy. Ligg's gaze was also telling; it was the look of someone planning to drag us into their revelries, likely tired of handling Apollo and Pelorro's drunken antics.

"Sorry, Ligg, but I think I'll pass..."

"Wonderful! I'd love to join you!" Soulgros interjected before I could decline, raising her hand eagerly.

*Wh-Why?! You usually respect my decisions! Why now of all times...?*

"Heheh. This way, I have a perfect excuse to extend my time alone with Master without returning to the guild. Laladie-dono used the excuse of the

heroes to monopolize Master for a night, so I think I deserve this much,” Soulgros whispered conspiratorially to me, a mischievous glint in her eye.

Soulgros muttered something quietly before slowly approaching me.

“Master, finding that Elixir might take a while. Perhaps it’s time we consider bridging the gap between dark guilds and legal guilds,” she whispered.

Hmm. She has a point, I suppose. Still, leaving without informing our guild members feels wrong... Just as I was lost in thought, Soulgros leaned in closer and whispered again.

“Then I’ll use one of the two favors you promised me. Please, Master,” she pleaded softly.

*Ugh, she got me there.*

I had indeed promised her two favors in which I’d do anything she asked. Using one here was a smart move. Honestly, I would probably grant any request from a Yerkchira member without needing such promises, but still...

*Fine. There’s no helping it now.*

“All right! Let’s head back and have a drink!” Apollo cheered, grabbing my shoulder.

“Yeah! Let’s drink!” Lucil echoed, his excitement palpable.

“No, Lucil, you’re too young for that,” Ligg interjected calmly.

Apollo’s arm around my shoulder was warm and friendly, while Lucil’s enthusiasm was matched by Ligg’s level-headedness. They really were a close-knit guild.

*Well, our guild is just as tight, if not more so!*

And so, Soulgros and I decided to accept their invitation and join them at their guild for the night.

As we started moving, I noticed Pelorro had been oddly quiet. Considering his personality, I had expected him to be more involved.

“Was it Rast-dono’s gaze that I felt, or was it something more unsettling?” Soulgros suddenly stopped, deep in thought.

I called out to her, urging her to keep up.

*Come on, or you'll be left behind.*

"P-Please, don't leave me!" she exclaimed, hurrying to catch up.

I chuckled at her panic.

"What about the members of Praeshield the Pride Shield?" someone asked.

"Oh... I'll adjust their brains again and send them back to their original locations," she replied casually.

"What does that even mean to 'adjust their brains'?" Lucil asked, confused.

## Chapter 24: Heinichen Makes a Move

“I never thought Praeshield the Pride Shield would be defeated so easily,” a gruff voice remarked.

Master and the members of Yerkchira the Messianic Legion, along with Lucil’s guild, had left the area. After a while, the manipulated members of Praeshield had also departed. Now, a few figures emerged in the place they had occupied—members of the dark guild Heinichen—the Steel Matriarch.

“Rast was pretty tough,” a muscular man noted.

“Hehe! Good riddance to that persistent pest!” The guildmaster of Heinichen the Steel Matriarch, Luscelt, cackled. Rast, from Praeshield the Pride Shield, had been a bothersome regular guild member, constantly snooping around their activities. His obsession with justice made him a noisy nuisance for Luscelt, frequently interfering with their operations.

But now, Rast had been defeated by Yerkchira the Messianic Legion.

“It’s crazy. We struggled with Rast, but Yerkchira took him down like it was nothing,” another member said.

“You’re not scared of Yerkchira, are you?” Luscelt asked, glaring at the large man who spoke. His intense gaze was enough to silence the man. They already had one coward in the guild—Ild—and Luscelt couldn’t tolerate another.

“N-No, Master! Not at all!” the man stammered, recognizing the danger of opposing his guildmaster.

“But Master, you didn’t expect Praeshield to show up, did you?” Ild interjected with a smirk.

“Ild...” Luscelt growled, a vein throbbing on his forehead.

“You idiot! Are you seriously that stupid?” one of the men shouted at Ild.

“Why are you saying such terrible things to me?” Ild retorted, feeling unjustly accused.

The man, fearing the repercussions of Ild’s reckless suggestions, wasn’t willing to risk his own life for Ild’s foolishness. Yet, Ild, not fully grasping the gravity of his words, felt nothing but frustration at the perceived unfairness.

“Haah... Well...” the man sighed.

“Huh...?”

To everyone’s surprise, Luscelt didn’t explode in fury. He took a deep breath and managed to contain his rage. Though unexpected, Luscelt hadn’t anticipated the Pride Shield’s involvement in this matter either.

The information control within Yerkchira was formidable. Luscelt knew that if his guild wasn’t a dark guild with connections to the prince, they might have remained ignorant of Yerkchira’s existence. It was a highly secretive guild. So, who had provided Praeshield with such sensitive information?

“Well, it could only be that bastard,” Luscelt muttered, his suspicion quickly forming.

He suspected their spy had leaked the information. Was the spy now regretting their alliance with a dark guild? If so, it was too late to change sides now.

“But then again, an idiot wouldn’t understand such complexities...” Luscelt mused aloud.

“You mean Ild, right?” another member joked.

“Hey, that’s not fair—probably,” Ild protested, adding the last part uncertainly.

Luscelt ignored the noisy banter around him, focusing on the next steps. It was time to adjust their plans.

“All right, you lot. It’s time for us to move,” Luscelt commanded.

“Finally! About time!” one of the members cheered.

“Seriously?” another groaned, less enthusiastic.

When Luscelt called out, the muscular man responded with an enthusiastic fist bump, clearly ready for action. The issue lay with Ild, who remained visibly anxious.

“Didn’t you see what they did to Rast? He was screaming in agony! We couldn’t get too close without being noticed, but whatever they did, it must have been horrendous,” Ild stammered.

“Hehehe! That’s exactly what we want, isn’t it?” Luscelt laughed maniacally.

This is how a dark guild should be. Recent events showed that the Messianic Legion was more active than anticipated. They were not just a hidden force but a formidable enemy that the Steel Matriarch must confront. To become the most powerful dark guild, Luscelt needed to completely defeat Yerkchira through sheer force.

“If we don’t handle this properly, it’s over for us...” Ild muttered, still trembling.

“Shut up! If you can’t do it, you’ll die!” Luscelt snapped.

“Eek...” Ild whimpered, shaking even more under Luscelt’s intense glare. Luscelt couldn’t fathom why Ild had joined a dark guild if he was so weak-hearted. Losing interest in Ild, Luscelt turned to the muscular man and a thin man wielding a sword.

“Go kill some of Yerkchira’s members. Bring back a body part as proof. I want to show off to the others,” Luscelt ordered.

“You got it!” the muscular man replied.

“Understood,” the thin man added.

With their orders clear, the two men left the forest to carry out their mission.

“And you! Get moving!” Luscelt barked, kicking Ild in the rear.

“Yikes!” Ild yelped, sprinting off like a frightened animal prodded by a whip.

“All right... Let’s start a full-scale war, Yerkchira. Hehehehehe!” Luscelt cackled into the night, the sound echoing through the forest.

## Chapter 25: The Feast

“Cheers!” Apollo led the toast, and the mugs filled with frothy ale clinked together.

It was said that this tradition had been brought by a hero from another world several generations ago. I wondered if he had come from the same world as Maho and Yuuto. But now wasn't the time to ponder such things.

Soulgros and I were guests at Lucil's guild, celebrating the end of our first day searching for the Elixir. It felt premature to celebrate since we hadn't found it yet, but given the intense day we'd had, it seemed appropriate. Being ambushed by a legal guild like Praeshield the Pride Shield was unexpected, to say the least.

If things had gone wrong, our cooperation with Lucil's guild might have fallen apart. We could have been dragged to the capital, and Lucil's guild could have been branded a gray guild. Despite Rast's sacrifice, we managed to stabilize the situation reasonably well.

“Hey! Are you drinking enough, Master?!”

*Ouch!*

I felt a strong impact on my shoulder and turned to see Apollo beside me. His face was flushed, and his breath reeked of alcohol.

*Already drunk...?*

“It was really tough today... Teaming up with a dark guild, getting attacked by a legal guild...” Apollo plopped down next to me, throwing his arm around my shoulder as he started to complain.

*Uh-oh... He's a troublesome drunk, isn't he? Where's Ligg, his usual handler...?*

“...”

Ligg was seated a bit away from us. Our eyes met, and he gave me a smile and a thumbs-up.

No one seemed inclined to rescue me from Apollo's drunken grip. Ligg quietly sipped his drink, not bothered since he wasn't the one being harassed.

"Gimme some booze too!" Lucil demanded.

"No way!" Pelorro replied, the two of them bickering over drinks.

It looked like they were too preoccupied to help me out either.

"So, as I was saying, we should really build this guild up, you know..." Apollo continued, oblivious to my plight.

*Am I really stuck dealing with this...?*

"What's with the shoulder hug? Move aside," a familiar voice interjected.

"Guh!" Apollo grunted as he was shoved away.

To my surprise, it was Soulgros who had come to my rescue. Like a daughter defending her father, she brushed Apollo off and smoothly took the seat next to me.

*Wow... Sometimes her actions can be over the top, but this time I'm genuinely grateful. Thanks.*

"No need for such flattery, Master... hic," she replied.

*Wait, what?*

Soulgros was swaying slightly, her body language unsteady. Her expression was hidden behind her mask, but her eyes were glazed and unfocused.

*N-No way...*

"Masteeeeer... hehe," she giggled, wrapping herself around me.

*She's drunk too?! I never knew Soulgros was such a lightweight... Could it be because of her species? Maybe alcohol affects her more quickly.*

"Snnff, snnff! Ahhh... I'm not usually into smells, but Master's scent is something else," Soulgros murmured, her nose buried in my shoulder, sniffing deeply.



*No, stop! I don't smell that good! You all smell way better!*

However, my attempts to deter the drunken Soulgros were futile. She continued to cling to me, her cheeks flushed from the alcohol.

“Master, I demand a cuddle,” she slurred, snuggling closer.

Resigned, I let her sit on my lap. Well, if I thought of her as a daughter seeking comfort, it was kind of cute.

*Though she wasn't exactly a child in terms of age.*

“Hehe... I can feel Master's warmth...” she murmured, twirling around on my lap to face me, hugging me tightly.

*Um, her chest is pressing against me... Is this okay? I'd heard daughters typically resist their fathers' affections as they grow older.*

“Master, it's about time you gave me a child...” Soulgros said, looking up at me with dreamy eyes.

*A child?! And what does she mean by “it's about time”?!*

Panic set in, and I quickly shook my head to refuse. “No, no, no!”

“What's she talking about?” Apollo asked, stumbling over.

“Child? What does she mean, Ligg?” Lucil echoed.



“Um... well...” Ligg stammered.

Lucil, for some reason, had found the topic interesting enough to approach the knowledgeable Ligg for answers. Poor Ligg was trying his best to evade the question, clearly at a loss.

Ligg shot me a look that was half pleading, half annoyed.

*Sorry, buddy, but you didn't help me when Apollo was all over me, so I guess we're even.*

Seeing my unhelpful expression, Ligg looked utterly despairing. But he was smart; he'd figure it out somehow.

Meanwhile, Soulgros was still on my lap, her breath coming in heated gasps.

*Hey, what are you doing? Stop squirming and rubbing against my leg. This is getting out of hand.* I decided to use one of my spells to calm her down.

“Mm...”

The spell worked, and Soulgros soon began to breathe softly, fast asleep.

*Phew... That was close.* Apollo and Pelorro had been watching us with intense curiosity. If Soulgros had continued, they might have gotten the wrong idea, or worse, tried to join in the drunken antics. I wasn't sure if I could handle both of them while keeping Soulgros safe.

“Big brother?”

“L-Lucika?!”

Amidst the chaos, the door creaked open, and a red-haired girl stepped into the room from the back.

## Chapter 26: Lucika's Worries

Her appearance closely resembled that of Lucil, almost as if she were a female version of him. This girl was Lucil's younger sister, Lucika, who was afflicted by the curse. To help her, Lucil and his companions sought the aid of our dark guild and were on a quest to find an Elixir.

"Wh-What's wrong? You need to be resting, don't you? Was it too noisy?" Lucil hurriedly rushed to Lucika's side, concern etched across his face. However, Lucika, with a sweet smile, tried to reassure her brother.

"No, it's not that. I feel really good right now. I feel like I could go back to being an adventurer," she said, flexing her small arm, trying to show off an imaginary muscle with a bright smile. Her thin arms seemed fragile, but for Lucil, seeing his sister this energetic was a rare and emotional moment. Tears began to well up in his eyes.

"Lucikaaa..."

"Come on, big brother. No crying." Lucika gently patted her weeping brother on the head, trying to comfort him.

I'm glad. It seems my magic is effectively suppressing Ragel's curse. For the next few years, she should be fine. Ideally, I would like to pour more magic into her to alleviate her symptoms quickly, but her body wouldn't be able to withstand the full force of my magic.

"Oh..." Lucika's eyes landed on me. When I smiled at her, she returned the gesture and left Lucil's side to approach me.

"Doctor, you're at our guild," she said.

"Yes, I'm just visiting for a bit. We were having a little celebration. I hope we weren't too noisy."

"No, not at all. Everyone made such a wonderful room for me." Lucika smiled happily.

“I see.” This guild truly cared for its members. *But our guild is just as caring!*  
*I’ll say it as many times as needed!*

“Thanks to you, Doctor, I’m feeling much better. Thank you so much,” Lucika said, bowing her head deeply.

I shook my head.

“No, no. What I did was just a temporary fix. To truly break the curse, we need the Elixir. Everyone’s out looking for it now, so please bear with it a little longer.”

At my words, Lucika’s expression clouded over.

“Hm? Did I say something strange?”

“N-No... It’s just...” she began hesitantly, “I can’t help but feel guilty for causing everyone so much trouble. I know that my condition is making things hard for everyone. The guild’s spending so much money on me that it’s jeopardizing its operations...”

Her face was marked by sadness and distress. “Everyone’s suffering so much because of me. I wonder if there’s any point in me being alive. Maybe it would be better if I were dead, so I wouldn’t be such a burden on everyone.”

Wow, this guild really cares about its members. Putting the well-being of their comrades above their own—it might seem like the norm, but how many adventurer guilds can truly say they live by that credo?

All right, enough admiring them. I need to share my thoughts.

“Honestly, I’m not a member of your guild, so I don’t know the full extent of the hardships caused by your curse. However, it’s clear that it has brought some misfortune. Just thinking about how much money a small guild like yours must have spent to get information from World’s Eye is dizzying.”

“Yes... you’re right...” Lucika murmured, lowering her head further.

“Hey, you bastard!” Lucil started toward me angrily, but I raised a hand to stop him.

“Caring for your sister is admirable, but now it’s time for me to share my thoughts. Please listen quietly.”

I made sure Lucil stayed put and then continued speaking.

“As I mentioned before, you might be a burden to them...”

“But so what if you are?”

“What?” Lucika blinked in surprise.

“This is just my opinion, but guild members are like family. Even if one of them becomes a burden, they will never be abandoned.”

“That’s not...”

“It’s true that very few guilds, even legal ones, live up to this ideal. It’s even rarer among gray guilds and dark guilds—except for ours, of course. So, let me ask you this: If Lucil were cursed instead, would you abandon him?”

“Of course not! I would never abandon my brother!”

Lucika’s strong response shattered her previous gloomy demeanor.

“Exactly.”

“From what I understand, the Ragel’s curse was originally aimed at Lucil. Lucika, you took on such a deadly curse without thinking of yourself, showing just how much you care for your brother. Now, what about Apollo, Ligg, and Pelorro? Would they abandon you?”

“They wouldn’t,” Lucika said softly but firmly.

“Exactly. Don’t you think your guildmates feel the same way about you?”

“That’s right!” Lucil suddenly shouted.

“B-Big B-Brother?!”

Unable to hold back any longer, Lucil, who had been anxiously restraining himself, suddenly lunged at Lucika. She blinked in surprise as her brother embraced her.

“You got cursed because of me,” Lucil said.

“No, that’s not true! I did this on my own!” Lucika protested.

“Exactly. Which is why it’s my choice to save you! Stop thinking all this nonsense by yourself!”

Lucika trembled at her brother's words, tears welling up in the corners of her eyes. Other guild members began gathering around the siblings.

"That's right. You two are our comrades. We won't let you die on us..." Apollo said, though he was clearly intoxicated and struggling to stay coherent.

"Apollo-san..."

"Lucika, Lucil and Apollo are right. You are an important part of our family," Ligg added, supporting Apollo with a smile.

"Ligg-san..."

Though Apollo was swaying, Ligg supported him with a chuckle and gave Lucika a warm smile. Overwhelmed with emotion, Lucika's eyes sparkled with tears of gratitude.

"What a wonderful guild."

As I voiced this sentiment, Lucika let a single tear fall and smiled beautifully.

## Chapter 27: Soulgros's Worry

**“H**uh?”

Soulgros woke up suddenly. She remembered clinging to something warm and comforting, but now that warmth was gone, leaving her to hug herself tightly.

“Ouch... my head...”

As she tried to sit up, a throbbing pain coursed through her head. It was definitely the aftereffects of alcohol. Soulgros quickly analyzed the toxins in her body.

“Ugh... I really shouldn't drink,” she muttered, beginning to purge the toxins from her system. For most people, detoxifying their body this way would be impossible, but for someone like Soulgros, who could turn her own blood into a potent poison, it was a simple task.

“Ah... much better.” She sighed, feeling the effects of the alcohol disappear completely. She sat up, and the blanket that had been covering her slipped off. Soulgros picked it up, brought it to her face, and sniffed it deeply.

“Hmm, Master's scent lingers faintly. He must have left not too long ago,” she deduced, calculating how long her beloved Master had been away based on the remaining scent. Looking around, she saw the aftermath of their celebration. Apollo was snoring loudly, a bottle of alcohol clutched in his hand. He must have given up on using a glass and drank directly from the bottle.

Ligg, who was groaning under Apollo's weight, had clearly been a victim of the larger man's drunken collapse. It was no wonder Ligg was reluctant to join these parties. Nearby, Pelorro was wrapped in a blanket, sleeping soundly.

Not seeing Lucil and Lucika, Soulgros used her senses to locate them and found they had returned to Lucika's room, sleeping peacefully together. Given her curse, even slowed by Master's magic, it was best for Lucika to rest in bed.



“So, where is Master...” Soulgros murmured, expanding her senses to locate him.

As she expanded her sensory net beyond the guild, Soulgros detected something outside. Determining that she had no further business here, she disappeared without a trace.

※ ※ ※

Master was sitting on a small hill, gazing up at the starry, moonlit night sky.

*What could he be thinking about?* Soulgros wondered, watching him from behind. Although she had purged all the alcohol from her system, just seeing his back filled her with a drunken euphoria. Observing Master from behind was her greatest joy.

Sure, standing next to him or holding his hand were wonderful too, but nothing compared to admiring him from behind.

“Master,” she called out softly.

She wanted to look up at his face, not from behind but from his side. When he turned to her, he gave her a warm smile and spoke in a gentle voice, filled with concern for her.

“I’m fine, Master. I’ve completely detoxified the alcohol,” Soulgros assured him, nodding firmly.

*Still, I feel like I’ve forgotten something wonderful.* Soulgros often lost her memory when she drank too much, but her sixth sense told her something incredibly pleasant had happened. She cherished these rare sensations, even if she couldn’t remember them. If it had been something unpleasant, she would feel uneasy, but now her heart was warm and content.

*Hmm, it feels like I’ve forgotten something precious...* She squirmed in frustration, but Master looked at her with concern, interrupting her thoughts.

“May I sit next to you?” she asked.

“Of course,” he replied without hesitation.

“Then, excuse me...”

Soulgros sat down next to Master, pressing herself close against him. He smiled wryly but didn't seem to mind, so she continued to stay close. It wasn't too warm tonight, so this much should be acceptable. To ensure his comfort, she lowered her body temperature slightly.

*If any of the others see this, it's going to be trouble,* she thought, knowing it would definitely lead to conflict. She was ready to defend herself, though. As she thought about this, she glanced at Master's profile. He was gazing up at the night sky with a smile.

*When we first met, he didn't smile this much,* she remembered. Back then, Soulgros couldn't even take human form. Master had always worn a much sterner expression.

*He was handsome then too, but I like this warmer side of him.*

Of course, opinions differed among the members of Yerkchira. Members like Laladie and Soulgros preferred the kinder, more indulgent Master of today, while those like Ritter and Leiss, with a more masochistic bent, sometimes missed the sterner Master of the past.

However, it wasn't as if Master had been harsh or cruel back then either, so it was a matter of slight preference. Regardless of his demeanor, they would follow and serve him—such was the way of Yerkchira the Messianic Legion.

“May I ask what you were thinking about?” Soulgros broke the silence, eager to share anything with him.

Master explained that he had been thinking about Lucil and the others. He was moved by how they spared no effort or expense for Lucika's sake.

*Ah... that's something we could never manage,* Soulgros thought, recalling the faces of her comrades and chuckling softly.

Because we could never be like Lucil's guild. If someone were afflicted with a deadly curse in our guild, it would likely turn into a celebration instead. Of course, the members of the Messianic Legion of Yerkchira would likely neutralize a curse like Ragel's before it could take hold. Even if it did, those who could withstand Master's magic would be able to counteract it.

Master smiled gently at the ninja girl.

“I’d like our guild to feel more like a family too.”

“Yes, indeed,” Soulgros replied, though she doubted it would ever happen as long as Master was with them. Yet, without Master, Soulgros and the others wouldn’t have any reason to be together, so he was absolutely essential.

“Do you have any worries?”

*Is he trying to make our guild homier already? It’s hard to imagine a warm, family-like dark guild.*

She didn’t have any real worries. Following Master around and being his shadow—his stalker, some might say—was enough to make her happy. But as she thought, something came to mind.

“It’s the size of my breasts,” she said.

Master’s smile froze slightly, but Soulgros didn’t notice. She grabbed her chest through her ninja outfit and continued, “I think my size is perfect, but Laladie and Krankheit treat me as if I’m one of them, and it’s troublesome.”

Laladie and Krankheit, the renowned Flat Chest Duo of Yerkchira, were always trying to find solidarity among the guild members with less prominent chests. Among the many well-endowed members of the Legion, these two were keen on recruiting allies.

Typically, members of the Flat Chest Alliance would say things like, “Huh? Who needs comrades? Just leave Master behind and go,” but when it came to breast size, they sought camaraderie. Soulgros found herself on the verge of being inducted into their ranks. Although her breasts were neither too big nor too small, in the eyes of Laladie and Krankheit, she qualified as flat-chested.

If that were the only issue, Soulgros might have considered joining them. However, she could change her breast size at will, which made it hard for her to accept being labeled as flat-chested.

“What do you think, Master?” Soulgros looked up at Master’s face from beside him. Was it her imagination, or did his cheeks seem a bit strained?

“For me, this size is the most practical for moving around. But if Master desires, I could make them larger,” Soulgros said, entwining her arm with his, implying she could adjust her body as he wished. In truth, having no breasts at all would be most practical, eliminating the need for chest bindings.

However, covering her entire body with her ninja outfit would make her lose almost all of her feminine allure. Besides her ponytail and eyes, everything else was covered.

*If that happens, Master might not see me as a woman.*

While she found happiness in watching him from behind, she naturally wanted his affection too. Therefore, she couldn't bring herself to transform her breasts and hips into something more masculine. After all, Soulgros, despite being a stalker, was still a woman.

“So, what do you think?” Soulgros asked, squeezing her breasts together to create some cleavage under her ninja outfit.

Of course, Master couldn't see the explicit details through the fabric, but he could imagine. Soulgros's perfectly sized breasts pressed together, forming tantalizing cleavage.

She looked up at him confidently, but...

“Mmm...”

With a gentle pat on her head, Soulgros's desires were extinguished in an instant. She looked up at him, and he smiled softly, stroking her head.

“Mmm...”

It seemed today wasn't the day. Soulgros puffed her cheeks adorably under her face cover but accepted it. If Master were easy to win over, someone would have already succeeded in earning his affection.

After all, the members of Yerkchira were relentless in their efforts to gain his favor. Some, like the alraune, had even plotted to abduct him for a decadent life together.

So, for now, Soulgros rested her head on Master's shoulder, content to be close to him.

## Chapter 28: In the Night Outskirts

**“A**h, the night without the sun is always delightful, but tonight is especially lovely,” a woman remarked as she walked through the outskirts of the town, bathed in the moonlight. Her long, silky blonde hair fluttered in the cool breeze as she laughed joyfully. Her face conveyed a sense of high pride, yet she was stunningly beautiful to a chilling degree. Her voluptuous and alluring figure was draped in a blood-red dress, accentuating her elegant form.

“This quiet time, free from the rabble, suits my elegance perfectly,” she mused, glancing up at the full moon with a soft chuckle. Anyone from Yerkchira who knew Vampille well would roll their eyes and tell her she was the noisiest of all.

“I wish I could gaze upon this beautiful moon with Master... Where on earth has he gone? That stalker ninja! I’ll kill her!” Vampille sighed wistfully about Master in one breath, then stomped the ground furiously as she recalled the ninja. The mysterious air of a noblewoman disappeared completely, leaving only a woman seething with jealousy and anger over something she desired being taken from her.

“Don’t you agree?” She suddenly addressed someone, the enigmatic and cold aura of a noble lady returning all at once.

Of course, there was no one around. Only a fool would venture outside the town at this hour, where dangerous monsters and criminals roamed. Vampille, not being an ordinary human, was an exception.

Well, the other members often called her foolish anyway.

*Was that just my imagination?* Vampille started to worry when no response came. To any observer, she would look like someone absurdly talking to herself out of nowhere.

*No! I am not Krankheit!* Vampille screamed internally, picturing the self-proclaimed noblewoman Krankheit, known among the Messianic Legion of

Yerkchira as the embodiment of painful delusion. Krankheit was a woman with gray hair who often tried to act mature but ended up failing spectacularly, tripping over her words. Vampille, who prided herself on being a true lady, couldn't bear the thought of being compared to Krankheit.

"Didn't expect to be noticed," a large, muscular man muttered as he emerged from the darkness. His ferocious grin was anything but friendly, as one would expect from someone out on the outskirts at this hour.

"You took your sweet time coming out!" Vampille snapped.

"Huh?" The man was taken aback. He had anticipated a scream, not an admonishment for being late. Unaware of Vampille's fear of being compared to Krankheit, he found her reaction baffling.

"Well, I don't know your master, and I have no clue who this stalker is..." he grumbled, frustrated by the situation. He had tried to approach her, but she had been too engrossed in her monologue to notice him.

"That's irrelevant!" Vampille dismissed his complaints without a second thought. A vein throbbed on the man's forehead. Only someone like Master could handle this spoiled lady.

"So, who exactly are you? It's incredibly rude to spy on a lady during her evening stroll!" Vampille demanded.

"Walking outside the town at night counts as a stroll? The Messianic Legion sure is a strange bunch," the man retorted.

"It's not dangerous at all. The monsters step aside if you ask them nicely," she replied, unfazed by his sarcasm.

The man's attempt at irony fell flat. If he had made such a remark to someone like the clever Anat or the stern Schwarte, he might have lost his head. Thankfully for him, Vampille's naïveté spared him.

Incidentally, Vampille was unaware that when she asked the monsters to move aside, they felt more like they were being threatened by a far superior force than politely requested.

"Now, introduce yourself properly," she demanded.

“Oh, right,” the man replied. “I belong to the dark guild Heinichen, and my name is—”

He began to introduce himself with a confident expression, boasting about his prowess and the greatness of his guild. However, Vampille, who had asked for his name, had already tuned him out. She only cared about which organization was foolish enough to oppose her and Master.

*I seem to recall someone mentioning a guild daring to defy Master and me...* Vampille mused, barely registering the man’s words. She didn’t concern herself with the guild’s significant issues, nor did she consider her fellow members in her assessment. To her, opposition to Yerkchira the Messianic Legion equated to defiance against her and Master personally.

“—and so, our guildmaster is particularly interested in your guild,” the man concluded.

“Huh? Oh, is that so?” Vampille replied, realizing too late that he had reached the climax of his story. Although she hadn’t listened to a word, she tried to feign interest. This alone marked a significant improvement from her past behavior.

“We also aim for the title of the strongest dark guild. I bear no personal grudge, but I’ll have to kill you here,” the man declared. In his mind, being the strongest dark guild equated to being the world’s most powerful guild. Considering their proficiency in lethal human conflict, this wasn’t entirely inaccurate.

Of course, many outstanding adventurers belonged to legal guilds, so being the strongest dark guild didn’t necessarily mean being the world’s strongest. Nevertheless, the man was fully committed. As he finished speaking, a murderous aura radiated from him, potent enough to make even mid-tier adventurers shrink back.

Such was the reputation of members of Heinichen, a guild notorious for its heinous deeds.

“That’s a request I cannot comply with. I still want to savor more of Master’s blood,” Vampille responded, her voice calm and her smile unwavering. She belonged to the Messianic Legion of Yerkchira, arguably the world’s most

dangerous guild, teeming with Master-obsessed members. She neither flinched nor recoiled; instead, she giggled softly.

Thus, the first clash between Yerkchira the Messianic Legion and Heinichen, the Steel Matriarch began.



## Chapter 29: In the Night Town

**W**hile Vampille was clashing with a member of Heinichen, another woman was walking through the town. Her silver hair, which usually glistened mysteriously under the moonlight, was now hidden under a hood to conceal her ears. Her tanned skin, different from a sunburn, contrasted with her typically expressionless face, which now held a faint smile.

“I’ve obtained Master’s favorite spices. I hope he will be pleased,” Schwarte, dressed in a maid’s outfit, murmured as she cradled a paper bag filled with spices. Despite often being annoyed by the members of Yerkchira, thinking about Master always brought her peace. She had been particularly irritated just moments ago.

“Honestly... tagging along only to disappear without a word... that fake lady,” Schwarte muttered, recalling Vampille’s obnoxious laughter and her gaudy dress. When Schwarte had discovered they were out of Master’s favorite spices, she immediately set out to buy more. Unfortunately, she had been caught by the troublesome Vampille, who insisted on knowing why she was going out. When Schwarte reluctantly explained, Vampille decided to tag along, claiming it was because it was for Master. Had it been for anyone else’s ingredients, Vampille wouldn’t have bothered.

“Taking care of Master is my responsibility...”

Even though she allowed Vampille to accompany her out of sheer irritation to avoid her tantrum, she certainly did not do it out of pity or affection. Schwarte, who devoted all her emotions to Master, had no compassion left for the selfish lady.

Despite Schwarte’s begrudging permission, Vampille had gotten lost.

“If only she would get so lost she couldn’t find her way back to the guild and just die in a ditch,” Schwarte muttered coldly. The already chilly night air seemed to drop several more degrees.

Of course, searching for the lost Vampille never crossed her mind. Schwarte had to get back to the guild headquarters quickly to start preparing dishes with the spices Master liked. Just like Laladie was a Hero Observer and Soulgros was a Guild Observer, Schwarte also had the duty to observe something.

This duty often took her away from the guild, limiting her opportunities to cook for Master. She always wanted to make the most delicious meals for him whenever she could. This was her constant thought.

“Therefore, I can’t waste time dealing with you,” she said, turning around and letting her short silver hair sway under her hood. A skinny man leaned against a nearby building wall, a thin sword—a katana, a rare weapon in this kingdom—hanging at his waist.

“That’s a shame. Since I came all this way, how about giving me some attention, Maid-san?” The man grinned, swaying as he stepped in front of Schwarte.

He clearly had no intention of letting her go. Schwarte, eager to get back to the guild and start her preparations, exuded an air of irritation despite her unchanged expression.

“You’d be better off dealing with the loud, pretentious idiot noblewoman. Unlike me, she’s a combat-specialized idiot,” Schwarte said, selling out the hopelessly lost Vampille without hesitation. Despite bringing her along unwillingly, she thought this was the first time Vampille had proved useful.

The skinny man shook his head. “It’s you I want to fight, Maid-san. Besides, one of my comrades is already with that noblewoman, so don’t worry about her.”

“Damn,” Schwarte muttered, clicking her tongue in annoyance. She quickly returned to her usual stoic expression.

Her mind buzzed with annoyance. Not only was Vampille useless as a decoy, but she was also a constant source of frustration. In her mind’s eye, a tiny Vampille and her entourage loudly protested, but Schwarte ignored them.

“May I ask why you are so fixated on me?” Schwarte asked in a bored tone, despite her expressionless face.

The man chuckled ominously and caressed the katana at his waist. “My blade craves blood, especially the blood of a strong swordswoman like yourself.”

*Great. A bloodthirsty idiot,* Schwarte thought as she watched him draw his sword and stroke it lovingly. She wasn’t afraid, but rather, her own embarrassing memories were resurfacing. She shook her head to banish them, not wanting to recall those moments that made her want to grovel at Master’s feet for forgiveness.

Having successfully suppressed the memories, Schwarte focused on the man. He wasn’t one to seek a peaceful resolution; he barely listened to anything she said.

“May I ask about your comrades?” she inquired.

“Well, I guess it doesn’t matter.” The man shrugged. “I’m going to kill you anyway, so it won’t hurt to tell you. We’re from Heinichen, the Steel Matriarch, another dark guild like yours. Our Master wants the title of the strongest, so we’re here to take you down.”

Schwarte’s body twitched at his words. “Ah, Steel Scraps, is it? What a foolish guild to defy our Master.”

“What did you say?” the man growled, veins bulging on his forehead. He glared at Schwarte with a murderous gaze, but she remained unfazed.

“Very well. As a maid, it is my duty to eliminate Master’s enemies. I shall engage you,” Schwarte declared, stashing the bag of spices into the folds of her long skirt with a deft motion. From the same skirt, she drew a sword. The wonders hidden within a maid’s skirt were numerous.

“If I win, I want to see what’s under that maid uniform,” the man sneered.

“Unfortunately for you, I only lift my skirt for Master,” Schwarte retorted.

The man drew his katana, the two now ready for combat. He sought the blood of a formidable swordswoman, while she aimed to eliminate Master’s foes—and perhaps to quell the irritation of having her embarrassing past pricked at.

In the dimly lit streets, the two dark guild members clashed.

## Chapter 30: In the Night Forest

**“H**ehehe, hehehehe...”

In an enchanting forest bathed in gentle moonlight, a girl sat and laughed eerily. She had a stack of papers on her lap, furiously scribbling on them with a fervor that bordered on madness. The writing wasn't in the common script of the kingdom, but in demonic runes so horrifying that merely glancing at them could drive a person insane.

The girl used these infernal characters solely to prevent anyone from stealing a peek at her work, raising questions about her humanity—not that she was human. Among the bizarre members of Yerkchira, only she and Master could decipher the entire stack of writings.

“Phew... I-I finally finished this section,” muttered the girl with gray, drill-like hair—Krankheit. She smiled with satisfaction, though her grin held a tinge of self-deprecation, as always.

“This place is so quiet... Our guild is so noisy... I can't focus on writing there...” Krankheit gnawed on her nails, exuding an aura of irritation. The guild headquarters of the Messianic Legion of Yerkchira was always lively and noisy, filled with shouts, curses, and murderous intent—a wonderful place.

However, when Krankheit was writing, she needed quiet.

For someone as introverted as she was, the constant din was nothing but stressful. But even if she complained, there were a few members who would likely take joy in making even more noise to bother her.

Yerkchira thrived on such mutual antagonism.

“I can't write this forbidden book in such a noisy place...” Krankheit flipped through the stack of papers, nodding in satisfaction. A single glance at the pages, crammed with the menacing demonic script, was enough to threaten one's sanity. Even the guild members wouldn't want such a dangerous tome

written at headquarters. Krankheit's goal was to become an alluring, intelligent woman like the protagonist of the book Master had gifted her, *The Fallen Angel of the Enchanting Nation*. Her forbidden book was filled with notes on how to achieve that persona and her fantasies of what it would be like. Whenever she tried to write at the guild, members—usually Corine—would invariably interrupt her, which was incredibly frustrating. After all, only she and Master were permitted to view the forbidden book.

However, the malevolent energy radiating from Krankheit as she wrote in demonic script was enough to make even her comrades like Corine wary of her presence.

“Well, I’ve written down everything I thought of... I suppose it’s time to return to the guild. Master might have come back by now,” she muttered, her voice slipping into its natural tone before she consciously adopted a more mature demeanor. Recently, thanks to frequent practice with Master, she had been able to maintain this facade for longer periods of time. Still, strong emotions could quickly cause her to revert to her true self.

Some guild members who knew the real Krankheit often laughed at her attempts, but she knew repetition was key to making this new persona stick. If they laughed again, she would just show them another nightmare. Resolute, she stood up from the stone she had been sitting on.

“Huh?” She unintentionally let out a rather undignified sound, inappropriate for the elegant woman she aspired to be. The reason for her surprise lay in the scene before her. The forest she had been in was typically serene, with gentle moonlight and a peaceful atmosphere where townsfolk often came for picnics. But now, the forest had transformed. The trees were twisted grotesquely, growing in unnatural, sinister ways, their branches devoid of leaves and life. The once bright moonlight had turned into a dull, foreboding red, casting an eerie glow over everything.

“Is this... an illusion?” Krankheit's switch to her adult persona was immediate. She sensed someone nearby and instinctively donned her mental mask.

She was very familiar with such drastic changes in her surroundings. This rapid shift in the environment was something she had experienced before, something

she knew how to evaluate accurately.

“Correct,” came a voice in response to Krankheit’s monologue. The voice sounded gentle and somewhat timid, which surprisingly made Krankheit feel a bit of kinship with it, despite knowing it was an enemy. Emerging from the twisted trees was a young man who looked equally timid.

“Oh, are you the one casting this illusion?” Krankheit asked.

“Y-Yes. My name is Ild, and I’m an adventurer from Heinichen,” the young man replied, blushing at Krankheit’s feigned sultry demeanor. Krankheit was thrilled to play the part of an adult woman. Unlike the members of Yerkchira, who knew her true self, strangers like Ild had no idea who she was, allowing her to wear her mask of maturity with enthusiasm.

“You are under the influence of my illusion magic,” Ild stated.

“Oh, dear. That’s quite troublesome,” Krankheit replied, maintaining an air of nonchalance, though she was genuinely surprised. Illusion magic was exceptionally rare. Unlike the more accessible elements like fire or water, mastering illusion magic required significant talent and effort. Its power was formidable, enough to ensnare even someone as skilled as Krankheit.

As Krankheit pondered her next move, Ild spoke up apologetically. “Um... would you mind surrendering?”

“Oh? And why is that? Aren’t you going to kill me without hesitation?” Krankheit asked, taken aback by the unexpected request for surrender. She had been playing the part of the sophisticated woman so well, yet all she could muster in response was another “oh.”

“Well, our master, Luscelt, wants to kill all of you from Yerkchira and make Heinichen the most powerful dark guild in the kingdom—no, the world. But honestly, I don’t care much about being the strongest. Unlike Luscelt and the others, I don’t enjoy killing unnecessarily.” Ild smiled wryly.

Despite being under Luscelt’s strict rule, his words reflected a leniency unusual for a dark guild member. It was an attitude that might endear him to ordinary people, as his words seemed considerate of Krankheit’s well-being.

“That won’t do,” Krankheit said coldly, dismissing his offer without a second thought.

“Won’t do...?” Ild echoed, taken aback.

“Yes. Yerkchira the Messianic Legion cannot afford to lose to another dark guild,” Krankheit declared. For her, the guild’s defeat meant Master’s defeat as well, and that was something she could never accept.

“That’s unfortunate,” Ild muttered, his demeanor shifting drastically. Gone was the timid, gentle young man; in his place stood a cold, sharp member of the dark guild. No matter how kind-hearted he seemed, Ild was still a member of the Steel Matriarch.

“You can’t escape my illusion magic. Here, you will die while dreaming,” he stated, the space around him beginning to distort and warp. This demonstrated how deeply Krankheit was ensnared in his spell. The battle seemed all but decided. Illusion magic was potent; once caught in it, escaping was nearly impossible without help. Only those with exceptionally strong wills or who were well-versed in illusion magic themselves had any chance.

This confidence allowed Ild to confront the notoriously fearsome members of the Messianic Legion of Yerkchira despite his natural timidity.

“How terrifying. Will you show me a dream so wonderful that I won’t mind dying?” Krankheit asked, a seductive smile on her lips. In the back of her mind, she thought that if it were a dream of being pampered by Master, perhaps she wouldn’t mind dying. But she kept this thought hidden, maintaining her alluring facade.

Despite being enemies, Ild’s heart skipped a beat at Krankheit’s captivating smile.

## Chapter 31: Crossroads

**“Big** brother, don’t overexert yourself. And Doctor, please don’t push yourself too hard for my sake,” Lucika said, her voice filled with concern as she saw us off on our quest to find the Elixir once again. Despite her apologetic tone, she wore a small smile, reflecting a sense of relief and happiness appropriate for her age. Seeing her display such genuine emotion warmed my heart.

Lucika was puzzled as to why a supposed doctor like me was heading out on a dangerous mission to find the Elixir, but I managed to brush off her concerns with a vague explanation about medical research. It seemed to suffice.

“Master isn’t doing anything reckless for your sake, and I won’t let him,” Soulghros muttered, seemingly dissatisfied with something Lucika had said. However, since she didn’t voice her complaint directly, I let it slide. This showed her maturity compared to someone like Laladie.

And so, after spending the night with Lucil’s guild, morning came. I hadn’t been able to contact my guild members... I’d have to apologize when I got back. As I mused over these thoughts, Lucil, Soulghros, and I made our way to the forest, where World’s Eye’s information indicated we might find the natural Elixir. Just as we were about to enter, Apollo approached me.

“Hey, Master. About this Elixir search... I have a suggestion. Mind hearing me out?” he asked.

“A suggestion? Of course I’d love to hear it.”

Any idea that could help us break through our current situation was welcome. Given the vastness of the forest and the uncertainty of finding the Elixir, we could be here indefinitely. As a guildmaster, I couldn’t stay away from my duties for too long, and Soulghros might lose patience with our prolonged stay with another guild.



“I can handle it, as long as you’re here with me, Master,” Soulgros reassured, seemingly having read my thoughts. Her support was heartening.

“This forest is huge, right? So, how about we split into two groups to cover more ground?” Apollo suggested, watching my reaction closely.

I nodded in agreement. Splitting up could indeed help us cover more ground and find the Elixir faster. With only Lucil, Lucika, Apollo, and a few others alongside Soulgros and me, our manpower was limited. Apollo’s suggestion was reasonable, but there was a fundamental issue.

“You needed our help in the first place because it was difficult for your guild to search the forest alone. If Soulgros and I split up and led separate groups, it might be more effective, but...

“Master, I do not follow anyone else but you,” Soulgros declared firmly.

That settled it. I couldn’t force her to separate from me, especially knowing how much I was already pushing her limits. Besides, it wasn’t about being lenient with my guild members—it was about respecting their boundaries.

“Oh, I understand that,” Apollo said, nodding. “That’s why I suggest we split our groups: you and Soulgros search one part of the forest, and my guild searches another part.”

“But you might struggle without our help.”

“True, which is why I’m asking if we could search the shallower parts of the forest while you two handle the deeper areas. We can’t venture too far without facing stronger monsters, but we can manage the outskirts,” Apollo explained, looking a bit apologetic.

I considered his words and nodded. It made sense. The deeper parts of the forest were more dangerous, and Soulgros and I could handle those areas better. The outer edges would be safer for Apollo and his guild.

“Yeah, it’s a logical suggestion, and I’m fine with it. How about you, Soulgros?”

“Hmm. It feels like I’m being handed a slightly complicated task, but if Master agrees, I have no objections,” Soulgros said, though she seemed slightly

unsatisfied. Still, she respected my decision. She might feel like this is a hassle, but in reality, it's not that bad.

The search area for the Elixir is broader in the shallow parts of the forest. The reason is simple: I often wander deeper into the forest during my walks, staying away from populated areas to avoid unnecessary encounters. As a master of a dark guild, it was wise to avoid places where I might run into people.

While not many know about our guild, there's always the chance of running into someone like Longman, who attacked me and Laladie with Yuuto and Maho's group. It's better to stay cautious.

So, Soulghros and I would deal with stronger monsters deeper in the forest, while Lucil and the others would search the wider, but safer, outskirts. Both groups had their challenges.

"All right, let's go with Apollo's plan."

"Great, then we'll—" Apollo began to give instructions, but was interrupted.

"Wait! I want to go with Master!" Lucil suddenly exclaimed.

"Hey, Lucil. The whole point of splitting up is so we don't slow Master and Soulghros down," Pelorro protested.

"But think about it! How often do we get to work with people as strong as Master and Soulghros? We don't know when we'll find the Elixir and end this collaboration. We should take the chance to learn while we can!" Lucil argued.

Pelorro tried to reason with him, but Lucil was adamant. He had a point—once this Elixir hunt was over, we likely wouldn't work together again. Despite being a friendly and warm guild, we were still a dark guild. Regular guilds, no matter how understanding Lucil's group might be, wouldn't accept us. Even smaller guilds like theirs could face serious trouble if they were seen associating with us.

*Well, Lucil seems to overestimate my strength. I'm not that strong.*

Though I knew Soulghros's abilities were indeed impressive, making her worth observing.

“Huh? Absolutely not. You’re a nuisance,” Soulgros coldly rejected Lucil, who was trying to cozy up to her.

“Come on, don’t say that. I won’t be a bother,” Lucil pleaded.

“Your very presence is a nuisance, Lucil-dono,” Soulgros shot back, her tone icy.

Of course, I couldn’t bring Lucil along without Soulgros’s approval. However, I believed it might be beneficial for Lucil to witness Soulgros in action. It could be a valuable learning experience for him. Moreover, it would be a good opportunity for Soulgros to work on her interactions with outsiders, something she struggled with less than the other members of Yerkchira. I voiced my thoughts to her, as carefully as I could.

“Understood,” Soulgros responded promptly.

“That was quick. Are you sure you’re okay with this?”

“Of course. My opinion is insignificant compared to Master’s will,” she replied with fervor.

While I appreciated her respect for my decisions, I wished she’d value her own opinions more. This was something I hoped all my guild members would learn. After all, I couldn’t always be there to guide them.

“All right!” Lucil’s joyful exclamation pulled me back to the present.

“Hey, are you sure about this? Lucil isn’t weak, but he’s not on your level, Master,” Apollo said, looking concerned.

“It’s fine. I’ll make sure he stays safe.”

Apollo looked at me with his mouth open in surprise before breaking into an embarrassed smile.

“I don’t need such a noisy brat,” Apollo grumbled, but there was a hint of fondness in his tone.

“H-Hey, Apollo. Are you sure about this?” Pelorro asked, looking a bit panicked.

“Yeah, Master says it’s fine, and Lucil wants to go. I don’t see a reason to say no,” Apollo replied confidently.

“Yeah, I suppose so...”

“All right, let’s get going!” Lucil exclaimed, pulling eagerly at my arm.

“Hey, don’t pull Master around like that. I’ll knock you out,” Soulgros warned, her tone icy.

Lucil’s excitement made me momentarily lose sight of Pelorro. When I glanced back at him, there was nothing particularly unusual. Perhaps it was just my imagination.

“Let’s meet back here at noon. How about by the lake we found earlier?” Apollo suggested.

“Sounds good to me,” I replied.

“All right... Hey, Lucil! Don’t be a burden to Master and Soulgros!” Apollo called out.

“I won’t be!”

“You had better not,” Pelorro added.

“I won’t!” Lucil insisted, clearly enjoying the banter.

“Well then, I’m counting on you to take care of Lucil,” Apollo said, giving a final nod before leading Pelorro and Ligg into the forest.

Then I turned to Soulgros and Lucil. “All right, let’s head out.”

“Understood,” Soulgros responded.

“Yeah!” Lucil echoed, his enthusiasm unwavering.

With that, the three of us entered the forest.

## Chapter 32: A Foreboding Scent

**“W**ow, Soulgros, you’re really strong!”

Lucil gazed at Soulgros with sparkling eyes as she effortlessly slaughtered the attacking monsters one by one. Lucil watched her with admiration, impressed by how easily she dispatched such powerful monsters.

“Heh, you’re making me blush.”

Soulgros placed a hand behind her head, though she didn’t appear particularly embarrassed. For her, it seemed, this level of performance was nothing special.

I nodded approvingly. As Soulgros’s guildmaster, I couldn’t help but feel a bit proud.

“Do you think I could become strong too? Maybe if I imitate Soulgros, I could!”

“Nah, I don’t think so,” Soulgros replied in an exasperated tone as Lucil swung his sword wildly.

Indeed, the way Lucil and Soulgros fought seemed fundamentally different. Soulgros excelled in mid-to-long-range attacks, with a high proficiency in throwing kunai and ambush tactics. Lucil, on the other hand, seemed to be a power type who would charge head-on with a sword, although I hadn’t seen him fight enough to be sure. Mimicking her would likely be more of a hindrance than a help.

“Huh...?”

A healthy rumbling sound echoed. It wasn’t me. And it couldn’t have been Soulgros; she was a bit different in that regard.

By process of elimination...

“Heheh. I’m hungry.” Lucil scratched his head sheepishly.

I looked up at the sky to check the sun's position. The sun was right above us, brightly illuminating the area. We had been so engrossed in searching for the Elixir that I hadn't noticed how much time had passed.

"It's already late. Apollo and the others might already be waiting for us at the meeting spot."

"Got it. Well, let's hurry and get to them. I'm starving, so can we grab something to eat along the way?" Lucil asked, looking up at me.

"Hmm, good point. Were we going to have lunch here today? I had been planning to return to the guild by noon..."

"No, no! For the sake of goodwill, we should eat together with Lucil-dono and the others!" Soulgros insisted, her tone urgent.

"Is that so? I thought we had already become fairly close..."

"Haha, even if Master thinks so, I do not," Soulgros declared proudly, puffing out her chest.

"Not something to boast about, really."

Well, if Soulgros said so, then I supposed we should have a meal with Lucil and the others.

"This way, we can prevent any annoying interference from the other guild members," Soulgros said, clenching her fist triumphantly.

"Come on, let's go already..." Lucil looked up at us with pleading eyes. His stomach growled, emphasizing his hunger. He was probably at her limit. I smiled apologetically and began to move.

"BUUOOOOOHHH!"

At that moment, a boar-like monster appeared before us. Unlike a normal boar, its sheer size was daunting. It had long, sharp tusks and its eyes glowed a menacing red.

*Uh... what was its name again?* I couldn't remember, but I knew it was a monster with incredibly dangerous charging power.

"Ha, what a nuisance," Soulgros muttered, stepping forward.

*Well, she could probably take it down in less than a minute.*

“Wait a second! Let me handle this!” Lucil pleaded, stopping Soulghros in her tracks.

“Soulghros. Even though only your eyes are visible, Lucil hasn’t noticed how incredibly annoyed you look.”

“Come on, Master!” Lucil pleaded with me, knowing that asking Soulghros would take too long.

“Hmm... well, I suppose Lucil could handle this monster...” Apollo had asked me to look out for him, so I couldn’t let him take too many risks. “If things get dangerous, I’ll step in to help. Is that okay?”

“Of course!” Lucil grinned and stepped in front of the monster.

“Will Lucil-dono be all right?” Soulghros stepped back and stood beside me, asking with a hint of concern.

“I’m not really worried.” She seemed rather indifferent, watching Lucil and the monster.

“Yeah, I think he’ll be fine. This monster seems just right for his level. Though I had been away from the front lines for a while, so my judgment might not be the most reliable. Seeing you fight must have inspired him. It’s only natural to want to prove yourself when your comrades are fighting bravely.”

“Comrades?” Soulghros tilted her head in confusion.

“Let’s not pretend you don’t understand the concept. If Lucil gets cornered, you’ll need to help him... Will you do that?”

“If it’s Master’s order, I will fulfill it completely... though a few kunai might end up sticking in him.”

“All right, I’ll take care of it. Just keep an eye on things, Soulghros.”

I watched Lucil battle the monster with a wry smile.

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“Ah... this isn’t going well...” Lucil muttered, holding a fruit in his hand. He furrowed his brows, clearly dissatisfied with his performance, and pouted.

As I had assessed, that boar-like monster was reasonably strong. If one had the means to attack from a distance, like magic or Soulghros’s kunai, it wouldn’t have been such a tough battle. However, Lucil, who relied solely on close combat, struggled quite a bit. In the end, things got a little dangerous, so I stepped in to help.

I ended up obliterating it with a magic blast, leaving no trace behind. *I probably need to get back to the front lines and relearn some restraint.*

“Aren’t you going to eat, Soulghros?”

“I am already full just by watching Master from behind.”

*No way that’s true. I suspect she simply doesn’t want to eat the fruit Lucil gave her...*

Or at least, I hoped it wasn’t that bad...

Regardless, Lucil had gathered a lot of fruit.

“Can you really eat all of it?” I asked.

Lucil smiled sheepishly. “No, I thought I’d share with the others... You can’t find fruit like this near the outskirts.”

“Ah... how heartwarming.”

*I see, I see. So that’s why he had his arms full of fruit. Forgive me for thinking he was just a glutton. “I’m sure Apollo and the others will be happy.”*

“Really...? Well, they don’t have to be happy about it or anything,” Lucil said, turning away in embarrassment.

As I watched her, smiling, Soulghros spoke up. “It is about time to reach the meeting place.”

Just as she said, after a bit more walking, we arrived at the small lake we had discovered yesterday. Apollo and the others... didn’t seem to be here yet...

“They’re really not here. Damn, they’re late. I’m going to eat everything,” Lucil grumbled as he ran toward the lake.



“But it’s strange.” Considering how much Apollo cared for Lucil, it would make sense for him to be worried and arrive early...

As I tilted my head in confusion, Soulgros leaned in close and whispered to me.

“Master.”

Soulgros spoke as if it were nothing.

“There is a scent of blood in the area.”

## Chapter 33: A Tragedy

Soulgros reported this to Master out of concern that he might be in danger. She wasn't worried in the slightest that Apollo and the others might have gotten involved in some incident. Among the members of Yerkchira, she was one of the few who could lend an ear to outsiders.

However, this didn't mean she genuinely connected with them. Like Laladie, Soulgros didn't care what happened to anyone besides herself and Master.

But Master was different, and his eyes widened in surprise.

*How kindhearted he is...* Soulgros thought, her already high opinion of Master rising even further. Worrying about Apollo and the others, whose well-being mattered little to her, showed just how kind he truly was.

Ironically, even if Master hadn't considered Apollo and the others at all, Soulgros would have thought him bold and admired him even more. Her criteria for evaluating Master were exceedingly flexible.

"Well then..."

Master asked if the scent of blood could belong to a monster. Although she wasn't Vampille that could identify individuals solely by the scent of blood, Soulgros, who had some knowledge of blood, could usually determine the species. She twitched her nose under the cloth to confirm.

"This isn't a monster. It's human blood... and quite a bit of it." Soulgros made her assessment.

"Where is the scent was coming from?"

Naturally, if it was Master's request, she would do anything to fulfill it. Fortunately, this task wasn't particularly difficult.

"It's coming from near the spot where Lucil ran off."

Soulgros pointed toward Lucil, who was disappearing among the trees.

*He probably smelled the blood as he got closer to the source.* Master followed him, walking briskly in his direction.

As always, Soulgros followed closely behind. By the time they caught up to Lucil, everything was already over.

“What is this?” Lucil murmured in a daze. Master gave him a somber smile.

As Soulgros had mentioned, the scent of blood was unmistakably strong here. The trees and grass were stained with copious amounts of it. And on the ground lay two bodies, their lifeless eyes staring up at the sky. The fruit slipped from Lucil’s arms, falling to the ground.

“Apollo... Ligg.”

The two corpses lying on the ground, staring lifelessly at the sky, were very close to Lucil. They were fellow guild members, practically family. These were the people who had selflessly offered their time and resources for Lucil’s sister, Lucika. Now they lay dead, their bodies bleeding profusely.

“Why...?” Lucil’s strength left his body, and he sank to her knees. Memories of Apollo and Ligg’s living faces floated through his mind.

Apollo had been a good-natured elder. A laid-back man who loved his drink yet always put the guild members first. Many a time, Lucil had thought of him as a father figure, especially since he had no parents.

Ligg was a kind man. He was strict about manners and etiquette, often scolding Lucil for his ignorance, but the young man knew it was because he cared for him. Although his frequent talks about the Church of Angels could be tiresome, he never hesitated to use healing magic to aid injured guild members, regardless of the toll on his own magic reserves. He always prioritized others over himself.

Lucil never voiced it, but he deeply cared for them both. Now, Apollo and Ligg lay dead, their bodies drenched in blood.

“Excuse me,” Soulgros said to Lucil as she approached the bodies. She gently closed Apollo’s open eyes and briefly examined the state of the corpses.

Apollo's body bore no wounds indicative of a sharp weapon. Instead, it was covered in bruises, as if struck with tremendous force. One of his arms was also missing, the torn flesh suggesting it had been ripped off rather than cut.

"Hmm... It seems they were attacked by an enemy with immense strength. This enemy likely didn't use weapons but relied solely on brute force," Soulgnos deduced.

"So, you're saying a monster killed Apollo and Ligg?" Lucil asked through gritted teeth, his eyes filling with tears as he glared at Soulgnos.

"Well, shouting at me won't help," Soulgnos replied calmly, dodging Lucil's fierce gaze. Though Lucil's anger was palpable, it wasn't enough to faze Soulgnos.

Something was odd. The place where Apollo and Ligg fell showed hardly any signs of a struggle. Apollo and Ligg weren't weak adventurers. Of course, compared to Soulgnos, a member of Yerkchira, they might seem lacking, but they weren't helpless.

In fact, when attacked by the mid-tier guild, Praeshield, they not only survived but managed to defeat their assailants. Yet here they were...

*It seems they were killed without any chance to fight back...* Soulgnos thought.

While there were indeed monsters deep within the forest capable of such feats, this lake was in a relatively shallow area. Could a monster from the shallow regions have overpowered Apollo and Ligg so completely?

"Damn it! I won't forgive this! I won't let them get away with it!" Lucil shouted, burning with rage and hatred. Soulgnos watched him, lost in thought.

Even if Lucil found their killers and attacked, he would likely meet the same fate. Excluding Ligg, who was primarily a healer, Apollo, who engaged in close combat and led his guild, was more skilled than Lucil. If even he was killed so easily, what chance did Lucil have?

Well, Soulgnos wasn't kind enough to offer a warning.

"Whew... Still, it's strange. Who could have killed Apollo-dono and Ligg like this?" Soulgnos wondered aloud.

“Shall I tell you?”

A voice responded to Soulgros’s musings. This slimy, unsettling voice belonged neither to Master nor to Lucil. As Soulgros began to turn to see who it was, her body suddenly froze.

No, it was stopped.

“This is how those two were killed,” the voice continued.

With a thud, Soulgros’s slender body shook. She moved her eyes to the source of the discomfort—her stomach. A ghastly arm, covered in blood, had pierced through her abdomen, filling her vision with horror.

Then, the unsettling laughter echoed again.

“Ahyahyahyaha!”

## Chapter 34: The Resilient Two

**“A**hyahyahya!! This is how I killed the others, too!”

With his arm still impaling Soulgros’s stomach, the man laughed a horrifying, gleeful laugh. She moved her eyes to glare at the man behind her.

“Y-You are...”

“Oh? You don’t know who I am?” he sneered, eyeing the stricken Soulgros like a predator savoring its prey.

Twisting his arm to widen the wound, he elicited a pained moan from her. Her anguished cries only seemed to heighten his pleasure.

“Ahyahyahya!! I’m in a good mood, so I’ll give you a special treat and tell you!”

With a swift motion, he withdrew his arm from Soulgros’s abdomen. Finally free of the foreign object, she collapsed to the ground. Uninterested in her plight, the man turned his attention to Lucil, who was staring in disbelief, and Master, who wore a faint smile despite his comrade’s dire state.

“I am Luscelt, Guildmaster of Heinichen the Steel Matriarch, a dark guild such as yours! I hope you’ll enjoy your deaths!” Luscelt laughed heartily, thoroughly entertained by his own announcement.

“Next, it’s your turn. Are you ready to die?!” His eyes, wide with excitement, darted toward Master and Lucil as he prepared to strike.

“It is you who shall die,” came a voice.

“Huh?”

Soulgros, who had been writhing in pain on the ground, stood up as if nothing had happened. With a swift motion, she plunged a dagger into Luscelt’s chest. He looked down at her in stunned disbelief, not comprehending what had just happened.

"You shouldn't be so confident just because you made a hole in my stomach," Soulgnos said coldly, glaring up at him with icy eyes and a mocking smile hidden beneath her mask.

To return the favor, Soulgnos twisted the dagger embedded in Luscelt's chest.

"Y-You!" he gasped.

"Don't touch me. You're disgusting," she snapped, slicing the dagger sideways through his chest. A gaping wound opened, and Luscelt fell to the ground without a sound.

"Making a hole in a maiden's body... Unforgivable. Die," Soulgnos spat angrily.

Her abdomen, however, still had a gaping hole in it.

"Wh-What? How are you okay?" Lucil stammered, trembling. He had been sure Soulgnos would die from such a wound. Having an arm-sized hole in the stomach was undoubtedly fatal.

"Well, it's a wound that would kill a human, but I am not human. While it's not as if this injury doesn't affect me at all, it's not fatal," Soulgnos explained, patting her wounded stomach and laughing heartily. Blood continued to pour from the wound, making Lucil's unease palpable. Master's smile also seemed strained, his face pale.

"Quite the coincidence," a voice rasped.

A hand grasped Soulgnos's leg with incredible strength, almost crushing her ankle.

"What?!"

For once, Soulgnos's perpetually calm and mocking demeanor cracked. She looked down at Luscelt, who should have been dead, as if she were seeing a ghost. He grinned up at her, relishing her shock.

"Impossible! I pierced your heart!" she exclaimed.

Indeed, she had felt the sensation of her blade stabbing through Luscelt's heart.

Soulgros had gouged out his heart, ensuring he should be dead. It was impossible for him to cling to life like this, like some sort of undead.

“I won’t die that easily!” Luscelt snarled.

“Gah!”

Luscelt sprang up with tremendous force, still gripping Soulgros’s ankle. His grip was so strong that she couldn’t break free. Using her ankle as a pivot, he twisted her body around.

“Take this!”

“Ugh!”

With a swift motion, Luscelt’s sharp kick struck Soulgros’s side, sending her flying through the air. The force of his kick produced a sound that seemed impossible for a human body to make, as if his leg was sinking into her flesh. She was flung like a ragdoll, hurtling toward the lake.

With a massive splash, Soulgros plunged into the water.

“Soulgros!” Lucil shouted, but there was no sign of her resurfacing.

“Ahyahyaha! There’s no way she could survive that. That kick must have crushed her bones and organs. And now that she’s in the water, she’s done for.” Luscelt laughed, finding amusement in Lucil’s distress. The young man stared at him, bewildered.

“Well, I’m not human, just like that woman. I don’t know what she is, but I’ll tell you my species,” Luscelt said, tapping the wound on his chest where Soulgros had cut him. Lucil’s eyes widened in shock.

“The wound... it’s healing?!”

With a hiss and a puff of smoke, Luscelt’s wound closed up. In no time, the injury disappeared without a trace.

“I’m undead. Cutting my heart won’t kill me. Ahyahya!” he cackled.



## Chapter 35: The Spy from Heinichen

**“By** the way, I’m a rather special kind of undead. I heal quickly,” Luscelt boasted.

Lucil was stunned. He knew about the undead—well-known fellkin with high resistance to physical attacks and a measure of immortality. To kill an undead, one needed a weapon blessed by the Church of Angels or magical attacks. But he had never heard of an undead that could heal its wounds. Luscelt must be a mutated variant of the undead, as he claimed.

However, Lucil had no interest in his species right now.

“You bastard! Why did you kill Apollo and Ligg?!”

“Apollo...?”

Luscelt tilted his head, genuinely confused by Lucil’s outburst. He wasn’t trying to provoke him; he truly didn’t know whom he was talking about.

“Ah! Those two lying over there?” He finally realized.

“Yes!” Lucil’s anger erupted at Luscelt’s feigned ignorance.

The undead responded nonchalantly, “There’s no particular reason. If I had to say, it was because they were in the way of my fight against Yerkchira. But really, does it matter?”

“What...?”

Lucil was left speechless by Luscelt’s words. This man had killed Apollo and Ligg for no reason, and now he dismissed their deaths as unimportant. The shock at the man’s nonchalance overshadowed even his rage.

“And Pelorro...”

“What?”

“What did you do to Pelorro?!”

Lucil demanded to know the fate of the last guild member, who was still missing. Unlike Apollo and Ligg, Pelorro's body was not among the dead.

Could Pelorro have been captured and subjected to cruel treatment by Luscelt and his cohorts? Given that Luscelt had killed two of his friends so callously, Lucil feared the worst for Pelorro. Seeing his glare, Luscelt smirked.

"Oh, him? Sure, I'll let you see him. Come on out!"

Luscelt called out into the trees. After a few moments, the sound of footsteps approached.

"Pelorro!"

Emerging from the shadows was Pelorro, showing no signs of injury. His eyes were vacant, and his usual lively demeanor was absent, but he was alive, and that was enough to make Lucil feel relieved.

"You're okay! Thank goodness... I'll get you out of here!" Lucil drew his sword and faced Luscelt. He knew he wasn't optimistic or foolish enough to think he could defeat the man who had just overpowered Soulgros, but with a comrade in danger, he had no choice but to fight, regardless of the odds.

"Ahyahyaha! Aren't you misunderstanding something?" Luscelt laughed, showing no fear even with Lucil's sword pointed at him. His reaction made sense, given his overwhelming strength.

"Misunderstanding...?"

Luscelt's laughter grew louder as he leaned in, his grin widening.

"Go on, tell him yourself. Aren't you comrades?" he said, shoving Pelorro toward Lucil. Pelorro didn't resist, simply stumbling forward. His lack of reaction to the rough treatment puzzled Lucil.

Pelorro was typically an expressive man, and such behavior should have provoked anger or defiance. Yet he stood there, looking down with a pained expression.

"Tch. If you can't say it, then I will," Luscelt sneered.

"I... I am..." Pelorro began hesitantly.

“Pelorro...?” Lucil asked, his voice filled with concern.

Luscelt’s grin grew even more sinister as he continued, “He’s not what you think, Lucil. He’s a spy from Heinichen. He’s been feeding us information all along.”

Lucil’s eyes widened in shock and disbelief. “No... that can’t be...”

“Believe it, kid. Your dear comrade here has been working for me from the start,” Luscelt confirmed, enjoying the look of betrayal on Lucil’s face.

Pelorro still showed no reaction, and Luscelt sneered in contempt.

“You... Lucil, right? Let me tell you the truth!” Luscelt’s voice was filled with malicious glee.

He relished the thought of the despair this revelation would bring to Lucil. The very idea sent shivers down his spine. Though he wanted Pelorro to confess himself, his desire to see Lucil’s despair overwhelmed him.

“This guy betrayed you and had those two killed!”

“What?” Lucil’s eyes widened as he looked at Pelorro, who remained silent. A strained, unnatural smile formed on his face. Cold sweat trickled down his temple as he asked, “That’s a lie... right?”

“He’s lying, isn’t he? You would never... kill Apollo and Ligg, right?”

“...”

In reality, it was Luscelt who had killed Apollo and Ligg. But if Pelorro had assisted him, that made him a murderer too. Lucil desperately wanted to believe it was a lie and reached out to Pelorro, but he remained silent. Frustrated, he raised his voice. “Say something, Pelorro!”

Pelorro flinched, finally lifting his head. Slowly, he opened his mouth.

“It’s true. I sold them out to Luscelt.”

Pelorro’s confession was the last thing Lucil wanted to hear.

## Chapter 36: For Money

**“W**hat I did was sell information to Luscelt and his gang,” Pelorro said, finally spilling the beans. Now that he had started, he felt there was no point in holding back, and the words flowed out uncontrollably. “The information was about our movements, about Master and Soulgros—what kind of people they are. Things like that.”

Lucil tried to imagine how Pelorro had passed on this information. Perhaps during those times when he disappeared after drinking at the guild, he had met with Luscelt to relay the information.

“Why...?” Lucil’s voice trembled. He wanted to shout in anger, but the shock of Pelorro’s betrayal left him unable to speak loudly. Pelorro’s tone, on the other hand, grew stronger, as if he had resigned himself to the truth. He spoke with intense emotion.

“For money.”

“What...?”

Lucil asked again, not because he hadn’t heard but because he couldn’t believe what he had heard. The words were clear, but their meaning was too shocking to accept.

“The reason I sold the information to Luscelt was simple. I did it for money—because I could get a lot of money.”

Hearing the same words again, Lucil realized it was no mistake. He had betrayed his family for money.

“For such a reason!”

“Such a reason?” Pelorro repeated, his voice now tinged with anger. Lucil’s outrage seemed to fuel his own.

“Yes, for such a reason!” Pelorro glared at Lucil, his face contorted with fury.

This anger was different from the playful anger Pelorro had shown in the past. It came from a deep, genuine place within him.

“Do you have any idea how important money is?! You need it for everything! To eat, to buy necessities—you need money for all of it!”

“I know that! But selling out your comrades—your family—for money?!”

“All of this is your fault, Lucil!”

“What?” Lucil’s eyes widened in disbelief as he looked at Pelorro. He glared at him with bloodshot eyes, his face flushed with anger. His breathing was heavy, and he showed no sign of calming down. In fact, his emotions seemed to be spiraling out of control.

“Hah. Listen, Lucil. Our guild is small, right?”

“Y-Yeah, it is...”

Lucil nodded at Pelorro’s words. Indeed, their guild barely met the minimum membership requirement of five and was undeniably a small guild.

“Because we’re small, we don’t earn as much as other guilds. After restocking on healing and antidote potions, there’s hardly any money left. I became an adventurer to get rich. How am I supposed to be satisfied with a meager amount of money?”

“Even so, we were having fun together, weren’t we?”

Lucil knew that Pelorro was more obsessed with money than the other members. But he had never found it suspicious; it was a common trait among adventurers. Lucil and Lucika had also become adventurers to earn money and feed themselves.

Despite their small numbers, their guild had competent members. They never struggled to make ends meet and enjoyed their time together as a family.

“Yeah, it really was fun,” Pelorro said with a faint, wistful smile.

If he had only cared about money, he could have left their small guild and joined a larger one. Pelorro wasn’t weak. He could have joined a mid-tier guild like Praeshield if he didn’t aim too high.

Yet he stayed with Lucil and the others because he found comfort and camaraderie. He enjoyed bickering with Lucil, teasing Lucika, drinking with Apollo, and listening to Ligg's lectures. He cherished those everyday moments.

But something had changed.

"But things were only truly fun until Lucika was cursed," he said.

"The curse..."

Lucil shrank under Pelorro's gaze, understanding the gravity of the situation.

"Yes. The curse Lucika took to protect you... Master called it a Ragel's curse, right? Since then, I—*the guild* changed," Pelorro said, laughing bitterly.

"Sure, I never hated Lucika or you. I always used healing potions generously when you got hurt, never hesitating to spend money on you."

"..."

Indeed, Pelorro had never hesitated to use items for Lucil or Lucika despite his apparent obsession with money. That was why Lucil had never suspected his greed.

"But you see... isn't it strange that we ran out of money so quickly? Huh?!"

"..."

Lucil trembled at Pelorro's shout, recognizing the truth in his words.

"We spent everything just to buy information about the Elixir! We used all the money we saved! When that wasn't enough, we sold guild supplies! Now there's nothing left in the guild!"

The rarity and value of natural Elixir was indeed greater than human life.

Even if Lucil's small guild had gathered all their resources, it wouldn't have been enough to obtain information about the Elixir. Yet, the information broker World's Eye had demanded just the amount they could scrape together and sold them the information easily.

"When I sold the information, World's Eye said something about wanting to cause trouble for someone they disliked. I didn't understand it at the time," Pelorro explained.

As a result, their guild was left nearly bankrupt.

“And that’s not all. We’re in debt now, too... Damn it. I didn’t become an adventurer to live this desperate, on-the-edge life!”

“Because of me...” Lucil felt a crushing sense of guilt.

It wasn’t Lucika who had originally been the Ragel’s target—it was Lucil. Lucika had sacrificed herself to save her brother. It was unfair to blame her. Pelorro continued, glaring at Lucil.

“Lucil, you don’t know this, but I told Apollo and Ligg many times to give up on Lucika. I said we should stop paying for information on Elixir. They were conflicted, you know?”

“...”

Lucil clenched his teeth. Even hearing Pelorro’s words, he couldn’t bring himself to blame Apollo and Ligg. It was only natural. Spending such a large amount of money for a comrade wasn’t a decision taken lightly.

“Even so, they decided to pay for the information to save Lucika! Despite my repeated objections!”

Pelorro bared his teeth in frustration.

“Comrades? Family? Does that mean it’s okay for the rest of us to suffer just to save one member?”

Lucil looked down, struggling to reconcile his feelings. Pelorro’s anger and frustration stemmed from feeling neglected and from the immense pressure of their dire financial situation. Pelorro felt the burden of their decisions more acutely, leading to his betrayal.

Moreover, the money they spent was only for information. Paying such a large amount didn’t guarantee they would obtain the Elixir. If they became preoccupied with searching for the Elixir and couldn’t take on regular requests, the guild would have no income at all. They still had debts to repay, so there would be hardly any money left.

“I couldn’t stand that!” Pelorro exclaimed.

“Pelorro...” Lucil couldn’t find the right words to say to him.

The greedy man had indirectly caused the deaths of their beloved family members, Apollo and Ligg, but Lucil couldn't bring himself to condemn him. Not when the man was pouring out his emotions like this.

"And the final reason I abandoned you all was you, Master," Pelorro said, glaring at Master with vacant eyes. Even under such a chilling gaze, Master smiled serenely.

"When you stopped the progression of Lucika's curse, it made it impossible to stop the search for the Elixir. Apollo and Ligg became even more determined. When I suggested we give up one last time, they got angry at me."

If Master hadn't intervened and the curse had continued to progress, Lucika would have died within a year. Pelorro didn't know the specifics of the curse, but he knew that much. If that had happened, they could have started over. He could have endured it for that long. But with Master extending the time they could search for the Elixir, it became unbearable for Pelorro.

"It's partly your fault I betrayed them, Master!"

"No, it isn't! Master saved us!" Lucil protested, but Master only responded to Pelorro's sharp glare with a wry smile.

Having said everything he wanted, Pelorro turned and walked toward Luscelt. He, who had been listening to Pelorro's words with a pale, sneering face, addressed him as he approached.

"Well, well, Pelorro. You've finally told them everything. How does it feel to get that off your chest?" Luscelt asked, his tone mocking.

"Shut up," Pelorro replied curtly, his expression still filled with bitterness and regret.

"Oh, are you done?" Luscelt asked.

"Yeah. I've said everything I needed to. You want to kill Master, right? He's pissed me off too. Make sure you make him suffer before you kill him."

"Ahyahyaha! You don't need to tell me twice," Luscelt replied, laughing unpleasantly. Hearing this, Lucil realized there was no way he could ever



reconcile with Pelorro. Luscelt pushed himself off the tree he was leaning against and placed a hand on Pelorro's shoulder.

"So, you're ready to say goodbye then?"

"Yeah. Make sure you give me the money," Pelorro said, glancing briefly at Lucil. Seeing Lucil alive one last time made him feel a twinge of sentimentality, but he had already made his decision when he allied with Luscelt and the Steel Matriarch.

However, Luscelt only laughed mockingly at Pelorro's resolve.

"You're an idiot. You don't get it, do you? Listen carefully to what I'm saying..."

Before Pelorro could understand Luscelt's words, a loud thud echoed.

Lucil's eyes widened in shock as Luscelt's grin twisted even further.

"Huh?"

Pelorro finally realized that Luscelt's arm had pierced through his own stomach.

## Chapter 37: Maniacal Laughter and a Smile

**“A**gh!”

Pelorro couldn't hold back the something rising within him and coughed. The warm liquid that clung to his lips stained his hand a bright red. Only then did he realize that Luscelt's arm had pierced his abdomen.

“You... bastard!”

Pelorro grasped Luscelt's arm with trembling hands, trying to pull it out, but Luscelt's strong arm didn't budge.

“Ahyahyaha! When I said *goodbye*, I meant you were bidding farewell to your life, you idiot!”

Luscelt laughed uproariously, looking up at the sky. Pelorro, who had believed he could just walk away from this, appeared utterly ridiculous to him.

“I'm not giving you any money, you fool! You barely gave us any useful information, so don't get any ideas!”

“You... betrayed me?!”

“Haah?!”

Pelorro, sweating profusely, glared at Luscelt with desperate eyes. The guildmaster sighed deeply, exasperated by the dying man's misguided words. He despised idiots and useless people.

“Since when were we close enough for it to be considered betrayal? Don't kid yourself. To me, you were nothing more than a toy for Heinichen... My toy!”

Luscelt had never considered Pelorro a comrade. At best, he was a toy—treated well as long as he was amusing, discarded when he was no longer interesting. It was that simple.

“Even if we were comrades, what made you think I wouldn't betray you? I'm from a dark guild, not a half-baked guild like Yerkchira. We're the most feared

dark guild, Heinichen the Steel Matriarch!”

“Gah!”

Pelorro’s body went limp, and he coughed up more blood as he collapsed to the ground.

Of course, Luscelt had no intention of understanding Lucil’s feelings. He was the type to sneer and mock the sorrow and anger of others.

“Die!”

Lucil reached Luscelt quickly, driven by his rage toward the man who had killed Apollo, Ligg, and Pelorro. He swung his sword down in a fit of fury.

“Fool. You’re no match for me!”

Luscelt countered Lucil’s descending sword with a simple punch to the blade. The sword shattered into pieces, scattering in a glittering spray. Lucil stared in shock at the broken shards. “What?!”

“Goodbye. Enjoy your reunion with them.”

Luscelt grinned and brought his fist down on Lucil. But just before the punch connected, Lucil’s form vanished.

“Huh?”

Did Lucil manage to dodge the attack at a speed even Luscelt couldn’t track? He dismissed the thought. No weakling from a small-time guild could evade his attack.

The answer was obvious.

“You!”

Luscelt turned his gaze to Master. As expected, Lucil was now standing beside him, bewildered and wide-eyed.

“How did you get him out of the way? Magic?”

When Luscelt asked, Master nodded calmly, not bothering to hide the truth.

It was likely a form of teleportation magic—a highly difficult and mana-consuming spell, almost as rare as illusion magic.

“Ahyahya!” Luscelt laughed.

Yes, that’s exactly what he wanted. Anything less wouldn’t be worth crushing. This was a war between two of the strongest dark guilds, and Luscelt sought a thrilling, blood-pumping battle.

“Great! As expected of the Master of Yerkchira the Messianic Legion. You’re nothing like these weaklings I’ve killed!” Luscelt exclaimed.

It was true that Master was strong. While Luscelt had easily killed Apollo, Ligg, and Pelorro, this man wouldn’t be as simple to defeat. However, Luscelt had no intention of losing.

“But remember, I’m an undead—a deathless fellkin. No matter how strong you are, how long can you fight against someone who can’t die?” Luscelt taunted, grinding his teeth with a gleeful smile.

Being undead, Luscelt could continue fighting even with injuries that would be fatal to humans or other fellkin. Though undead typically had weaknesses to magic and weapons blessed by the Church of Angels, Luscelt, Guildmaster of Heinichen, the Steel Matriarch, had already overcome those vulnerabilities.

The only way to truly stop him would be to cut off his limbs and render him immobile, but even then, Luscelt possessed the ability to self-heal. He was undoubtedly the strongest, most invulnerable undead.

“Master, let me fight too...” Lucil said, rising to stand beside Master. Luscelt was a powerful fellkin, and if Master fought alone, he might be killed. Lucil wanted to fight alongside him.

“Master...?” Lucil looked up to see Master’s gentle and reassuring smile as he extended an arm, signaling Lucil to stay back.

“Ahyahya! Yeah, stay put, kid! Even if you join in, it won’t change the fact that you’re all going to die!” Luscelt laughed, reveling in the situation.

Finally, the day had come when he could crush the Messianic Legion. Soon, the world would recognize the Steel Matriarch as the undisputed champion of the dark guilds.

No matter how much Luscelt tried to spread his infamous reputation, those who knew about Yerkchira refused to acknowledge him. The fact that they didn't recognize Heinichen as the strongest dark guild infuriated him to no end. But now, his frustration was about to end. By killing the Master of Yerkchira, he would force everyone to acknowledge Heinichen as the most powerful.

"But if I win too easily, it won't be any fun..."

Luscelt kicked the ground and grinned.

"Make sure you entertain me!"

In the next moment, the ground beneath Luscelt shattered with a thunderous noise. Using his undead strength, he closed the distance to Master in an instant.

"What?!"

Lucil next saw Luscelt with his fist raised before Master. Lucil couldn't move a muscle. The speed at which Luscelt attacked was beyond his ability to react. There was no way to avoid the attack now. Luscelt aimed his fist at the always-smiling Master's face, intending to land a devastating blow.

But instead...

"Huh?"

Luscelt could only utter a bewildered sound.

His punch, which should have struck Master, was caught effortlessly by Master's hand. Luscelt had envisioned smashing Master's face and beating him to a pulp before making him beg for mercy, only to laugh and kill him by gouging his stomach.

Yet his full-force punch was easily caught.

Master, still smiling gently, clenched his hand.

With a sickening crunch, Luscelt's fist was crushed.

## Chapter 38: Close Combat

**“W**hat is this?” Luscelt couldn’t comprehend what had just happened. His punch, aimed directly at Master’s face, had not only been intercepted but completely destroyed.

The gap between Master’s appearance and his actions was too great for Luscelt to process. Master, who always appeared calm and friendly, had crushed his fist with a gentle smile, as if they were exchanging a handshake.

“This can’t be real...” Lucil muttered in shock.

He knew Master was strong, having fought alongside him against monsters, but he hadn’t realized just how strong Master truly was. Lucil had thought Soulghros, who often fought monsters, was stronger than Master. After all, Luscelt had easily killed Apollo, Ligg, and Pelorro and had effortlessly neutralized Lucil’s attack. Yet here was Master, effortlessly catching Luscelt’s punch and crushing his fist.

“Master truly is powerful. It’s enough to make my heart race,” came a familiar voice from the side.

“Yeah, strong... Wait, what?” Lucil responded absentmindedly before realizing something was off. Who else could be talking to him in this moment? Apollo, Ligg, and Pelorro were already dead. Master and Luscelt were still locked in their confrontation, with Master smiling serenely.

That left only one person...

“Soulghros?!”

“Yes, what is it?” Soulghros replied calmly.

Lucil turned to see Soulghros standing there, seemingly unaffected by the earlier battle.

When Lucil looked over in a hurry, he saw Soulghros standing there with a tilted head, giving him a look that said, “Why are you shouting all of a sudden?”

Are you an idiot?”

“Wha?! Weren’t you taken out by Luscelt...?” Lucil protested vehemently.

In Lucil’s memory, Soulgnos had been brutally beaten. She had a hole punched through her abdomen and was then kicked with such force that it was easy to assume her internal organs were severely damaged.

Although she had managed to stab Luscelt’s heart, his overwhelming power had overshadowed her efforts.

“I told you, didn’t I? Something like that won’t kill me,” Soulgnos replied.

Indeed, while she had been attacked and thrown aside when Luscelt assumed she was defeated, it hadn’t incapacitated her.

Then why had it taken her some time to return?

“Wait a minute, Soulgnos. Your stomach... is healed?”

“Yes, it took a bit of time,” Soulgnos said.

Lucil stared at the place where there should have been a gaping hole in Soulgnos’s abdomen. The wound had completely healed, showing only smooth skin.

“Well, that’s because I’m a slime. Absorbing the lake’s water to rebuild my body is easy.”

“Huh... wait, a slime...?”

Lucil stared at Soulgnos in shock, feeling like he had just been hit with an unbelievable revelation.

“A slime, like those weak monsters...?”

Soulgnos had said other shocking things—like how she could heal the hole in her body by absorbing water—but what captured Lucil’s attention was the sudden declaration of her being a slime fellkin.

It wasn’t the fact that she was a fellkin that surprised him. Given Soulgnos’s extraordinary combat abilities, it wasn’t as shocking as learning that Luscelt was an undead fellkin.

The problem lay in the fact that Soulghros was a slime. To Lucil, a slime was one of the weakest monsters, often fought by beginner adventurers. Could such a weak creature really be this powerful?

“Yes. If I hadn’t met Master, I would have been easily killed by some adventurer,” Soulghros explained.

Even someone with her extraordinary combat abilities hadn’t started out powerful. She had once been a mere blob of liquid, crawling along the ground like any other lowly slime. Her transformation began when she met Master.

Soulghros reminisced about the serene plains where she first encountered Master.

*But now, I need to watch Master in action,* she thought, deciding to revisit those memories later when she could savor them privately.

With that, Soulghros turned her attention back to Master and Luscelt.

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The sound of blood dripping onto the ground brought Luscelt back to his senses.

“Stop screwing with me!”

Furious at the unexpected counterattack, Luscelt swung his right leg like a whip toward Master while still gripping his crushed fist. The undead’s brain had no limiter on his strength, making the speed and power of his kick formidable. It was strong enough to send Soulghros flying into the lake with a single blow.

But Master easily dodged the attack by simply ducking.

“Tch!”

Master smiled in response, releasing Luscelt’s crushed fist and grabbing his arm instead.

Then, with a powerful yank, Master effortlessly lifted Luscelt off the ground.

“Ga!”



Master swung Luscelt's body and slammed him forcefully into the ground. Unable to brace himself for the impact, Luscelt's entire body absorbed the tremendous shock. Even though, as an undead, he couldn't feel pain, the force was so great that it left him gasping for breath and momentarily incapacitated. It felt as though his entire body was on the verge of falling apart, rendering him immobile.



Luscelt didn't have the luxury of time to recover. Master, still smiling, raised his leg to strike. Despite the gentle expression on Master's face, Luscelt's instincts screamed danger. He forced his damaged body to respond, using his undead strength to leap away just in time. A moment later, Master's foot came crashing down where Luscelt had been.

"Gaah!"

Although he narrowly avoided a direct hit, the force of Master's stomp was incredible. The ground cracked, sending shockwaves and debris flying toward Luscelt. A chunk of rubble struck his head, drawing blood.

"So, this is how strong Soulgros's Master is," Lucil muttered, struggling to keep up with the intense battle. Luscelt, who had seemed overwhelmingly powerful before, was now being overpowered.

"I knew Master was amazing from the incident with Laladie, but this... This is beyond my expectations," Soulgros said, equally astonished.

She knew Master's strength from their first encounter. However, given that Master had spent years confined to the guild headquarters—at their own insistence—it was natural to assume he had lost some of his power. During Laladie's abduction incident, Master had subdued a significantly enhanced ogre manipulated by Corine, Yerkchira's resident tsundere. But now, Master was effortlessly toying with Luscelt, Guildmaster of Heinichen the Steel Matriarch, who was far more powerful than an ogre.

"Damn you!"

Luscelt, his body battered and bleeding, forced himself to stand, slamming his knee in anger.

He glared at Master with burning hatred.

"Yeah, you're strong, but I'm undead! No matter how much you hurt me, I won't die or even feel pain! You might feel confident now, but in the end, I will win! The Steel Matriarch will prevail! Ahyahya!"

Master simply continued to smile, unfazed by Luscelt's outburst.

Luscelt continued to laugh, his eyes bloodshot.

Indeed, just as he had said, the wounds inflicted by Master were beginning to heal. The head wound that had been bleeding was already closing up.

This situation could turn into a war of attrition where neither side could land a decisive blow. In such a scenario, the tireless Luscelt would likely emerge victorious.

*Well, in that case, I'll be the one to kill Luscelt,* Soulgros thought.

Even though Luscelt was a unique undead with self-healing abilities, Soulgros believed she could kill him. She could convert her body fluids into a highly potent poison, strong enough to dissolve anything it touched.

Even if Luscelt could heal, being completely dissolved would exceed his regenerative capabilities.

*I've seen enough of Master's impressive fighting. Maybe it's time to step in,* Soulgros thought, preparing to move.

But then, Master nodded thoughtfully in response to Luscelt's words, crossing his arms in contemplation. He then placed his hand on his chest and began to cast some sort of spell. Master's entire body was momentarily enveloped in a soft, two-colored light.

"Hey. What did you just do?" Luscelt asked, now extremely wary of Master after the brutal close combat. Master simply responded with a gentle smile.

## Chapter 39: An Unexpected End to the Battle

*What... What kind of magic did he just use?* Luscelt wondered, staring at Master who was merely smiling serenely.

Luscelt had always relied on his physical strength to kill his enemies. The undead body was tough and didn't require the use of weapons or the learning of magic. As a result, he couldn't identify the spell Master had just cast.

*Damn. If only Ild were here, things would be different...*

Ild, a cowardly but knowledgeable man, would have been useful now. Luscelt had already given orders to Ild and the other two commanders to kill the members of Yerkchira. They were skilled enough to accomplish this task, and they would undoubtedly return with the heads of their targets.

Therefore, it was crucial for Luscelt to kill Master here and now. Even if his subordinates succeeded, it would be meaningless if he himself failed. He needed to prove his strength as the guildmaster of Heinichen.

"Come at me!" Luscelt roared, glaring at Master with intense focus. He exuded a thick killing intent, hoping to paralyze Master with fear. Based on the earlier fight, Master seemed to prefer close combat, much like Luscelt himself.

By overwhelming Master with his killing intent, Luscelt intended to immobilize him and land a decisive blow. He tightened his fist, ready to strike.

"Huh?"

Master defied his expectations effortlessly. With a sharp punch, Master sliced through the air. A crisp sound echoed as Luscelt felt a powerful shock and was knocked onto his backside. Looking at his right arm, he saw that it was no longer there.

"Aaaaagh!" Luscelt screamed.

With his eyes and mouth wide open, Luscelt screamed in agony. Was it the invisible attack that made him scream? No, it was something else that had

shocked him to the core.

“Wh-What was that...?”

“Pressure punch...” Soulgros muttered, recognizing the technique.

It was a skill where one delivered a sharp punch, projecting the impact onto a distant target. This technique usually required a lifetime of training for those with a natural talent for close combat.

Soulgros was astonished that Master, who appeared so young, could use such an advanced technique. Though she knew Master had lived far beyond a normal human lifespan, so her surprise quickly subsided.

*Still, to think he can use a pressure punch... it's unbelievable,* Soulgross thought.

Among those Soulgros knew, only Leiss, the muscle-brained combat maniac, and possibly Vampille, could use such a technique. Master had never seemed like someone who would resort to such brute-force tactics.

“It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it huuurtsss!” Luscelt screamed, clutching the severed stump of his arm. His eyes bulged in agony.

The true horror Luscelt experienced was not just the loss of his arm but the excruciating pain emanating from the wound.

“Why?! Why does it hurt?! I’m undead!”

As an undead, Luscelt had never felt pain from any attack. Not knowing pain had allowed him to kill ruthlessly and brutally. Now, for the first time in his existence, he was experiencing true suffering.

“But... I have self-healing!” Luscelt screamed, desperately willing his body to heal. He believed that once the wound closed, the pain would vanish.

However, as the moments passed, a grim realization settled in. His wound wasn’t healing as expected.

“H-Hey. What’s happening...?”

Luscelt's panic grew. Despite his belief in his regenerative abilities, the wound remained open, and the pain persisted.

The fellkin realized another horrifying change occurring within him.

"Why isn't my self-healing working?!" he screamed.

Blood continued to pour from the wound on his severed arm, and no matter how much he willed it, the wound refused to close. As an undead, healing such an injury should have been a simple matter, even if reattaching the arm took a bit longer. But now, the bleeding wouldn't stop, and the pain was relentless.

"A magic that blocks self-healing and inflicts pain on those who don't normally feel it, perhaps..." Soulghros speculated, observing the situation.

It seemed likely that the spell Master had cast on himself was precisely that—a combination of magic to prevent regeneration and induce pain.

"Is there such magic?" Soulghros murmured, momentarily dropping all the ninja pretenses, fascination taking over.

"Damn it!! What did you do to me?! What the hell did you do?!" Luscelt roared, his eyes wild with fury, spittle flying from his mouth.

Despite the intense killing intent and anger radiating from Luscelt, enough to make even seasoned knights or adventurers faint, Master remained calm, smiling faintly without a bead of sweat on his brow.

"Hic!"

For the first time in his existence, Luscelt was consumed by fear. If Master had been merely strong, Luscelt might have felt anger but not fear. In a prolonged battle, his undead nature would have given him an advantage. But Master was an enigma. His overwhelming power and incomprehensible magic had turned the tide, preventing Luscelt's regeneration and causing him to feel pain.

Unable to understand or predict Master's capabilities, Luscelt was terrified. This inexplicable power and mastery over unknown magic had left him paralyzed with fear.

"Raaaahhh!" he screamed, driven by a desperate mixture of fear and rage.

Overwhelmed by fear, Luscelt made a desperate decision: he charged directly at Master with a punch. This was not a mere act of suicide; it was an undead being pushing beyond its limits, harnessing inhuman strength. With his left fist clenched tightly, Luscelt's strike could have shattered even the hardest metal golem. As the master of the Heinichen guild, Luscelt was displaying his ultimate power in this final moments.

It was all in vain against Master.

A heavy thud echoed through the air.

This sound came from Luscelt's exposed left side, where Master's sharp kick connected before Luscelt's punch could land. Coincidentally or intentionally, the kick was eerily similar to the one Luscelt had used to send Soulgros flying into the lake. The difference was in the force behind it. While Soulgros was merely knocked back, Master's kick completely tore Luscelt's torso apart.

Luscelt fell, defeated, as his body crumpled to the ground. Master had ended the fight effortlessly, leaving no doubt about his overwhelming strength.



## Chapter 40: The Leaders of Heinichen, the Steel Matriarch

**W**atching Luscelt, the guildmaster of Heinichen, collapse to the ground, I let out a sigh of relief.

Wow, it had been a long time since I engaged in close combat, and the tension was so high I could barely breathe.

Honestly, close combat, where a single mistake could be fatal, isn't my strong suit. I much prefer staying at a distance and acting as a magical artillery.

"Master, you were amazing. So cool," Soulghros said, walking over to me as I was lost in thought.

"Are you okay? No injuries?"

"Oh, it's nothing serious. I healed quickly by absorbing water from the lake," Soulghros replied with a casual smile.

Well, being a slime, she would probably be fine... but as her guildmaster and someone who saw her almost like a daughter, the sight of her with a hole in her abdomen was terrifying. That was why I had engaged in close combat with Luscelt. I wanted to repay him with my fists for hurting her.

"Yeah, that really pissed me off."

"You fought for my sake... Oh no, I'm feeling all sorts of things," Soulghros said, writhing a bit.

"Feeling what?"

I could only chuckle at Soulghros's exaggerated reaction.

"You're really strong, Master," Lucil said, approaching us.

"Are you hurt?"

"No, thanks to you."

“That’s good. It’s been a while since I teleported someone else, so I was a bit worried.”

Lucil nodded, still in awe of the fight that had just transpired.

“Master, can I ask? How did you manage to defeat the undead Luscelt? It looked like you stopped his healing too...” Lucil asked, looking up at me with curiosity.

“Ah, it’s a bit strange to agree with Lucil-dono, but I’m also curious. Is there such a spell?” Soulgnos added, her curiosity piqued as well.

They were both asking about the spell I had used before attacking Luscelt. That spell had the effect of causing pain to those who normally don’t feel it and preventing self-healing. The latter was essential to ensure victory. If he kept regenerating, it would have been a losing battle. As for the former, I was a bit upset seeing Soulgnos hurt and wanted to teach him a lesson about the pain of harming others.

While I may not be the most righteous person, it felt necessary at that moment. Soulgnos had mentioned there was no such spell, and she was right. “I created it on the spot out of necessity. Fortunately, it worked as intended.”

“Creating a spell? Is that even possible?” Lucil asked, looking bewildered.

“Master is a great mage?” Soulgnos muttered to herself, still in a daze.

“Yes, it’s relatively straightforward. As long as you have a clear idea of what you want the spell to do and follow the proper steps, anyone can do it. Being able to do it in the middle of a battle is something that comes with experience... though I’m still quite young, of course.”

“Ugh... ooo...”

As we chatted, a groan emerged from below. It was Luscelt, still alive despite only having his upper body left after my kick.

As expected of an undead, he wasn’t dead yet, not even unconscious.

“Persistent, isn’t he? Like a cockroach,” Soulgnos said with a hint of disgust.

*That’s harsh, Soulgnos.*

Well, considering Luscelt kicked her and put a hole in her abdomen, she has the right to speak harshly.

“Why didn’t you kill him?” Lucil asked, glaring at Luscelt with intense hatred.

*To kill an undead, you either need powerful holy magic or a weapon blessed by the Church of Angels. Since I’m not a follower of the Church, my only option was the former. But trying to use such magic in close combat against someone as skilled as Luscelt would have been risky.* Luscelt, as expected of a guildmaster, possessed formidable strength.

Though I couldn’t forgive him for hurting Soulgros and killing Apollo and Ligg, I decided to leave the final decision to Lucil. Soulgros seemed indifferent, merely watching Luscelt with a lack of interest, and my irritation had subsided.

“A...ahaha...”

While I was considering this, Luscelt let out a sickening laugh.

It was impressive that he could still speak with only his upper body left. The resilience of the undead was remarkable.

“Do you think you’ve won...Yerkchira the Messianic Legion...?” Luscelt glared up at me, his eyes filled with malice. I held Soulgros back with a raised foot, preventing her from stomping on him for daring to glare at me.

What could he mean? The battle seemed clearly decided.

Or perhaps Luscelt still had some ace up his sleeve, something that could turn the tide even in this situation.

“Ahaha... This isn’t just a duel between you and me. It’s a war between our guilds... Heinichen the Steel Matriarch against Yerkchira the Messianic Legion. My subordinates are certainly in action too, aren’t they?” Luscelt declared, his voice tinged with triumph.

“Hoho!” Soulgros reacted with unexpected delight. If Luscelt’s words were to be believed, it meant that members of Heinichen were also attacking my guild members.

*Why is Soulgros so pleased about this?*

Despite Luscelt's boast, I wasn't worried. My guild members weren't weaklings who would be easily defeated. If I could handle an opponent like Luscelt, they certainly could too.

"Master, where are you going?" Soulgnos asked, noticing my movement.

Lucil called out as I turned on my heel. "Hey, Master! Where are you going?"

"Oh, it's nothing. I just have something on my mind. It's not like I'm worried about everyone and need to check on them to make sure they're okay."

"Master! Let's discuss, in detail, what to do with Luscelt right here and now!" Soulgnos cried, clinging to me.

"Let go, Soulgnos. I can't think about Luscelt until I make sure the others are safe. Lucil, do whatever you want with Luscelt! I'm going now!"

As I tried to walk away with Soulgnos still attached to me, a shrill female voice echoed through the forest.

"What do you think you're doing, clinging to Master like that, you slimy creature?!"

"Ugh..."

It was a voice I knew all too well. Soulgnos grimaced, and I turned to see the source of the voice. A woman with long, silky blonde hair and a lavish red dress—so ostentatious it seemed almost poisonous—stood glaring at us. It was Vampille.

"Why is she here...?"

"What do you mean, why? I returned to the guild to share my heroic tales, only to find that Master hadn't come back yet. So, being the kind soul that I am, I decided to personally come and find you!" Vampille declared, placing a hand on her ample chest and arching her back confidently.

*Heroic tales? Did she complete some significant task?*

"Indeed! I... What was it called... Something like... Scrap Iron?"

"Heinichen the Steel Matriarch, you clueless ojou-sama," came another familiar voice, offering assistance.

And then there was Schwarte, wearing her distinctive long-skirted maid outfit.

“It’s been a while, Master. I’m so moved that I can finally see you. All thanks to that foolish ninja dragging you around...” Schwarte said, bowing gracefully.

Soulgros grimaced. “Ugh... Not only Vampille, but Schwarte too...”

Seeing Schwarte’s polite bow and hearing her kind words, I felt a mix of happiness and confusion. After all, we had just seen each other two days ago. And Soulgros, your reaction doesn’t exactly scream camaraderie. *Nevertheless, having two members of Yerkchira here at once... What on earth is happening?*

“Master, I’m here too,” came a sultry voice, accompanied by a tug on my sleeve.

I turned to see Krankheit, with her gray hair and an alluring smile, standing behind me. *What? Krankheit too?* This was getting more confusing by the second.

“N-No way... Th-Those are...” Luscelt stammered, his voice strained due to his condition.

Well, with only his upper body remaining, it’s no wonder he had difficulty speaking. In fact, it’s a miracle he can talk at all.

“What’s this upper-body ghost doing here?” Vampille remarked, looking at Luscelt on the ground with a disdainful expression. She added a soft “Looks disgusting” under her breath.

“This is the guildmaster of Heinichen,” Soulgros announced proudly. “Master defeated him in a magnificent battle.”

Soulgros’s boastful report made me feel a bit awkward. It wasn’t exactly a magnificent battle, but still...

Vampille and the others blinked in surprise at Soulgros’s words, then smiled.

“Oh, come now. That can’t be true. Master, who’s been away from the front lines for so long, defeating another guildmaster? Impossible!” Vampille’s words struck me like an arrow.

*It hurts so much...*

“Master, you don’t need to do anything. I’ll take care of everything for you,” Krankheit whispered, her hand gently caressing my cheek with a seductive smile.

“Krankheit, could you please stop caressing my cheek so seductively? And what do you mean by ‘don’t need to do anything’? Is my competence really that doubted...?”

“Serving Master is my job,” Schwarte countered, glaring at Krankheit.

“Ugh... Sure, I’m not as strong as you two, but I can fight a little, you know...”

“No way! You have to see Master’s greatness firsthand to understand. So far, it’s just me who has seen it!” Soul gros chimed in, trying to lift my spirits with a smile.

If that’s the case, then Lalladie probably knows too, right?

“But why are you all here anyway? You’re in the way.” Soul gros’s question brought my wandering thoughts back on track.

“Right, why did they gather here in the first place?”

“Ah, that’s because...” Vampille started.

“To report this to Master,” Schwarte cut in, her tone serious.

“Report this?” I tilted my head in confusion. “What were they talking about?” Vampille and Schwarte seemed to be on the same page. Each of them placed something in front of me.

“You... you all...” Luscelt’s voice trembled with disbelief.

What they placed before me were two human bodies.

## Chapter 41: Carnage

**“S**omething attacked me, so I took care of it!” Vampille declared, puffing out her chest with pride. The corpse she was dragging along appeared to be male, or at least that’s what I assumed, given his entire body was withered and shriveled like a mummy.

“How exactly did you take him down?”

“Oh, I’m so glad you asked, Master!” Vampille eagerly approached me, her hands gesticulating wildly as she explained. She had been out for a nighttime stroll in the suburbs—though Schwarte had interrupted, accusing her of being lost, which Vampille vehemently denied. Suddenly, a hulking, muscle-bound man had attacked her.

*Looking at the corpse, you’d never guess that,* I thought.

He had thrown a punch, and Vampille, matching his blow, had sent him flying instead. Well, she was the second strongest in the guild next to Leiss, after all. After immobilizing him with a single hit, she drained his blood, claiming a complete victory. Initially, she had drunk his blood herself but found it unpalatable, so she summoned her familiars to finish the job.

“Master! You can reward me now if you like!” Vampille’s eyes sparkled as she drew closer, her breath quickening with excitement.

*She’s such a troublesome young lady,* I mused. Nonetheless, I decided to pat her head.

“My! It’s not usually allowed for anyone to touch my head, you know,” Vampille remarked, but she made no move to brush my hand away. Instead, she pressed her head against my hand, her silky hair feeling pleasant to the touch.

“Master, I have done my part as well,” Schwarte spoke up, seemingly not wanting to be outdone by Vampille. When I looked over at her, I saw that,

unlike the full body Vampille had brought, Schwarte was only holding a severed head.





“...”

Schwarte stared at me longingly, so I asked how she had defeated her foe. With a calm yet somewhat proud demeanor, she explained that her attacker had been a master swordsman. He seemed to treasure his sword greatly, so she had cut it apart. Following that, she decapitated the man, who had been left in a state of shock.

“Well done, Schwarte. You’ve worked hard.”

“I would do anything for Master,” Schwarte said, accepting my head pat with a serene expression. I appreciated the sentiment, though I was starting to find the frequent display of corpses somewhat troubling. Speaking of which, where was Krankheit...?

“I was also attacked by some Scrap Metal,” Krankheit said, snapping her fingers.

At that signal, a young man emerged from the bushes with a rustling noise. He looked like any other young man, except for the fact that his eyes were void of light and his steps were unsteady.

“Ild! You... Why are you following someone from Yerkchira the Messianic Legion? Have you betrayed us...?” Luscelt growled softly at the sight of him.

Despite his words, the man—apparently named Ild—did not respond.

“It’s useless. He’s under my magic,” Krankheit declared.

“Wh-What...?” Luscelt seemed unable to grasp Krankheit’s words.

But knowing her power, I understood. Krankheit was skilled in illusion magic, one of her specialties. It appeared Ild was caught in her spell.

“So, there’s another user of illusion magic besides Ild...” Luscelt’s words revealed that Ild was also an illusion magic user. It was rare to have two such users in the same place, given the scarcity of this particular magic.

“One of my guild’s officers...” Luscelt said.

“So, according to Luscelt’s words, it seems the assassins he sent were these three. All of them were taken down by our guild members.”

I wasn't worried, though. I believed in them.

"Well then, it looks like the only one left is the Scrap Metal guildmaster, Luscelt."

Soulgros said, crouching in front of him. With only his upper body remaining, Luscelt couldn't escape, no matter how scared he was.

"Luscelt-dono, as a master of a fairly powerful dark guild, you must have a wealth of valuable information, right? I'll be taking that information now."

"Ugh, you're as revolting as ever."

Soulgros began to twist her hand into a grotesque shape in front of Luscelt, clearly intending to show off. Vampille visibly grimaced at the sight.

*While it's good that she's honest, Vampille might need to learn a bit about diplomacy.*

"I'm going to insert this hand into your ear, Luscelt-dono. From there, I'll reach your brain and mix things up a bit. It might hurt a little, but bear with it."

"That's a lie. People who've had that done to them looked like they were in immense pain."

Schwarte denied Soulgros's words.

*Just hearing about it makes it sound excruciating. Stirring the brain...*

"We!" Suddenly, Luscelt raised his voice. "We will become the strongest dark guild! We won't lose to anyone! We'll be feared by everyone! The strongest dark guild! You guys in Yerkchira the Messianic Legion are in our way! That's why we will kill you! We'll slaughter all of you and become the strongest! Ahahahahahaha!"

"Whoa. What's with him all of a sudden?"

Vampille's face turned pale at Luscelt's sudden outburst. I kept smiling, but I was quite scared myself.

"Maybe he broke down?" Krankheit suggested. "For him, defeating us, Yerkchira the Messianic Legion and the Scrap Metal were crucial parts of his identity. With both of those shattered, his mind probably couldn't take it."

“What a pathetic end,” Schwarte added, following Krankheit’s explanation.

“I see... Well, they were the ones who attacked us first, so I can’t really sympathize with him,” I said.

“Just because his mind has broken doesn’t mean I won’t extract the information,” Soulgros said, moving her writhing hand closer to the still-laughing Luscelt’s ear.

“All right, time to mix things up,” she said.

## Chapter 42: The Location of the Elixir

“Pheh. As expected, after running a dark guild for so many years, he had quite a bit of valuable information,” Soulgros said, wiping her forehead and exuding a sense of accomplishment. While she was busy meddling with Luscelt’s brain, I had moved to a slightly distant location with Lucil.

*I couldn’t let a child witness such a gruesome scene, after all.*

Though we moved away, we could still hear Luscelt’s maniacal laughter turning into screams, which made Lucil’s face turn pale. Away from the chaos, Lucil and I discussed what lay ahead for his guild.

With Apollo, Ligg, and Pelorro dead, Lucil’s guild now only consisted of him and Lucika. The two of them alone couldn’t meet the requirements to maintain the guild. Although I offered to take them in under Yerkchira’s banner, Lucil refused.

“I want to keep that guild going, even if those guys are gone,” he said.

I couldn’t force him to accept my offer. As I pondered how I could help, Krankheit proposed an idea. She suggested integrating Ild, who was under her illusion magic, into Lucil’s guild. With his strong illusion magic, he would not only bolster their numbers but also add significant strength. The issue was whether Lucil could accept this arrangement.

At first, he was hesitant, but Krankheit’s magic revealed that Ild had never truly supported Heinichen’s activities. This revelation led Lucil to agree to take Ild in. Although I felt uneasy about bringing someone from a dark guild close to us, Krankheit assured me that she would thoroughly manipulate his memories, which eased my worries.

With this decision made, we returned to Soulgros. Krankheit, Schwarte, and the others had already returned to the guild headquarters. Vampille protested loudly, but Schwarte dragged her away.

“To think that we came searching for the Elixir and ended up in this situation... It’s been a whirlwind,” Lucil murmured, his gaze distant.

“Yeah. I never imagined things would turn out like this either.”

“In any case, I’ll need him to let me help with the search for the natural Elixir for a while longer.”

“Really?! You mean it?!” Lucil exclaimed.

“Of course. The request Soulgros and I accepted was to find a natural Elixir, after all. Besides, Apollo entrusted me to look after you.”

“Apollo...” Lucil choked back his tears, just as Soulgros quietly approached.

“By the way, I happened to find something that might be the Elixir,” she said.

“What?!” Lucil’s tears seemed to vanish instantly at her sudden revelation. I was equally surprised; I hadn’t noticed at all.

“Where did you find it?!” Lucil asked eagerly.

“Ah, that would be...” Soulgros began to respond.

At that moment, I felt a familiar presence approaching.

“Master!”

I turned to see a smiling girl with fluffy green hair fluttering in the wind. It was Laladie, an alraune and a member of my guild.

“Not just Vampille and the others, but Laladie too... Today is a good day.”

As Laladie waddled over, I went to meet her halfway, and she jumped into my arms.

“Ahh... It’s been so long since I’ve had my Master fix... That damn ninja kept dragging you around, making it hard to find you,” Laladie pouted, sniffing repeatedly.

“So, she missed me that much, huh? I’m kind of happy to hear that.”

“You’ve arrived,” Soulgros muttered softly.

“Hmm? What does she mean by ‘arrived’? Laladie?”

“Yes, Laladie-dono has the natural Elixir,” Soulgros said calmly, as if it were nothing out of the ordinary, yet it was a shocking revelation.

“What...?”

“Eeeeeeeeeeh?!” Lucil’s scream echoed loudly.

“Whoa! What the heck is wrong with you to be yelling all of a sudden? You little runt!” Laladie snapped back.

Lucil’s reaction was understandable. Anyone would be shocked to hear that an adorable girl like Laladie possessed a natural Elixir.

“Wait, Laladie has the Elixir?”

“The Elixir...? Yes, I have it. Here it is,” Laladie responded nonchalantly. She showed off a large flower nestled in her green hair to me.

“The nectar from this flower is the Elixir. It’s the one Master always enjoys drinking,” she explained casually.

“Eeeeeeeeeeh?!”

“Wait, really?! Didn’t you think it important to tell me such an important fact!”

Laladie had occasionally given me some of her nectar to drink, but I had no idea it was the Elixir. Without knowing, I had been drinking an immensely rare and valuable Elixir in large quantities.

*Have I been selfishly consuming something so precious, depriving those who need it most? Could this be why I haven’t aged much? Because of Laladie’s Elixir?*

*No, that can’t be it. I didn’t age much even before meeting her.*

“I’m sorry! I have a favor to ask! Please hear me out!” Lucil suddenly rushed over and knelt down before us with incredible speed, snapping me out of my thoughts.

“Whoa! What’s with this kid? I’ll kill him!” Laladie growled, clinging tightly to me and glaring at Lucil.

“Well, Laladie, you’re not exactly big enough to call him a ‘runt’ either.”

“Please share some of that Elixir with me! My sister... Lucika needs it!” Lucil begged, pressing his head to the ground. In response, Laladie...

“Huh? No way. I refuse,” she said, glaring at Lucil with terrifyingly cold eyes.

*Well, I kind of expected this.*

“Please! I know how rare it is!” he pleaded again.

“Huh? Why should I give my bodily fluids to your sister? Absolutely not. I only give it to Master,” she declared firmly.

Despite his desperate plea, Laladie refused to budge.

*Hmm... I can't really push too hard on this. Before meeting Yuuto and Maho, Laladie had given me some of her nectar in the flower garden, and it was clearly a painful experience for her.*

*I do worry about Lucika and want to help, but not if it means causing Laladie pain. However, I do sympathize with Lucil's situation.*

“Laladie, I'm sorry to ask, but could you spare even a few drops of the Elixir for Lucil?”

“Uh... Hmm... If Master asks, I have to consider it...” Laladie grumbled, then started to seriously ponder my request. Lucil swallowed nervously, waiting for her decision. After a while, Laladie clapped her small hands together.

“Oh, I remember. I have some lower-grade Elixir that I wasn't planning on giving to Master. If that works, you can have it,” she offered.

“R-Really?! That's fine! Please share it with me!” Lucil pleaded, crawling closer in desperation. Laladie clung to me, looking disgusted.

“Laladie, you're showing too much on your face. It's really contorted right now.”

“Fine... I guess I have no choice.” She sighed.

Laladie summoned a flower from the ground with her ability. As its petals unfurled, a small vial filled with a glowing liquid emerged.

“Here, take it,” she said.



“Th-Thank you! Really, thank you so much!” Lucil carefully took the vial from the flower petals, holding it as if it were a precious treasure.

“Thank you, Laladie. Thank you for listening to my request.”

“It’s Master’s request, so of course I listened! Besides, it’s just a failed Elixir, so it’s not that important,” Laladie said, rubbing her cheek, marked with our guild’s crest, against mine.

“A failed Elixir? I wonder if it’s still effective.”

Soulgros answered my unspoken question. “Even if Laladie-dono calls it a failed Elixir, it’s still far superior to any artificial Elixir.”

“I see. So, there are successes and failures even among natural Elixirs.”

“The nectar I produce for Master has various benefits beyond the usual. It makes your skin smooth and even leaves a mark that shows it’s from me...” Laladie added with a hint of pride.

*Is she a housewife?*

Since Laladie spoke so confidently, I decided not to make any trivial comments.

“Thank you so much! Now I can save Lucika...” Lucil said, tears streaming down his face.

“Actually, you should be thanking Laladie. I didn’t do much. Let’s help with the burial of Apollo and the others, and then we’ll head back to the guild. Is that okay?”

Lucil nodded immediately, “Yeah! They would be happy if you, Master, helped with that.”

“Well then, Laladie-dono, you can return now. Your task here is done,” Soulgros said.

“It’s a shame. Laladie and Master have fused, so we can’t be separated. You should be the one to return to the guild,” Laladie retorted.

“Huh? I need to stay to pay my respects to Apollo-dono and the others.”

“You’re lying. You don’t care about them at all,” Laladie snapped.

“All right, Soulgros and Laladie, let’s not fight.”

And so, our search for the Elixir came to an end.

## Chapter 43: Soulgros's Request

**“All** right, everyone, the moment has finally arrived. It’s time for Master and me to have our intimate moment,” Soulgros announced into the void of the dark night. Having returned to the guild headquarters after burying Apollo and the others, she was speaking to no one in particular, her excitement reaching a fever pitch.

She stood in front of Master’s bedroom door, a place she rarely had the opportunity to be. Normally, she would face countless interruptions from the members of Yerkchira the Messianic Legion. Even Ritter, who had supported her on a date with Master, would never allow her to sneak into Master’s bedroom.

But tonight was different.

“Hehehe. I kept my ‘anything goes’ right for this moment,” Soulgros mused. She had earned the right to spend time in Master’s bedroom by exercising her special privilege. Since Master himself had granted permission, none of the guild members could argue against it.

Thus, despite their gritted teeth, they let Soulgros pass.

“My body... is fine. I’ve cleansed myself thoroughly,” she reassured herself, checking her form even through her ninja attire. Before approaching Master’s room, she had carefully absorbed clean water to replace the fluids composing her body. Being a slime species allowed her to perform such a feat.

*Today is going to be a memorable day...* she thought. She couldn’t present herself to Master in an unclean state.

“All right, here we go,” she whispered, performing a final check to ensure nothing was amiss.

Instead of knocking, Soulgros transformed her body. She let go of her human shape and reverted to her true slime form, slithering her way under the door.

Soulgros slithered through the small gap under the door, utilizing her ability that made her proficient in espionage and assassination. Unfortunately, she often used it just to sneak into Master's bedroom.

*Ahh...*

The first thing she noticed upon entering the bedroom was his scent. Although she wasn't particularly obsessed with smells, Master's scent was different. Her slime body wiggled restlessly.

However, she wasn't there to indulge in his scent or to borrow his underwear. She had something more significant in mind. Confirming that Master was asleep, she transformed back into her human shape.

As she approached his bed...

"Soulgros, were you awake?" Master called out, startling her. She flinched and looked at him nervously. He was watching her with a gentle smile, as if he knew everything she intended to do.

"I-I wasn't planning to sneak in. I thought it would be considerate not to disturb your sleep," she stammered.

*That's a lie.* She had planned to obtain some of his seed while he slept. The current cold war among the members of Yerkchira the Messianic Legion didn't concern her. Even if her actions turned the cold war into a hot one, she believed in taking chances. Unfortunately, Master's intervention ruined her plan.

"So, Master, as promised, can I sleep with you?" she asked.

Master responded affirmatively, as expected. In her wisdom, Soulgros immediately changed her approach and decided to pursue him directly.

"Well then, I'll join you," she said, slipping into his bed as he welcomed her with a smile.

"Oh... this is..."

Soulgros wasn't particularly fond of sleeping. She usually regarded it as a necessary task, much like a chore. However, sleeping beside Master felt different. She felt a warmth in her heart, a sense of comfort that made it seem like she could have a peaceful rest.

“No! I can’t just fall asleep like this. That’s not why I’m here tonight,” she reminded herself, shaking her head to clear her thoughts. She glanced at Master, who looked at her curiously, and nodded decisively.

With a graceful movement, Soulgros straddled Master’s body. She was careful not to put too much weight on him, adjusting her position delicately. As Master widened his eyes in surprise, she narrowed hers, smiling softly.

“Master, you must be tired tonight,” she said.

Though he didn’t understand her intention, Master nodded. The battle with Luscelt, the master of the dark guild known as the Steel Matriarch, had indeed been exhausting, despite their victory.

“In such times, a man has three ways to relieve his fatigue,” Soulgros continued, raising three fingers. “The first is sleep. The second is a bath.”

She folded down each finger as she mentioned them, then paused before folding the last one.

“And the third is a woman.”

Master seemed to have a mental exclamation mark pop above his head. It was too late to escape; Soulgros had anticipated his reaction and had already positioned herself on top of him.

“Well then...” Soulgros said, opening her ninja garb with a bold motion. Fortunately, she wore a black chainmail-like garment underneath, keeping her modesty intact.

However, this inner garment accentuated her body more than the outer ninja attire did, clearly outlining her moderate-sized breasts and flat abdomen, all visible to Master.

“I can adjust the size to your preference,” she said, squeezing her breasts together with her arms.



Soulgros emphasized her breasts by reshaping them, aiming to arouse Master's desires. While this tactic might be enticing for any man, it caused Master, who saw Soulgros as a daughter, to break out in a cold sweat.

"Hmm..."

Noticing that Master wasn't reacting as she had hoped, Soulgros resorted to her final tactic. She reached up to the cloth covering her face, which she never removed in public, and slowly unraveled it.

"This feels more nerve-wracking than showing my chest," she admitted.

Master's eyes widened at the sight of Soulgros's face, which he hadn't seen in a long time. He was used to her slitted eyes, but her slightly smiling mouth was a rare sight. Her skin was translucent, a clear indication of her slime nature. Her eyes melted with affection, and her tongue sensuously licked her glossy lips.

Glancing down, Master saw the curves of her breasts under the thin chainmail and her toned abdomen, all highlighting her shapely figure. If this had been Soulgros's attempt at a kunoichi's honey trap, countless men would likely lose their lives easily.

However, Master had no such concerns. Soulgros had no intention of deceiving him; she simply wanted an intense workout in bed.

"Hehe, the time has finally come for me to claim Master! Here I go!" She giggled, reaching for his chest.

At this point, nothing could stop her. The bothersome members of Yerkchira the Messianic Legion could only watch helplessly.

"Huh?"

Soulgros swayed unsteadily on top of Master. She had forgotten something important: despite outmaneuvering the formidable members of the guild, there was still an insurmountable wall—Master's self-control.

"Wh-Why do I feel so sleepy all of a sudden...?"

Her eyelids grew heavy. Unable to resist, Soulgros fell into a deep sleep, snoring loudly. Master chuckled as he looked at her, half-dressed and

slumbering soundly. Gently, he covered her with a blanket to keep her warm—assuming she could even catch a cold.

Had Soulgros used her right to request anything from Master to ask for a night together, things might have turned out differently.



## Chapter 44: Lucil's Guild

**“Raaaaaargh!”**

The roar of a monster—an orc—echoed through the forest. The creature's filthy, massive body was barely covered, exposing a distended, unhealthy belly. In one hand, it wielded a giant club, a weapon that had claimed many victims.

The orc had been wandering the forest in search of prey when it stumbled upon a group of five humans. Seeing that only one of them was an adult while the other four were children, it attacked without hesitation, disregarding the possibility that they might be adventurers.

“Yaaaaaah!”

The orc's mighty club was skillfully deflected by one of the children, a red-haired boy. The weapon struck the ground forcefully, causing the orc's hand to go numb.

“Lucika!”

“Yes!”

At the call of the boy who had deflected the attack, a girl with long red hair, similar in appearance to the boy, dashed toward the orc. Despite their resemblance, Lucika did not appear boyish; rather, the boy had a more androgynous look. Lucika was small and slender, hardly looking like an adventurer.

“Take this!”

“Raaaaaargh?! ”

Lucika's movements were those of a seasoned adventurer. She swung her sword, slicing through the orc's thick leg as she passed by. Although the cut wasn't deep enough to sever the tendon, the unexpected sharp pain made the orc scream.

“Roooooooooar!”

The orc, enraged, glared at Lucika and raised its club to strike her. Despite the looming threat, Lucika showed no fear. She trusted that her reliable companions would come to her aid.

“Ild!”

“Got it!”

Just as Lucika had anticipated, the boy’s voice rang out. He called out the name of the only adult in their five-member party. With just that call, Ild understood what was required of him and immediately cast his signature spell.

“Grrr...?”

The orc’s movements, which had been aimed at striking Lucika with its club, suddenly slowed. It seemed to lose sight of her, even though it had been about to attack her in a fit of rage. Of course, Lucika hadn’t moved from her spot, so there was no reason for the orc to lose track of her. This anomaly was the result of Ild’s illusion magic. The orc’s senses, which it normally relied on, were now being manipulated by Ild.

“Lucika, now!” Ild called out.

“Got it! Thank you, Ild!” Lucika replied, shaking her red hair as she darted away from the orc.

As she moved aside, the boy took her place and charged at the orc.

“Yaaaaaah!”

With a spirited shout, he slashed at the immobilized orc. Aiming for the creature’s neck—since the fat-laden belly wouldn’t take much damage from his sword—the boy delivered a precise strike, successfully decapitating the orc.

“That was amazing!”

Seeing the fallen orc, the two remaining members of the party, who hadn’t participated in the battle, rushed over to the boy and girl. One of them, a child about the same age as the boy, looked at him with sparkling eyes.

“Lucil, you’re incredible!”

“Hey!”

The girl, who hadn't been involved in the fight, lightly smacked the boy's head and puffed out her cheeks in admonishment.

“You have to call him ‘guildmaster’!”

“No, it's fine,” Lucil said with a sheepish smile, feeling a bit embarrassed at being called guildmaster.

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In the end, Lucil's guild did not dissolve. After losing Apollo, Ligg, and Pelorro, Lucil and Lucika couldn't meet the minimum requirement of five members to maintain their guild. Even with the powerful illusionist Ild joining and boosting their strength, it wouldn't mean anything if they didn't fulfill the basic requirements. Typically, adventurers from disbanded guilds would join other guilds, but Lucil and Lucika had no intention of leaving. This guild was a precious memory of their time with Apollo and their family, irreplaceable by any other.

The fact remained that they didn't meet the guild requirements though. They were deeply troubled about what to do until the solution came unexpectedly. They rescued two children from a monster attack outside the town, and those children expressed a desire to join their guild. These two were the same boy and girl who had been watching Lucil and the others fight the orc earlier. They were still novices as adventurers, and seeing the battle up close had inspired them.

“Lucika-san, you were amazing out there!”

“Uh, thanks,” Lucika replied, a bit overwhelmed as the girl, who was around her age, jumped up and down in excitement. Lucika wasn't used to such reactions and felt a bit uncomfortable. Despite being the same age, the girl greatly admired Lucika for her strength and always praised her effusively. Lucil thought it was about time Lucika got used to the attention.

“The real hero here is Master! I've never seen anyone take down an orc so cleanly!”

“I told you to stop that!” Lucil, blushing, tried to quiet the boy who was innocently praising him. Though he was embarrassed, he appreciated being recognized for his skills and enjoyed the praise.

However, Lucil found it difficult to accept being called Master.

“You’ve been the Guild Master for a while now, so you should be used to it by now...” Ild remarked.

“Shut up!”

“Ouch?!”

Lucil, irritated by Ild echoing his own thoughts about Lucika, kicked him in the butt. It was one thing to think it himself, but hearing it from someone else was different.

“I really don’t think I’m cut out to be a guildmaster...” Lucil muttered, unusually pessimistic for his typically strong-willed personality.

In his mind, there were two guildmasters. One was the former master of their guild, Apollo. Despite his bad drinking habits, Apollo cared deeply for the guild members, treating them like family. Lucil had even looked up to Apollo as a father figure at times.

The other was the master of the dark guild, Yerkchira the Messianic Legion. This man had helped them break the curse placed on Lucika, demonstrating an overwhelming strength that easily subdued Luscelt, the guildmaster of Heinichen.

Both were very different, yet both were fitting guildmasters. Apollo had the kindness to cherish his guild members, while the Master had the strength to protect them. These were qualities Lucil felt he lacked, especially since he had endangered his guild members for Lucika’s sake and couldn’t stand up to Luscelt.

“Big brother, are you worried?” Lucika asked, her smile mischievous.

“I-I’m not worried at all!” Lucil quickly denied, but Lucika, being his sister, easily saw through him. She gave him a gentle smile.

“You might not be as great as Doctor, but you’re doing your best,” she said.

“O-Oh...”

Lucil couldn't tell if he was being encouraged or insulted.

“Sigh... Doctor...”

Lucika let out a sigh filled with emotion, almost as if she were feverish. Ever since the Master had saved her, her behavior had been peculiar. It was natural to feel grateful for being saved, but her actions and words now resembled those of a dangerously infatuated young girl. She had cried, blaming herself for Apollo and the others' deaths, but as she began to recover, her behavior took this odd turn. It seemed to have started after she drank the Elixir from the large flower worn by one of Master's guild members, a little girl named Laladie.

“Leaving Lucika aside, I think you're doing well, Lucil,” Ild said.

Lucil looked at the illusion magic user, who had joined their ranks after the incident. Initially, he harbored anger and resentment toward Ild for being part of Heinichen. However, as they worked together, Lucil came to understand Ild's true nature and overcame those feelings. Now, Ild supported Lucil as the guildmaster and often took on the role of managing the four often unruly children.

“That's right! I look up to you, Lucil!” the boy said, his eyes sparkling.

“Master might not be as amazing as Lucika-san, but he's still great,” the girl added, though her comment included an unnecessary comparison.

“You guys...”

Hearing their words made Lucil rethink his doubts. It wasn't about whether he could or couldn't do it; he had to do it. He couldn't let the guild, which bore the legacy of Apollo, Ligg, and Pelorro, disappear. He had to work hard to ensure they could smile down on him from the afterlife.

“All right! We're going to make this guild so great that we can catch up to the Master and his guild someday!”

“Yeah!”

Lucil raised his fist, and Lucika and the others followed suit, raising theirs in unison. Lucil's guild was embarking on a new beginning.

“Well, that might be a bit difficult,” Ild muttered, but his words didn’t reach the enthusiastic children.

## Chapter 45: The Kingdom's Puppet Master

**“T**his... this can't be happening...”

The prince, one of the most influential figures in the kingdom, held his head in his hands in his private chambers. As the first in line for the throne, he could virtually enact anything he desired within the kingdom. Yet, only one thing could trouble him to this extent.

“Heinichen the Steel Matriarch has been destroyed...?”

The cause of the prince's shock was the report of the annihilation of a dark guild, Heinichen the Steel Matriarch, which he had personally nurtured. This guild was one of the few dark guilds and was regarded as the most feared and terrible in the kingdom. If the public were to learn of this fact, it would undoubtedly cause an uproar, but only the prince and a select few close aides were aware of it.

His sister, the princess, who was his adversary in both name and fact, seemed to have sensed something, but she had not discovered his alliance with the Steel Matriarch. Now, the prince no longer needed to worry about that. The Steel Matriarch had been obliterated without a trace.

“To think that they would be defeated... N-No, this must mean that the members of Yerkchira the Messianic Legion are truly monsters!”

The prince ground his teeth in frustration. The reason for the downfall of Heinichen the Steel Matriarch lay in a mission he had issued.

He had ordered the extermination of another dark guild, Yerkchira the Messianic Legion, which was even more feared by the state and the upper echelons of other guilds than Heinichen.

It wasn't that the prince had been harmed by them. Rather, he feared that his greatest enemy, the princess, might align herself with a dark guild just as he had. Among the dark guilds operating within the kingdom, only two were of

concern: Yerkchira the Messianic Legion and Heinichen the Steel Matriarch. The latter was already under the prince's control, leaving Yerkchira as the primary threat.

Thus, he had issued the extermination order to eliminate the potential danger, but the result was a complete reversal. The prince had lost his valuable pawns and now faced the possibility of having drawn the ire of Yerkchira the Messianic Legion.

"That fool, Luscelt! After all his boasting, to lose so disgracefully!"

The prince trembled with rage as he remembered Luscelt's annoying laughter. Though he found the man utterly untrustworthy on a personal level, he had placed great faith in Luscelt's combat abilities. Losing such significant military power was a severe blow.

Of course, as a prince, he had considerable resources at his disposal, including knights with abilities on par with Ritter, one of the kingdom's most skilled Royal Knights. However, these knights, despite their rugged, adventurer-like nature compared to the princess's knights, couldn't be publicly given dirty jobs. This was where the usefulness of a dark guild came in handy.

"Damn it! Who am I supposed to entrust with these shadowy tasks now?" the prince cursed.

While the Royal Knights loyal to him would follow his orders, mere obedience wasn't enough. They needed to be capable of executing those orders effectively. This was why he had previously manipulated Longman, one of the Hero's Party, to attack Yerkchira the Messianic Legion with the support of Royal Knights. That attempt had ended in a complete defeat, proving their lack of sufficient power. Heinichen had been the ideal tool for such operations, but now...

"Sigh... Calm down. I need to make sure that she doesn't find out about my connections with the dark guild," the prince muttered, beginning to ponder if there was any incriminating evidence left behind.

There were likely few physical traces. When he brought in Heinichen, no formal written contracts had been made; everything was handled verbally. While he hadn't completely dismissed the possibility of betrayal, he had his own



elite forces and considerable strength, being a regular at the adventurer's guild himself. Although he couldn't win a direct confrontation with Luscelt, he could buy enough time to summon his elite forces. There had never been any real trust between himself and Luscelt; they had merely used each other for mutual benefit.

"So, the next concern is human evidence..." the prince thought aloud. He decided to summon a certain man through one of his maids.

After a while, there was a knock on the door.

"Enter," the prince commanded.

The door opened, and a tall man stepped in. He was significantly taller than the prince, with a rugged face that suggested he was a seasoned warrior. He wore thick armor, but it was easy to imagine the well-trained physique beneath. A crimson cape, permitted only for those recognized by the king, billowed behind him.

"What do you require, my prince?" the knight asked, kneeling.

"Humph! I wouldn't call you if I didn't have a need!" The prince sneered, clearly displeased with the knight's presence. Wasting no time, he got straight to the point.

"You know that I have been keeping the Steel Matriarch under my control, correct?"

"Yes..."

"They've been annihilated by the Messianic Legion."

The knight remained silent, showing no visible reaction. However, unseen by the prince, a slight twitch of his brow betrayed his inner thoughts.

"Are you asking me to exterminate Yerkchira the Messianic Legion?"

"Don't be foolish!" The prince's sneer turned into a clear, mocking laugh.

"Most likely, Luscelt didn't reveal that his actions were under my orders to Yerkchira. Besides, it was Luscelt who was eager to fight them in the first place."

The prince recalled how Luscelt had frequently sought reasons to attack Yerkchira.

“Moreover, a clash between dark guilds would have left the victor significantly weakened. They must be in a weakened state now, making them less of a threat,” the prince reasoned, though he was, unfortunately, mistaken.

“I need you to play a crucial role in the increasingly intense battle for the throne.”

“I understand,” the knight replied, still looking down. The prince, satisfied, nodded approvingly.

“Good. Here are your orders: investigate anyone who knows or suspects my connection with the dark guild and report to me. And for those I deem unnecessary... dispose of them.”

“Understood.”

With that, the knight rose, bowed at the door, and left the room. Watching him leave, the prince chuckled quietly to himself.

“Things haven’t been going well lately, but with that man, I won’t lose. The next king will be me.”

## Chapter 46: Path to the Kingdom

**“A**m I to be tied up as well?” Soulgros asked, bound to a chair in the dining hall. This scene mirrored a previous occasion when a certain loli had taken Master out.

“Of course, you perverted stalker. We’re about to execute you,” said the loli, looking down at Soulgros with a smug grin. Clearly, she was enjoying the reversal of roles.

“Dragging Master around and getting him involved in a fight with Scrap Metal, it’s unbelievable. Not to mention letting the enemy master overpower you and needing Master to protect you...”

“I’m so jealous!” Vampille shouted, interrupting Laladie. Corine’s icy words quickly silenced her.

“Vampille, quiet!”

In the end, the members of Yerkchira the Messianic Legion were simply jealous that Soulgros had been protected by Master.

“Come on now. We did manage to defeat Heinichen the Steel Matriarch, so there’s no need to be so hard on Soulgros.” Leiss, the voice of reason within the group, tried to mediate. However, the others, upset about Soulgros having good memories with Master, weren’t placated. Schwarte, although her words remained calm, exuded an aura of discontent.

“Indeed, we might have issues with Soulgros, but we need the information she possesses,” Anat, the nominal leader of Yerkchira, said, diffusing the immediate tension. Despite this, the members were still not entirely satisfied, as it wasn’t Master’s directive.

“That’s right, Laladie. We must endure the unendurable,” Soulgros said, attempting to justify herself.

“Ugh! When did you get loose?! And stop touching me! Who knows what your body is mixed with?” Laladie recoiled.

“That’s so mean...” Soulgros lamented.

Soulgros nodded enthusiastically and patted Laladie on the shoulder. Laladie, more upset about being touched than about Soulgros escaping her bonds, grumbled in discontent. Being a slime species, slipping out of ropes was an easy task for Soulgros.

“So? Did you get any useful information from the master of that Scrap Metal guild?” Anat asked.

“Indeed. I discovered two reasons why Scrap Metal attacked us. One was Luscelt-dono’s animosity toward us. The other was a bounty issued by the prince,” Soulgros answered smoothly.

It was now clear to Yerkchira that the prince was involved. Luscelt hadn’t voluntarily disclosed this information; Soulgros had extracted it by forcefully tampering with his mind. Expecting the prince to foresee this was unreasonable.

“Why is the kingdom involved?” Vampille asked, displaying her lack of understanding—or interest.

“So, the kingdom is involved after all?” Anat mused, quickly piecing together the implications of Soulgros’s report. This ability to quickly grasp underlying truths was why she was the de facto leader, even if only nominally.

“By the way, I heard the kingdom is becoming quite unstable. Is that true?” Leiss asked, turning to Ritter, the “Kingdom Observer.” Ritter, who had been quietly maintaining her sword in preparation to cut down Soulgros, nodded impassively.

“The succession struggle is intensifying... or so I’ve heard.”

“O-Or so you’ve heard...? Are you not certain...?” Krankheit asked, her voice filled with concern as she watched Ritter tilt her head.

“I’m not interested,” Ritter replied flatly.

“Then what’s the point of being the ‘Kingdom Observer’?!” Corine exclaimed. What kind of observer lacks interest in their target? Corine’s outburst was met with nothing more than a tilted head from Ritter. Ritter’s unwavering loyalty to only those she personally acknowledged made her both a pure and frustrating ally. Unfortunately for Corine, she wasn’t one of the few Ritter deemed worth listening to.

“Nina said it... There’s going to be a lot more fighting from now on.”

“Nina is the princess of the kingdom,” Soulgros added, filling in the gaps in Ritter’s terse explanation.

“This sounds like a hassle,” Vampille remarked, seemingly uninterested.

“Whenever a new head of state is to be decided, it’s bound to be troublesome in any country,” Schwarte replied.

Indeed, with many nations adhering to absolute monarchies, such power struggles often became messy affairs.

“In any case, we need to deal with the prince who attempted to harm Master,” Anat said, and the others nodded in agreement.

Yes, the prince who forced Master into battle must be made to pay. The primary culprit, Heinichen the Steel Matriarch, was already dealt with—only one member had survived, and those who hadn’t participated in the attack on Yerkchira had already been killed by Leiss and Corine.

“Among the dark guilds, the dominance of Yerkchira the Messianic Legion is now certain. It’s time to consider something bigger,” Anat said.

“Oh? So, what do you plan to do?” Laladie asked, intrigued.

Anat smiled brightly. “We will take the kingdom.”

*The Dark Guildmaster's Smile Would Fit Best*

**THE MASTER  
AND SOULGROS'  
ENCOUNTER**

## Chapter 47: The Master and Soulgnos's Encounter

**A** lone slime stood on the plain. It was a small, liquid creature—an archetypal slime, considered the weakest monster in this world. Unlike poisonous slimes with their myriad toxins or giant slimes large enough to engulf humans, which required trained knights or adventurers to handle, this standard slime was far from a threat. An ordinary adult could easily kick it to death, and even playful children could end its life with ruthless attacks. It was truly a weak, weak monster.

The slime wobbled gently in the breeze on a pleasant grassy field. One might think it had been separated from its companions, but slimes lacked the memory capacity to remember such things. Low intelligence, low abilities—this was why they were called “trash monsters.”

However...

*Hmm... This is bad,* the slime thought.

This slime was an anomaly. It could think and feel emotions. Although it couldn't speak aloud and its emotions were simple and subdued, this was astonishing in itself. To researchers of monsters, such a slime would be an extraordinary find, immediately captured for study.

*To think our final boss would appear out of nowhere... This is the price of wandering thoughtlessly,* the slime mused.

For slimes, the final boss was none other than a child. Knights? Adventurers? They didn't bother with creatures that posed no threat to people. Slimes had to watch out for children who played by mercilessly smashing them. Thus, slimes avoided places where children might be—near villages and towns.

This was a basic survival instinct. Unfortunately, slimes typically lacked the intelligence to understand this, except for this one peculiar slime. It had barely escaped from a group of slimes that had been decimated by a group of playful children.

Why, then, had such an intelligent slime been associating with its low-intelligence brethren?

*“My meat shields are gone!”* That was the crux of it. Slimes were weak. This intelligent and emotional slime was no different; it could be easily killed by a child’s kick.

Thus, it had used its fellow slimes as shields or decoys to survive. But those shields had been quickly destroyed, leaving it all alone.

*Now, what should I do...? There are no children to torment me, nor are there any monsters. This place is perfect for living... except there’s no water here,* it thought.

The lack of water was the reason it couldn’t stay. Water was essential for a slime’s body. Without it, it would truly die. The slime’s core allowed it to regenerate as long as water was available, which was perhaps their only advantage. But this advantage was now a burden. While slimes could also consume magical energy, a weak slime attempting to steal magic from others was usually met with death. Despite its high intelligence, this slime had no more abilities than any other slime.

*Why do I have such high intelligence and emotions?* it wondered. If it were like other slimes, it would have been crushed by children and died quickly. But having intelligence and emotions meant it wanted to live and took action to ensure its survival.

*Perhaps it would be better to spend my remaining time here until I die of thirst. At least here, I can spend my final moments peacefully,* it thought. Struggling to survive was exhausting. It had sacrificed its fellow slimes and fled desperately—what awaited it at the end of such a struggle? Instead of continuing to fight, it considered embracing a peaceful end.

“Grrrr...”

*Ah, it’s over for me,* the slime thought, accepting its fate as a wolf monster appeared in front of it. Slimes were liquid creatures with a core that was inedible and easily crushed if they got in the way. Now, the slime was directly in the wolf’s path. Without seeing it as a threat, the wolf casually lifted its paw, as



if to kick a pebble aside. Just as the slime accepted its imminent death, the wolf suddenly turned around.

The wolf's face contorted with panic.

And then...

"Yelp! Yelp!" The strong-looking wolf let out an unlikely cry of fear and bolted away. The slime's life was spared, but the presence that had scared off the wolf was now approaching.

*Take me with you, too,* the slime internally screamed, but it was futile. Unable to speak, it could only watch as the wolf disappeared. Soon, the sound of footsteps approached.

Finally, the figure appeared before the slime.

*A human?*

A man with golden hair and an impeccably structured face stood there. His expression was so emotionless it seemed almost mechanical, creating an aura of intimidation. As he looked down at the trembling slime on the ground, the slime felt a chill deep within its core.

In that moment, the slime understood why the wolf had fled in terror. Normally, humans were mere prey for such creatures, yet this one had made the wolf run. The reason was now crystal clear.

*This man... is on another level!*

It wasn't about strength or weakness. There was something about this man that instilled an undeniable sense of defeat.

*Please, just pass by without doing anything!* the slime wished, but that hope was shattered when the man reached out his hand.

*Ah... This is the end for me. My short life as a slime ends here...* the slime thought, resigning itself to its fate as the man's hand approached.

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Incredibly, the slime was still alive. Not only that, but it found itself being gently held and petted on the man's lap. This scenario had been repeating daily for nearly a week. Every day, the man returned, placed the slime on his lap, and petted it.

And each day, he opened his mouth to speak, sharing his grievances. He lamented about wanting to befriend children, only to make them cry, or how people avoided him whenever he tried to converse with them. The slime wanted to tell him to do something about his expressionless face and intimidating aura, but unfortunately, it lacked the ability to speak. Despite the man's annoying rants, the slime had a simple reason for not running away.

The man's touch was warm and soothing, and in his presence, the slime felt safe from other predators. Moreover, his gentle petting, despite his complaints, was oddly comforting. It was a strange relationship, but the slime, with its limited capacity for understanding, accepted it.



*Ah... The magic I get from this man is still the best,* the slime thought contentedly.

It was able to absorb the magic power from this man instead of water, which was essential for its survival. And it was of exceptionally high quality. Without it, the slime might have fled long ago... maybe.

The gentle petting and the kindness it received were new experiences for the slime. This might have contributed to its decision not to leave... or so it tried to convince itself.

*No, no, I don't have such a weak mindset. I stay with this man because I can get the magic power I need to live. That's all it is,* the slime reassured itself, trying to banish any softer thoughts.

*But the magic is so delicious, and I'm getting stronger. His petting is gentle too... Maybe not all humans are bad,* it mused.

Whether it was because the slime was unique or because the man's magic was exceptional, it felt itself growing stronger. It seemed capable of many things now. So, for the time being, the slime decided it wasn't so bad to stay and listen to the man's complaints.

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"Go-zaru."

Another week had passed since the slime had accepted the man. Incredibly, the slime had now taken on a human form and could even speak, though the only word it could say was "Go-zaru."

Despite its small, child-like form, the fact that a slime could transform and speak at all was extraordinary. This anomaly was likely caused by the combination of the slime's unique nature and the man's high-quality, unusual magic. Now evolved, the slime could have left the man, considering its newfound strength...

"Go-zaru."

Instead, it clung to him even more, seeking affection.

*This is... It's just to absorb more magic by staying close to him. With this unusual evolution, I can further evolve by taking in more of his magic. I can become strong enough that I won't have to run from anything anymore... So, that's why I'm doing this. There's no other reason,* the slime rationalized.

Despite its excuses, the slime had no intention of leaving the man. Dressed in clothes bought for a child, it had fully settled into its new life.

"Go-zaru," it murmured, cuddling up to the still-expressionless man.

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*I wonder if he's here yet,* the slime thought, kicking its legs back and forth while waiting for the man. By now, it had become clear that the slime was deeply attached to him. Suddenly, the sound of footsteps approaching through the soil reached its ears.

*He's here!* the slime thought happily, turning around...

But instead of the anticipated man, a group of rough-looking thugs appeared, causing its face to fall.

"Hey, there's really a kid here," one of them said, confirming what they had heard from a merchant they had attacked.

"Dumped, huh?" another sneered. "Doesn't matter. With that face, she'll be a beauty someday."

"Don't get any ideas. Even kids like this can fetch a high price with the right buyer. We're selling her for cash," the first thug replied.

"Yeah, yeah," the others agreed, grinning as they approached.

The slime understood. It knew that a kind person like the man who had held and petted it, sharing his magic, was rare. Most humans were greedy creatures.

The slime, despite its unique ability to take on a human form, had no way to fight off these thugs.

*Well, it was fun while it lasted. Maybe it's okay if it ends here,* the slime thought, resigned to its fate.

The slime, with its somewhat detached outlook, accepted its fate. It seemed overly casual, but that was its nature. However... if it could wish for one thing before the end...

*I would have liked to be petted by that man one more time,* it thought wistfully.

As if to shatter this small wish, the thugs reached out their hands...

“Please don’t touch my partner.”

“Huh...? Gwahh?!”

Just as a young man’s voice rang out, the closest thug to the slime was sent flying. It was a magic bullet—a concentrated blast of magic.

The thug was effortlessly blown away, and his companions, as well as the rescued slime, stared in wide-eyed amazement at the man who had saved them.

He was an enigmatic man, cold and imposing, yet strangely comforting.

*He... saved me...?* the slime thought in disbelief.

This was the first encounter between the man who would become the guildmaster of Yerkchira the Messianic Legion and Soulgros, who would become one of its members and his devoted stalker.

## Afterword

**T**hank you for picking up *The Dark Guild Master's Smile Would Fit Best, Volume 2*. This is Mizokami. Thanks to all of you, I was able to publish a second volume. I am filled with gratitude!

This time, Soulgros takes the spotlight as the main heroine. Thanks to Kozou-sensei's wonderful illustrations, she looks incredibly cute... even if she is a stalker. Kozou-sensei had a tough job designing all the heroines, but Soulgros turned out to be a favorite among them.

Of course, all the characters are adorable. Laladie, for example, is super cute. Yet, there's something about Soulgros that really struck a chord with me. Maybe it's her kunoichi charm?

In this volume, we also had a dark guild showdown, featuring another dark guild... which ended up getting annihilated. I love writing about battles between evil organizations, so being able to include such a plot in the second volume made me really happy.

In the short story, I wrote a bit about Master's past. It features a time when he didn't wear his usual smile. I'd love to write about how his interactions with the future guild members softened him over time. Initially, Soulgros couldn't take on a human form and was just a weak, albeit special, slime. Exploring her growth and her deepening devotion to the Master is something I'd like to delve into someday.

A big thank you to my editor, S-san. I'm still learning, and your support has been invaluable.

Kozou-sensei, thank you once again for the fantastic illustrations. The artwork of Soulgros, who was the main heroine this time, and Krankheit, who received illustrations for the first time, were particularly delightful.

And to all the readers who picked up the second volume, thank you so much! I'm thrilled to have been able to release two books. I'm not sure about the next

volume yet, but I hope to meet you all again. Until then.





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