

The Dark Guild Master's Smile

would fit best

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YAMI GUILD NO MASTER HA KYOUMO HOHOEMU Vol. 1

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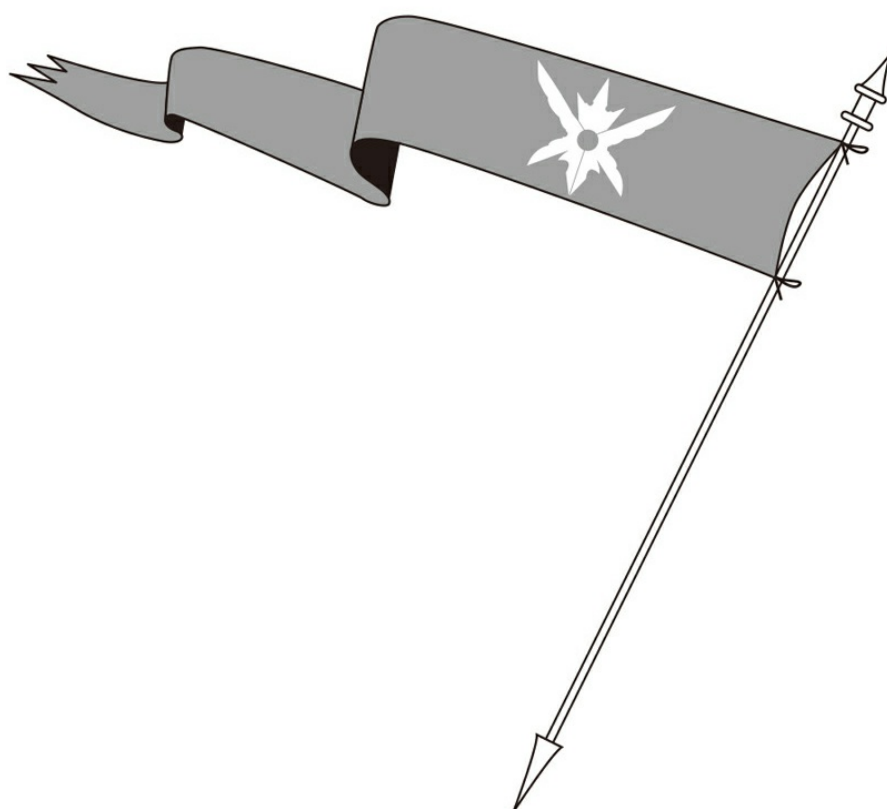


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The Dark Guild Master's Smile Would Fit Better

PROLOGUE

A NIGHT AT THE DARK GUILD

Chapter 1: Master of the Dark Guild

Was it that late already?

I looked at the hanging moon out the window and stopped working. After a good, long stretch, I rolled my stiff shoulders. Another day, another mountain of paperwork to tackle. I knew that in my position, paperwork was a better use of my time than being out in the field, but it seemed outright cruel that my guildmates were risking their lives and wellbeing while I, their superior, sat safe in the guild. They were all like children to me, and I hated that they were the only ones in danger.

I wished I could aid them more directly, but I knew they'd stop me and send me back inside in a heartbeat. Did they really think I was that useless? It hurt more than I wanted to admit. I wasn't anywhere near as strong as them, obviously, but I'd been traveling on my own before forming the guild, and I often relied on my own strength to break out of trouble. I was confident that I, at least, wouldn't be useless to them.

I pulled out a small portrait from within my desk—a rough drawing of my guild members. I had drawn it myself, in fact, and despite not being good at much of anything, it turned out decently well. As I looked each of them over in turn, I found myself smiling. In the end, I would always do what they wanted me to. I didn't have the mental fortitude to see them sad or upset.

Still, I was struck by how different I was compared to when I'd drawn the picture. I barely ever smiled back then, and I frequently intimidated my guildmates by accident. I didn't think I was that scary, but apparently I was wrong. It would've been weirder to smile, considering my work—and yet, after seeing the girls' reactions, I resolved to always smile, no matter what. Ever since then, they stopped crying or growing somber at the sight of me, instead smiling readily in return. It was certainly difficult at first. I was never the type to show my emotions; without good reason at least, but now it felt wrong to *not* smile.

A woman's voice sounded from behind me. "Hey there. Done with work, are you?"

She had long, flowing black hair and a broad smile. Her face held all the beauty of a goddess, and she had a remarkably voluptuous figure. Lesser men would've been spellbound, but I was utterly unaffected by her appearance.

My guildmates were all just as attractive, and they all enjoyed being near me, for whatever reason. I wasn't so crass as to see them in such a carnal light. They would hate me if I did, no doubt, and I was hellbent on avoiding that at all costs. In the process, I had developed something of a resistance to so-called "womanly charms."

"You're quite passionate, aren't you? I don't know anyone else who'd still be poring over quests this late."

I couldn't tell if she was impressed or disturbed—perhaps both—but I wasn't about to be swayed by the late hour. My guildmates would risk their lives on these quests. If the reward was insufficient, or if it seemed unusual or unsafe in any way, I couldn't let them take it on. It was the least I could do to make up for never taking the field myself.

She grimaced a little. "You seem to think that's reason enough to spend twenty hours a day at your desk. It's not."

I smiled back at her. Was she worried about me? I was flattered, really. More than that, I was impressed that she'd somehow snuck all the way into my office. She wasn't a member of the guild, but she frequently came to visit me nonetheless.

She chuckled. "It's not all that hard to make it in here, Master. I just need to leave before anyone notices me."

She was referring to my guildmates, no doubt. They were all incredibly powerful and very sensitive to unwelcome presences.

"Of course, it's not normal for *anyone* to detect me so easily," she muttered awkwardly.

By that same token, it was unusual for anyone to be able to slip past their security so easily.

“Well, that’s awfully nice of you to say, but...”

But what?

She drifted closer to me. “Have you decided to take me up on my offer?”

Her offer? The only offer I could think of was when she asked me to become hers.

“Yes, that,” she replied with a nod. “I can assure you that it comes with all kinds of benefits. Would you like to know a spell to extend your lifespan? Or perhaps you’d prefer to spend some more... *intimate* time together? I’ll do whatever you ask.”

I wasn’t aware there were benefits involved. Unfortunately for her, I was already far longer-lived than any ordinary human, to the point where I wouldn’t be dying for a great many years. So, I turned her down.

“Oh, you!” She pouted unhappily.

How many times had I declined her offer already? I wished that she’d just give up. No matter what she promised me, I would never belong to her. I had my guild to look after.

She let out a sigh of resignation. “You like this place that much, do you?”

I did—though to be precise, I loved the people in it.

“No wonder they like you so much. You’re infuriatingly kind.”

Wait, *they* liked *me*? I had no idea. Most of my time was spent working, after all, and most days I hardly even saw them. Still, I was happy to hear that, and more than a little bashful.

“I think I understand why they want to give you the world.”

It took me a moment to process what she said. I was happy to receive any kind of present from them, but I had to have misheard what they were giving me.

“Oops, I’d best be going. I wouldn’t want them to find me here.”

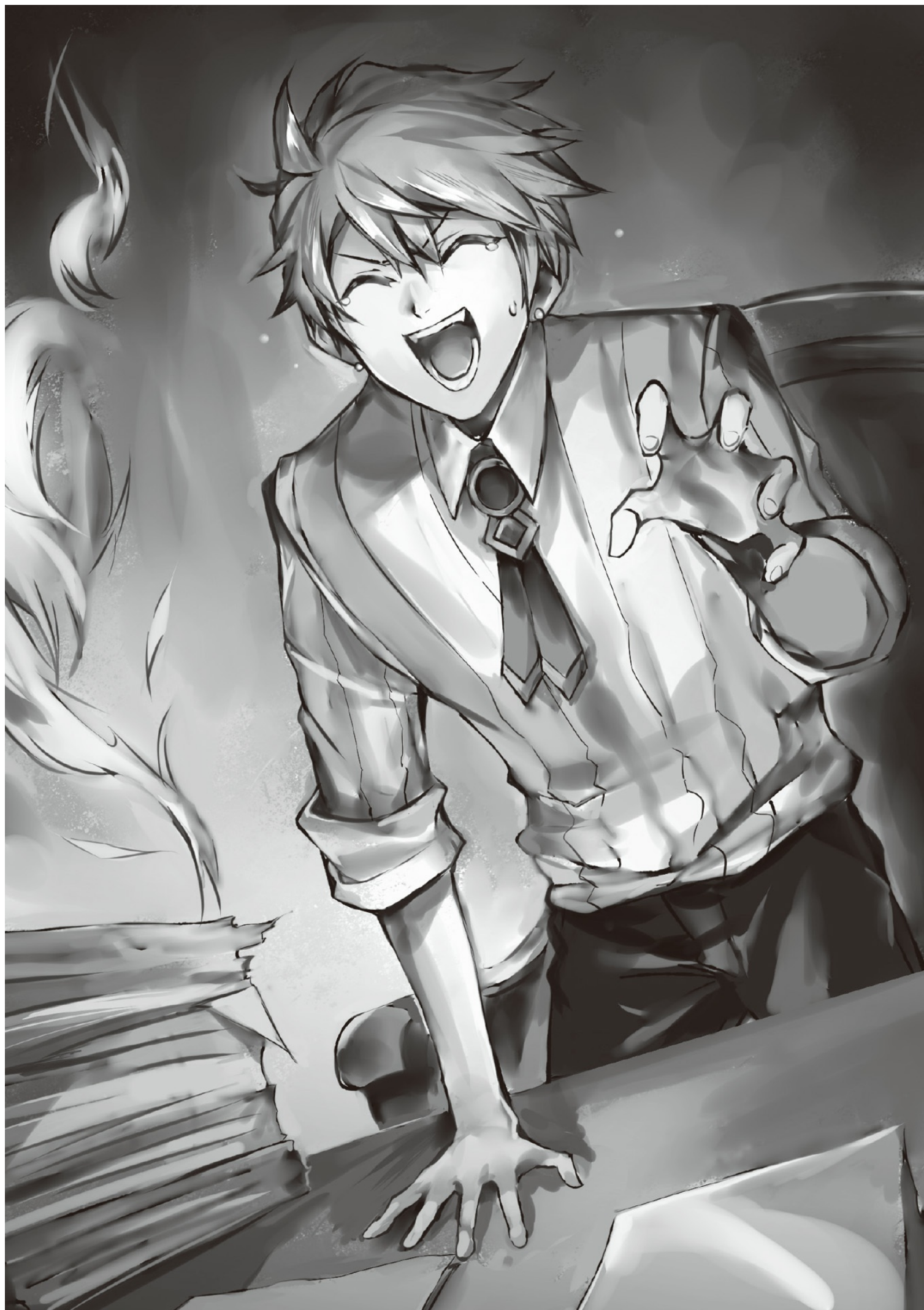
She pulled away from me, and from the way she... jiggled... it was clear she was trying to leave a strong, lasting impression. But she had to wait. I needed to

know what she said!

“I’ll see you later then, Master. You’ll be mine sooner or later!”

With that, she smiled alluringly and disappeared into thin air.

Wait! What exactly did she mean by “the world”? What were those girls planning now?! I’m so worried that it feels like my heart is going to stop. Come baaack!!



Chapter 2: The Dark Guild Subjugation Squad

“So, uh... Where are we going again?”

“What?”

The man glared at his accomplice who had asked an idiotic question as their group filed down the dark, narrow path. It was the middle of the night, and the dark forest around them seemed to unnaturally amplify their voices.

Does this jackass seriously not know? the man found himself wondering.

“The hell are you doing here if you don’t remember?”

The accomplice scratched his head. “I’m low on cash, you see...”

“Low? Didn’t you just say you got a big haul?”

“Well, yeah, but slaves don’t come cheap!” He smiled sheepishly, batting his eyes as if pretending to ask for forgiveness.

The man resisted the urge to vomit. He might’ve forgiven the accomplice if he was at least the slightest bit attractive, but on that heinous criminal’s face, the gesture was simply disgusting.

“Shut up about the slaves, will you?” the man hissed. “We ain’t the only ones on this job.”

“Oops!”

The accomplice nervously looked around for anyone who might’ve overheard him.

Slavery was technically illegal in the Kingdom of Efan. Within many circles, however, holding slaves was implicitly accepted. Nobles and military officers, especially, were exempt from the law, as they were generally seen as too important to prosecute over something so small. The man and his accomplice, as members of a gray guild that frequently committed crimes, were likewise unconcerned with the law.

“Yes, you really *must* be more careful,” said a deep voice from behind them. “If we hear you discussing such crimes, we’ll have to arrest you.”

They’d been overheard after all. The speaker was a tall man in armor, upon which the knights’ insignia was emblazoned. With that, however, he dropped the matter. The man saw a sort of kinship in the knight. Clearly, they weren’t so different after all.

“Sorry ‘bout that!” the accomplice said with a grin, bowing apologetically. “I don’t have any slaves, honest!”

“A little late for that.” The knight smirked back.

No ordinary person would be privy to such a sight, of course. Gray guilds were far from legal, and for them to be working so openly with the Royal Knights? It was unthinkable. The knight himself, however, was strolling along with them as though it were only natural. The man was nothing but grateful for his generosity.

“So? Where are we going?” the accomplice asked again.

“We’re going to destroy the dark guild in these woods,” the knight replied.

“Huh... Wait, seriously?!”

The accomplice was shocked. Small wonder.

The gray guild the two men belonged to was a criminal organization by any measure, but still only recognized as “gray.” Dark guilds were another matter entirely and were under special scrutiny from the Kingdom. The man hardly knew of any. Each was a massive syndicate that could rival entire countries in power. There were supposedly very few of them to reflect that fact—most estimates said you could count them on one hand.

Their target that night was the somewhat irregular dark guild that laired in that forest, on the border of the Kingdom of Efan—Yerkchira, the Messianic Legion. They were strange in just how little was known about them. The Kingdom was careful to keep its name out of the public consciousness, and most of its people had never heard the cursed name of Yerkchira before in their lives.

Two things about their foe were certain, however. The first was that their headquarters lay squarely within Efan's borders, and the second was that they were many times smaller than any other dark guild.

"No wonder the reward money was so damn much," the accomplice muttered, finally putting it all together.

The man shook his head, scowling. "Read the whole posting next time, dumbass."

"Don't blame me! There was hardly anything there to read!" Since it seemed like a good enough opportunity to ask more, he continued, "Are we really taking on a dark guild like this? I know I'm good in a fight, but this's a small group."

The knight guffawed. "Why so nervous? You're specialists in violence, and you have the might of the Royal Knights with you! Cheer up, man!"

He was right. Likely, they'd be more than fine. A *real* dark guild like Heinichen, the Steel Matriarch, was different. They were widely feared for their violence and cruelty, with a reputation that was well-known even among the common folk. Yerkchira was essentially unknown, which logically meant that they weren't evil enough to earn much of a reputation. They couldn't be that much of a threat—especially with how small their numbers were said to be. Their subjugation squad was more than capable of clearing them out.

"Whatcha guys doing?" echoed a young girl's voice from the darkness.

"Shit!" the man cursed, jumping in surprise.

They were deep in the forest, far from any towns or villages, and no normal person would be there, especially in the middle of the night. Even more disturbing was the apparent youth of the voice. The accomplice and the knight seemed every bit as shocked.

The man squinted ahead through the darkness until, finally, he spotted the speaker.

"Damn... It really is a kid."

She had long, fluffy green hair, and she regarded them with confusion as the man and his allies approached. She had a large floral hairpin, which struck the man as somewhat unusual.

“What’re you doing way out here?” the man asked.

“Lala could ask you the same thing, mister!” she chirped back. “Lala lives here with her *special person*.”

Something about her tone was oddly stiff and mature, and the way she sighed as she mentioned this “special person” was oddly sexual. The man was in no way attracted to children, but even he felt his heart skip a beat.

Her response itself gave the man more questions than answers. He was positive that there weren’t any settlements nearby. That must mean she lived alone with... whoever her companion was. He cast a sidelong look at the knight, trusting he had a better grasp of the area.

“She must be a wanderer of some sort,” the knight whispered. “There are plenty of folks like her that live in the wilderness, often due to a falling-out with their home village.”

The man nodded. That sounded reasonable enough.

“She’s pretty cute, too,” the accomplice added with an unsettling grin as he began to approach the girl.

The man looked at him with open revulsion. “You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

“No, no, I don’t mean it like that!” he protested. “But she’s got a pretty sweet face, y’know? She could fetch a pretty penny.”

The man let out a sigh of relief, though he knew the accomplice’s plan wasn’t much better. Still, he could easily imagine how much she’d sell for.

“Course, I’d keep her if she wasn’t a kid,” the accomplice continued with a snicker. “I like ‘em older.”

Nobody so much as batted an eye. It was just par for the course when working for a gray guild. The man felt a slight pang of guilt, but he made no move to stop his accomplice.

The knight simply shook his head. “Could you at least wait until my back is turned?”

Of course, he wouldn’t stop the accomplice. After all, no knight who would willingly work with such criminals could have any real conscience.

“So why are you here?” the girl asked.

The accomplice grinned in a way that made the man feel dirty. “You see, sweetie, us big, strong men are gonna go beat up a big, bad guild around here. We’re like the Hero. Why don’t you stick with me where it’s safe?”

The man was surprised his accomplice would be so bald-faced about his desire to kidnap the child, but she didn’t even flinch. She must have been incredibly dense, and it was clear at that point that the girl was as good as sold. It would be a handsome payout, too, if he found a noble with the right appetites. *I’ll have him treat me to drinks when this is over.*

The accomplice’s grin widened. His thoughts had probably turned to how he’d spend the money already.

“Oh, okay.” The emotion dropped from the child’s voice, and she gave the accomplice a look of blank indifference. “So, you’re here to hurt Lala and the others.”

The accomplice froze. “Wh-What?”

That was the last word he ever said. The ground split beneath his feet as something colossal emerged and “ate” him.

“Wh-What the hell...?”

The man couldn’t believe his eyes. In front of him was a massive plant, with vines and roots roiling and flailing as though it were more animal than vegetable. It was unmistakably a flower; however, larger and more terrifying than anything he had ever seen.

“Shit!”

The man could only watch as the accomplice’s top half flopped out from between the edges of the petal-mouth. He let out a strained shriek of fear and agony, and with a wet crunch, blood exploded from between his lips. His eyes

glossed over, the light departing them like a candle out of wax. He was dead, no doubt about it. The plant had bitten him in half.

The man whipped about to beg for help from his comrades, but what he saw was even more upsetting. The panicked cries of his friends assailed his ears.

“H-Help me!”

“Gaaaaaahh!!”

Where the rest of his guildmates and the knights once stood, there was now a field of writhing, tentacle-like roots. They were unnaturally pointed, and as he watched, they tore through the people’s helpless, fleshy bodies with ease.

“Plants...?” he muttered in disbelief.

Blood spattered and sprayed against the trees, and the roots writhed in pleasure as they drank deep of their crimson bounty. Not even the knights’ plate mail offered any solace from the onslaught—if anything, it made it even easier to entrap them, the pointed wood hungrily boring through the metal and into their chests.

The girl pouted her lips as she looked out at the carnage she had caused. “Aww... There’s so many left.”

Her reaction, still largely devoid of emotion, was almost more terrifying than the roots themselves.

“Verily, Laladie-dono,” came another woman’s voice, this one much colder. “Thou hast much to learn yet.”

The next second, a flurry of kunai found their mark in the chest of one of the guildsmen. Blood dribbled from his mouth as his legs gave out. He was dead before he hit the ground.

Finally, the man noticed that a woman was standing next to the girl that seemed to be called Laladie. She was clad in a ninja’s dark garb, and while only the scant bit of skin around her eyes was visible, he could guess from the bulge at her chest that she was a woman.

The woman shot the girl a disapproving look. “If thou art useless even within thine own forest, thou shalt not ever prove thine worth.”

“Shut up!” Laladie snapped back angrily. “Lala only messed up because she was trying to avoid you guys! Lala would’ve killed them all if she was alone!”

“I find myself doubtful of thine claim.”

“Why, you...!”

The remnants of the subjugation squad stared affixed at the couple as they argued. The man could feel hatred bubble up from within his chest as their attackers continued to ignore them.

“Fucking bitches!” one of the guildsmen spat as he drew his sword. “I’ll fuckin’ kill you!”

He charged towards them, but he never got close enough to strike. A knight had come out of nowhere and taken his head clean off his shoulders with a single deft swipe. Then, without her face betraying so much as a whisper of emotion, she wiped the blood from her blade.

The knight pointed a shuddering finger at her. “R-Ritter-dono?! Why are you here? No, why are you siding with *them*?!”

She cocked her head to the side in confusion, her black hair swaying only slightly. “I’m a member of Yerkchira,” she replied bluntly.

“What?!” All the gathered knights recoiled in shock and horror.

A Royal Knight working with the Messianic Legion? It was unfathomable.

One of the knights at the back of the formation trembled for a moment before breaking off in a run back the way they came. News of Ritter’s betrayal had to reach Efan at any cost—*especially* since Ritter was said to be a close friend of the queen.

“I need to tell Her Majesty!” he muttered as he ran.

“Yeah, ain’t gonna let you walk out with that one.”

The would-be messenger froze. Their foes were supposed to be behind him, but a woman’s voice seemed to be coming from the darkness in front of him.

That hesitation was his downfall. An iron fist collided with his face, crumpling it like an old sheet of paper. One of his comrades squealed in horror as gore

splashed against his face.

“We need Ritter in the knights, see?” The woman smirked as she drove her fist into her palm. The arching horns sprouting from her head made it clear she was no human. “It’s kind of a part of our plan.”

“I... wouldn’t say that much, Leiss,” Ritter replied flatly.

As the squad trembled at the demon-woman, however, another voice, this one thin and pitched, caught their attention.

“Oh? Is the fight already over, perhaps?”

She was unarmed and clad in a rather low-cut crimson dress. The brightness of her clothes only made the pale, sickly hue of her skin more apparent. She wasn’t half as intimidating as their other attackers—in fact, she looked rather weak.

“Over there!” One of the guildsmen pointed in her direction. “We can get outta here!”

One of his comrades nodded. “Roger!”

They both charged at her. The woman, however, only rolled her eyes languidly.

“Could you please not? You reek somewhat awful.”

She lightly waved her hand, and the men’s heads exploded.

“Gwegh?!”

“Ugh!”

Their eyes feebly bounced off nearby tree trunks, the gore of their brains startlingly vibrant in the darkness. Still, the bodies limped forward, somehow still standing despite the horror of their deaths. They began to stumble toward the woman at the sickly noblewoman’s side—a maid, by any measure.

“Stand back,” she intoned calmly. “I can’t let you stain my beloved uniform.”

In the blink of an eye, the headless walkers collapsed into dozens of fleshy chunks. Only now could the survivors see a highly unusual-looking sword clenched in her fist. It took a great deal of raw power to cleave through so much

flesh and bone, but the maid had made it appear trivial. A few of them shuddered.

The red-dressed woman smiled. “You cut so beautifully, Schwarte.”

“And you, Vampille, are as sloppy as ever. Look at the mess you’ve made.”

“Y-You’re hardly any better!” Vampille shrieked back.

To the survivors, the pale woman was Death itself—no, every one of the women surrounding them was an avatar of Hell. It was clear that not one of them would survive at that rate.

“Aaaaaaagh!! Somebody help!!”

They scattered in all directions, running as fast as their legs could carry them. If they split up, then maybe at least one of them would survive—they outnumbered the women, after all.

This realization came a mere instant before this last hope of theirs was quashed.

“Gah! G-Goblins?!”

Just beyond the dark guild’s encirclement was a throng of green-skinned monsters, their rusty shortswords thirsty for human blood. Under normal circumstances, the subjugation squad would’ve had no trouble vanquishing the monsters. The sight of their comrades’ gory fate, however, had left them too shaken to resist.

“Gaaaagh?!”

“Aaaaaaaagh!”

One by one, they were swarmed by the creatures. Their deaths were far from quick and easy, as the goblins took their time to enjoy every second of the slaughter, avoiding the killing blow for as long as they were able.

A red-headed woman stood behind the throng, her arms folded indifferently under her ample bosom, as she watched the monsters work. Her brow was furrowed with disgust.

“Even I’m disgusted by this, and I’m the one controlling them.”

“Yeah,” chimed a second woman at her side. She wasn’t as curvaceous as the first, but she exuded an oddly seductive aura. “You’re the worst of the worst, Corine.”

The few remaining men looked at each other frantically.

“What now?!” one asked in terror. “At this rate, we’re all gonna...”

He was suddenly cut off by one of his own friends and colleagues—who drove his sword straight into his gut.

“Wh-Why...?” he muttered, hacking up blood.

“What the fuck?!” the attacker screamed, staring down at his sword. “Why’d I stab him?!”

A fresh chill ran down the others’ spines. From the look on his face, he was truly shocked by his own actions. His surprise didn’t last long, however, as another guildsman slit the second’s throat, despite the fear and denial covering his face.

Corine shot a dark look at the woman beside her. “Really? Do you have to make them kill each other? That’s just sick, Krankheit.”

She giggled impishly. “You think so?”

Corine rolled her eyes. Krankheit was a coward through and through, but she had a sadistic streak that readily took over at times like these.

“Y-You gotta be shitting me,” the man muttered to himself in horror.

He was the last survivor of the subjugation squad. All around him were the maimed corpses of his comrades. There were so many of them mere minutes ago. He could hardly believe he was the only one alive now.

“Well, it looks like you’re the last.”

He jumped with a shrill squeal as a woman in a priestess’s crisp uniform approached him. She had a polite, practiced smile on her lips, and her body was remarkably well-proportioned. Had they met on the street, he would’ve approached her in a heartbeat. Now, however, he saw nothing but a devil in human skin.

“Jeez, Anat, you gotta drive it home like that?” Leiss chuckled as she approached.

“Who cares?” Laladie chirped. “They sure haven’t done us any favors!”

The man looked about him, only to realize he was surrounded.

He screamed, “Wh-What the fuck are you?!”

“What are we?” Anat chuckled. “You should know that.”

She opened the front of her shirt. Despite himself, the man’s gaze was drawn to her cleavage for a moment—but when he saw the symbol inscribed on her skin, he recoiled in terror.

“We’re Yerkchira, the Messianic Legion—the very dark guild you were sent to destroy!”

Little did he know, every member of the greatest of the dark guilds was there, save for the guildmaster himself.

“F-Fuck this!” he cursed. “How the hell were we supposed to kill you fuckers?!”

They never stood a chance. He and his gray guild were combat experts, and the knights were the most highly trained soldiers in the kingdom, but they couldn’t even scratch Yerkchira. If only they’d known how outmatched they were before leaving town...

“So?” Anat pressed with an angelic smile. “How would you like to die?”

The man squealed in horror as she continued.

“Skewered to death on roots, maybe? Stabbed with countless kunai? Maybe you’d prefer a nice, clean decapitation—or maybe you’d rather have your brain explode? What about being hacked to pieces or being punched to death? Would you like to be ripped to shreds by goblins? Or maybe we can see if one of your friends is still able to stab you? My, you have so many wonderful options!”

The deaths of his comrades flashed through the man’s mind. None of them died easily. Their howls of agony still echoed in his ears. No matter where he looked, all he laid eyes on were the perpetrators of the violence.

“Gh... gwogh...”

Something inside his brain snapped. A wet patch rapidly spread on the front of his pants, and a tart stench hit their noses.

Corine recoiled. “Ugh! He wet himself!”

Schwarte shook her head sadly. “Please don’t speak too ill of him. He seems rather broken.”

“You don’t even care!” Laladie cackled. “Look, Soulgros! There’s some of your precious water! Why don’t you drink it?”

The woman in shinobi attire snapped. “I shall slay thee where you standst, Laladie-dono! Vampille-dono alone hath the composure to handle such a drink!”

“Me?!” Vampille’s eyebrows shot up indignantly. “How *dare* you even suggest such a thing?! Ritter, Krankheit, Leiss, say something!”

Ritter gave her a blank look. “... What?”

“Who cares?” Krankheit added.

Leiss shrugged. “Sorry, ain’t my problem. Can I go home already?”

They continued to bicker and argue around the man. It was nothing unusual for them—not a one of them cared to follow anyone’s orders, save for those of their master.

Anat nodded. “Yes, I believe we had best all head home. I’d rather not stay around this... individual any longer.”

Anat had the most authority of any of them, and at her suggestion, they turned and began to file back toward Yerkchira’s headquarters.

“Ahahahahahahahahaaaaa!!” came the man’s dry, maddening laugh from behind them as he continued to soil himself incoherently.

Not a single member of the Dark Guild Subjugation Squad survived. Their campaign ended in catastrophic failure.



Chapter 3: The End of the Subjugation Squad

“It seems the other squad has been wiped out.”

“Hm... I’d feared as much.”

The men were talking in hushed tones some distance away from where the gray guild and knights had encountered Yerkchira. This second group, however, wasn’t another group of lowly criminals—they were highly trained assassins, and thus specialized in a different approach altogether. They moved cautiously to avoid attracting any attention as they closed in on the dark guild’s headquarters. They were lucky to have made it so far without any difficulties. The other squad must have been an effective distraction. Their foes evidently weren’t expecting a second attack.

“They were nothing more than tools to an end,” the squad leader said unaffectedly. “Forget about them. Our goal is Yerkchira’s guildmaster, and we won’t settle for less.”

“Sir!” his subordinate replied with a curt nod.

They were a highly capable bunch, and they were prepared for a deadly mission. They wouldn’t stop until every one of them was dead. Perhaps, that was the key to their lengthy list of successes.

“We’re here.”

Before them loomed the dark shape of Yerkchira’s headquarters. It resembled an old castle, or maybe an abandoned mansion. They stopped for a moment, not expecting such a massive structure, but resumed their approach without issue.

They did not, however, notice the young man watching them from the second-story balcony.

“Can I help you?” came his placid voice.

The assassins froze in their tracks. The smile on the youth's face almost made them forget they were on the battlefield.

"Is that... a civilian?" one of the assassins muttered.

The leader shook his head firmly. No ordinary man could be in a place like that. "He has to be our mark... the guildmaster."

A ripple of tension ran through the assault force.

The youth only smiled. He asked them offhandedly if something was amiss—the night was oddly loud.

An assassin scoffed. "His underlings are monsters, but the man himself is nothing impressive."

He didn't seem to realize the danger he was in, but the leader was unconvinced. The master seemed... off. Something wasn't right. He couldn't believe that any leader of a dark guild could be so incompetent.

"We've been commissioned to kill you," the bold assassin announced, despite a chastising look from his squad leader. "Surrender now and we'll make it painless."

The young man finally seemed to understand their purpose, but he only grimaced as he scratched his head. He couldn't just die. He still had important business to attend to.

"Your funeral," the killer replied, and the squad readied their implements of death.

Of course, he wouldn't just roll over and die. Nobody in their right mind would.

"W-Wait." The leader held out his arm to stop his men. "I have a bad feeling about this."

As the words escaped his lips, a light breeze stroked his cheek. It was unsettlingly warm, and the leader tensed with unease. He clamped his eyes shut in discomfort, but he knew it would be foolhardy to stay blinded and readily pried his eyes back open.

"Damn! What is this wind...? Is everyone all right?!"

The leader's eyes went to the guildmaster, but the youth was smiling just as he had before. For a moment, he nearly believed that the man was as powerless as he seemed. Maybe his unease was only his imagination.

It was another few seconds before he realized his subordinates hadn't replied.

"I said, are you all ri—"

—I'd give up if I were you.

"The hell are you saying?!" The leader whipped around to face his men. "I told you to answer..."

He trailed off. He was completely alone. As he widened his eyes in shock, a beam of moonlight gave him his answer—the vegetation was *drenched* in fresh blood. With horror, he spied the bodies of his men. They were carved up into disturbingly small pieces.

"Wh-What...? How is this...?"

He couldn't think clearly. What happened? Were they attacked somehow? It couldn't have been the wind's work—could it?

His gaze snapped back to the young guildmaster. The full moon was at his back, his lips still curved into a peaceable smile. It was anything but the face of a murderer.

As the leader watched, however, something black snaked out of the guildmaster's body. It should've been hard to spot such a shadowy shape in the night, but the thing was far darker than the gloom surrounding him. It continued to grow for a moment before lashing out at the leader.

"Aaaagh?!"

His scream pierced the night, but all that replied was the silence of the forest. Only Master was left, his smile colder and crueler than it was mere moments before.



The Dark Guild Master's Smile Would Fit Better

PROLOGUE 2

A DAY AT THE
DARK GUILD

Chapter 4: Cafeteria Cold War

The morning sun filtered through the window onto my face, and I let out a big stretch. The light was still faint by any measure, but as something of a denizen of the night, it was just about perfect as a wake-up call. Last night was especially busy, and I hoped that we'd have a bit of peace moving forward.

"Hey, Soulgros?"

"?!"

At the sound of my voice, I heard the intense rustling of foliage from outside the window behind me, then a loud thud as something fell heavily to the ground. I shouted in surprise, and whipping about, I found Soulgros sprawled on the ground below the balcony. She seemed just as shocked as I was. What in the world was she doing? I rushed over to help her to her feet.

"I could very well ask thee the same, Master. Were you aware of mine presence from the beginning?"

"Of course I was. I treasure you as I would my own daughter, and I couldn't possibly miss your distinctive aura."

She began muttering to herself discontentedly, "Daughter? I know not whether to rejoice or curse mine luck... Regardless, it seems I must polish my stalking abilities further..."

I ignored her muttering and asked her to show me her shoulder.

"M-Mine shoulder?! Hast thou lost thine mind?!"

No, not at all. She'd just fallen from a tree, and if I channeled a bit of mana into her Crest, I could ease her pain somewhat. If I remembered correctly, hers was on her shoulder.

"A-Ah. Naturally. By all means."

With that, she pulled her garb up so that I could see Yerkchira's emblem where it was imprinted into her shoulder. I gently put a finger to her supple flesh and let my mana flow into her.

"Hm?!"

She twitched with surprise for a moment before utterly melting at the sensation. Nearly her entire weight was against me, but she was so supernaturally light that it was hardly any trouble.

She blinked slowly at me. "I must admit, thine mana is rather delicate. I can hardly describe such bliss."

R-Really? I was only trying to help her heal more quickly, and I had no idea it had such a puzzling side effect. *Still, I suppose it's better than putting her through more pain,* I rationalized as I cut off the flow of mana.

She smiled a little as she checked her body for any remaining injuries, apparently finding none. "I shall be sure to boast to the others of this."

What brought her to me in the first place?

"Ah, of course. The morning repast has been prepared, and thou hath been bidden to the cafeteria to partake."

Was it that time already? I had little to complain about, of course—it had been ages since the entire guild was together for a meal, and I'd been looking forward to it for a long time.

"I speak on behalf of the entire guild in saying we are enthused to break bread with you. Of course, it would be mine wish to dine with you alone..."

That was awfully nice of her to say; I responded with a smile.

"I had best proceed to the dining hall. Thou hast mine gratitude for healing mine wounds."

With that, she vanished.

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I took my time walking to the dining hall. I wished I could rush there, as I was leaving the entire guild waiting, but they took offense at that. Apparently, they had created some sort of rule where they had to greet me all at once—not that I cared for such formalities, of course. I was the first to arrive, and I could still remember the looks of shock and betrayal they gave me as they walked in to find me already seated. Worse, they even apologized for being “late”—even Vampille and Corine, who were far too proud to feel remorse most times.

It felt like they were all making mountains out of molehills. There was no reason for them to apologize at all, let alone so profusely. As a result, I made a point of being the last one to arrive for any meal, lest I unleash that pandemonium again.

Soon enough, I found myself outside the dining hall’s broad doors. Since I wasn’t sure if all the girls were there yet, I decided to check the room’s occupants through the flow of mana first. It wasn’t much, but I had a small amount of confidence in mana manipulation.

Fortunately, everyone was already in attendance. There was no point waiting around outside, then. I struggled to open the door alone, my legs straining as it grudgingly eased open. I had no idea what the doors were made of or why, but I didn’t complain.

The dining hall was large enough to comfortably accommodate all ten of us. Artisanal chandeliers hung from the ceiling, and all manner of expensive-looking decorations were arranged along the walls. At least, I assumed they were expensive—likely only Vampille knew their true worth. The middle of the room held a long, narrow table, which had five ornate chairs on either side of it. All nine of my guildmates were already seated, leaving only the most opulent chair at the place of most importance unoccupied.

I headed for the open chair. I frankly didn’t care if I had the same chair as everyone else, but again, it wasn’t worth arguing with them over. As soon as I sat down, everyone else stood.

“Thank you, O’ Splendorous Master, for another glorious day,” Anat announced on behalf of the whole guild.

As she did so, everyone laid a hand over the spots where their Crests were engraved. Each began to glow softly. Laladie's was on her right cheek. Soulgro's was on her right shoulder. Ritter's was on her bottom, for some reason, and Vampille's was on her stomach. Schwarte's Crest was on her left shoulder, mirroring Soulgro's, and Leiss's was on her tongue. Corine had hers on her right thigh, and Krankheit, on her left. Anat's was on her chest.

The glow was honestly somewhat disconcerting—a perfect match for our unusual guild. Ritter made it all seem a little more comedic than it should have been, but she seemed deadly serious. Honestly, it was unnerving. They insisted on doing it every day, despite my protests, but they seemed shocked when I told them to stop, so I simply accepted their gratitude with a smile.

I told them they could take their seats.

“Thank you,” they replied in unison as they sat.

With that, the stuffy atmosphere finally dissipated, as though everyone had finally released the breath they were holding. Every one of them had their quirks and eccentricities, but when they were giving thanks, they seemed to come together as one—in a creepy way, as if hypnotized, but still. There was no sign of anything truly troubling at work, so I figured there was nothing to worry about.

Schwarte began bringing out the food. Despite being clad in her usual maid outfit, she wasn't a servant, but I was grateful that she stepped up at times like this. I thanked her as she laid out breakfast in front of me, and she smiled and curtsied, just like a proper maid would.

After we had begun eating, Anat looked up at me. “Master?”

What was it? I was a little surprised to hear her talk during a meal, especially considering how strict she typically was about proper manners. I leaned in to listen.

“I heard you stroked Soulgro's Crest. That wouldn't be true, would it?”

What? I touched her Crest, certainly, but it was only to help her heal. From Anat's accusatory tone, it sounded like she thought I touched her in a more

sexual sense. I hurriedly explained that Soulgros had fallen out of a tree, and I was performing first aid.

Corine raised an eyebrow. “Really? I thought there was something more to it, given how she was showboating about it.”

“The fault is hardly mine own. ‘Twas truly blissful.”

Putting it like that didn’t exactly help my case.

Vampille threw herself on the ground and began rolling and kicking around in a tantrum. “No fair! That’s N-O-T F-A-I-R!”

Her dress was getting filthy.

“Wh-What if you touched *my* Crest?” Krankheit suggested shyly. “I think that’d put this to rest.”

She often pretended to be mature and composed, but at times like this, it was clear she was rather introverted.

Still, touching anyone’s Crest without good reason was... well... awkward.

“Master!” Laladie tottered over to me and stuck her face out toward me. “Please touch Lala’s Crest next!”

That should be fine. Hers was only on her cheek.

“Might I ask the same of thee?” Soulgros asked expectantly.

Of course not. Even if I was going to be touching the others’ Crests, she’d already had her turn.

“I-Inconceivable!”

“You didn’t touch mine,” Ritter flatly announced, turning around and lifting up her skirt to reveal her plump buttocks. “Touch me.”

“Yeah, right!” Leiss screamed. “That’s just... wrong!”

Definitely. That would clearly be crossing a line. But just to be clear, I wasn’t going to touch Leiss’s tongue, either. That was just plain unsanitary.

“But mine is on my stomach!” Vampille announced proudly, lifting her skirts to show me. “I daresay that won’t be an issue!”

It was strange for her to say that while throwing her ladyhood to the wind, but I admitted she had a point. It would be more like rubbing the belly of a large, friendly dog than anything else.

“Master?” Schwarte approached me cautiously. “Might I ask...?”

That shouldn’t be a problem. There was nothing untoward about a shoulder massage.

Corine sighed. “I suppose you could touch my Crest if you really wanted to.” That said, her eyes were darting about uneasily.

Her Crest was on her thigh, though. That was clearly inappropriate.

Krankheit worriedly glanced at the shock on Corine’s face, then me. “Not me either?!”

Nope. No thigh-touching.

Anat shot me a pleading look. “What about—”

“No way.”

“Oh, poo! You didn’t even let me finish!”

I wasn’t about to budge, however. Her Crest was on her chest, and touching her like that felt wrong for all sorts of reasons.

“That’s not even *close* to fair!” Corine shouted poutily.

“Shut up!” Lala cackled. “You got shut down, just admit it!”

Ritter backed right into me. “Touch my butt... please?”

“He said ‘no way’!” Leiss shouted at her.

“Exactly! No way!” Vampille echoed haughtily.

I got the distinct feeling that everyone had forgotten to actually eat their breakfast. There was nothing wrong with having a little fun, but this felt a few steps too far. In the end, it took a great deal of time and effort to calm everyone down again.

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“Hey, what if we held a meeting? No harm touchin’ base while we’re all here, right?”

Leiss’s somewhat unexpected suggestion came right after she’d finished scarfing down the bloody hunks of meat on her plate. She had an excellent point. Our guild—or rather, every guild I knew of—held monthly meetings to discuss recent events. Most typically only invited their leadership, but since we were small, everyone attended. Even the members who spent most of their time away from headquarters returned for the meetings.

“I suppose we should,” Anat mused, a hand to her chin. “There’s no telling when we might next get the chance. What do you think, Master?”

It sounded good to me, and I readily told her so. She nodded, her soft smile hardening somewhat. Everyone else quickly ended their chatter and turned to focus. Even Laladie, who’d been perched on my lap, returned to her chair.

After ensuring she had their full attention, Anat nodded contentedly and cleared her throat. “We’ll now begin the monthly meeting of the dark guild, Yerkchira.”

That was the main thing that distinguished our guild from others. We were a collection of fugitives from the Kingdom and other guilds alike. I let out a heavy sigh. It was never supposed to be this way.

The monthly meetings weren’t especially formal or pressing. If there was an emergency, there would be a contingency meeting held then and there. Most of the time, they served as a means of checking up on my guildmates’ mental states, and there was no specific agenda as such. Everyone seemed in perfect health, I noted as I looked up and down the long table. They all seemed driven by their respective work, and it seemed many would be leaving shortly. There were always exceptions, of course.

“Don’t worry, Master!” Laladie giggled. “Lala and the others won’t get hurt at work, promise!”

I appreciated her attempt to reassure me, but I was unconvinced. The girls would occasionally return bandaged.

“Yeah,” she readily admitted, “but we’ve never gotten hurt *at work*.”

I wasn't sure I understood her. Did that mean all their injuries were off the job, so to speak?

Laladie only chuckled cutely. "You'd be surprised!"

I was somewhat unsettled by her response.

"Well," Anat declared, clasping her hands together, "I believe we should end the meeting here. Nobody has anything else to report, do they?"

I nodded. I got to see everyone, and that was enough. With that, I stood up to leave—but I stopped when I realized everyone else was still sitting.

"Lala and the others would like to talk about our work alone."

That made enough sense, I supposed. There were plenty of aspects of our work that made sense to keep hidden, and my being guildmaster didn't mean I was privy to my guildmates' secrets. Again, I found myself wishing I could take some jobs myself, but I knew they wouldn't allow it. Did that mean they didn't trust me? I was quite used to violence, though mentioning it to them would do nothing to help my case. Instead, I told them I'd get back to previewing quests and left the hall.

As I left, I thought I heard them mention something about a plan to give me the world, but I must have been mistaken.

Chapter 5: The Report

Anat clapped once to regain everyone's attention and smiled. "Let's confirm where we are with our work, shall we? No need to report if there's no change in your target, of course."

The following silence seemed to imply agreement from everyone in attendance. From there, Anat collected their reports one by one.

"First off, Lala, our Hero Observer."

She was short with long, fluffy green hair, out of which bloomed a single large flower.

Laladie put a finger to her lips in thought. "Hm... Lala doesn't know yet if they've made any progress. Maybe Lala hasn't been spying on them long enough?"

Anat nodded understandingly. "The Hero did appear rather suddenly, after all. I must admit I was taken aback."

Laladie nodded. "Lala's going to focus on watching their movements for now. Oh, but they beat a general of the Demon King's Army a while ago!"

A murmur rippled through the room, and Vampille leaned forward interestedly.

"I must confess I haven't the interest to look into them further, but is this Demon King's Army so weak that losses to utter novices are common?"

"They're all weak," Laladie replied bluntly.

The Four Lords of the Demon King's Army were really nothing to write home about.

"But just in case, Lala's gonna keep watching them. May as well," she added with a little sigh.

Anat nodded understandingly, then turned to Soulgnos.

“Tis mine turn next?”

She wore a ninja’s light garb, and only the small bit of skin around her eyes was visible. A long blue ponytail plumed from the back of her head.

“Mine target be the guilds. As of yet, there is no end to the surreptitious quests calling for our elimination.”

“That’s troubling,” Schwarte replied coolly.

Even after the last massacre, there was no sign of them being left alone. Still, they couldn’t just leave the attackers be when they posed such an imminent threat to Master, so they always made a point to be as thorough as possible.

Anat pursed her lips in thought. “Maybe it’s finally time we gave the guilds a taste of their own medicine? We can’t possibly condone such an insult to Master, after all.”

Soulgros nodded. “For once, fanatic, our opinions align.”

Soulgros almost never agreed with her. Anat’s obsessed worship of Master was at times a little much.

“For now, you can continue your infiltration of the guilds.”

Soulgros nodded. “Verily so.”

“Who’s next to report, then?” Anat looked about the room, but nobody came forward. She clapped once, as if to announce the change in topic. “Excellent work, everyone. Next, I’d like to discuss a more deliberate plan for how we’ll complete our ‘present’ for Master.”

Anat smiled, and everyone else smiled—no, *smirked* in suit. Their hearts burned with zeal as they imagined their glorious objective.

“Our ultimate goal is Master’s utter domination of the world,” Anat announced eagerly. “And now, it’s finally, *finally* time to put our designs in motion.”

Their eyes lit up with an eager, predatory light.

“Let’s get to it, then—our all for Master.”

“Our all for Master,” they echoed.

They all stood as one. Their desperate love for Master had finally led them out of the darkness and into the light.

The Dark Guild Master's Smile Would Fit Better

ACT 1

THE TALE OF THE HERO'S PARTY

Chapter 6: First

Today was every bit as paperwork-heavy as I'd come to expect, and most of my guildmates had already left on jobs. All their requests were startlingly dangerous, and though I was of course worried for their wellbeing, I trusted they would be fine. It was my job to have faith in them, and I tried to keep my thoughts purely on my work.

"Master!"

The door to my study flew open, and Laladie trotted inside. The flower in her hair bobbed charmingly, and her smile was nothing short of angelic. Unable to simply sit at my desk and wait, I eagerly approached her and scooped her into the air.

"Ehehe!" she giggled. "Lala's done her work!"

Yes, I could see that. I praised her as I hugged her tightly, and she began to rub her cheek eagerly against mine, her Crest glowing softly.

As ashamed as I was to admit it, I could clearly feel her distinct lack of curves as I held her. Still, she had a feminine softness to her flesh, which I could feel very distinctly against my face. She seemed to be doing it as a show of affection, much like a cat would, and I had to admit it was quite adorable.

I kept my mind well out of the gutter, as courtesy dictated, but her breathing seemed oddly labored as she rubbed herself against me. I was vaguely aware of an undercurrent of arousal, for whatever reason, so I pulled her face away from mine, smiling politely all the while. It would clearly be best to avoid whatever that was from now on.

Her face dropped slightly. "What a shame."

Alternatively, if she acted less... adult about it, I supposed, it wouldn't be an issue. Nonetheless, I was glad to see her home, and she was the first to have finished the day's work. I expected Leiss or Corine to return first, though.

Her expression lit up. “Wait, Lala’s first? Yay! That means Lala gets to have special alone time with Master, just like you promised!”

The sheer joy on her face was infectious, and I could feel my smile broaden.

“Lala guesses those perverts are caught up in their surveillance work,” Lala mumbled to herself, her grin warping with malice. “Lala’s glad she just has to watch the Hero!”

Surveillance? What surveillance?

Her eyes widened for just a moment in surprise before clamping tightly onto me with an innocent grin. “Master, Master! Lala wants to practice walking more, and she wants you to help!”

Walking practice? It made sense. Her people weren’t skilled at walking by nature, and occasionally I helped her improve her footing. If she wanted to better herself, then I would do whatever I could to support her. I saw myself as her guardian, and besides, I’d nearly finished my paperwork by that point.

“Yesss! Let’s go outside!” she exclaimed giddily as she tugged at my arm.

Outside? I didn’t see why we couldn’t do it inside the guild. We even had a lovely indoor garden.

“It’s about the feel of it. It’s like going on a picnic! Besides,” she considered in a barely-audible mumble, “the others are gonna be back soon. They’re gonna try to disrupt Lala’s special time with Master, Lala knows it! Lala won’t let them!”

I couldn’t completely catch what she said, but her idea of picnicking sounded tempting. I’d barely left the guild at all as of late, and it couldn’t hurt to get some fresh air. I agreed to her suggestion.

“Yay!” she cheered with a grin, and again she began to mutter to herself. “All according to plan. Lala only needs to strengthen her grip on Master, and she’ll become his queen!”

I smiled at her, and she grinned innocently back at me, as though butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth. We held hands as we left the guild. I was a little

confused, since I could've sworn I heard her say something slightly upsetting under her breath, but I decided to forget it. It probably wasn't important.

As we were leaving, I thought I heard Soulgros's voice from the guild—something like “Drat! That vixen hath beaten me back!”—but it was probably just my imagination.

Chapter 7: The Hero's Party

“Ugh, I’m soooooo tired!”

“Come now, Longman-san, don’t be so rude.”

“Cut me some slack, will you? First, we had to kill those demon things, and then that Lord guy—it took a lot outta me!”

In one of the palace’s many guest rooms, a small party of four was assembled. One of them—Longman, a man in heavy armor—was sprawled languidly on the bed. The priestess was clearly upset with him.

Yuuto chuckled at the sight as he rested his sword beside the door. “I think we’re all tired. Try not to be too harsh on him, Mary.”

The last of the unusual crew—a young woman named Maho—watched them in silence.

“I must admit, you all did marvelously!” Mary, the priestess, declared, looking around at her three companions and applauding politely. “I still can’t believe you defeated Dos of the Four Lords so easily!”

Yuuto grimaced awkwardly. “We didn’t, though. He ran away.”

“What’re you talking about?” Longman stood up to give Yuuto a hearty slap on the back. “Even the king congratulated us for being the first people *ever* to push a Lord back! Go on, show a little pride in your work!”

Longman let out a loud, guffawing laugh. He had a point—apparently, the Kingdom had suffered one crippling loss after another before they stepped onto the scene. They were the Hero’s Party—also called Heroes, although only one of them coined the title itself—and they made it all happen.

“Hey,” Maho finally said, a little awkwardly, as if hesitant to ruin the mood. “Are we really sure about this?”

Yuuto and Mary's faces both clouded with doubt, but Longman only snorted indignantly.

"Just drop it, will you? We already talked about this a hundred times."

"B-But how can we know we'll get to go home after we beat the Demon King's Army—back to our world, I mean?!"

Tears brimmed in her eyes, her voice hoarse.

Yuuto averted his gaze. He, Maho, and Longman had been summoned from another world. They didn't belong there.

"How do we even know the king's telling us the truth?!" she shouted. "I mean, he drags us here against our will and wants us to fight some Demon King? How is that fair to us?!"

"A-And we feel awful for summoning you," Mary hurriedly reassured them. "But our whole country—everything we hold dear—is at risk of disappearing forever. Please don't be too mad at us."

Mary was the only member of the party who was a native of this world. She served as their guide, teaching them the basics of the world and how to properly conduct themselves. In battle, she supported them from the rear.

"That's *your* problem!" Maho hissed. "Why won't you leave us out of it?!"

"Please stop arguing." Yuuto's expression was stern and noble as he chided his friend. "If we don't fight, who knows how many innocent people will pay the price? I want to help them."

Maho's eyes widened with fury. "How can you just throw away your life for a bunch of people who aren't even from Earth?! I just want to live a normal life!"

"Shut the fuck up!" Longman bellowed, closing in until his massive, muscular body was right in front of her, but she didn't seem at all intimidated. He glared down at her, tears of frustration brimming in his eyes. "What's your fucking problem?! The king gives us good grub and all the women we ask for! Stop bitching at the people who're trying to help us!"

Longman was different from the rest of them in that he'd come to that strange world before them. He'd changed his name since, and from the

firmness in his voice, it was clear he was more than content with his circumstances. He had been an office worker in a dead-end job back on Earth, and he was enjoying being waited on hand and foot.

“Aren’t you at all suspicious?!” She challenged him angrily. “Don’t you remember what they just told us? Why do they want us to take on some dark guild now—Yerkchira or whatever?! Last time I checked, they have *nothing* to do with the Demon King! Face it, we’re just tools to them!”

“I... Well...” Yuuto floundered about for a response. He’d been thinking the exact same thing.

No sooner than they’d reported their success against the Demon King’s Army, the king told them to take out Yerkchira next. Apparently, a squad of Royal Knights had been dispatched to dispose of the dark guild, but none of them returned. A rescue party found a single survivor, but he was so deeply traumatized by whatever he’d encountered that he couldn’t even tell them what happened. Whatever dwelt in those woods was horrifying beyond description.

“Still,” Yuuto finally mustered, “it’s for the good of the poor people of this country. It’s only right to fight for them.”

Maho looked at Yuuto in disbelief, then up at Longman’s unbudging glare. Her pleas had fallen on deaf ears.

“Oh, whatever! Screw you guys!” she shouted angrily, stomping out of the room, tears spilling down her face.

Why don’t they get it? Don’t they want to go home? That’s all I want! Her thoughts were in shambles as she ran through the corridor.

She passed flustered maids and baffled knights as she fled, but she didn’t have the energy to compose herself for them. She had never asked to be taken to this world, and the very thought of fighting for her life terrified her. They obviously hadn’t taught her any combat skills at her high school, and everything about her life there made her miserable.

Somebody save me!

She inwardly screamed in fear and pain as she ran, but her plea went unanswered.

What she didn't know was that she would get exactly what she wished for soon enough.

Chapter 8: Laladie's Reward

“Master, come over here!”

Laladie was giddy. She'd never gone out alone with Master before. There was always some other Yerkchira member in the way—not to mention Soulgros, his habitual stalker.

Master looked up at the sky and remarked how lovely the weather was, a light smile playing across his lips. He readily followed behind her, and they soon came to the edge of the forest.

Not far inside the woods, Master led her to a beautiful garden. He'd heard about it some time ago and remembered it as a place Laladie might enjoy. Just being with him was sheer bliss, but this was almost too much for her. She knew she had to give him her everything.

“Wah?!”

Perhaps getting a little too drunk on her joyous fantasies, she tripped over nothing and fell right into the dirt. She always had trouble walking, like most of her people, and she should've been paying more attention. It wasn't painful, though—she landed squarely on a bed of flowers. Master hurried over to scoop her up, and her cheeks blushed strawberry pink.

“Ehehe!” she chuckled awkwardly. “Lala should've known better!”

She knew she must've seemed more embarrassed than anything, but being this close to him was wonderful. Laladie often found herself thinking about what she could do to make Master hers forever, but her childish demeanor seemed to do the trick just fine.

Master then asked her if they were going to practice her walking like they'd planned, and she nodded yes. He took her by her diminutive hand and strolled slowly with her through the garden. If she'd dropped dead in that instant, she would've passed on without a single regret.

It seemed like he had chosen that spot for their walk because he knew she genuinely struggled with it, but her eyes hardly left Master's face the entire time. He didn't seem to notice, however—he was fully enjoying the beautiful day, soaking up the sunlight with a contented smile. She was just happy to see him happy. Even as the exertion took its toll on her feeble lungs, her cheeks were blushing with bliss alone.

After a while, they decided to take a break, and Laladie planted herself squarely on Master's lap.

"Ahh... Lala's so tired..." she muttered, wiping away her sweat.

She'd been pushing herself a little harder than usual since she was with him. She looked up at his face expectantly, and he readily stroked her hair. It was a little embarrassing given how much she'd been sweating, but she wasn't about to let a trifle like that stop her. He didn't even seem to notice her sopping brow as he praised her work ethic. At that point, she felt officially content with their date.

She stretched, letting out a petite yawn. "Lala might just fall asleep like this."

The flowers smelled divine, and the day was perfectly warm. She'd done quite a bit of exercise, and the fatigue was beginning to drag on her eyelids. She struggled to remain upright as her head began to bob.

"Oh!" Suddenly, she remembered something critically important, and she chased the sandman away. "Lala made lunch for us!"

She had precious little time to enact her lovey-dovey fantasies with him. This was no time to sleep.

Extending her hand, she used her powers to make a large flower grow. When it bloomed, it revealed the wicker basket held within. He stared at the large plant, spellbound—he didn't get to see her abilities in use often, after all. She was willing to show them to him anytime he wanted, of course. Honestly, she wanted him to see what made her special whenever possible.

Realizing she hadn't said anything yet, she shook her head clear of her rosy fantasies. She fought bloodthirsty monsters on almost a daily basis, but none of those fights had made her heart pound so intensely.

“P-Please have some, Master.”

He hesitated for a moment, asking her if she was sure he could have it.

“Of course! Lala made it for you! Unlike Leiss or Vampille, Lala has a very small appetite.”

Master smiled happily, which filled Laladie’s heart with joy. She didn’t even care that she’d said something that either of the other women would’ve had her head for. If they didn’t hear, she reasoned, she could say whatever she wanted about them.

She opened the basket. “Ta-da!”

It was packed with mouthwatering sandwiches. She procured a second basket as well, this one full of freshly picked salad greens. Master’s mouth watered as he told her how good it all looked. Laladie was confident in her cooking skills, but she was relieved to receive his stamp of approval nonetheless. She had to make sure he didn’t eat anything untoward, after all. She had mixed in some... fluids, of course, but she knew he wouldn’t mind. The others did much the same. Personal additions aside, she had to know how it tasted.

Laladie held the basket up to him. “Go on, Master, try it! Lala wants to know what you think.”

He nodded and reached inside for a sandwich. After a bite, he told her it tasted good.

“R-Really? Lala was so worried... She doesn’t make sandwiches very often.”

Most of the meals at the guild were made by Schwarte, and Laladie was a little worried her lack of experience would rear its head. Fortunately, even when prompted a second time, Master repeated his glowing review with a smile.

“Hahh... Lala’s so glad to hear that!”

Master then encouraged her to grab something herself. He’d feel better if they ate together, he said.

“Of course!”

Lala grabbed one of her sandwiches and took a small bite. She frankly couldn't believe something so simple could fill her heart so. She'd been especially busy lately, with laying the groundwork to give Master control of the world, and her usual quests to support the guild financially. She couldn't even spend most of her days off with him—whenever she tried to see him, there was always some other Yerkchira member dragging the poor man around. Her frustration had been slowly building, but the wait felt worth it now.

“By the way, Master,” Laladie started, blushing deeply. “Lala knows a way to make lunch taste even better.”

Master cocked his head to the side in confusion. He had no idea what she was thinking of, and it took quite a bit of courage for her to even suggest it. After a moment's thought, she was relieved to see him nod.

“Okay!” Laladie said as she stood up, steeling her resolve. “Lala's gonna do it!”

She had a lot more confidence in this particular seasoning than in her cooking skills, and she desperately wanted Master to try it. She had to produce some of her special fluid. Eyes stretching wide open, she began to strain.

“Hnnnnnngh!”

Master looked at her in equal parts confusion and surprise, but she ignored her special person's gaze. Her round cheeks blushed deep crimson as she scrunched up her face. Evidently, he found it quite charming, as his smile grew about three times wider. He wondered aloud just what was about to happen.

“Ah!” she suddenly gasped. “I-It's coming! Lala can feel it! Master, hurry! Give Lala the baskets! Hurry!!”

She realized only a moment too late that she'd commanded her sweet, darling Master like some miserable underling. There was plenty of time to apologize later, though—it was about to come out, and she had to make sure it landed in the basket. Fortunately, he didn't seem to mind at all, as he hurriedly brought it closer, just as she'd asked.

A long shiver ran up her legs and throughout her body.

“Hngh... mmmmmmmmm!!”

Squeezing out the last of her strength, she braced for the end that was soon to come. Master watched her every giddy movement curiously.

“Hyan!” she finally yelped, her body letting out one final spastic twitch, then freezing up. She’d used up too much energy to move for a longer moment.

Master’s eyes widened in surprise. He asked her worriedly if there was anything wrong, but she just smiled as she struggled to bring her wild breath back under control. Then the viscous, sticky substance began to pour from her flower. The bloom on her head was soon filled with the sweet nectar, and she leaned down to let it spill over the salad and sandwiches.

“Hahh... There, done. Try some, Master!” Laladie wiped the sweat from her brow, extending it toward him. “It’s, um, Lala’s honey.”

The seasoning was nectar of her own making—but for the sake of clarity, there was nothing lewd or unwholesome about that particular seasoning. It was a perfectly normal thing for her people to do, though she told him she was keeping it a secret from the others.

“By the way,” she continued warmly. “Lala hears this is very ‘in’ right now.”

His eyes lit up eagerly as he smiled.

The others were less wholesome in their mealtime “additions,” often using dubious medicines or dark magics. The kitchen was a battlefield as everyone tried to ensure only their contributions made it into his food and were only just discreet enough that Master himself was none the wiser.

“Go on, Master! Try it!”

She held a sandwich up to his lips. Hopefully, he wouldn’t notice how aroused she was at the thought of him ingesting her fluid.

He met her gaze, then slipped the sticky sandwich into his mouth. After rolling it around in his mouth for a moment, his smile grew even wider. According to him, it was the most delicious thing he’d ever had in his life. Laladie could feel her spine tingle from the compliment.

“L-Lala’s glad you like it,” she finally muttered, suddenly feeling strangely lightheaded.

Countless kings—even the Demon King himself—struggled to get their hands on such ambrosia, but her sweet nectar was for him alone. It was astoundingly addictive, to the point that even the slightest taste could leave one unable to live without it, but she had faith in him. She knew his iron will would prevail. Sure enough, he didn't leap on her, pressuring her for more of that liquid bliss. He seemed perfectly content to work at his sandwich bit by bit.

Master's taking in so much of Lala's liquid from her special place! He's slurping it all down! Oh, Lala can barely watch!

She tried to keep her twitching and fidgeting discreet, only arching her back slightly as the mysterious sensation filled her. Master gave her a slightly puzzled look, but the honey was too delicious to stop eating.

"Oh, Master! Let Lala feed you now. Open wide!"

She edged closer until their bodies were pressed together, smiling as she held out a sandwich dripping with her ichor. Naïve as her body still was in such adult ways, she rather enjoyed the sensation of her soft flesh against his—and if she was lucky, she might be able to snuggle up closer to him and bury her face in his chest.

Master was oblivious to her motives as he smiled thinly, then opened his mouth to accept her fluid-laden present.

"Now it's Lala's turn," she said, grabbing onto the front of his clothes so that she was immediately in front of him. "Ahh!"

Laladie opened her mouth wide, like a hatchling eager to accept a meal from its parent. He held his sandwich out for her to clamp her mouth around, still smiling as he humored her desires.

"Hehe!" she giggled, hands now on her cheeks. "It tastes so good!"

She honestly wasn't a fan of eating her own honey, but having Master feed it to her made all the difference.

For a while, they enjoyed feeding each other tantalizing bites of the sandwich.

"GROAAAAAAGH!!"

When that howl of rage filled the air, the intimately comfortable mood that had filled the garden was gone in an instant. Rumor had it that at that moment, the light in Laladie's eyes died.

Chapter 9: The Orcs and the Hero's Party

I recoiled in shock. For some reason, the bliss that I'd seen in Laladie's eyes a mere moment before was utterly gone.

More important, however, was the source of the interrupting cry. I turned to find several large monsters charging at us. I recognized them as orcs, a remarkably common creature. It wasn't unusual for them to band together. What struck me as odd was that they typically stayed in their usual haunts in the heart of dark, overgrown woods. In the woods as we were, the flower patch was in a large clearing, and we were in direct sunlight. Spotting them was easy because of that, but it was strange that they would attack us where we were eating.

Reasons aside, however, we had to defend ourselves. That was our top priority.

"Filthy creatures!" Laladie growled, glaring at them with unbridled rage. "How dare they?!"

It was a little strange to see her like this, given how she spent so much of her time smiling happily. I knew exactly what she was so upset about. Those poor flowers! Every tramp of the monsters' heavy feet crushed more of the lovely little plants. It was hard enough for me to watch, but I couldn't imagine what Laladie was going through. She enjoyed a much closer connection with nature than I did.

"Lala will make them pay!" she spat.

Thick vines sprouted from her back, twitching eagerly with anticipation as they prepared to lash out at their prey. Normally, I'd just stay behind her and relax—they were only orcs, after all.

This time was different, however. Despite all the time I'd spent of late cooped up in the guild, I was confident in the experience I'd accumulated in my prior travels. I could handle a few orcs... hopefully.

I stood beside Laladie, prepared to fight, and she looked up at me with anticipation in her eyes.

“M-Master... You want to protect Lala?”

I told her that I’d be more than capable of dispatching the beasts alone, but she vehemently shook her head. Her hair slapped against my arm, and I tried not to wince at the stinging pain.

“Lala’s first time working with Master... I’m so excited!”

Something about her tone struck me as unusual, but she wasn’t wrong.

“Gruogh!”

The orcs howled their war cry as they charged, the filth covering their bodies becoming more apparent with every thunderous step. They clearly weren’t in the habit of taking baths, but I wasn’t about to lecture them on proper hygiene. I was far from confident in close-quarters combat, so I planned on hitting them with spells before they could reach us. Laladie had a similar fighting style, if I remembered correctly. She intended on skewering the hulking creatures on her vines. Just as we were about to clash with the monsters, however, a voice rang out across the garden.

“Wait!”

It wasn’t either mine or Laladie’s, and it obviously didn’t belong to any of the monsters. It had to have been from a third party, and sure enough, the answer came in the blink of an eye.

As the beasts stopped, glancing about in uneasy confusion, a young man stepped into the clearing. He was clad in armor, but not the plate mail of the Royal Knights. It was more like Ritter’s attire, covering only the wearer’s vitals. He had an ornamented sword that caught the light in an odd way, and his back was to us so that neither of us could see his face.

His timing was perfect. He could only have been a hero.

Behind me, Laladie twitched in surprise. “Is that...?”

Did she know him somehow?

A second figure ran up behind the first, panting heavily. “S-Slow down, will you?!”

The second man was clad head to toe in thick armor. He certainly looked more like a knight than the first. Behind him were two young women. They seemed like members of a guild had somehow wandered into our forest—and if that was the case, they could spell trouble.

“Okay.” Laladie nodded as I shot her a knowing look.

She grew a small flower from the ground at her feet and grabbed a pinch of the coarse pollen within. She gently rubbed the powder against the Crest on her cheek, and before my very eyes, it was replaced with smooth, unmarked skin.

I was glad she was so quick on the uptake. From the look of it, none of the interlopers had seen the identifying symbol. We were far from on good terms with regular or even gray guilds, and I wanted to avoid needless bloodshed.

“No need to fear,” the young man at the head of the party declared with a smile in our direction. “We’re here to help.”

Erm. Thank you.

“Peh!” Laladie scowled at him and spat on the ground.

I wished she’d stop being so openly hostile to them, especially since that oddly dead look had returned to her eyes. Why would she spit on the garden if she loved it so much? Besides, it was jarring to see such vulgar malice coming from such a petite frame.

The heavily armored man peered over at us and visibly brightened at the sight of Laladie. “Hey, one of them’s a cute girl! Better bring my A-game, then!”

“Stick it up your ass!” she snapped at him. “Only Master can say that to Lala!”

Exactly, mystery man! She was simply adorable, just like the other women of the guild. Honestly, I thought Laladie should learn to be more accepting of compliments.

“Let’s do this!” the leading youth declared, the grip on his sword tightening. “Longman, after me!”

“Roger that, Yuuto!”

Yuuto and Longman charged at the monsters, weapons in hand, and the orcs snarled hungrily as they lunged for their new prey.

With that, the flower patch erupted into violence.

Chapter 10: Clash Among the Flowers

“Hnngh!”

The man in heavy armor blocked a heavy blow from the orc.

Come to think of it, though, I’d better use their names whenever possible. I didn’t want to think of them as just “the youth” and “the man.”

While the orc was occupied by the man’s broad shield, however, the lightly armored youth leapt at it from the side.

“Hahh!”

The filthy creature’s blood stained the flowers red. The party was clearly strong enough to warrant their attempt to rescue us. Orcs weren’t that strong, of course, but the party’s every move was like a well-oiled machine. I was glad they didn’t recognize us as dark guild members—they would no doubt challenge us if they did.

“Longman!” one of the young women shouted. “If you’re hurt, please withdraw for first aid!”

“Got it!” Longman shouted back. Apparently, she’d noticed that he was slightly injured by the force of the beast’s blow.

The woman was clad in a priestess’s garb, much like Anat’s. Fortunately, the design was markedly different. If she had been of the same nonsensical “Masterism” faith that my guildmates had founded, I would have surely fainted.

The priestess laid her hands on Longman’s wound and closed her eyes.

“O heavenly host, bequeath your blessing upon this man!”

As she prayed, a soft light began to seep from between her fingers. In an instant, his wound was gone.

“Thanks, Mary!” Longman said with a grin before heading back into the fray.

Was that healing magic? From the look of it, she'd been repressing the effect of it as much as possible. Again, I was reminded of Anat and how even if I had the faintest of scratches, she would incessantly pour her most effective healing into my wound like a woman possessed, terrified I would die. Her skills were truly impressive, and at times I thought she could even resurrect the dead if she needed to. It was just a thought, though—I knew such a feat was impossible.

“Hyahh!”

Yuuto shouted as he drove the tip of his blade into an orc's neck. The creature clumsily grasped at its neck before falling heavily on the flowers. It was still alive, no doubt—they were incredibly hearty creatures—but it couldn't return to the fray with such a critical wound.

Just then, one of the orcs that Longman had been holding at bay remembered us, turning and charging at Laladie with a howl.

“Shit!” Longman cursed, but he was too slow to follow it.

It must have reasoned that the party of four was too much for it to handle and went for those it deemed to be noncombatants instead. It was a clever decision for a monster of its dull wit, but it wasn't insightful enough to recognize our strength.

I began gathering mana into my hand. I would blow it away, no matter who its target was. Before I could release my spell, however, a voice rang out again.

“Earth Bullet!”

A massive clump of earth collided with the beast from the side, sending it sprawling away from us. I turned to find that the last member of the interloping party—the second young woman in their rearguard—was the source of the magic.



“Thanks,” I called out to her with a smile, but she just pointedly turned away. I wasn’t that surprised, to be honest. My guildmates aside, most people—especially women—avoided me like the plague. I knew it couldn’t *actually* be some kind of illness, and I put a lot of time and energy into my personal hygiene, but I had no idea what else it could be.

I heard Laladie curse under her breath beside me. “Did Lala just see her *flinch away* from Master’s smile? Lala can’t let anyone who’s seen his brilliance live...”

I couldn’t make out exactly what Laladie was muttering about, but it didn’t seem very cordial.

“Dammit!” Longman swore again, switching my attention back to the fight. “The last one’s getting away!”

Sure enough, the final orc of the pack was fleeing back into the woods. After seeing its comrades die in such rapid succession, it must have decided the battle was good as lost.

“I suppose we can’t chase after it now,” Yuuto said as he sheathed his sword.

With that, a sense of ease returned to the clearing.

I thanked them for saving us, but Yuuto only gave us a sheepish smile.

“We can’t accept your thanks—rather, we should be apologizing for the trouble. We were fighting the orcs some distance from here, you see, and three of them broke away from the others. It’s rather unfortunate they ran right for you.”

That made sense. I knew there had to be some reason for the orcs to be in such a place. The monsters must have chosen to regroup in the clearing so they could spot their pursuers more easily.

“I’m sorry!” Yuuto said, bowing at nearly a right angle.

“Allow me to apologize as well,” Mary added, following suit.

I noticed that Longman and the other, unnamed woman made no move to greet us. Not only that, Laladie was still glaring at them murderously. I chided her; I wasn’t upset with them, and there was no reason for her to be so hostile. While they may not have recognized our affiliation yet, the unnamed woman

was cautiously sizing me up. She was starting to unnerve me, but I ignored her as I told the party that we were grateful for their aid all the same.

“We appreciate your generosity.” Yuuto stiffly bowed to me.

“See?” Longman scoffed. “Told you we had nothing to be sorry about.”

“Longman!” Mary chided him, clearly upset.

He didn’t seem the type to mince words, and while I might consider such honesty a virtue in some cases, he didn’t seem to have any sense of discretion. Laladie just seemed to grow more irritated at his words.

“Hey, you two,” the quiet woman at the back finally said. “What are you doing way out here in the middle of nowhere?”

Realizing she was talking to me as well, I brightened up a little. Maybe she didn’t hate me?

“Lala was practicing her walking. The flowers here are super pretty, so we wanted to do it here.”

The young woman gave her a dubious look. “Walking practice... Sure.”

It was clear she was curious about us. We’d have to watch our every word, or else we might give away more than we should.

I asked if they would mind telling us what they were doing here.

“We’re on a quest,” Yuuto explained readily. “On our way to the village on the other side of this forest. Unfortunately, we ran into those orcs.”

And from there, they chased the monsters that fled right to us. That made sense enough.

Yuuto hesitated for a moment before continuing the questioning. “Do you mind if we escort you out of these woods? I’m afraid I still feel guilty for putting you through such an ordeal. This place is rife with monsters, and we’ll gladly protect you to make amends.”

I paused. I could appreciate that he was the moral, disciplined type, but his offer would only cause problems for us. The village he was likely referring to was quite far from our guild, and the wildlife posed no threat to us in the first

place. We could stroll through every foot of the place if we wanted to, at no significant risk. I wanted nothing more than to politely decline.

“What now?” Lala whispered to me. “Should Lala make a flower with a smell to make them go all flerpy-derpy?”

No, that would clearly be going too far. Besides, I had no idea what kind of scent would even have that kind of effect. It sounded more like poison than anything else.

I decided to take them up on their offer. With that, we would officially be “protected” by Yuuto’s party until we reached town.

Chapter 11: Introductions

“Allow us to introduce ourselves. My name is Yuuto.”

From the looks of it, he was their party’s leader. I told him it was a pleasure.

The woman in the priestess’s robes curtsied deeply with a smile. “My name is Mary, and I am a priestess of the Church of Angels.”

At the mention of the Church of Angels, I stiffened slightly. She would *not* get along with Anat, especially since the Church openly vilified all beliefs aside from their own.

“I’m Longman!” the heavy knight said with a grin, crouching down until he was nearly at eye level with Laladie. “Nice to meet you, Laladie-chan!”

She giggled, a sweet and pretty sound that was almost unnaturally crisp. From that alone, I could tell she hated his guts. She was clinging tightly to my hand in such a way that they couldn’t spot it easily, and I could feel her quiver as she ardently restrained herself. I hoped all that tension wasn’t purely out of the desire to beat them senseless.

The last member of their party sighed. “Maho,” she said bluntly.

That was an interesting coincidence. Both Maho’s and Yuuto’s names sounded distinctly foreign, the kind I heard only rarely. I could faintly recall that people from the Eastern Isle had similar names, which meant that the two of them could indeed be a long way from home.

I decided to stop beating around the bush and ask them directly if they were adventurers.

Longman puffed out his chest with pride. “We’re not any old adventurers—we’re the one and only Hero’s Party!”

Yuuto flinched. “L-Longman...”

Hero's Party, he said? I heard that title before. They must be this generation's Heroes. I found myself wondering just how long I'd been alive if I could still remember meeting the last generation so easily.

I noticed Laladie flinched slightly at Longman's words, but I didn't pay her any mind.

"Who are you?" Maho finally asked, eyeing us—or rather, me—uneasily.

Right. It was only polite that we introduce ourselves properly, I reasoned, shaking myself out of my thoughts.

"Lala's name is Laladie—but don't use her name. This man here, though, is Lala's Master! He's super handsome, super important, and super wonderful!"

L-Laladie? It's one thing to introduce yourself simply and effectively, but did you really need to sing my praises like that? Besides, they'll be suspicious of that name for certain. The last thing I want is anything potentially outing us as dark guild members.

Mary gave her a confused look. "S-So, Laladie-san, you must rather like this, er... 'Master' of yours."

"Yep! But don't you dare talk to Lala like you know anything, okay?"

I noticed that Maho's glare was growing more antagonistic by the second. I was sure that she suspected something amiss.

"Master?" Yuuto asked slowly, as if trying to put things together. "What kind of 'master' are you?"

What now? I couldn't be truthful with them. If I said I was a guildmaster, they'd of course ask which guild.

Finally, Yuuto's expression lit up. "So, you're a scholar? Her teacher, maybe?"

I hurriedly nodded. That was a good enough alibi. If I stressed that I was mentoring Laladie, they would hopefully accept her calling me Master. In case they asked, I decided that the clearing was home to an exceptionally rare kind of flower and that we were there to pick it.

"Well then," Yuuto announced, "we'd best get underway."

“Wait just a minute,” Laladie objected.

What was the matter?

“Lala has to go... pick some flowers.”

Ah, she needs to use the bathroom. Would she be fine alone?

“Lala will be fine.” Her cheeks went slightly pink, and she began to fidget. “O-One day Lala will be close enough to you to show you, but she really doesn’t want you to hear that now.”

“One day”? Wh-What did she mean by that?

“Hey, Laladie-chan!” Longman called out to her, smirking lewdly. “Need me to go with you?”

She giggled, her smile as pure as a mountain stream. “Get fucking bent, maggot.”

That... was a horrible thing to say, on both parts. I understood she despised his blatant ulterior motives, but we didn’t want them to hate us.

With that, Laladie turned to me, her usual smile back on her face, though clearly strained somewhat. “Lala will be back soon, Master!”

I wasn’t sure why she felt the need to say goodbye, but I told her to be careful.

Longman stared blankly after her, his legs trembling slightly. “I-Is it just me, or was that one hell of a response?”

“Of course it was, and you deserved it!” Mary scolded him. “That’s no way to talk to a woman of any age.”

I let out a sigh of relief. We’d made no serious slip-ups yet, but I wanted to make it to the village and away from our new companions as soon as possible. After all, the Heroes and dark guilds were about as compatible as oil and water.

Chapter 12: Laladie's Musings

The Hero's Party, huh? Lala never thought she'd run into them here. Laladie thought to herself as she stumbled uncomfortably over the gnarled roots of the forest floor. Her walking issues were common among her people, and while she'd gotten far more used to it as of late, it was still slow, exhausting work.

Of all the times to run into the very people she'd been spying on, it *had* to be when she was finally alone with Master. Her surveillance was just a part of their plot to gift him the world, but it was supposed to be a surprise. The Hero's Party was one of their biggest potential threats, and she had been watching them to ensure they didn't interfere.

Nobody's out here. Lala could go back and murder them all then and there. If she does, the surprise will work for sure!

Her adorable face screwed up in a sadistic sneer. There was, unfortunately, one problem with that plan.

"Why did they have to come now?!" Lala moaned.

Their timing was *horrible*. It was an awful way to end her date with Master, and she would've much preferred to make some more wonderful memories with him instead.

"Lala could try to kill them quickly, of course..."

Even if she managed to assassinate all four of them without alerting Master to her motives, he'd take her right back to headquarters, no doubt. She knew he liked her, and even if she avoided arousing his suspicion, he wouldn't risk staying there with her with a mysterious murderer of their escort around. That soundly ruled out her most obvious plan.

"L-Lala still has plenty of time," she reassured herself. "She doesn't have to decide now."

There was an oddly cold look on her face, her childish features betraying something far older and more cruel than any of her companions could expect of her.

“It’s time for Lala to clean up.”

With that, she disappeared into the trees.

Chapter 13: Maho's Suspicion

“W-Wait, Maho? What're you...?”

“Just shut up and follow me!”

Maho grabbed Yuuto tightly by the arm, half-dragging him away until they were well out of earshot of not only Master, but Longman and Mary as well.

“What's the problem?” he asked her uncertainly.

Her eyes flew wide with rage. “‘What's the problem?!’ Why are we taking that... that *stranger* to town with us?!”

She was never particularly calm before, but ever since she arrived in this strange world, her temper had been growing shorter and shorter.

He gave her a blank look. “We put him and his companion in danger. It's the least we can do to make it up to him.”

“Yeah, but can't we just say sorry and send him on his way?”

“We could, but that's a little cold, don't you think?” There was an accusatory edge to his voice now.

“Well... yeah.”

She hated being the bad guy. Of course, she felt guilty about inadvertently sending the orcs at the pair, and she understood wanting to make sure they were safe. Still, something tugged at her.

“He... He scares me, somehow,” she finally confessed.

“Wait, you mean that ‘Master’ guy?”

She nodded, but he didn't seem to understand her unease.

Maho stole a glance back at the smiling stranger. He was extremely well-groomed, and golden hair neatly framed his ocean-blue eyes. There was nothing about him that seemed out of place for this world, except for that

almost unnatural cleanliness and composure. He was tall and rail-thin, as though a stiff breeze could knock him over. On top of that, he was always smiling—the kind of expression that instantly put everyone around him at ease.

Yuuto followed her gaze, his brow furrowing further. “Are you sure he’s scary?”

Maho nodded again, more firmly this time. “Just look at his smile. It’s impossible to guess what he’s thinking. I... I guess he’s kind of a little bit attractive, but...” She trailed off awkwardly.

Yuuto smiled in relief. She’d been a depressed, angry mess for a while now, and he seemed happy that she’d found something to ground her.

“And you’re sure you’re not overthinking things?” he asked.

“O-Of course not! I saw what he did during that orc attack!”

“Wait, what did you see?”

“He was channeling a *huge* amount of mana! They said I received superhuman magical talent after coming to this world, but there’s no way I can control that much!”

His eyes widened. Each of them received special powers after arriving in this world. Yuuto became a master swordsman and was given an exceedingly rare Holy Sword. Longman gained the ability to shrug off almost any hit and great talent as a frontline defender. Maho received fantastic magical talent and the knowledge to put it to full use. Because of their respective strengths, they were able to push back the Demon King’s Army shortly after arriving.

But that kind, unassuming man had the raw magical power to put even Maho to shame.

Yuuto thought long and hard for a minute. “What if this Master is a noble?”

“A noble?”

“Remember what Mary said? Everyone in this world can use magic, but most of the powerful casters are from noble bloodlines.”

According to her, magic proficiency grew greater with every generation. If Master was from a long line of royals, it could explain his talents.

“Didn’t he say he was a scholar, though?” Maho replied confusedly.

“Yeah, but only the oldest son gets the noble title, right? I think it’d make sense if a second or third son became a teacher instead.”

“I guess that makes sense,” she muttered.

She wasn’t convinced, but she seemed significantly more relaxed than before.

“And remember, we’re only going with Master and Laladie until the next village. You can wait that long, right?”

Hesitantly, she nodded. “If you say so.”

Content with her reply, he smiled. “Let’s get back to the others, then. We’ll leave as soon as Laladie comes back.”

“You’re the boss,” she muttered, and with that, they rejoined their companions among the flowers.

Chapter 14: Realization

“M-Master has been abducted!”

Vampille’s scream tore through guild headquarters. She had finished her quest as soon as she was able and headed directly for Master’s study, hoping to be praised for her hard work. Instead of the guildmaster’s smiling form, however, she found the room empty and a letter folded on his desk.

Before Vampille could completely lose her mind, however, Schwarte plucked the paper out of her hand from behind and flipped it open. The message was clearly not in Master’s handwriting—it seemed far sloppier and less refined.

Lala took Master and left! Hehe, are you losers jealous? Lala and Master might never go back to the guild. We might elope. Hahaha, Master finally belongs to Lala and Lala alone! You stupid idiots should go find a worse man to shake your dumb asses at!

As soon as she finished reading, Schwarte tore the letter to shreds.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” Vampille shrieked in horror. “There may well be a clue to Master’s whereabouts!”

“There isn’t,” the maid retorted flatly.



Clearly, it was nothing but empty boasting. Schwarte's expression rapidly shifted from apathy to cold determination. If that brat Laladie was in front of her, then she may well have lunged.

"I'll kill her," she declared calmly.

"Hold up, blockhead."

She turned to see a familiar figure with impressive horns—Leiss.

"What?" Schwarte asked frigidly. "Laladie deserves nothing less than death for her crimes against Master!"

Vampille nodded vehemently. "Precisely! Why, I'll bury her alive when I find her!"

"Yeah, that'll do jackshit to the little sprout. Seriously, you guys can't keep your cool about Master." Leiss smirked, shaking her head. Of course, she put her fist through the wall in rage when she first read the letter herself, but they didn't have to know that. "Don't sweat it; the others are already on it."

"You're certain they can catch up?" Schwarte asked dubiously.

"Nothin' to worry about," Leiss replied. "Our resident stalker's with 'em."

Vampille nodded. "I suppose she is, indeed, best suited for the task."

They all thought about the mysterious ninja, despite not even knowing what she really looked like beneath her countless layers. She was nothing if not thorough, and with her leading the pursuit, Laladie's little abduction plot was bound to fail. Still, something felt off.

Schwarte simply stood in silence; discontent written across her face.

"Ah, this so nerve-wracking!" Vampille wailed. "Don't you dare fail us, Soulgros! How I wish I could secure their success with my own two hands...!"

Leiss smiled, her lips thin. *I'd better check in on them as soon as they get back.*

Through her cool demeanor, however, her eyes were full of icy hostility.

Chapter 15: The Orcs' Mastermind

“Damn! How could you have failed?!”

Some distance away from the clearing the Hero's Party and Master were resting in, a man was hunkered in the undergrowth. His head was crowned with small horns, and great batlike wings sprouted from his back. He was a fellkin, but more than that, he was one of the Four Lords under the Demon King's direct command. His name was Dos.

“Those loathsome Heroes! How dare they disrupt our campaign?! I'll see them all perish!”

He lashed out at one of the massive trees closest to him in anger, felling it with a single mighty blast. The orc kneeling before him shuddered with fear and grunted uneasily.

Dos had clashed with the Heroes once before. He lost, much to his chagrin, and was forced to retreat to the main camp of the Demon King's Army. There, he had been mocked and tormented by his own colleagues for his negligence. The boastful laugh of that cowardly, red-haired bitch still tormented him.

How could he lose to such inferior humans, let alone a group of only four? What fellkin could return home with their pride intact after such a miserable display? If the misfortune was anyone's but his own, he would've mocked them relentlessly.

“I must restore my honor!” he seethed, rage and indignation ruling his every thought. “I'll slay those miserable mortals if it's the last thing I do! I knew I was a fool to assume mere monsters could do it. No, I must slay them myself!”

His wounds were still fresh from his last fight with them, his mana reserves still depleted. That was why he had enlisted the aid of the orcs, but he should've known they would fail him. No, he had to do it himself.

With that, he turned to leave for the flower patch but realized the orc was still kneeling.

“What are *you* still doing here, you worthless wretch? Perish!”

He fired a single blast of magic at the hearty creature, killing it instantly. Hardy as the monster may have been, he was one of the Demon King’s elites. He expected no less.

Slaying it helped him regain his composure, however, and he turned his thoughts to how he might corner the Heroes more efficiently.

“Right... Wasn’t there a pair of humans with the Heroes?”

He had been remotely watching the battle, and he could faintly recall a man and a small girl in the fight. Better yet, the man seemed rather frail, and the girl obviously possessed no means of opposing him.

“They’re the Heroes, after all,” he mused. “Of course they would come to the rescue of a pair of civilians.”

It was a perfectly demonic plan. All he had to do was take one of the pair hostage, and the Heroes would be powerless to resist him. If the Hero were more like Dos or his allies, he wouldn’t resist slaying the hostage himself, but he trusted that a party of self-righteous fools wouldn’t be so wise.

That aside, the women of Yerkchira felt just as cutthroat to their own colleagues.

“That girl just entered the woods alone, didn’t she? She’ll be an ideal hostage.”

He grinned. He’d watched the girl leave the group alone. Spreading his wings, Dos prepared to launch himself toward the helpless child.

“No need to go anywhere,” came a sweet voice from startlingly close by. “Lala came to meet you.”

“What...?”

He tensed, ready to react to the speaker, but his preparation was for naught as a girthy vine slammed into his chest, sending him sprawling across the forest floor.

“Gah?! Wh-What in blazes?!” he grunted, head spinning from the force of the impact.

The earth beside him began to stir, and a large flower pushed itself into the open air. As soon as the petals were freed of the dirt, they spread wide.

“Hello, mister.”

Inside the bloom was the little girl herself. Her face was eerily devoid of emotion as she studied him from her perch in the pollen.

His eyes grew as wide as dinnerplates. “What...? How did you find me so soon?!”

It should’ve been nearly impossible to pick him out in the middle of such a dense forest. Not even ten minutes had passed since the orcs’ attack, and not only did the girl find him, she made her way to where he was hiding. No mere human could even approach one of the Four Lords without passing out. She had done the impossible twice in a heartbeat.

“Now,” the girl continued with a frigid glare, “you know what Lala’s here for.”

“R-Revenge?”

“Yep.” She nodded contentedly at his reply.

“Are you an ally of the Hero?”

“What? Don’t be such a stupidhead, you maggot. Lala’s only ally is Master.”

He must’ve touched a nerve, as her eyes were oddly dead. He didn’t doubt her words for a second.

As a rule of thumb, none of Yerkchira’s members saw the others as comrades, save for Master himself. Their alliance was as miraculous as it was intricately conceived.

“Lala’s really mad at you. You ripped up so many of those flowers, and Lala hates to see her friends hurt like that.”

“Flowers?” He snorted. “Why all the fuss over such a trifling thing? Besides, how should I have known the orcs would charge into the sunlight so readily?”

“Shut up. They were yours, so you take responsibility.”

You'll pay with your life, Laladie thought, though she was careful not to say so. There was something more important that she had to tell the demon first.

“Lala’s angry about the flowers, of course, but that’s not what she’s most upset about.”

“It’s not?”

“Nope.” All at once, she let her rage bubble to the surface. “You made those filthy orcs of yours come near Master! Lala will make you pay for your insolence with your life!”

“What?!”

He could understand if she was worried about some threat to him—orcs were dull, bloodthirsty creatures—but the thought that he would die for the orcs coming near some worthless human was ludicrous. Still, Laladie’s seriousness made it clear that was what she took the most offense to.

“You fool!” he spat.

To both of their surprise, Dos was the first to move. Their whole conversation was an opportunity for him to buy time and reaccumulate his mana.

“Wither!”

He released the high-density mana he’d accumulated at Laladie point-blank. That very move had enough force to knock the Hero or any of his companions out cold. He could feel the energy collide with something solid, and a great wave of displaced wind from the impact collided with his face.

“Hahaha! I don’t care who you claim to be, child, but nobody can survive that attack unscathed!”

“Ew... This smoke reeks.”

“What?!”

When the air cleared, he had expected to see her slumped weakly in the dirt. Instead, she was coughing lightly to dispel the foul fumes from her lungs. He couldn’t believe his eyes. The flower she’d been sitting on had grown to shield her from the blow, and it didn’t have so much as a scratch on it. His attack had done nothing.

“Lala’s turn now,” she said as she extended her hand.

“Gaghh?!”

That one simple action was enough to send him sprawling. The impact somehow came from behind him. He whipped around.

“Th-The trees are... moving?!”

Sure enough, the towering giants of wood and leaves had pulled their heavy roots from the earth that bound them and were slithering toward him. The branches swayed threateningly with every inch they advanced.

“Damn you, witch! Mere trees cannot vanquish one of the Demon King’s Army’s best!”

He unleashed a violent wave of mana, which collided with the trees and shattered them into rough splinters.

Laladie clapped slowly. “That was so cool.”

“Of course it was.”

Despite the circumstances, the praise felt quite pleasant. But why wasn’t the girl more afraid? Shouldn’t she be more upset that her spell was countered so spectacularly?

“Time for round two.”

“... What?”

Dos could only stare in horror as the countless trees behind Laladie writhed to life. There were too many to count, and he could feel a cold chill course down his spine.

“This is a forest. Lala has more weapons here than she could ever need. This fight can’t end until you knock down every last tree in these woods.”

She grinned happily at him, but he lost sight of her almost instantly as the frenzied wave of trees rushed toward him.

“DAMN YOOOOOOOOOU!”

He howled as he laid into the wooden swarm with blast after desperate blast of mana—but there was no end in sight.

Chapter 16: The Demon General's End

“Is that you, Laladie?”

“Oh, Corine.”

By some coincidence, Corine ran into Laladie on her way through the forest. While Yerkchira's members didn't get along as a rule, they didn't all hate each other the same. Corine and Laladie were on decent terms—they could tolerate each other if need be.

“What are you doing here?” Laladie asked.

“Well, when I figured out that fellkin freak was so close to Master, I decided to come bury him. Looks like you beat me to the punch, though.”

She glanced at Dos, who lay splayed on the forest floor. He was drenched in his own blood, his body broken and battered. The nearby trees' branches were slick with his blood, and with their gory work complete, they had taken root once more.

Laladie shot Corine a confused look. “How did you know he...? Oh, right. You're the Demon King's Army Observer.”

“Yeah.”

Laladie recalled the last monthly guild meeting. Corine had reported the Army's movements and, more importantly, that she herself had joined their ranks. Laladie didn't doubt that she was still loyal to Yerkchira—or rather, to Master. If she *were* a traitor, Laladie would've killed her with her own hands, and Corine's own guilt would torment her to no end. They were nothing without Master.

“He didn't hurt Master, right?” Corine asked, gesturing at the demon's body with her chin.

“No. A weakling like him could never lay a hand on Master, especially with Lala at his side! He *did* bring some filthy orcs too close to Master, though, so he

had to pay.”

Corine’s eyes hardened. “Huh. That so?”

Approaching Master was no easy feat, even for his most devout followers. The very thought of mere monsters coming anywhere near him was blasphemy. That wretched fool deserved far worse than death.

With that, Corine extended her hand to Dos’s corpse, light bursting from her palm.

“Wake up!”

The light she conjured was anything but warm and illuminating. It had a cold pall to it and seemed to only deepen the shadows of the dark forest. As the rays fell on the body, it began to twitch and convulse.

“Ourgh...” it moaned.

Laladie wrinkled her nose. “Ew.”

Slowly, Dos’s body climbed to its feet. Its eyes were still devoid of life, and if anything, its bloody wounds seemed to have putrefied.

Laladie faintly recognized the abomination. “You made it a ghoul?”

“Yep!” Corine puffed out her chest with pride.

Laladie tried to ignore the ample, heavy swaying that the motion provoked, pointedly turning to grimace at the undead Corine had created.

“That’s just cruel,” Laladie finally said.

“You think just killing him is enough after disrespecting Master like that? He deserves it.”

Maybe she’s taking it out on that dummy because she can’t get close to Master herself? Laladie wondered, but she didn’t say it aloud. She sighed. Why were all her guildmates such degenerate sadists? She was different. She only beat the fool to death for his sins.

“It’s really a ghoul? A real one?”

Corine snorted. “What else could it be?”

Ghouls were undead creatures that continued to roam the earth long after death. Their progenitors' souls were still trapped within their bodies, preventing them from moving on to the next life. Dos's soul wouldn't know peace, condemned to wander alone, until the knights or a passing guild put the body to its final rest. Weak humans made weak ghouls, and it was generally easy to liberate them. Dos, however, was one of the Four Lords, and even in death, he possessed awesome power. He wouldn't die easily even as a ghoul, and there was no telling how long his soul would be tormented.

"Lala didn't even know you could cast that spell. She thought only *she* could do that."

"I had her teach me. Of course, my creations aren't half as perfect as hers. She could probably bottle up a soul or two without even having to lock it in a ghoul."

They both shuddered quietly at the thought of their comrade. She wasn't just loyal to Master—she was obsessed. If she ever found out about Dos's crime against Master, she'd pluck his soul right out of its rotting prison and torture it personally—not that Laladie or Corine were obsessed with Master themselves, of course. Obviously not.

Laladie sighed. "Well, Lala had better get back to her date with Master."

She'd heard some worrying things from a flower she had spying on Master and the Hero's party with, and Maho was unhealthily suspicious. The sooner Laladie returned to protect Master, the better.

"What?"

Corine instantly bristled. Any of them would kill for time alone with him, and she wasn't about to let such a blatant insult stand.

"You're the only one who sees it like that!" Corine snapped. "Master just thinks it's walking practice, doesn't he?"

"Love can blossom from anywhere."

"Don't think I won't kill you, you loli slut!"

"Same here, cow-tits!"

Their argument continued to echo emptily through the trees, with only the ghoul to hear them.

Chapter 17: A Heroic Escort

“Longman!”

“Roger!”

At Yuuto’s cry, Longman slammed his heavy shield into the goblin in front of him, its brittle knife harmlessly bouncing away.

“Hahh!!”

“Gaaaahh!!”

The horrid creature recoiled, stunned, and a single beautiful slash from Yuuto saw it fall lifelessly to the ground.

“Earth Bullet!”

Maho conjured a boulder at the goblin assaulting Mary, smashing into it and sending it sprawling.

Mary rushed to her comrade’s side. “Longman-san! Let me heal you!”

I’d have expected nothing less from the Hero’s Party. Their teamwork was well-wrought, and I could see no exploitable flaws in their formation. It would take a lot more than a handful of goblins to stop them.

Laladie let out an exaggerated yawn. “Lala’s sooooooooooooo boooooooooooooored.”

She’d gotten tired of all the walking some distance back, and she was clinging lazily to my side. She should at least try to stay awake, what with the battle unfolding before us. Then again, mere goblins couldn’t hurt her if they tried, and I easily understood where her boredom stemmed from.

They didn’t need to protect us from such weak foes. I’d gladly welcome their protection against dragons or demons, of course, but anything I could say to convince them would weaken my alibi as a humble scholar. They might expect

me to have basic self-defense skills, but I couldn't properly fight without seeming suspicious, especially with Maho still so vigilant around me.

"Oh. Looks like she's in trouble," Laladie muttered, stifling another yawn.

'She'? Who?

"Aaaaaahh!"

A high-pitched scream hit my ears. Sure enough, a goblin was bearing down fast on Maho.

Can't you pretend to care, Laladie?

Of course, I was still smiling cheerfully. All my smiling practice had unfortunately made it so that I couldn't stop, even when I was angry. I felt a slight pang of guilt, as I probably looked like a doting parent with his spoiled daughter.

"Geheheeeee!"

I extended my hand at the creature, planning to knock it back with a mana bullet. Unfortunately, as the projectile collided with the green creature, it vaporized with a loud *BOFF!*

That was... unintentional. I'd meant to hold back a little more, but it had been so long since I'd fought that I must have lost my feeling for it. I didn't need magic for my paperwork, so it made sense I'd struggle at first.

"..."

Maho really didn't have to stare at me with such shock, though. I was just glad she was the only witness, and her companions were still preoccupied. If she didn't make a scene, it'd be like it never happened.

"It'd be too bad if they all knew." Laladie looked up at me pleadingly. "Can Lala please take care of them all? Pretty please?"

Of course not. I didn't want any of them dead. If the Hero's Party turned up dead—or didn't turn up at all, for that matter—it'd mean all-out war with the Kingdom. Killing them would be our absolute last resort.

"Thanks," said a small voice.

“The fuck’d she say?” Laladie’s eyes narrowed dangerously.

The fu...?! I wasn’t expecting such language out of her, especially with that surly attitude!

By the time I’d looked up at Maho, though, her concentration was already on the goblins, and I watched as she crushed a few more of them. It seemed she would keep quiet about my little slip-up.

I felt a wave of relief wash over me. It’d be all sorts of inconvenient if the Hero’s Party’s own mage had to die. Honestly, I couldn’t be happier.

Chapter 18: Krankheit's Interference

“Sorry, everyone! A few of the goblins are heading your way!”

Laladie's head snapped up at the sound of Yuuto's voice. Sure enough, a handful of the monsters were rushing them, and Master was still lost in his thoughts.

“Fine! Lala supposes she can wipe their sorry asses.”

She muttered as she rolled her shoulders, the motion of a true predator. She'd been fighting for far too long to forget to loosen up beforehand, and she could feel her mana bubble eagerly to the fore.

“Time to crack some—”

Laladie sharply cut herself off. Her voice didn't sound right. It had an edge of drunken mania to it, and sure enough, she was unsteady on her feet. She obviously hadn't been drinking. There was an outside force eating away at her good sense.

No... Krankheit, that bitch!

The goblins couldn't cast anything like that, and none of the Hero's Party had access to such a crooked spell. The culprit, then, was obvious.

How did they catch up to us already?!

The spell had to be Krankheit's, which meant the search party from the guild had already caught up with them. Laladie scanned her surroundings, and sure enough, that dreary creep was perched in a nearby tree with Soul Gros at her side. The latter must have tracked them down, while the former was screwing with Laladie's head.

How dare they! She didn't even hesitate, dammit!

At this rate, she wouldn't be able to lift a finger against the goblins, and they'd tear her limb from limb—with her own guildmates' help, no less. Strange

how that worked out. She couldn't hold too much of a grudge, though, since she knew if one of the others had run off with Master, she would have treated them just as ruthlessly.

“Kh!”

Laladie hurriedly sprouted a flower in front of her with a relaxing scent and stuck her nose into it. That was enough to dispel Krankheit's charm.

She looked up to find a goblin within reach, a rusty blade held high. She was as good as worthless in such close quarters.

“Master!!” Laladie shrieked.

He wouldn't let her die so easily, of course, and she watched as the goblins in front of her were blown away. She turned back to him, eyes full of joy—and only when he had relaxed somewhat did she look up at her hidden assailants.

“Hehe.”

She could feel their rage grow, like a choking fog, but it felt great to be on top. Their clumsy interference had only made her feel that much closer to Master.

Chapter 19: Maho's Lament

“Let’s stop here for tonight. Does that work for you, Master-san? Laladie?”

“Why are you talking to Lala so rudely, stupid?”

I nodded to Yuuto, hurriedly glossing over Laladie’s rudeness. We wouldn’t be stuck with them for much longer, and the last thing we needed was to cause problems on purpose.

Sighing deeply, I smiled up at the sky. The sun had completely set, and the forest was rapidly growing darker. I had no idea the village Yuuto and company were aiming for was so far away, and I never considered the possibility that we might have to camp out. Hopefully, the others wouldn’t be too worried—if not for my sake, then at least for Laladie. If only there was some way to get in touch with them...

“Hmhmhmhmhm~!”

Mary noticed Laladie’s cheerful humming and stopped to crouch. “You seem to be in high spirits, Laladie-san.”

“No, not really... but Lala will get to spend even more time with Master now!”

That was a lie. She was clearly enjoying herself immensely. Was she just eager to spend the night under the stars? I could understand that.

“Dinner’s ready!” Yuuto announced.

At his call, everyone gathered around the bonfire to eat. Yuuto had insisted on sharing their food with us, but I turned him down. We were enough of a burden on his group as it was—and besides, the resentful look in Longman’s eyes made it clear that while Laladie was welcome to whatever food she wanted, there was nothing for me to eat there. We would never see each other again after we parted ways sometime tomorrow, so I frankly didn’t care what he thought of me.

No, Laladie, stop that. No summoning man-eating plants. Yes, just fruit—and don't give me that look.

The fruit Laladie grew was delicious, and we both easily ate our fill. It was apparently a rare strain that was nearly extinct in the wild—a shame, really. Mary seemed fascinated with it.

“Are those what I think they are?” she asked in disbelief.

Apparently, they were as rare as I'd thought. I made sure to thank Laladie for her generous gift. None of the fruit was quite as tasty as her honey, though.

Laladie blushed fiercely, and she began to fidget. “O-Oh. Lala can make more for you whenever you want.”

“Hey! The hell kind of relationship do you two have?!” Longman barked.

After that, Laladie's mood improved greatly, and she even hand-fed me a few pieces of fruit. Yuuto and Mary watched us pleasantly, but Longman was staring at me so hard I could've sworn he was jealous.

I wasn't about to let Longman anywhere near Laladie, of course. There was enough of a difference between what I assumed to be their ages for it not to be at all acceptable. Still, it was nice to have dinner with someone aside from my Yerkchira guildmates for once.

Mary rubbed her eyes and yawned. “I'm starting to get rather tired.”

Yuuto nodded. “Let's decide the watch order and get some sleep, then.”

I readily offered to join the rotation. I got the feeling they'd exclude me if I didn't explicitly offer, after all.

“Are you sure?” Yuuto asked dubiously.

It was the least I could do after barely carrying my weight throughout the day. After all, even an academic—which I was—could keep an eye out for danger.

“Just let him already,” Longman suggested. “If he's offering, may as well take him up on it.”

I was glad he was so simple-minded. Laladie shot him a dirty look, but I was too tired from keeping her in check all day to remind her of her manners yet

again.

Finally, Yuuto conceded. “If you insist. Just promise me that if you see or hear anything unusual, you’ll wake someone up immediately.”

I nodded readily.

It occurred to me that Laladie and I could sneak away while I was the only one on watch, but Yuuto would be worried about us, even if Longman or Maho weren’t. The better play would be to accompany them all the way to the village as planned.

“Lala will stand watch with you!”

No, she should sleep with Yuuto and the others. I was grateful for her offer, but all the walking had taken its toll on her.

“You dragged me half the way, Master, so I’m not tired at all.”

Since it was ultimately her choice, I finally agreed to stand watch with her.

She grinned at me. “Great!”

With that, it was decided that Laladie and I would be taking our watch together.

“...”

Maho seemed to be watching me out of the corner of her eye, but I was probably just imagining things.

“Laladie-chan!” Longman called from beside his sleeping roll. “Why don’t you sleep with me instead of staying up with that bore?”

“Drop dead.”

Dang it, Laladie, language!

※ ※ ※

“Zzz... Zzz...”

Sure enough, Laladie was quick to fall asleep after my turn to keep watch came. I shook my head with a soft smile and stroked her hair.

“Hehehe...”

What kind of dream was she having? From the amount of drool seeping from the corner of her mouth and the utter relaxation plastered across her face, I could only assume it was a good one.

Laladie and I were seated some distance from where Yuuto and his party members were sleeping. There was no sign of movement from them or the surrounding underbrush, so I decided to let her rest.

Just then, I heard a rustling sound from the bushes. I wasn't worried about it, however, as I could tell it wasn't a bloodthirsty monster or opportunistic bandit.

“What is it, Maho?” I said softly toward the vegetation.

The rustling suddenly grew more fervent, then stopped altogether. After a long moment, a familiar form emerged.

“How did you know it was me?”

It was a guess, I told her, not bothering to delve into how I could feel her. The aura wasn't as strong or distinct as the more martial members of her party, but her adolescent, unrefined energy was easy enough to feel. Of course, that would likely change as she became more experienced.

I stopped beating around the bush and asked her what was wrong.

“I, um... I wanted to talk to you.”

“To me?”

She nodded readily, and I motioned for her to come closer. I had a small fire stoked there, and it was better than standing in the bushes.

“O-Okay.”

She nervously crept closer to the fire and sat down. I noticed that she was a little more than two arm lengths away from me. That wasn't surprising, and honestly, I thought her comrades should be equally suspicious of a total stranger like me.

“Wait, is Laladie asleep already?”

She was. The day's travel had taken quite a toll.

“Huh.” Maho craned her neck to get a better look at Laladie’s petite form and chuckled softly. “She can be downright terrifying when she’s awake, but when she’s snoring away like that, she seems pretty normal.”

Just as I’d feared, Maho was a sharp one. I almost wished they were all as gullible as Longman.

Laladie’s face scrunched up, and she began to toss a little in her sleep, perhaps because she could feel Maho staring. Fearing she might wake up—or worse, accidentally kill Maho in her sleep—I stroked her hair to calm her down. Within seconds, Laladie was back to snoring softly.

I let out a sigh of relief. I was hoping I could at least talk to Maho without risking anyone’s life.

“Anyhow, I just... I owe you one. You saved my life.” Maho dipped her head in deference.

I assured her that it was nothing. She’d already thanked me earlier, so there was no need to keep dwelling on it. They did protect Laladie and me after all, so taking out one little goblin was the least I could do.

She had good manners, though, a sure sign of a solid upbringing. I’d assumed she was callous and stubborn to a fault, but she clearly knew how to show proper respect.

“I have something I want to ask you.”

And what was that, I wondered?

“You’re a scholar, aren’t you? You probably know all sorts of things that I don’t.”

Right, I’d nearly forgotten that was my cover story. I assumed that my long life had given me more knowledge than the average person. That didn’t mean I knew a lot about more specialized fields, but she was welcome to ask.

“Well...” She hesitated, clearly unsure if she should ask me at all. “Do you know of any way to go to other worlds?”

... *What?* My eyes grew wide. Of all the things she could ask, why that? I was at a loss as to how I should reply.

“Y-Y’know what? Never mind. Forget I said anything!” She hurriedly motioned for me to stop before I could say a thing.

Was she sure she didn’t want an answer, though? Or did she assume I didn’t know anything about the topic since I seemed so shocked? I knew a thing or two about that, after all.

“I don’t really know how to put this, but I’m not originally from this world.”

“Huh. Is that so?”

“Hehe. Surprised, right? I know I was at first. I had no idea there were two worlds in the first place.”

She smiled a little sadly as she looked up at the stars.

I had to ask her if she had wanted to come to our world at all.

Maho stood bolt upright. “Of course not!” she snapped.

I hurriedly shushed her. Laladie might wake up if she wasn’t quiet!

I planted my hands over Laladie’s ears just in case, but she didn’t open her eyes. She just wrinkled her nose in slight irritation and went right back to sleep. I let out a sigh of relief. Maho was probably a hair away from death.

I motioned for the mage to be silent, and she obediently sat back down.

“Sorry,” she whispered.

It was my fault for asking such an insensitive question, so it was every bit as much my fault as it was hers.

“I never wanted to come to this place,” Maho finally said. “I mean, I suddenly get dragged into this monster-infested world, and just because I can cast some okay magic, they want me to take on a whole army? That’s bullshit!”

She was careful to be quiet this time, but I could feel the unbridled rage behind her words.

Of course she would be upset. They had practically kidnapped her and forced her to fight tooth and nail for people she’d never seen before in her life—and against the strongest force in the land, no less. Maho was lucky that she had magical talent. I couldn’t imagine any regular person surviving more than three

days in her shoes. Even I would've hated to be in her shoes. Putting my life on the line for Yerkchira was one thing, but I couldn't imagine having to risk life and limb for strangers.

"They tell us to fight, and all the support they give us is Mary. Sure, she's helpful, but don't you think they could send, I dunno, more than one of their own people?!"

That would imply, then, that Mary was a denizen of my world, but Yuuto and Longman were from Maho's world. That was a bit of a surprise—I'd guessed Yuuto shared her origins, but I wouldn't have thought the same of Longman. The Kingdom had really stooped low in conscripting them, and I had a hard time believing they had any intention of defeating the Demon King's Army on their own merit at all.

"Everyone else is crazy. Longman's decided to live in this world forever, and Yuuto's a real bleeding heart. Why don't they want to go home? I can't be the only one who just wants out of this mess... right?"

Large, wet tears began spilling down her cheeks.

What could I do for her? I wasn't sure if I should treat her as I would my guildmates when they were upset, but I couldn't just watch her cry.

"Huh...?"

I didn't know how alone she must've felt, and any attempt to sympathize with her would've seemed fake. All I could really do was pat her on the head and smile. It was a coward's response.

Maho looked up at me, eyes wide with surprise.

"Er... Cheer up."



“Heh... haha...”

Oddly enough, she started laughing, leaving me feeling even more awkward. I didn't understand what was so funny.

“I came here to say thanks, and I wound up venting... Sorry about that, but thanks for listening. I'm feeling a lot better now.”

She grabbed me by the wrist and pulled my hand off her head.

As long as she felt better, that was enough for me. Though admittedly, I was confused as to why she was still holding onto my hand, so I asked her.

“N-No reason,” she said, hurriedly releasing me. She brought the hand she'd grabbed me with up to her chest, softly laying her other hand over top of it. “A-Anyhow, I should really get some sleep. Your shift should end soon, though, so hang in there.”

“Yeah. Good night.”

With that, I watched her return to where Yuuto and the others were sleeping.

Chapter 20: Laladie's Feelings

“Hahh... She's finally gone...”

Laladie let out a heavy sigh as she rubbed her eyes in irritation. She'd barely even fallen asleep beside her beloved Master when that Maho girl ruined everything with her annoying shouting and sobbing. If Master wasn't clearly trying to settle things peacefully, Maho would be fertilizer by now. *That young mage should be glad her bond with Master was so deep*, Laladie thought.

Master apologized for waking her, but she firmly shook her head.

“It's not your fault. It's all because that mage wouldn't shut up.”

It wasn't his fault—it could never be his fault. It was all that Maho bitch and her stupid mental health. Still, Laladie's heart was aglow as he apologized to her. He clearly cared for her a lot, and she was so beside herself with glee that she rubbed her face into his chest, marking him once again as hers.

Maho's attitude toward Master was deeply disconcerting, and while Laladie could easily kill the girl, Master seemed opposed to that solution. The mage wasn't half as troublesome as the rest of Yerkchira, but that might change if she wasn't careful.

“Lala wasn't expecting the Hero's Party to be from another world, though. Lala was wondering where they had come from all of a sudden.”

Laladie shifted so her back was to him and hugged her knees to her chest. Hugging him was fun, but being hugged by him from behind like that was euphoric. He seemed a little annoyed, but quickly gave up and embraced her gently.

She stopped to enjoy the sensation for a moment and told him she'd heard his entire conversation with Maho. None of Yerkchira's usual information methods could figure out the Hero's Party's origins, so it made sense that they

came from another world. They had connections and influence all over the world, but that obviously didn't extend to other worlds.

Her eyes widened. "Wait, did you know that already, Master?"

Sure enough, he nodded and admitted it. Apparently, he knew about the last Hero as well, and that they'd likewise come from an alternate world.

"The last Hero lived a hundred years ago, right? Back when the demons and humans were fighting?"

That was just what she could remember from Anat's mind-numbingly boring classes, but if she was right, Master had to be over a hundred years old. He kept insisting that he was human, but she thought they only lived to be eighty, maybe fifty or so if they were unlucky. He looked perfectly young. Of course, it didn't matter to Laladie—or anyone else in Yerkchira, for that matter—if he was human or not. He was Master, and that was all they needed.

As he talked about the past, a faint wisp of a smile crossed his face, and Laladie couldn't hold herself back any longer.

"Lala's heart won't stop pounding! Lala doesn't even care how old you are or anything now!"

She eagerly glomped onto him and took deep breath after breath of his musk. Her heart wasn't the only part of her that throbbed with longing for him, but that was fine—wonderful, even. There were only the two of them now, a man and a woman.

Wait... Is it finally time for Lala to unleash her secret plan?!

Her eyes widened giddily as she realized it'd be possible now. It was a plot she'd been cooking up for ages now that would make them one forever. She called it Operation: Steal Master Forever, or Plan S for short. She would grab him and drag him deep into the wilderness, so deep that nobody would ever hear from him again, and they'd live in peace and depraved bliss until the end of time. Best of all, Master was extremely trusting—she'd only have to ask him to accompany her, and that'd be it.

The only issue with Plan S was where she'd take him. If he just disappeared, all of Yerkchira would hunt him down like a pack of starved bloodhounds, and

they'd tear her apart with the same desperate zeal. She was confident she could kill one or two of her guildmates if she had to, but she wouldn't survive an eight-woman kill squad.

Hehe! Lucky for Lala, she has just the place in mind!

She smirked gleefully. They couldn't kill her if they never found her, and she knew just how to create the perfect love nest. She'd give birth to a colossal flower and live inside its petals with Master. If she made it withdraw deep into the earth, they'd never track her down. Corine or Soulgros might be able to find where they were buried, but Laladie could dispatch those two easily enough. That was all it would take for them to retreat into their own special world, together forever.

Master had never taken her up on her seduction before, but if he spent enough time in close quarters with a sweet little maiden like her, he'd surely feel like opening his thighs sooner or later. Laladie's unusual anatomy aside, she was an adorable young woman, and anyone would count themselves lucky to have her as a concubine. If they were alone long enough—if she was persistent enough in her propositions—he'd be hers before long.

Mmmh... L-Lala can't wait!

The thought of having him all to herself turned her on in ways she didn't believe were possible, and she stared fixatedly up at him with moist, plaintive eyes. Her cheeks were flushed bright red, her breathing growing ragged and labored with the thought of him.

Lala could take him right now... She should!

Nobody could interrupt them now. It was finally time for Plan S to be set into motion.

Sorry, Master, but Lala swears you'll only be unhappy for a little while. Y-You can do whatever you want with Lala—anything and everything your heart desires!

Drinking in the vacant look on his face, she was just about to summon the flower that would be their salvation when she stopped.

"... What did you say?"

He muttered that the night sky was beautiful. She followed his gaze skyward to find a sea of stars above them, bathing them both in the soft glow of the heavens. The weird little lights were nothing special—they were nothing compared to the sweet sight of Master’s face—but they seemed to impact him deeply. His smile was as innocent as a newborn child’s as he gazed at the sky.

“Hahh...”

Laladie stopped. Operation: Steal Master Forever would require them to stay underground for the rest of their lives. She’d be stealing the night sky from him, and if that made him unhappy, she’d wither away and die. Living in their own special world meant nothing if he didn’t want to share it with her. No matter how badly she wanted him to violate her in every way imaginable, he wouldn’t even rail her once if he was too sad.

“Master? Can Lala snuggle up closer to you?”

He looked down at her in confusion. She was already sitting flush against his body, and he didn’t seem to believe she could get any closer. Still, he agreed to her request.

Laladie scooched up closer to him, shifting her weight on her small, round behind until she was seated in his lap as tightly as possible. When she was finally content, she nuzzled her right cheek into him so that she could feel his warmth through her Crest. She would’ve loved to display it more proudly, to show the whole world that she was a member of his guild, but now wasn’t the time. They’d all begrudgingly agreed to secrecy at the monthly meeting after Master had left.

For now, she would wait. Any day now, they’d put their little present plan in motion, and the entire world would hear the name of Yerkchira—of Master—and tremble. She could choke back her discontent for a little while longer.

“Master?” She looked up at him sweetly. “Someday soon, the whoooooole sky—and Lala—will be yours forever.”

She would have to be content with their time together for the moment. Plan S could wait until after he had his “present.” With that, she leaned into him and relaxed. She didn’t notice his smile grew a little more strained after her promise, but she didn’t care.

But if we're going to give Master his present...

There were plenty of obstacles to his glorious conquest, the most glaring of which was the Hero's Party. She had a golden opportunity to kill them now, even, since they were traveling together. There was only one problem with that.

Is it just Lala, or does Master like them?!

The most damning evidence of that was how softly he'd treated Maho a short while ago. He certainly seemed to be comforting that whiny slut. Laladie wanted him to be that nice to *her*.

No, that's not the important thing—Lala's going to have an even harder time killing them now!

He didn't seem to hate them, at the very least, and she didn't know how he'd react if she murdered them. What if he hated her for it?

She shuddered at the thought. "Eugh!"

She'd rather die. No matter what, she had to avoid that at all costs.

Lala guesses she'll have to let them live for now.

That seemed to be her only choice. It would delay their plans, but letting them live wouldn't pose that much of a problem in the long run. From what she'd seen of them, they were nothing special. She could kill them whenever she felt like it.

For now, Lala will watch and wait. And when they've all left Master...

Her cheeks dimpled innocently at the thought. Master shot her a confused look, but that didn't matter. For now, she could drift off into an easy slumber, knowing everything was going according to plan.

Chapter 21: Ritter's Malice

“... I could kill her now.”

Two women were perched in the branches above where Master and Laladie were resting. The first was Ritter, her small body clad in her light armor, and the second was, of course, Soulgros. Laladie was sleeping soundly without a care in the world. It'd be easy to murder the little bitch while she slept, and the whole guild would be better without that traitor.

Soulgros shook her head. “Regrettably, I hath no means of killing her alone. I may well strike Master in folly.”

“Then let me do it.”

Ritter clenched her fists, eager to wet her hands with the little one's blood.

Soulgros watched uneasily as her comrade drew her sword, miming the killing blow in the air.

“Verily, thou couldst well succeed—but thy mark liest beneath Master's very gaze. Fail, and he may come to loathe you.”

Ritter suddenly froze. Come to think of it, when Krankheit's assassination attempt was on the verge of succeeding, Master readily leapt to Laladie's aid. If she tried to slay the gremlin now, Master might stand in her way. The thought sent a chill down her spine.

She sheathed her sword. “I won't, then.”

Soulgros's eyes widened. “Art thou certain?”

“No. I'm so jealous, I want to kill Laladie right here and now. But I can't do anything Master would hate me for. I'll have time to kill her later.”

None of Yerkchira's members got along even tangentially well, and if they didn't have a common enemy in Laladie, Soulgros and Ritter would be at each other's throats in a heartbeat. The one thing they had in common was Master.

“Later.”

There was no point in staying together if they weren't killing Laladie, and Ritter hated the idea of breathing the same air as the ninja. In the blink of an eye, the knight melted into the darkness and was gone.

Soulgros let out a sigh. “Perhaps mine guild could stand a lesson in discipline?”

Her whisper faded into the night forest, reaching no one's ears but her own.

Chapter 22: Goodbye Never Comes

“Hahh...”

I smiled thinly as Laladie let out a sleepy sigh. She'd been up late the night before keeping watch with me, and she clearly hadn't gotten enough rest as a result. I couldn't let her stumble along with us when she was so tired, so I was carrying her on my back. She was startlingly light, and since we were finally drawing close to the village, the roads had improved to the point where the path was level and easy to tread.

“Nnnh... Lala wants to smell Master more, but she also wants to sleep... Lala doesn't know what to do...”

Apparently, she wasn't as drained as I'd feared. I had half a mind to put her down and let her walk for herself, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I was nothing if not soft on my guildmates, and there was nothing wrong with spoiling her from time to time.

Maho shot Laladie a dubious look. “Are you sure she's as exhausted as she looks?”

I could only smile thinly in reply.

Since last night, Maho had been decidedly more open and friendly with me. She replied when I bid her good morning, and she was less pointedly distant during our meals. Even Yuuto and Longman seemed surprised by her change of heart, but Laladie had started treating her more coldly for some reason. I couldn't understand why—we were finally getting along, and there was no need to put on such a brave front. I counted myself lucky that Laladie's hostility hadn't soured the mood too much, and I was starting to enjoy our temporary traveling companions.

I told Maho that I'd keep on carrying Laladie, and the mage narrowed her eyes at me suspiciously.

“Huh. You spoil her, don’t you?”

For some reason, I got the same frosty glare from Maho that the girls of Yerkchira sometimes shot at each other.

“Of course he is!” Laladie boasted. “Lala and Master’s bond is stronger than orichalcum and shines brighter than diamond!”

Really? That was the first I’d heard of it. I couldn’t help but furrow my brow in confusion as I tried to figure out what she was talking about. Nonetheless, she clearly had a great deal of respect for me, and I was grateful for that.

Laladie sneered. “You think you can come out of nowhere and sidle up to Master so easily? That’s just sad! Lala has her plate as full as it is with the others!”

“S-Sidle up...? H-How dare you?!”

Maho blushed violently for some reason, her eyes darting uneasily to and away from me.

No wonder she was embarrassed. She was keeping a respectful distance from me, and the accusation was an awkward one. If anything, Laladie was getting a little too clingy—case in point, she was rubbing herself against my back and trying to disguise it as the natural bump and sway of the road. I was a little confused at first, but it was clearly as unnatural as it seemed. Besides, if I tried to call her out on it, I had a feeling the conversation would turn very sour, very quickly.

As Maho and Laladie started glaring at each other with a ferocity that left me very unhappy to be in the middle of, Yuuto’s cry suddenly came from the front of our group.

“Look, up ahead! It’s the village!”

Great! Anything to end this awkward silence!

Sure enough, I could glimpse the small, scattered houses of a small settlement through the trees. It appeared our journey with the Hero’s Party was at an end.

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I profusely thanked Yuuto and his comrades. The trip was far more pleasant with their presence.

“Oh, no,” Yuuto insisted. “It was all our fault for sending those orcs toward you in the first place.”

He was a polite young man to his core, and I could easily understand why he was the Hero.

Longman let out a purposeful sigh, glancing conspicuously at Laladie. “Man, I wish I could’ve traveled with Laladie-chan some more. Why don’t you just join the Hero’s Party straight-up?”

“Don’t even joke about that.”

Longman was the same as always. He didn’t even glance at me, much less extend me the same offer. He never seemed to like me that much. Laladie just seemed relieved to finally be rid of him, and she seemed at peace with the outcome.

“I’m so sorry for the trouble we’ve caused you,” Mary apologized again with a bow.

She was nice enough, and she kept on apologizing to us for the encounter with the orcs. This time, however, I caught a distinct hint of something else in her expression. Something wasn’t quite right about her. *That’s why I stay well away from fanatics on principle*, I reasoned. I was glad to part ways with her.

“...”

Maho simply stared at me. My relationship with her had changed more than any of the others. I thanked her for her help during our travels together.

She stiffened suddenly. “What? No, you helped me more than anything! First with those goblins, and then when you listened to me vent... I’m really glad I met you.”

I assured her I didn’t do much of anything. The goblins were far from threatening, and I couldn’t give her any useful advice for her troubles. As for the latter, I was thankful she opened up to me at all, since most of Yerkchira’s members refused to rely on me.

“Actually, I kind of wish you could join the Hero’s Party with us...”

Longman snorted. “*Him?* You mean Laladie-chan, right?”

He was persistent, if nothing else.

I was glad she offered, but it wouldn’t work out. I ran a dark guild, and they couldn’t have the kingpin of a criminal organization running around with the champion of the weak and innocent. I’d cause more trouble than I was worth.

“I know. I... I know that. You’ve got your own priorities.”

My priorities? I supposed running the guild counted—the paperwork wouldn’t get done without me, after all. That was the only way I impacted anyone or anything, though, and the thought was rather depressing.

“So... this is goodbye.”

Her voice had notes of profound sorrow in it, and I found myself thinking back on the day or so we’d spent together. There was no saying this would be our last meeting, and we might well meet again someday. I just hoped that when that day came, it wouldn’t be as enemies.

She nodded at my words, smiling sadly. “Yeah... We’ll meet again; I know it.”

I swore to myself that once the paperwork back at the guild was more under control, I’d pay her a visit.

“In your face!” Laladie jeered at her. “As long as you’re in the Hero’s Party, Master belongs to Lala, now and forever!”

Couldn’t she have said anything else?

Either way, that was the end of our trip with the Hero’s Party. I had gone into it assuming the worst, but it was surprisingly pleasant overall.

“Let’s head back, Laladie. Everyone else must be worried.”

She suddenly drooped. “Oh right... If we go back now, Lala’s flirty alone time with Master will end... It was nice while it lasted.”

Flirty...?

After flashing Laladie an unamused smile, I cast one last look back at the Hero’s Party, studying each of their faces in turn, finally fixing my gaze on

Maho. Her smile was so thin that it looked like it might flicker and fade in a heartbeat. She feebly waved to me.

“Goodbye, everyone.”

Just as Laladie and I turned to leave, however, I heard a voice from behind us.

“Um, excuse me? Are you the Hero and his party?”

The speaker was a broad-shouldered middle-aged man dressed in thin rags.

Yuuto nodded. “We are. Who might you be?”

“I am the village headman,” he replied with an energetic bow. “Please, Hero-sama, you must save us!”

My heart sank at his words. It seemed like our parting with Maho and the others may be put on hold.

“Yes!” I heard Laladie chirp under her breath. “Now Lala’s date with Master will last longer!”

She thought this was a date? That was news to me, but if she was happy, I wouldn’t complain.

According to the headman, a powerful monster had taken up residence nearby, and trade with the other villages had stopped altogether as a result. Settlements like theirs couldn’t rely on aid from the royal capital given their remote nature, so they relied on other frontier towns to get by. Without trade, the village was on the brink of ruin. Many of the more confident villagers had already left to slay the monsters, but none of them returned alive.

What kind of monster could possibly take up residence there? Depending on its strength, I might not be of any help to them at all.

“I wish we could help you,” Yuuto started uncertainly, glancing over at Laladie and I.

I understood now. He was worried about getting us involved again, and as much as I hated to admit it, we’d be far better off heading back to the guild.

The headman paled. “N-No, I beg of you! Please save us!”

“Please!” echoed the nearby villagers, who likewise dipped their heads low. They must have gathered while we weren’t paying attention.

Laladie and I weren’t even members of the Hero’s Party, so I didn’t understand why they were watching the two of us so intently.

More importantly, as I looked around the village, I noticed that most of the villagers were men. That wasn’t to say there were no women at all, but the numbers seemed oddly skewed. Were most of the women staying away out of fear of us? No, they clearly recognized the Hero’s Party on sight. Something strange was going on.

Laladie tugged on my sleeve. “Master, you should listen to those filthy vermins’ feeble cries for help. Lala doesn’t mind, honest.”

Really? She was that much stronger than me, so I reasoned if she was fine with it, we’d be fine.

Longman looked at Yuuto. “C’mon, let’s do what we can for Laladie-chan.”

“But... are you sure?”

“Of course,” Mary echoed. “I can’t speak for Laladie-san, but Master-san has some talent in combat himself. We’d best enlist his aid.”

Yuuto stopped to mull it over.

I decided not to correct Mary on her misconception. I hadn’t fought in ages, but Laladie was a formidable combatant like any of our other guildmates, and she had a better mind for combat than I did. Still, it was strange that Longman and Mary were both so eager to have us along. Then again, I pored over quest details often so that none of my guild took on suspicious or unnecessarily dangerous missions, so maybe I was trying to find hidden reasons where there were none.

Finally, Yuuto nodded. “Sorry, but would you mind helping us out a while longer? I swear that we’ll try to take on the heavy lifting ourselves.”

I quickly reassured him there was no need for that, and I was struck again by just how kind he was. Sometimes he felt a little too considerate, even, and I was a little worried someone would take advantage of him someday.

Laladie eagerly tugged on my arm. “C’mon, Master! Let’s go!”

Was she always so glad to help?

I felt someone staring at me, and I looked up to find Maho smiling at me in relief.

“Wait, hold up, Laladie. We need to gather as much information as we can on our mark first.”

“Aww! Lala can handle anything, promise!”

“That’s an excellent point,” Yuuto said, turning to the headman. “Is there anything you can tell us about the monster you’ve been plagued by?”

I wasn’t worried about Laladie or me, but Yuuto and his companions were another matter. The way Maho talked about it, they hadn’t been in our world for very long at all. A battle with a genuinely threatening monster could be the death of them.

The headman mopped his brow fretfully. “Well, I’m afraid we don’t know much at all.”

Longman raised an eyebrow. “You don’t? Your whole village is getting screwed up and you can’t tell us anything about it?”

“W-Well... It’s killed everyone who’s laid eyes on it.”

Huh? From what he said, his people never returned. There was no sign of a guild in town, let alone any Royal Knights or even a competent local militia, so none of them were monster-hunting specialists. Still, with the numbers the headman implied, it was strange they had no success at all. Maybe the monster was just that strong.

“B-But I can tell you one thing!” the headman reassured Longman hurriedly. “It’s big—larger than a man.”

“Big...?”

That still wasn’t much to go on. If it was a rogue golem or something, however, that could explain how hard it was to slay.

Longman sighed heavily. “Well, damn. I guess we’ve got no choice but to go fight it. You’re not gonna back out now, are you?”

Yuuto shook his head. “I can’t—not when so many people are suffering because of it.”

Mary clapped her hands with glee. “And that’s why you’re the Hero!”

Even I had to admit it was a noble aim. He was the kind of person who could change the world. All I could do was protect Yerkchira, and that was often a struggle.

It took me a while to notice Maho still hadn’t said anything. She edged closer to me, the look on her face a mix of happiness and unease—it was hard to describe. I had no idea what she was so happy about, but I shared her nervousness. It was disconcerting that none of them made it out of their fight with the beast alive. On top of that, she’d confided in me that she wasn’t here by choice, and she was terrified of fighting.

“Are you okay?” I asked her.

“Yeah... I’ll be fine. I’m a little scared, but even if things go south, you’ll save me... right?”

She gave me an impish smile. That was more like it.

I smiled back at her, but I could feel Laladie tighten her grip on my hand.

“Hmph! Master will be too busy saving Lala. He doesn’t have the time to care about you!”

Maho glared at Laladie. “Oh, I see how it is. You hate me, don’t you?”

“Lala hates everyone who buzzes around Master like you.”

Well, so much for keeping the peace. The air was thick with open hostility. I imagined that Laladie hated Maho so much because, in a way, she was like Corine. I barely knew anything about Corine’s roots, and I was sure they had very different upbringings, but their standoffish attitudes and low boiling points were one and the same. Maho was struggling with depression a little, but I could tell she was clever and generally made informed decisions. That wasn’t to

say that Corine wasn't smart—she was just a little too clumsy with her emotions at times.

“Master-san, Laladie!” Yuuto called over to us. “I'd like to head out right away. Are you two ready?”

“Yes, we are,” I replied.

The task before us was troubling at best, but it seemed a fitting last hurrah for our travels with the Hero's Party.

Chapter 23: The Monster's Identity

At the villager's request, the Hero's Party left to slay the monster that had been troubling them, with Laladie and I in tow. There was no need for us to keep traveling with them after reaching the village, but killing a monster was the least we could do to thank them. I was expecting Laladie to protest and insist we go back, but she seemed more than happy to go with them.

Our Hero-slash-dark-guild team scanned through the woods near the village, hunting for any sign of the monster in question. Apparently, it made its nest in the woods and emerged only to attack travelers on the road.

"I'm sorry for involving you in all this," Yuuto apologized. "First the orcs, now this..."

It was fine... probably.

I was still uneasy since we had no idea what we were up against, but between Laladie and me, the worst wouldn't come to pass. Yuuto and the others had no way of knowing we were such an effective safety net, of course.

I smiled warmly at Yuuto. *See? I'm not upset in the least.*

"Hmmhmhm~~~~"

Laladie was in an exceptionally good mood, and I could hear her humming happily from her perch on my back. I could understand Yuuto's endless apologies if she was upset, but it was the opposite. We had no reason to complain to him.

"I guess we're stuck together for a while longer," Maho said, looking up at me from beside me.

I nodded and smiled at her.

Laladie snorted angrily. "Hah! You'll be leaving Master anyway. Just try to enjoy the tiny little bit of time you have left with him!"

Maho visibly bristled. “I will, thank you very much!”

I had no idea why Laladie seemed to hate her quite so much. There had to be something at play I just hadn’t noticed, but I couldn’t think of it for the life of me. In the end, I decided to switch my attention and spare myself a headache.

A dark guild teaming up with the Hero’s Party... It was a dream team of sorts, only possible because they had no idea who we were. If they—or the villagers, for that matter—knew we were some of the most wanted criminals in the Kingdom, they’d be beside themselves with shock. We even had a bounty on our heads, and if the village found out, they’d probably try to turn us in for the reward. Not that it mattered, of course. I had no intention of letting either group ever know who we were.

“Mahoooo,” Longman whined. “Haven’t you picked anything up on that detection magic of yours yet?”

“Nope. No sign of anything around here. We’ll be walking a while longer, I think.”

“Seriously...?”

I wasn’t surprised he was tired. He was the group’s wall, so to speak, and his job was to stay put and take hits, then let Yuuto take out the foes while they were stunned. He was still clad head to toe in his thick plate mail, and that couldn’t have made travel through a forest easy. Of everyone, Longman was clearly the most exhausted by our search. Laladie was likewise a poor hiker and didn’t have much stamina, but I was still giving her a piggyback ride, so she was still full of energy. Similarly, Yuuto’s armor was light enough that it didn’t slow him down much.

“Hahh... Hahh... Where the hell is that monster? This sucks... Can we go back yet?”

He barely finished complaining when Maho tensed beside me.

“Longman! Look out!!”

“Huh?”

He whipped back at Maho, visibly irritated that she was yelling at him now.

“He’s too slow,” Laladie muttered in my ear. She was clearly unimpressed, but also unbothered.

A low, rapid thudding like a drumroll thudded through the woods, rapidly growing closer.

“GROOOOOOOOOOOOARR!”

The monster let out an ear-splitting cry as it tore through the trees. It brought its hefty club down on Longman in a heavy sweep.

“WHAAAAAAA?!”

He let out a shrill scream. The force of the blow would’ve been enough to kill most men, but he wasn’t their vanguard for nothing. He managed to raise his hefty two-handed sword at the last second to deflect the blow, avoiding a direct hit. It was too heavy for him to kill the force completely, however, and it sent him flying awkwardly into the trees.

“Did it get him?!”

“Laladie. Longman’s on our side.”

Besides, I knew from experience that saying something like that *guaranteed* he’d be fine. He was probably hurt, but nothing lethal. He’d blocked it decently enough, and most of the energy went into knocking him off his feet. More importantly, there was the monster itself to deal with.

“Th-This isn’t possible,” Mary muttered disbelievingly, her face a portrait of despair. “How is a monster like that here, of all places?”

Unlike the others, she knew enough about this world to recognize the beast, and it terrified her.

It wasn’t something that belonged in the forest, that was for sure. I hadn’t seen its like in ages, and not just because of all the time I’d spent inside. Its hulking frame was similar to an orc’s, but the more one looked at it, the more clear it became that this was a different beast altogether. Its dull red skin was many shades darker than Corine’s scarlet hair, to the point where it looked almost poisonous. Instead of an orc’s vacant gaze, it had the sharp and hostile features of an oni, and it looked at us with bloodshot eyes as saliva dripped

from its countless jagged fangs. It was almost pure muscle, a testament to the blow that had sent Longman flying.

“GROAAAAAAAAAAGH!!”

It let out a ferocious war cry. It was an ogre, one of the stronger monsters that roamed the world, and it was thirsty for our blood.

Chapter 24: The Holy Sword Strikes

At the sudden emergence of the ogre and its strike against Longman, the entire Hero's Party froze. It was a mighty foe, and neither Yuuto nor Maho were used to facing down monsters at all. They could only stare up at it in shock and terror. Even Mary was unable to move, but for a very different reason—she knew *exactly* what it was. Rumors of ogres' strength were far too common.

“GROAAAAAAH!”

The monster was eager to make the most of the sitting ducks. It charged at Mary with step after earth-shuddering step, then swung its great makeshift club down on her.

“O-Oh...”

She couldn't even move. She wasn't much of a fighter, and she stayed as far away from combat as possible. Of course, she couldn't dodge.

“Hehe!”

Laladie giggled with glee from her place at Master's side. She would've ripped it in half if it came anywhere near Master, but she couldn't care less about her other companions. They'd barely spent any time together, and she regularly thought of ways she could kill her long-time comrades in Yerkchira. Only Master mattered to her, and she'd gladly watch the rest of the world burn.

She spotted a flitting human shape at the corner of her vision just as the ogre was about to hit Mary.

“HAAAAAAAAAAAAHH!!”

It was Yuuto. He had finally compelled his legs to carry him forward, and he put himself in the path of the heavy club, raising his sword and deflecting it away. If he'd tried to take the attack head-on like Longman, his blade would've broken, and he'd have either died on the spot or been cast aside like a ragdoll. He was still inexperienced, but he showed all the promise of a true hero.

He sure learns fast. If he were worthless, Lala wouldn't have to keep such a close eye on him. That way, she'd have even more time with Master to...

The thought made her blush, and she clung to Master even more tightly.

The ogre's club fell heavily into the ground, sending a cloud of dirt geysering into the air.

"Mary!" Yuuto shouted. "Go find Longman and heal him, now!"

"O-Of course! Thank you for saving me, and be careful!"

She obediently ran off into the woods in the direction Longman had been knocked in.

With that, half of the Hero's Party was already out of the action, and Laladie became convinced that they posed no significant threat to Yerkchira or Master. She couldn't see any point in watching them at all at their current strength. The only confounding factor was the sheer speed at which the Hero and his companions grew. If she took her eyes off them, they could easily become a threat, meaning she'd be stuck babysitting them for a while yet.

"Master-san! Could you please back us up?" Yuuto called.

Laladie's eyes snapped to the Hero. "WHAT?!"

The nerve of that cretin! He was in no position to order Master around. It was the height of disrespect.

Unexpectedly, Master himself readily answered the call. Laladie stared up at him blankly, her brain frantically churning to process his actions.

M-Master's incredibly generous... Yes, that's it!

She nodded to herself as she tightened her grip on his clothes. Anything to avoid admitting she had disagreed with him. She was lucky that she hadn't spoken out against Yuuto, but the thought that she wasn't perfectly in sync with her beloved Master shook her to her core.

The wind finally cleared the cloud of debris, and just as the ogre's hideous face became visible through the dust, Maho extended her hand.

"Earth Bullet!"

The projectile would hurt if it hit, but the colossal creature simply swatted her stone projectiles out of the air with a swing of its club.

“Y-You’re kidding...”

Maho stared up at the fiend in horror. It was unlike anything she’d ever seen.

The ogre, seeing an opening, lunged at Maho just like it had Mary, bringing its massive weapon to bear.

Yes! Kill her! Kill her dead!

Laladie had noticed how Maho was looking at Master differently now. She was a threat, and it truly didn’t matter if the mage lived or died. Actually, she wanted Maho to die quite badly.

“?!”

To Laladie’s horror, her beloved Master stepped forward to *save* the girl from certain death.

He shot a sphere of concentrated mana from his palm at the creature. It raised its club as if to swat the spell out of the air, much like it had Maho’s, but its face seemed to pale at the sight of the projectile. Instead of trying to counter the spell directly, it leapt aside at the last moment. The bullet whiffed past it, colliding with the trees behind it and blasting them to splinters.

“...”

The ogre thudded to the ground, then turned to glare darkly at Master, who was smiling as pleasantly as always. He was the greatest threat to those humans, no doubt—but no sooner than it came to that conclusion did it reconsider. The little girl on the man’s back was scowling at the ogre with such raw malice that it shuddered. If it attacked the man, she’d kill it.

How DARE you glare at Master?! Lala will carve you up and leave you to rot!

Maho let out a sigh of relief. “Th-Thanks. You really saved me.”

He politely smiled back at her, and for some reason, her heart began to quicken. She hurriedly turned away from him to refocus on the ogre. It was all she could do to avoid Laladie’s gaze, which was now boring holes in the back of Maho’s head.

“Let’s go!”

With Yuuto’s cry, the battle was on once more. He ran close to the ground, circling around the beast’s side. It realized his aim almost instantly, bringing its club to bear on the Hero.

“Hahh!”

He nimbly sidestepped the blow, swinging his blade at the red giant. Its skin was deceptively thick, however, easily deflecting Yuuto’s attack. If he had been using any regular sword, the impact would’ve either chipped the blade or, worse, sprained his wrist.

“Kh! How is it so hard?!”

“GROAGH!”

Irritated at Yuuto’s attempt to hurt it, the ogre whipped around with fury-driven speed to swat the Hero away. The rough strike clipped Yuuto, sending him sprawling away.

“Gah?!”

He was lucky to have avoided a direct hit, but it was enough to knock him off his feet. The ogre grinned sadistically as it closed in on him. It didn’t even realize Yuuto was smiling as well.

“Now, Maho!”

“Okay!”

The beast whipped around to discover Maho was accumulating a startling amount of mana. It was too angry before to pay attention to its surroundings, and it didn’t even notice she’d been preparing for her attack since before Yuuto ever approached it.

“Earth Needle!”

The ground at its feet warped, and before it could leap away, great spires of stone punched out of the earth. Not even that was enough to pierce its hide, however. She probably should’ve expected as much when even Yuuto’s Holy Sword couldn’t scratch it.

“How is it so tough?!” Maho cursed. “I’ll have to slow it down, then!”

She shifted the pattern of the rising spears, interlacing them against the ogre’s body until it was completely immobilized. It only sneered at her.

“GRAAAHH!!” it bellowed at her.

“Eep?!”

She jumped in shock at its sudden shout, and she could feel her spell slip away from her.

It was then that she felt a familiar hand on her shoulder.

“Master...?”

He seemed unfazed by the creature’s roar, and he calmly met her gaze. At his side, Laladie had her hands clamped over her ears, upset but clearly not scared by the noise. Seeing them so composed made her feel like a fool.

“Why are you so scared of a big, noisy idiot like that?” Laladie sneered. “Just kill it already. It’s super annoying.”

“Hehe... Yeah, you’re right.”

Maho decided Laladie was encouraging her in her own way, even if the girl herself meant it as an insult. It was do or die, and Maho didn’t have the luxury of fear.

“Shut up already!” Maho yelled.

She could feel the blood rush to her head as she fired off an Earth Bullet at it. The ogre was still mostly trapped in the web of stone spires, and her bullet hit it square in the face.

“GROAAAAGH?!”

Its head snapped back from the impact, but despite the spell having enough force to kill the average person instantly, it easily survived. Her bullet had collided with its eye, however, and had done enough damage that it was half-blinded.

“GRRRRUUUUUGH!!”

It stared fixatedly at Maho with its one good eye with such intensity that she almost staggered back, but she managed to grab hold of Master's clothes to root her in place.

"Hey! Where the fuck do you think you're grabbing?!"

Maho ignored Laladie's words as she faced off against the beast. Her every instinct was still screaming at her to run, and she would've never done such a thing before, but she held her ground. It was the only way to slay the monster.

"That's all the prep done, Yuuto. The rest is yours."

He nodded at her. "Thanks."

Yuuto was back on his feet, having finally picked himself up from the ogre's earlier blow. He closed his eyes in concentration, his blade extended at the ready before him. The Holy Sword began to glow and pulse with mana. The ogre pried its gaze off Maho to warily observe the Hero.

"This is the strongest technique I can use right now."

He raised the blade above his head and opened his eyes. The blade burst into new light, illuminating the depths of the forest like a second sun.

"GROAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!!"

The ogre began howling and flailing against its restraints. It had to flee and escape from that horrible light, so it began smashing down one stalagmite after another.

"You're not going anywhere!" Maho shouted, assailing it with new spikes faster than it could smash them down.

For every spike it beat down, two more rose to take its place. Its frustration only fueled its desperation as it mindlessly smashed away, desperate to beat down its restraints.

"Take this, monster!" Yuuto shouted.

The ogre started in shock, whipping back to face the hero in abject horror. It was too little and too late, however, as great grasping plumes of light lashed forth from Yuuto's blade as he brought it down on the fiend.

“GRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!!”

The red-skinned monstrosity was enveloped in the divine light, its lingering wail of fury echoing through the very heart of the woods.

Chapter 25: Laladie's Wrath

“Hahh... Hahh...”

Yuuto's chest heaved as he leaned on his sword for support, the tip driven into the earth in what more superstitious people might've considered blasphemy.

Laladie's eyes widened at his exhaustion.

Lala gets it now. He still can't use the Holy Sword to its full potential.

She'd expected him to still be ready to fight, but he was utterly spent. He could only use it once. That, she thought, was something the others should hear at the next monthly gathering.

“Did... Did we get it?” Maho asked uncertainly. She'd spent a great deal of mana casting the powerful Earth Needle spell so many times, and her mana reserves were all but spent.

Hmph. She's pathetic, too. Even that sad sack of tits, Vampille, or that cringey coward, Krankheit, could do better. If she was a little more competent, Lala might've tricked her into killing a guild member or two.

Laladie was careful not to let her thoughts slip out where they might land her in hot water, of course. She didn't want to get in trouble again.

“I'm so tired,” Maho moaned, collapsing plaintively against Master.

“Hey! No touching Master!” Laladie barked.

If Master wasn't standing right there, she would've killed the insolent mage on the spot.

Yuuto chuckled at the sight of them, flashing Laladie a charming smile. “You can let her have that much, can't you? We *did* just finally kill that ogre.”

“Let her?!” Laladie was beside herself with fury, all her intent to hide her venom out the window. The only thing she was hiding from them now was the

guild. “Who do you think you are?”

He flinched away, his brow furrowed with confusion. “I, uh... But...”

The very thought that she loved Master *that much* was unnerving, and he forced a smile.

Laladie did love Master as much as he feared and more, but she was looking past him. He still seemed confused, so she begrudgingly sighed.

“Did you think the ogre would die that easily?”

Her eyes fixed on the spot where the monster’s body should’ve been, and he followed her gaze. His jaw dropped at what he saw, his eyes widening in horror.

“You’re kidding...!”

It was impossible, but from the similar shock on Maho’s face, it had to be the truth. If Master wasn’t standing right beside her, she would’ve screamed incoherently at what had to be her imagination.

“GROAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARR!!”

Its mighty roar shook the very ground they stood on. The ogre was very much alive, blood trickling steadily from the gash on its head, its heavy feet planted firmly in the earth. Its breath was ragged, but its will was unbroken.

So, this is all the Hero can do now, is it?

Laladie was every bit as composed as Master, though she had the decency to keep her biting remark to herself. She knew Yuuto’s attack couldn’t slay the creature—as much as she hated her observation work, it told her that much for certain. They had only met to discuss their results yesterday, but she’d been spying for far longer. In fact, she’d kept her eye on the Hero’s Party ever since the Kingdom Observer, Ritter, first alerted them to the Hero’s existence.

They obviously couldn’t kill the ogre—in fact, she was surprised they’d hurt it at all. Ogres were regarded as one of the most powerful monsters, not to mention how incredibly hard they were to kill. The Hero’s Party didn’t stand a chance, not with less than six months’ experience under their belts. Not even their victory against Dos counted—Corine, the Demon King’s Army Observer, had sabotaged him as a prank. Yerkchira was quite literally everywhere.

The most important factor, however, was the Holy Sword itself. It had the ability to deal near-lethal damage to foes with demonic energy, but against everything else, it was simply a powerful weapon. That gave them the upper hand against Dos, but prevented them from dealing significant damage to the ogre. It had relatively low demonic energy compared to other monsters. On top of that, the Holy Sword's power depended on its user's strength, and Yuuto was still too weak to make full use of it.

"GRAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!"

The ogre pulverized the remaining stone spikes that had survived the Holy Sword's strike and leapt at Yuuto. The Hero barely managed to dodge the brute's club swing but was caught utterly off-guard by its follow-up kick.

"Gah?!"

He could feel his organs squelch wetly out of shape, and he coughed a plume of blood.

"GROUGH..."

With Yuuto down, the ogre turned to Maho, seething with resentment at having been bound by her. If not for her, it would've been able to leap out of the way of that infuriating blade of light. It wouldn't be bleeding now. It wasn't smart by any measure, but it knew Maho was to blame, and it was *furious*.

"Uah?!"

Maho stared back in horror, caught frozen like a mouse before a mighty viper. To her surprise, however, Master stepped in between them.

"Wh-What are you thinking?! Get out of here! I-I'll be fine, I promise!"

She tried to keep her quivering panic out of her voice. If he noticed, he didn't let it show, as he composedly turned back to Maho and smiled.

"Master...?"

"GROAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!"

Maho's whisper was nearly drowned out by the monster's cry of fury.

It had forgotten about the man with the smile. It knew he had dangerous magic, the kind that it feared on instinct and didn't dare try to deflect. Yuuto and Maho could wait—they were clearly too exhausted to do anything but die. The man, however, was a very real threat, one that had to be addressed immediately.

The ogre had forgotten about its true greatest opponent, however—someone who would gladly stand by and watch the Hero's Party die but would eagerly murder anyone who so much as looked at her Master wrong.

“What the hell do you think you're doing?”

“?!”

The ogre froze. The smiling man—no, the frail little girl clinging to his back—was exuding such raw malice, such rage, the likes of which it had never felt before. It had fought tooth and nail through many a bloodbath, but nothing scared it as much as the girl did.

Laladie's eyes let out a dangerous glow, her lips curling with fury. “You can do whatever you want with the others. Make it hurt. But Lala will be *super* angry if you lay a finger on Master!”

She was careful to retain at least a thin veneer of politeness. She knew Master would accept her no matter how foul she became, but she wanted him to see only the best sides of her.

“Master? Since the Hero and his idiots can't lay a finger on the ogre, can Lala take care of it? Pretty please?”

There was a saccharine sweetness to her tone as she asked him for permission.

Master hesitated as he looked around at their companions.

Yuuto was still lying sprawled on the ground. His injuries seemed too grave for him to stand, let alone fight. Maho was looking up at him, caution in her eyes. She could tell something about him had changed.

“Master...?” Maho mumbled.

Master simply nodded at her, then gave Laladie the go-ahead.

Laladie's face split in a sadistic grin as a fresh wave of ecstasy washed over her. She was absolutely elated to end any and every obstacle to her Master. She slid to the ground, trundling forward on sticklike legs.

"Are you sure about that?" came Maho's dubious voice. "Laladie's even younger than I am, right?"

She knew Master was strong, but Laladie was clearly just a little girl. She struggled to even walk properly, and fighting was out of the question. It was nothing short of suicide.

"How rude!" Laladie huffed. "Don't worry, Lala can fight a hundred times better than you ever could—and Lala's way older, too, you brat!"

Maho blinked in shock. She hadn't been so surprised since she had first woken up in this world.

Laladie snorted in irritation at the mage. She knew just how strong she was, and she didn't need a half-baked spellcaster like Maho to worry about her.

"GRAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!"

The ogre screamed at the little girl. If she turned tail and ran, that would be great—but its roar was more to reassure itself than scare its opponent. Unfortunately, she didn't even blink.

"Shut up already."

"Grough?!"

Thick, whiplike vines suddenly lashed out of the nearby vegetation, sending the ogre's colossal body tumbling back. The pain was only fleeting, however, and in moments it was back on its feet, staring down its tentacular attacker.

"A plant...?" Maho muttered in disbelief.

She couldn't believe it had been knocked back so easily. The tendrils were swaying and twitching in midair even now, eager for their next commands.

Laladie grunted in frustration. "It sure is hard... Lala doesn't even think she bruised it."

Maho would've fainted in an instant from the amount of raw mana it'd take to cast such an effect, but Laladie didn't so much as bat an eye. The girl was far beyond anything Maho could ever imagine, and she swallowed in nervous anticipation at what was sure to come.

Chapter 26: Laladie's Power

“Master? Lala promises she'll keep you alive no matter what, but could you give Lala a little more space just in case?”

Laladie turned around to give Master a coy look, turning her back to the ogre in the process. It concerned Maho that Laladie said nothing about keeping *her* alive, but she hoped that was a given.

Master nodded understandingly and took a few generous steps back. One look in her eyes told him he could trust her completely—though at his response, she blushed fiercely and began to fidget. She pressed both her hands hard over the flower on her head.

“Mmgh... Lala's honey might leak out if she's not careful...”

He noticed her legs rubbing tightly against each other and her knees quivering, but that was surely unrelated and held no correlation to her nectar-laden flower.

“GROAAAAAAAAAAAAHH!!”

The ogre bellowed a war-cry, its skin intensifying into a bright scarlet as it rushed at Laladie. A new clutch of tendrils sprouted from the ground to knock it away, but it wasn't foolish enough to fall for the same trick twice. It crouched for a moment, then launched itself through the air as if from tightly coiled springs, easily clearing the malicious plants.

“Hmph. It's agile for such a big thing.”

It had dodged her first attack, certainly, but she still had options. A new bouquet of vines blossomed from the ground, arching through the air to assault the ogre from all angles. It grunted with exertion as it swatted away coil after coil of whipping vines.

“You're not bad for a muscle-brained animal. Not bad at all.”

“Grungh?!”

Just as it was about to hit the ground, at the very moment it unclenched its muscles for the impact, a tree's hefty branch lashed out at it from above. The wooden appendage hit the monster square in the back, sending it crashing awkwardly into the earth.

Laladie didn't let down her guard, however. She could feel something was off.

"GRRRRRRRRRRHN..."

"Shit... It just took that?"

The ogre's face split in a toothy grin. It had somehow managed to twist about in the air and catch the branch against its gut. Its barrel-like biceps strained, and the hefty branch splintered apart in its beefy hands.

"GRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!"

It charged headlong toward Laladie, and every footfall left hollow craters in the forest. Countless girthy vines flailed and whipped against it as it ran, but it swatted away those it couldn't dodge with its club, only gaining speed as it went, closing the distance to its quarry step by step. Finally, the last of the meddlesome vines frayed and snapped, and the path to Laladie was clear.

"GROAAAAGH!"

"Laladie!" Maho wailed, her cry nearly submerged in the creature's roar.

She tried to draw out the last vestiges of mana she had left to save the girl, but Master held out his arm to stop her.

"What are you doing?! She's going to die!"

Master simply smiled at her. "I believe in Laladie," he said, his voice firm and reassuring.

Behind him, Laladie let out a moan of ecstasy. "Laladie never thought Master's trust could feel so *wonderful*! Now she knew why Schwarte was quivering when he said she could oversee the cooking!"

"Hey!" Maho cried out to her, wincing away only a little. "Could you stop squirming like that? Save whatever you're doing for later!"

"Oh, shut up, you whore! Who died and made you boss?!"

Maho was clearly terrified of the red-skinned juggernaut, but it wasn't Laladie's fault she was horny. Maybe the mage was right to shout, but honestly, what a turn-off.

Master listened to the two argue as the ogre closed in on the bitterly cursing little lady, its club raised high to crush her. Only someone who knew him at an exceedingly intimate level—namely, any member of Yerkchira—would catch his smile strain slightly.

“Don't worry!” Laladie yelled at Maho. “Lala's Master's special pet. She's not as worthless or stupid as you!”

“GROAAAAAAAAAAHH!!”

The ogre brought its club crashing down toward the girl's head, even more furious for her constant quipping and her blatant lack of focus.

Before it could connect, however, the ground at its feet was cleft in two, and a massive yellow flower bloomed between them. The ogre reflexively braced itself for another series of vine lashes, but the flower was still. It didn't so much as twitch. In that case, the creature reasoned, it would just pulp the plant along with the girl.

If it were more intelligent or even more cautious, it would've left the plant well alone. Unfortunately for the ogre, it was neither, and as soon as its club bit the flower's hearty stem, it howled.

“GROAGH?!”

“What?!” Maho shouted.

A gush of vibrant yellow pollen sprayed out of the flower, light enough that it covered half the scene in an instant.

The stench of the fine yellow powder made Maho wretch. “Ugh! What is this stuff?!”

“GROANGH?!”

Maho was well out of the flower's line of fire, and it was enough to make her eyes water and her nose run in an instinctive attempt to drown it out. The ogre had a face full of the stuff. Its highly sensitive nose was white-hot with agony as

it threw itself clumsily to the ground, writhing blindly as it frantically tried to pry the pollen free.

Through her messy tears, Maho looked over to Laladie, secretly hoping to see her in just as much pain from being so close to the plant. However...

“How can you just stand there?!” Maho cried.

Sure enough, Laladie was simply standing there, with the tedious look on her face that she got whenever she looked at anything except Master. She was somehow unaffected, Maho finally realized, still desperately trying to block the stench from her own nose. She glared at the little monster as her face became a wetter and wetter mess.

Laladie sighed. “Dumbass. Did you really think Lala would do herself in like that? She took precautions.”

Laladie had in fact planted a bit of purifying pollen in her nose beforehand, which would block out the stench for her completely. She smirked confidently at Maho as she struggled to breathe.

“Th-That’s not fair! And what about poor Master?!”

“Hah? You really thought Lala wouldn’t take care of Master, too? Lala thinks of him every moment of every day and every night, too! Ehehe!”

She cast Master a look of psychotic passion, fluttering her eyelashes sweetly. The sight made Maho want to wretch all over again.

“See?” Laladie pointed. “Master looks even better than usual!”

“Huh? I-I can’t—not when I look like this, I mean...”

Laladie bristled at Maho’s innocent refusal. “Ugh, you’re such a fucking creep! Stop squirming like the sleazy slut you are and look at him...” She shot an awkward glance at Master, realizing the coarseness of her language a little too late. “P-Please. Stop being coy and do it already!”

Finally, Maho did as she was told, looking up at Master’s face with a soft blush on her snot-stained cheeks.

“What? Why is there a flower growing on his face?!”

Sure enough, the very smile that sent Maho's heart racing and left Laladie so constantly aroused was completely covered by a bloom that blocked his nose and mouth completely. It was a strange sight, to say the least.

"That's a rare plant called a puriflower," Laladie explained proudly. "It makes fresh, clean air, so Master doesn't have to breathe in the stinky pollen at all."

"Hurry up and give me one of those!"

"Hehe, nope! Lala wants you to enjoy the smell a while longer!"

She grinned contentedly as Maho continued to fight the stench.

"GAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!!"

The ogre let out a mighty roar as it clamored back to its feet. Its only good eye was almost completely shut because of all the pollen, and most of its senses had totally been thrown for a loop because of the sheer power of the stench. It couldn't smell a thing now, much less see, leaving it at a total loss for its prey's location.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!"

It let out another scream of frustration. It had never been so utterly powerless before, and half out of fear, it began swinging its club at random—anything to keep its enemies away.

"Stop that!" Laladie chided. "You could hurt Lala!"

Not that she needed to approach it to kill the brute, of course. She was miserable at walking, and the ogre wasn't something she wanted to be anywhere near her. Instead, she summoned a few more of the giant yellow-petaled flowers and sent them toward it.

"GRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!"

Even through its pain and confusion, the ogre could hear several forms sliding through the air toward it. It began to swipe at the sounds, crushing flower after flower. It was strong enough to nearly wipe out the Hero's Party, after all—even weakened, it wasn't about to be overwhelmed by sheer numbers.

"You shouldn't do that!" Laladie chided playfully. "Those ones are poisonous!"

“Grungh?!”

Her coy “warning” came too late. It was already covered in the flowers’ viscous fluids. It froze, trying desperately to see what was happening, but the effect was far too great to miss.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!”

A howl of agony ripped itself free of the fiend’s throat, and it once again dropped to the forest floor to try to wipe off the fluid, rolling and flailing with even greater desperate ferocity. Nothing it did seemed to ease its suffering.

“Wh-What...? What’s happening to it?” Maho blinked at it in surprise, the pollen finally starting to leave her system. Before long, she realized the change it was undergoing. She clamped her hands over her mouth, swallowing hard. “Oh my *god!*”

Where it contacted the dubious fluid, the ogre’s skin melted and sloughed sloppily away. Unable to stand the sight, she violently lost her lunch—but even as she did so, she could hear the monster moan and spasm from where it lay in a steadily-growing puddle of its own flesh. Even worse, though, was the smell. She was hoping the yellow pollen was enough to block it out, but the almost chemical odor of searing flesh and bursting viscera prompted another round of vomiting. It took all the willpower she had to fix Laladie with a look of horror.

“They’re called Giftsauerblumen,” Laladie explained flatly. “They’re special poison flowers with acid nectar that can melt anything right away. Looks like its skin wasn’t hard enough.”

By that point, the ogre’s bottom half had completely melted, and the mighty arm that had wielded the club to such devastating effect was now a hole-ridden shell of its former self. It didn’t even have the strength to roar anymore through its half-skinless face, the sizzling of the bone nearly masking its pitiful moan.

“Guh... Uh...”

That was the terror’s last moan, its last mark on the world as the monster that had single-handedly pushed the Hero and his companions to the brink of death. With one last wet, moaning thud, it splayed its scant remaining limbs of the viscera-streaked leaf bed and ceased to be.

Chapter 27: Longman's Return

“I-I...”

Maho was speechless. She had assumed their party was decently strong, especially after beating Dos. The ogre had them so thoroughly beat in turn that she was positive that nobody could possibly kill it. But then, before her very eyes, that frail little girl with the puffy green hair and that flower on her head brutalized it. What had transpired was no fight—at no point could the monster even scratch Laladie, let alone threaten her.

“Wh-What are you?!” Maho shouted.

Laladie scared her even more than the ogre had, but it was more than the girl's overwhelming strength. It was the way she had simply stared unaffectedly at the brute's agonizingly slow end without so much as blinking.

Suddenly, Laladie turned toward Maho.

“Eep?!”

Step by step, Laladie waddled forward on clumsy feet. Maho broke out in a cold sweat. This could be the end. She squeezed her eyes shut, awaiting the end.

Laladie wasn't even looking at her, however. Despite her constant plots to kill her guildmates, she knew she was no victim, and had better things to do than take petty revenge on the mage.

“Master! Did you see Lala fight? Did she do well? Tell Lala what she did well!”

“... Huh?”

Laladie simply pushed Maho aside to clamp her arms tightly around Master as she plaintively rubbed her little body against him, her eyes wide and bright as she pleaded for attention.

Obediently, Master stroked her hair and complimented her.

She sighed euphorically, her cheeks flushing intensely. “Hehe! If killing an ogre is all it takes for Lala to get complimented like this, she might have to go wipe them out!”

According to legend, every ogre on the planet trembled in fear at that moment.

Maho only stared at the little girl as she giggled and bubbled against him. She couldn’t imagine what she was so scared of. Laladie was only a lovestruck airhead, like always.

She sighed, appraising Laladie carefully. “Seriously, who are you? You’re not really Master’s student, are you?”

Maho still couldn’t shake the feeling that Master was stronger than any scholar could possibly be, doubly so for Laladie. The Hero’s Party were combat specialists in the truest sense, and they were utterly eclipsed by the girl alone. She seriously doubted they were on a scholarly field trip.

Laladie puffed out her flat chest with pride. “Lala isn’t just Master’s student—she’s his *favorite*.”

Maho rolled her eyes. “Sure, whatever.”

She watched Master’s expression carefully, but he was smiling cryptically. It was clear he had no intention of talking. In the end, she couldn’t care less who they were. Laladie saved their lives, though Maho was loath to admit it, and Master was one of the few emotional supports she’d found in that lonely world.

“Hold it right there!” came a voice from the underbrush. “I know *exactly* who those two are!”

“Longman?!”

Sure enough, it was Maho’s companion, finally returning from where the ogre had thrown him deep into the trees. Mary followed right behind him, and at the sight of Yuuto laying sprawled in the dirt, she rushed over to heal him.

Laladie narrowed her eyes at him. “Why are *you* acting so important? You were useless.”

He scowled. “Shut up! The motherfucker hit harder than I thought it would, that’s all!”

Maho decided not to mention that she agreed with Laladie for once. Instead, something about his phrasing made her curious.

“Wait... Harder than you *thought*? Did you know our mark was an ogre from the beginning?”

He nodded firmly. “Yep, that’s right. I knew we’d run into it here.”

His answer only gave her more questions, and she could feel anger bubble up from deep in her chest.

“Are you stupid? Why didn’t you tell us earlier?! We went through hell while you were napping in the bushes!”

She’d never felt such despair as she had against the nearly-unkillable brute. He couldn’t know that feeling—he wasn’t even there. Her fury quickly grew to overcome the fear she’d experienced.

Longman snorted. “Like I could tell you. This was all a setup to expose their *real* selves!”

He pointed accusingly at Master and Laladie. The former was still smiling pleasantly, and the latter seemed sick of him already.

“What are you talking about?!” Maho snapped.

“No wonder you don’t know. We had to keep you and Yuuto in the dark.”

“Again, what the *hell* are you talking about?!”

His refusal to give her a straight answer was driving her crazy. Why couldn’t he just say it? She never got along with him all that well, and she felt this was precisely why.

Longman took a moment to puff himself up imperiously before replying. “Why don’t we ask the villains themselves? Got anything to say, dark guild Yerkchira?!”

“D-dark guild...?”

Maho whipped around at the pair, but neither of them reacted in the slightest, just smiling and frowning, respectively, as they always did.

Chapter 28: Reasons and Changes

“A dark guild? How dare you?!”

Maho snarled at Longman. She couldn’t believe that either of them could belong to such an evil organization.

Longman sighed, like a teacher being forced to explain the obvious. “Remember when we beat that Demon Army Lord guy? The King called us in and told us about the dark guilds?”

“Get to the point!”

“Hold on, I’m getting there. See, during the party they threw for us afterward, I got called out alone by some powerful people. They gave me some more detailed intel on the dark guilds.”

“What? Why just you?”

“Who knows? Probably ‘cause I’m the most reliable of anyone here.”

Maho was positive that wasn’t it. If she had to guess, it was because he’d have the easiest time taking the news. He was the one enjoying life in this new world the most, and the most mentally stable as a result. Maho in particular was grappling with her mental health, and she trusted the Kingdom only as far as she could throw it.

“Anyhow, they told me about the dark guild’s members. There wasn’t much, ‘course, but enough to go on.”

Suddenly, it made sense as to why they hadn’t told Yuuto or Mary, either. If they had heard that one of their new marks was a girl as young as Laladie, Yuuto wouldn’t have been able to fight her. Mary was similarly kind.

“They had some extra info on one particular member of Yerkchira, though—a girl who matched Laladie *exactly!*”

“What?!” Laladie gaped.

Somebody sold Lala out?! If it's the Kingdom, that must mean Ritter! That mush-brained slut of a knight! She's trying to get Lala out of the picture so she'll be Master's favorite!

One of her “comrades” was clearly to blame. None of the others would hesitate to thin out the competition, so to speak, so it was the obvious conclusion.

“The proof I needed was in that fight!” Longman continued. “The intel mentioned a girl who could control plants—that has to be Laladie-chan!”

“Um...”

Maho found herself unable to argue. The dark guilds had a reputation for ruthlessness and cruelty, which she had to admit fit the diminutive sadist. She'd melted the ogre alive, after all, and watched it suffer without any hint of emotion. Still, she couldn't be that evil... could she?

“I-Is that true?” came a feeble voice. “Master-san? Laladie...?”

“Yuuto!”

Sure enough, the Hero was back on his feet, though he needed Mary's support to stand. He still seemed to be in a lot of pain.

Maho whipped about to the pair, and to her horror, Master was smiling sadly now.

“Wh-What's wrong?” she stammered, her unease rising. “Tell them they're wrong... please?”

His sad smile only deepened.

The clearing fell into silence.

“Hahh, this is super stupid!”

Laladie's voice cut through the tension like a knife. She glowered at the Hero's Party as they all turned to her.

“Master. Can Lala just tell them already?”

Master hesitated for a moment before nodding helplessly. Then Laladie leapt back and away from them, a cruel grin across her face.

“You! The worthless one! You’re right. Not a bad deduction. Of course, if *she* hadn’t tipped you off, you would’ve never noticed.”

Longman’s eyes widened. “Whoa, you’re admitting it that easily?”

“Hah! Who cares what a bunch of maggots like you know?”

He guffawed. “You sure talk a mean game, Laladie-chan! ‘Course, it never was just us.”

Longman snapped his fingers, and for the first time, Maho could tell they weren’t alone. There were other people there, and a lot of them—thirty, at a guess. They sneered as they circled the group. Shockingly, she even recognized a few faces.

“Wh-Why are they here?!” Maho exclaimed.

Laladie looked around blankly. She couldn’t bring herself to care about anyone except Master, and she didn’t know a single face that surrounded them.

“You know these guys?” she asked Maho bluntly.

“How do you not remember them?! They’re the villagers who asked us to slay the ogre just a little while ago!”

Longman grinned. “You’re only half right. They aren’t villagers at all. They’re gray guild members and Royal Knights!”

“What?!”

Laladie had lost interest already, and after glancing around, she turned to gaze into Master’s eyes. “Hehe, he’s so much more handsome...”

Laladie should’ve been the most alert of any of them, but Maho found herself far more irritated. Intent on getting answers, even if Laladie didn’t seem to care, she turned back to glare at her former comrade.

“What did you do with the real villagers?”

The broad-shouldered man who had acted as the headman snickered. “Them? Long dead. We just wanted to borrow the place for a while, and they *had* to refuse. ‘Course, they had plenty of pretty women, so it wasn’t a total wash, if you catch my drift.”

Maho paled. “Y-You can’t be serious! You won’t be getting away with—”

“Sucks to be wrong! Guess who hired us? The King’s own son!”

She had no words. The gray guild had wiped out an entire village in what must have been a horrible ordeal, and the Royal Knights themselves aided them.

“Aren’t some of you knights?! If you don’t fight to protect your people, what are you even for?!”

One of the thugs sneered. “What, you thought life was a fairy tale? If you want a buncha saps to make everything right, go hit up the Queen’s knights or some shit; maybe you’ll have more luck. Us Prince’s knights, we take the world as it is—nah, as it should be.”

Maho couldn’t believe her ears. She had assumed the Royal Knights were there for the safety and protection of the common folk, but apparently those who supported the Prince were as corrupt as they came. They seemed glad, even, to murder defenseless peasants.

“M-Mary!” she stammered. “Tell me they can’t do this!”

Forget Longman, she could tell there was no point talking to his goons. Mary, though, would side with Maho for sure. Maybe she’d even help them escape from the mess she was in.

The priestess hesitated for a long moment. “Well, these people definitely shouldn’t have killed so many innocents.”

“Mary...!”

Maho’s spirits rose, but Mary’s eyes were fixed on the ground.

“But why should we blame them?!” Mary suddenly burst out, snapping up at the dark guild members. The soft kindness was gone from her eyes, replaced by a dull, indiscriminate malice. “Yerkchira are not adherents of the Church of Angels! Worse, I hear they’re adherents of Masterism—a cult of all things!”

“M-Mary...?”

“The Church of Angels is the one truth! All other forms of worship ring false and wicked! Let alone that horrific cult, Demon’s Dogma, no mindless,

meaningless gaggle of deluded fanatics should be allowed to practice their corrupting worship! They deserve to burn for their sins!”

Maho shuddered back in horror. Mary had always been so soft and considerate. She healed people out of a heartfelt belief that it was right, not that she had to, and she always had a word of reassurance for the injured. Was that all a trick to hide her venomous true nature? Or was the devil who wore her friend’s face the charade? Maho couldn’t bring herself to believe either aspect was fake.

Laladie let out a heavy sigh. “First that grinning, million-year-old fanatic back at the guild, now you. Lala hates all you zealous types.”

She thought back to Anat and grimaced, what with all her senseless chants and sermons. She pretended to be pleasant and peaceable, but at the slightest opportunity, she’d seal herself in her so-called prayer room and mutter so many fervent prayers of thanks, reverence, or even love that even Laladie thought it was ridiculous. Worse, Anat would drag one or more of the others along with her, and it was no understatement that she was the most-hated of all Yerkchira’s members. Still, Laladie admitted the idea of worshipping Master was infinitely more appealing than a bunch of stupid angels.

“I frankly don’t care if either of you are members of Yerkchira,” Mary continued, frothing at the mouth now. “But *nobody* is permitted to cast aside the Church of Angels for an accursed faith! The Angels will damn your rotten souls for eternity!”

“Lala would prefer to wait on Master hand and foot, so she doesn’t believe in your church thing—”

“*HERETICS!* On behalf of my hallowed saviors, I shall bring the hammer of judgment down on you myself!”

“Eugh... Lala super hates fanatics, even more than everyone else.”

Laladie’s face scrunched up in disgust and annoyance. In fact, in that moment, she couldn’t think of anything that repulsed her more.

Chapter 29: The Fall of the Hero's Party

“This can't be happening...”

Maho's vision began to go dark as despair gripped her heart. Mary had been with her through good times and bad. Master and Laladie saved her, both emotionally and literally. They were both precious friends and companions—unlike Longman, of course. Her opinion of him started bad and only got worse. But before her very eyes, her companions were on the verge of murdering each other.

“Hehehe!” Laladie chuckled, a laugh like the tinkling of a bell. “Lala was being a good girl for Master's sake, but finally, *finally* she can kill you! It's so nice to be free!”

That was par for the course for Laladie. She didn't care about any of the Hero's Party, much less see them as allies. They hadn't even betrayed her, as far as she was concerned, because she never trusted them in the first place.

“C'mon, Laladie-chan, wake up and smell the shit you're in.” Longman smirked. “You think you can take on this many men at once? Tell you what, agree to be my woman, and I'll put in a good word for you with His Majesty.”

“You can bring all the wimps you want, you can't beat Lala—and nobody would be twisted enough to want to be your 'woman!' Are you crazy *and* stupid?”

Evidently, Longman believed his advantage in numbers would be enough to succeed where the ogre failed. He was so confident that, from the way he was ogling her petite, angelic form, his thoughts weren't even on the battle.

Lala isn't even Master's plaything yet. She'd rather die than become yours!

She stuck out her tongue at him defiantly. Then she turned to the two remaining neutral parties, Yuuto and Maho.

“So? Whose side are you two on? You’re siding with them, right? Great, then Lala can kill you—”

It would be that much easier to kill all of them at once. That way, she wouldn’t have anyone to spy on, and she’d be the only free member of Yerkchira, and she could spend all her time flirting and snuggling with Master at all hours. The others would try to stop her, but with such a succulent prize at stake, none of them could possibly succeed.

Her conniving ended, however, when Master gave her a light, chiding bonk on the head.

“Ouchie!”

It didn’t hurt her physically, of course, since he was very gentle. Still, it deeply wounded her that she wasn’t perfectly aligned with his ideals.

He turned to Maho and asked her, as calmly as possible, if she was their enemy.

“M-Me? Your enemy...?”

He admitted that he liked both her and Yuuto. If they were going to try and hurt Laladie, however, then they would have to become enemies.

Maho’s heart skipped a beat, and she blushed beet red. “Y-You like me...?!”

“Mashter! Lala wuvs you, too!!” Laladie began giggling loudly, clinging onto him and practically drooling with desperation.

It was impossible for either of the women to maintain a straight face, but Master’s smile was still overshadowed. He wasn’t asking Maho or Yuuto to become their allies—that would be too much. He only wanted them not to fight him.

His voice had an odd sincerity to it. He wasn’t afraid that she or Yuuto would turn on him for the threat they would pose. Instead, he seemed genuinely concerned for their safety.

Maho didn’t want to hurt him, especially with how big a place he began to take in her heart. Perhaps just as importantly, she knew that trying to fight Laladie was suicide, and that the little girl wouldn’t hesitate to make her end as

slow and gruesome as the ogre's was. She never liked Longman, and she was less than enthusiastic about Mary's bared religious fervor. The gray guild and the Knights were just as bad, if not worse, for all the innocent people they'd killed just to set the trap. She wanted to side with Master more than any of the rest of them.

"Yuuto?"

"Hrm..."

She glanced at him to find that he was very carefully mulling over his options. He was kind to a fault, after all, and it couldn't have been easy to choose between his comrades or his new travelling companions. Maho would normally be irritated at his indecision, but for now she took pity on him as she patiently awaited his decision.

Normally, Yuuto would side with the rest of his party in a heartbeat. His role as Hero carried with it a great responsibility, however, and he hated the thought of either group perishing.

It was at that moment that Mary cast him roughly to the ground.

"Huh...?"

Neither Yuuto nor Maho could process what was happening. Mary's face was downcast, making it impossible for either of them to see her expression.

"Enough talk already," Longman said with a twisted smirk. "We all know you're gonna choose the bad guys."

"W-What?!" Maho protested. "Neither of us said anything!"

"You expect me to believe that? I saw how you two clung to Master. You *want* to side with him, don't you? That'd be better for everyone, really."

She blinked at him in surprise. It didn't make sense. Did he *want* to fight them?

Yuuto climbed clumsily to his feet, drawing closer to his former friend. "L-Longman? Why?"

"I'm tired, that's why." As soon as he said it, his face blossomed in relief, as if he'd been waiting ages to say it. "Look, Yuuto. My man. It's called the Hero's

Party for a reason. Everybody's talking about you all the time, Yuuto. I'm fucking sick of it! I came here first! Me! / found this world first! / deserve to be the main character! Why'd a bratty little shit like you come and upstage me?! Get your pussy ass out of my story!"

He was there the longest. He was summoned first, and when he first woke up in this world, his hellish life finally got better. Longman had fantasized about being sent to a wonderful new dimension often, and when that sweet salvation finally came, he readily accepted it.

He would've been more than happy to be the lone hero, but no, they *had* to summon a pair of kids. At first he was furious, but once he thought about it a little more, he realized they might help him. Every hero needed someone to save, after all. One of the kids was even cute, and even though she was stubborn, he could deign to add her to his harem.

Longman's confidence was quickly shattered. As they checked the kids' potentials after their summoning, it became clear that Yuuto was the only one of them who could use the Holy Sword. Yuuto would be the Hero. Meanwhile, Longman was relegated to being a mere sidekick. All he could do was take hits for the others, and that reality was more bitter than years of rotting in his soul-crushing desk job. With every thanks and blessing uttered for the young Hero, Longman's spirits sank.

"I've hated your guts from the moment I saw you!" he hissed.

"Longman..."

Yuuto's face blanked with surprise, prompting another round of raucous laughter from the traitor.

If it wasn't for the kid, *he* would be the Hero, no doubt. Maybe he could've had his way with Mary and Maho, and he might even have connections with some of the less reputable nobles he so deeply desired. Maybe he wouldn't have had to stoop to using slaves to placate his libido, let alone the disadvantaged young women he forced to please him.

"This is all your fucking fault, Yuuto. You did this to me!"

Yuuto knew Longman's accusations weren't fair or logical. He was being scapegoated. But the words of the man he had trusted and believed in as his friend broke his heart all the same. His eyes darkened and his shoulders sagged, as if the will to fight had vanished.

With a snort of contentment, Longman turned to Maho. "And you... Why do you have to be so goddamn bitchy?"

She twitched in surprise. "M-Me?"

"Yeah, you. 'I wanna go home! I hate it here!' Jesus Christ, why couldn't you just stop your fucking sobbing and grow a pair?!"

"That's not fair! Anyone would want to go home!"

"Read my motherfucking lips: *That's not how it works!*"

Every waking moment of his normal life was agony. He could've died from boredom alone. But no, Maho *enjoyed* her life as a schoolgirl. She didn't hate her life like he did. If she was that happy, then sure, she might want to go back. But it wasn't her story, and she had no business polluting Longman's life with her whimpering and her whining.

"You know what?" he finally said. "I don't care what any of you cocksuckers want. I'll just kill you all!"

He ripped an axe out of the hands of the guildsman beside him and threw it at Maho's feet. It plunged into the ground in front of her with such lethal ferocity that any doubt that he was joking instantly left her mind.

Then, in the middle of that lethal mood, a small girl's voice rang out.

"Hahh... Are you done arguing yet? Lala's tired of these games."

Chapter 30: Ogre, Ogre, Ogre, Ogre

Everyone stopped, the desperate air vanishing with Laladie's declaration. The former member of the Hero's Party turned to stare at her. She looked absolutely bored out of her skull.

Longman grinned snidely. "You'd better watch your mouth, Laladie-chan. You'll look even more pathetic when you wind up crying and begging for mercy. See, we have—"

"You mean the ogres hiding in the woods? Hah! You think that'll be enough to stop Lala *or* Master? What are you, stupid?"

He froze. How could she have known they had more of the unmatched brutes lying in wait?

"Shit. Guess the cat's out of the bag," he muttered before shouting to his allies. "Hey! Let 'em out!"

One of the men—a spellcaster, from the look of him—cast something, and moments later, the heavy thundering of heavy footfalls echoed through the woods around them.

"GROAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!!"

There were four of the brutish horrors now, bursting through the trees all around them. Maho and Yuuto could only stare in horror. One of the monsters alone nearly killed them.

"Heh, I knew it was worth sacrificing all those villagers!" The shit-eating grin had returned to Longman's lips. "Here I thought one would be plenty, but hey, there were still leftovers. I figured it couldn't hurt to have backups, and what do you know?"

Maho gaped. "H-How...?"

Laladie glared at her. "Shut up, idiot!"

“I-Idiot?!”

Laladie didn't so much as blink at the quartet of titans.

“Lala's a key member of Yerkchira. How could she lose to a bunch of wimps like this?”

Longman and his gang swallowed hard as the telltale Crest of Yerkchira began to glow on her cheek. The ground beneath their feet began to quiver and shake.

“Lala is an agent of the Messianic Legion, Yerkchira! Her duty is to turn any fool that would dare oppose her Master into mulch!”

Longman stared into her eyes in horror as she rose higher and higher into the air, until he had to crane his neck to see her face.

“You've got to be fucking kidding me!”

A gargantuan plant had burst from the ground at Laladie's feet, merging with her as it grew to staggering proportions. Her skin took on a botanic green tint as she changed, shrinking and becoming even more apparent as her clothes fell away in shreds, revealing her slight yet distinct curves to the open air—though of course, the important bits were covered by choice foliage.

“Oh, one more thing,” she continued disinterestedly. “Lala isn't human. She's an alraune—a fellkin. It's not a pleasure to meet you. Now die.”

Confronted with her true form, only one thought occupied Master's mind.

Why was it that when she used her full power, all her clothes fell off?

Chapter 31: Of Alraunes and Overconfidence

The plant was large enough to defy all reason. The flower that slew the ogre was large, but the mass of writhing vines and roots that had fused themselves to Laladie towered far above the trees.



“Okey-doke, time for you all to die. How about Lala saves everyone some time and you all die at once?”

The frigidity in her eyes sent shivers down their spines as she snapped her fingers in a cutesy manner. Then, with startling speed, huge flowers began to sprout all around them, swallowing them hungrily.

“GAAAAAAAH?!”

“M-MY LEGS!!”

The worst part of the hungry blossoms was their acid-slick petals, which ate away at their bodies with horrifying speed.

“AAAAAAAGH!!”

“Somebody save me!”

“Hothothothothothoooooooooot!!”

Fresh screams of fear and agony rang out as the trees behind the gray guildsmen creaked to life, skewering them on countless splintering branches. Before them, the knights scattered in panic as they fled from horrible, mouthed plants. Worst were the unlucky souls who were coated in the same voracious acid as the ogres, left to writhe and howl on the ground as their flesh ran off their bones in great, reeking torrents. Only those closest to Master were spared, left to bear witness to the horror.

“F-Fuck,” Longman muttered in disbelief. He couldn’t bring himself to run or even raise his weapon to defend himself. He could only stare at the hellscape, his entire body drenched in slick sweat. “Shit, shit! Ogres, get your asses in there! Kill that alraune!!”

“GROWAAAAAAAARGH!!”

Under other circumstances, the beasts wouldn’t even consider answering such a lowly human’s call, but the desperate rage in his voice spurred them forward.

Laladie only sighed at the sight of them. “Ogres? Lala’s sick of you already.”

The bulbous green trunk she was rooted on sprouted thick new branches, on which bulbous lantern-like fruit swelled. They swayed uncertainly on the laden boughs.

One of the luckily untouched men stared up at the bounties of nature vacantly. “U-Uh...”

Then, the fruits released themselves from the branches, hitting the ground just before the charging ogres and spraying their lethal contents.

“GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH?!”

The brutes’ screams of pain reverberated through the woods. The force of the bursting fruit sent them sprawling back into the underbrush. The impact likewise sent knights and guildsmen alike flying, even launching Longman and Mary from their once-safe haven.

“Jesus fuck, the hell was that?” Longman cursed, dazedly sitting up. Something like a massive thorn was stuck deep in his arm, and the blood oozed down his armor. As he looked around him, however, he realized just how lucky he had been. “What...?!”

The mighty ogres, immune to the very best the Hero himself could produce, were stuck full of countless gristly, shrapnel-like barbs.

“Y-You’re kidding... The ogres are dead, just like that?”

“Th-This shit is nuts! I’m outta here!”

“Ruuuuuuuuuuuuuun!!”

“Hey!” Longman barked after them. “Get your asses back here!”

None of them so much as glanced back at him as they ran. There was no reason for them to do so in the first place—he wasn’t in charge of them, and they were allied only in their united aims.

Those that turned and fled became easy prey for the trees and carnivorous plants alike, easily caught and torn into bloody chunks.

“Don’t just run, dammit!” Longman swore bitterly. “Mary? Mary, heal me—”

He stood to follow them, but the fresh stab of pain from the sharpened plant matter in his arm reminded him how much he was bleeding. He looked around for his companion and found her almost immediately. She was pinned to a tree by a spearlike thorn, the spike running clean through her gut like a butterfly on a display board.

“Ugh, I’m gonna... Uegh...”

He’d gone through plenty since joining the Hero’s Party, and he’d seen his share of gristly sights. None of them prepared him for the death of someone he knew and worked with. His legs gave out beneath him, and as he fell to the blood-streaked grass, he vomited the entire contents of his stomach.

Laladie snickered at the sight. “Oh? Not so strong now, are you?”

Longman looked around. Almost nobody was still alive, let alone able to run. Every knight and guildsman alike who had encircled the dark guild had met horrific ends except him. Master smiled peaceably, as if he hadn’t just borne witness to a mass murder. Maho, at his side, looked deeply conflicted. Yuuto, of course, was still staring in abject horror at Mary’s corpse. They were the only survivors except for Longman himself. Everyone had been slain by that harmless-looking little girl.

“A-Ah...”

For the first time, he realized the gravity of his mistake. What on earth had he done? Not even the most carefully honed defenses meant anything to the horrifying plant. He was as good as dead, and as he stared Death herself in the eyes, he wet himself in fear.

“Hmph. Nothing to say for yourself? Honestly, what were you thinking, opposing Master with such a pitiful force? Lala hates having to clean up your silly mess.”

A plant sprouted before him at her words, its petals spreading wide. Inside was a disturbingly fleshy mouth laden with razorlike teeth. It clacked its jaws in anticipation.

“G-Gaaaah!!”

The burning pain in his arm forgotten, Longman gripped his heavy two-handed sword, swinging it one-handedly with adrenaline-fueled might. It was the mightiest single blow of his life.

Laladie chuckled. “Too bad Lala’s plants aren’t that weak! Unless you’re on Ritter’s level, you’re good as dead!”

Longman froze. Ritter? He knew that name. *Wasn’t she the Kingdom’s—?*

His stream of consciousness abruptly ended. The flower caught his sword in its teeth, shearing the steel like paper. Then, it opened its mouth wider than should have been physically possible and began to hungrily stuff the warrior into its gaping maw.

With that, the Hero’s Party—and with it, the tales of Mary and Longman—ended at the hands of Yerkchira.

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“Hahh... Lala’s true form makes her so tired! Lala may as well go back now.”

With the trash all properly composted, she was ready to go back to her much smaller form. Yuuto and Maho were still alive, but they wouldn’t be foolish enough to make an enemy of Master now. Even on the off chance they tried to hurt them, they were both exhausted from their own fight with the ogre. She could kill them in her human-passing form easily enough. It bothered her that half of the Hero’s Party was technically still alive, but that should be plenty.

Just before she disengaged her alraune form, however, a roar hit her ears.

“GROOOOOOOOOOOOORGH!!”

Maho’s eyes widened in horror. “What?!”

One of the ogres, great thorns still sprouting from its red hide, had managed to stand. She knew it was an indiscriminate killer and that it would lunge out at the closest prey it could find—her.

“GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!!”

“... Huh?”

With its second howl, however, it *turned away from Maho* and barreled headlong toward Laladie. Perhaps some shred of Longman's last command remained in its feeble brain.

Laladie shook her head disapprovingly. "Dummy. If you killed that bitchy witch, Lala would've just knocked you into next week. Looks like you're dying here, too."

She willed another patch of giant plants to sprout between her and the brutes, and they swarmed it with a frenzy of sharpened vines and branches.

The ogre avoided every single one. It swatted some out of the air, and the rest it avoided with startlingly acrobatic twists and leaps. That alone might have been feasible for a monster of its strength—and yet its bloodshot eyes never once parted from Laladie.

"Mmh."

Pouting slightly, she unleashed a second wave of attacks, this time far more powerful than anything she could've mustered in her humanoid form. The ogre perfectly dodged her yet again, and now she knew something was wrong.

"How about this, then?"

If vines wouldn't work, she'd try something else. This time, she opted for a few of the giant acid-spewing flowers that had killed the first ogre so easily. She carefully guided it into position, then let the blossoms unleash a mighty spray. Surely, it couldn't avoid that. And yet—

"What?!"

She couldn't believe her eyes. The creature somehow could tell that there was no way of avoiding the acid, and so it extended its off-arm toward the plants, blocking the brunt of the wave. At the cost of one limb, it had managed to escape, and its good hand only tightened its grip around the club as it continued its sprint toward her.

It couldn't be happening. Granted, Yuuto and Maho had struggled against it, but she was different, a cut well above the weak humans, and the ogre was nothing to her. And yet, it survived not one, but three lethal blows.

Laladie broke out in a cold sweat. “Wait, that’s not... This is bad!”

If she had used her full power from the beginning, as she surely would have against a fellow member of Yerkchira, none of this would have happened. Against a mere ogre, however—much less one that was already mortally wounded—she had dismissed it as a non-threat. Now, there was little she could do against it.

“Lala doesn’t care if she makes it, but Master...!”

Her thoughts immediately went from the red-skinned omen of death rushing at her to her beloved Master. Fortunately, the ogre seemed indifferent to everyone except her. It didn’t so much as glance in his direction. All she had to do then was kill the irreverent monster, and everything would be fine. Everything would be—

“—Oh.”

The ogre was much closer than she thought. It must have covered a lot of ground in the time she was focused on Master. She could faintly make out the gleam of its daggerlike teeth through its grin as it raised its club to strike.

Finally, everything clicked into place. “Lala *knew* a stupid piece of shit like that couldn’t be this strong.”

Any normal ogre would’ve died from the thorns like the others. That one was different, however, and she had just figured out why.

“That stupid, red-headed, cow-uddered bitch!” she cursed. “Maybe Lala pushed her too far.”

“GROOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAR!!”

With the tiniest hint of regret rising in her heart, the ogre slammed its club into her trunk.

Chapter 32: Master's Power

THWANKK!!

An explosive burst echoed through the forest. Had it been a direct clash between Yerkchira members, there would have been far more resistance—but against a summoned plant with barely any power funneled into it, the ogre's blow was more than enough to crush it.

At the top of the towering plant, Laladie suddenly found herself in mid air.

"Oh, she's really done it now..."

Laladie's anger toward the ogre—or rather, the ogre's controller—was insurmountable before, but felt surprisingly little now. She'd given up entirely.

Alraunes were categorically miserable at walking. If Master hadn't picked her up and taken her with him back when they first met, she'd still be staring blankly into space in that remote corner of the forest. Most of her people, few as they were, almost never uprooted themselves to walk about, so their legs were effectively ornamental. Laladie was a highly unusual alraune in many ways, but mobility was never one of her specialties.

As she plummeted toward the ground, she could see the ogre grinning up at her, waiting until she fell into reach. Sticky saliva dribbled from its lips in great strands, its eyes jubilant that it could finally tear apart its hated enemy.

"GAAAAAARGH..."

"Ugh, gross."

Any energy she had left quickly left her at the sight. She could try to attack it, but like all her people, she could only draw out her true strength when she was firmly planted on the ground. Laladie wasn't completely powerless—she could hardly be a member of Yerkchira with such a crippling weakness—and she would be plenty capable of slaying an ordinary ogre. That one was being

controlled by that hideous wretch Corine, however, and was anything but normal. Nothing she could do now would dispatch it in time.

“Hahh... What a pain.”

And so, Laladie gave up. There was no point in struggling. If it was the kind of lecherous, vulgar creature that would force itself on its victims before dealing the killing blow, she might have had some avenue of resistance. Regrettably, the ogre was only interested in death and destruction.

“Laladie *does* have a backup plan, so she doesn’t mind dying here.”

She muttered those puzzling words to herself as she fell. Even if there had been someone within earshot, the rushing winds whipping about her would’ve ensured her voice was lost. Even though alraune were fellkin, she wasn’t immortal and had no means of returning to life. She did, however, have something of a workaround in mind.

She sighed. The incessant whipping of her hair was getting on her nerves. “Is Lala going to hit the ground yet?”

She looked down at the ogre. Its club was already wound at the ready, prepared to bat her clean out of the air. She clamped her eyes shut, awaiting what would hopefully be a relatively quick death.

...

“... Huh?”

No impact came. Instead, she felt something warm and reassuring envelop her, and she caught a whiff of an intoxicating aroma. Both were strikingly familiar. It was exactly what she felt whenever she was being held.

“M-Master?!”

Finally, she put it together and opened her eyes to find herself in Master’s arms. He was holding her in a princess carry, her now-even-tinier body nestled snugly in his arms.

“Grugh?!”

“What?!”

Both the ogre and Maho cried out from beneath them.

“Are you okay?” he asked her.

“Ah...”

Her mind froze. His words didn’t sink in somehow, and she was left staring dazedly at his charming smile. Something about the calm, polite look in his eyes prompted her to blush fiercely. He was a prince, rushing in at the nick of time to save his princess, like something out of a fairy tale.

“Ah... Ahhh...”

She was completely naked, her pale green skin utterly exposed to his eyes. She was suddenly aware of the wind on her aggravatingly small yet softly mounded breasts. Her stomach didn’t have the tight compactness that came with maturity, nor did it stick out—it was childlike, despite her great age. Her butt was the only part of her with any element of maturity, and it had a distinctly womanly shape to it. Everything, every part of her body, was utterly bare to Master’s eyes.

“W-Wait!” she pleaded. “L-Lala wants you to see her, b-but not so suddenly...!”

Her words only seemed to confuse him, however, and she pressed her face hard into his clothes to avoid her blushing becoming any more apparent, her tiny hands grasping firmly at him. It felt ridiculous to be so bashful now, but her heart was beating so madly in her chest that she had to cling to her rawest instincts just to maintain her sanity.

Finally, the cessation of the rushing air around them signaled the end of their trip, and their arrival on the ground.

She let out a weak moan. “I-Is it over already?”

Laladie had no intention of relishing the comfort of his warmth, however, and she wrapped her little arms tightly around his neck.

“GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!!”

The ogre bellowed in fury as it stomped toward them, its prey snatched from its grasp at the last moment. It was livid with rage at the interloper. It would

just have to kill Laladie and the interloper at once.

“If you lay so much as a finger on Master, you’re dead.”

“?!”

The ogre recoiled in shock at the mysterious voice in its head. Something about it struck a primal fear into its heart, so deep that it quivered with terror. Whatever the voice was, it was strong beyond all reason, and its instincts screamed to run and hide. Its prey was similarly strong, but the red-haired woman puppeteering its motions somehow made the fear go away. That was the only thing keeping the monster fighting.

“GRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGHH!!”

It let out another roar as it sprinted at the pair, this time squarely fixated on the little plant-girl hanging from the man’s neck. It wouldn’t dare argue with the voice, and as if to validate its choice, it could feel its body lighten as it swelled with new might. Its controller approved. Death to the girl, then.

“Don’t worry, Master. Lala is so happy to be in your arms that she thinks she’s going to burst. She can’t lose now. Just keep holding onto her and relax, and she’ll...”

Between his smell, his warmth, and the blissful sensation of being cradled in his arms, she felt all the mana she’d spent come flowing back to her. She had no doubt it was the fruit of Master’s love, as unscientific and impossible as that was.

She didn’t even finish her sentence before he planted a finger on her lips to shush her.

“M-Master...?!”

Her chest began to pound again with the sweet softness of his skin, and she watched wide-eyed as he smiled and told her to leave the rest to him.

“Hmmmhh?!”

Laladie moaned wetly to herself, her body twitching suddenly at the sweetness of his words. Her one relief was that he hadn’t seen her, having already turned toward the charging monster.

“GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!!”

It howled at him in frustration. Yuuto and Maho flinched uncomfortably at the sheer volume of the cry, but Master seemed utterly unaffected. He calmly extended his palm toward the creature, and a burst of searing-hot wind struck the ogre head on.

“Huh?”

The gasp of confusion could easily have come from any of them. Yuuto and Maho watched in wide-eyed shock, and despite Laladie’s long history with him, she had never witnessed anything like it.

The heat was roasting the ogre alive, its skin blistering and sizzling at a horrifying rate. It was still conscious enough through the pain to recognize the man as a critical threat. It couldn’t possibly kill the plant without slaying the man first. The voice was clear that no harm was to come to the man, but its mind was made up.

“...?!”

The voice seemed distracted, somehow confused by the latest turn of events. This would likely be the ogre’s only chance.

“GROAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!!”

It leapt forward with a mighty roar, changed its target in the air, and landed with every intention of killing the man where he stood.

“GRAGH?!”

Something suddenly exploded, assaulting the creature from all sides as if the air itself had ignited. It fell to the ground, stunned, but a moment later, branches from nearby trees lifted it off the ground and pulled its limbs taut in the space between two sizable oaks.

“That’s Lala’s...?!”

She couldn’t believe her eyes. Controlling her plants was her specialty, and yet he had the same skill.

Master’s smile strained slightly at her awe, but he moved on to his next spell without skipping a beat. He formed five spears from the earth at his feat and

launched them toward the monster in a single unified volley. Despite the inefficacy of even the Holy Sword, the lances easily pierced the creature's flesh.

“GYEAAAAAAAAAAGH!!”

With one last horrific cry, the ogre fell limp against its restraints, never to move again.

Chapter 33: Returning Home

I let out a sigh of relief. It had been quite some time since I was in a fight, but it seemed to go smoothly enough. Fighting the unusual ogre was nerve-racking, but I was determined not to lose, especially with what I said to Laladie.

“Master! Thank you so much for saving Lala! You’re her hero! You were soooooo cool!”

She wrapped her arms around me gleefully, and I tried not to appear too awkward as I stroked her puffy hair. In my line of work, “hero” wasn’t a title I could accept easily.

More importantly, there was business to attend to with Maho and Yuuto. Their party had been thoroughly shattered with the deaths of Longman and Mary, and I was somewhat apprehensive as to their next move. I hoped we wouldn’t find ourselves enemies.

Yuuto forced an uncomfortable smile. “I... Well, I need to do a lot of thinking about what I should be fighting for. In the meantime, I’m quitting being the Hero. I don’t think I’ll be finding my answer anytime soon.”

He had felt quite strongly about his allies, after all, and being betrayed so ruthlessly no doubt weighed on his mind still.

After nodding to him understandingly, I turned to Maho.

“I’m done with the Hero’s Party,” she declared firmly. “I’m not going to work for a country that literally tried to kill me.”

That was a perfectly sensible answer. What were her plans, then? If she wanted to be an adventurer, she could get into whatever guild she wanted with her skills.

Her gaze drifted. “Well, I guess I could join your guild if you’re—”

“Nope.”

Laladie immediately cut her off with surprising speed and ferocity.

Maho narrowed her eyes at the mandrake. “Excuse me? Are you the guildmaster? It’s not your choice to make.”

“Master doesn’t have the time to waste on you, bitch.”

“What did you call me?!”

Maho glared at Laladie with malice, and she smirked back condescendingly. I hated it when people around me fought, and I was never very good at mediating. I cast Yuuto a pleading look.

He smiled faintly. “Haha... You want to go back home, right, Maho? That’s what you’ve already told me.”

That’s right, she mentioned that during our time on watch last night. I didn’t have the chance to tell her back then, but I could send her back to her world if she wanted me to. Just offering was a load off my chest.

“...”

All three of them stared at me in shock. Laladie and Maho were frozen in their playful struggle, each stretching the other’s cheek wide to force them to surrender. Honestly, it was a little unnerving.

Yuuto and Maho reacted at the same time.

“You can do that?!”

“Why didn’t you say so last night?!”

I flinched a little at the sudden pressure, but I nodded in response to Yuuto. I only didn’t tell Maho before because I’d missed the ideal timing, and it never felt like the time to bring it up afterward. I learned the secret of interdimensional transport a little while—no, many years ago now—to help *her* return to her world. I’d done a lot of research on the topic, and it was within my power to do so.

“YESSS!!” Yuuto cried jubilantly, his earlier discomfort gone.

Maho didn’t say anything, however, and her brow furrowed uneasily. I knew she wanted to go back, but something was keeping her here.

Having a decent idea of her feelings on the matter, I handed her a pendant with a small red gem embedded in it. She accepted it dubiously.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a useful tool, a relic that makes the wearer’s magic function even in worlds devoid of mana. It has a few other uses, like increasing one’s mana stores and making spells more efficient.”

With talent like hers, I knew that she could master interdimensional travel if she put enough practice into it. It would help her to that end if she wanted it to, and if she ever found herself missing our world, she was welcome to pay me a visit at any time. I wouldn’t be dying anytime soon, after all.

“... Y-Yeah!”

Her face lit up like a star, and I smiled back from the bottom of my heart.

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Before me, Maho and Yuuto were standing at the ready, waiting to be sent back to their world. We hadn’t known each other for long by any measure, but I’d never forget having met them. Our time together was far too eventful for that.

I looked them both in the eyes in turn, then prepared myself to cast the spell that would return them home.

“Could you perhaps hold on for a minute?” said a singsong voice from behind me.

I turned around to see a familiar woman in a priestess’s garb—Anat.

Laladie recoiled in surprise and disgust. “Geh?! What are *you* doing here?!”

Anat smoothly ignored Laladie and headed right toward me.

“Oh, it’s been far too long, Master! I was so, so lonely without you! Won’t you please soothe my poor, wounded heart?”

With that, she hugged my face tightly into her bosom. She held me a little too tight, in fact, as I began to asphyxiate.

“You slew that ogre with such style and grace,” she cooed. “My heart was flutter with joy at the sight, and I was getting rather hot and bothered when you penetrated it with your mighty spears!”

I could barely make out what she was saying, let alone reply. She was literally smothering me to death, and I flailed about as I tried to get my point across.

“Ahh, your breath is so blessedly warm!”

She let out an oddly labored sigh, sticking my nose even deeper into her cleavage. It was no use. I wasn’t getting through to her, and I could feel my head beginning to grow light. There were worse ways to die than at the hands of my daughter, so to speak, but I hoped nobody would remember how I went. I couldn’t imagine a worse epitaph than “was smothered to death by boobs.”

“Get off him!!”

“Ahn!”

Luckily, just as I was about to pass out, Laladie grabbed the back of my clothes and yanked me free.

Th-Thank you... I certainly wasn’t keen on dying so soon after giving Maho the pendant.

“The hell are you doing here?!” Laladie barked at Anat, ignoring me. “If that’s all you came here to do, Lala swears she’ll kill you!”

Come on now, Laladie, she’s your guildmate. Why would you ever threaten her with something so cruel?

“Well, giving Master a great, big hug was certainly part of it—but more than that, I’ve come to give Maho-chan an offer of recruitment.”

“M-Me?!” Maho stammered. “Recruit me for what?”

Anat loped closer to the otherworlder with a smile. For some reason, I was reminded of a hyena stalking a rabbit. She turned back to me, a broad smile across her face. For some reason, I got the feeling that something was about to go horribly wrong.

Anat and Maho whispered the spell back and forth, before the priestess took a large step back with a smile.

“Now, let’s put you to the test! What’s your main objective as soon as you get back~?”

“To spread Masterism throughout my world!”

Maho’s eyes were spinning oddly, and she spoke with more enthusiasm than I’d ever heard from her before. Did Anat just brainwash her? How was that even possible in such a short conversation? What happened?!

I took a deep breath. Either way, Maho was going back to her world, and it was my duty to see her off with a smile. I turned to Yuuto. If anything went wrong over there, I knew he could handle it.

“Wh-Why me?!”

The poor boy, already shaken by the sudden power of Anat’s brainwashing, paled at me in the face of his great new responsibility.

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“It was a pleasure traveling with you, Master.”

“I’ll see you later, I promise! I’ll master how to cross the dimensions, and by the time I’m back, my whole world will be singing your praises! We’ll be unstoppable!”

With that, Yuuto and Maho were whisked away, back to their own world. I was growing increasingly scared of what Maho was planning, but I didn’t doubt that Yuuto would rein her in before things got too out of hand. It was out of their hands, and if she really wanted to spread what would clearly come across as an evil cult, that was her business, and I hoped Yuuto would have her back if the worst came to pass.

Anat turned to Laladie and me with a broad smile. “Well, then, let us head back to our guild. We were all so terribly lonely without you, Master.”

“Dammit!” Laladie cursed under her breath. “Looks like this is the end of Lala and Master’s special date...”

I nodded at Anat. We had been gone for quite some time, after all, and I had some apologizing to do.

Chapter 34: Master's Iron Will

Laladie clamped her hands over her pounding heart as she stood in front of the most important door in the whole world. It was a special place, a frontier that she would lay down her very life to defend. Beyond the door was Master's room.

He didn't have a separate study to conduct his official business as guildmaster in. That room housed both his desk and his bed. It was the latter that brought her there that night.

She knocked on the wooden door with trembling hands, and she heard that sweet, reassuring voice from within in a reply. Just hearing Master's voice filled her with joy.

"I-It's Lala. Can she come in?"

It took all her willpower to prevent her voice from squeaking.

To her relief, Master told her to enter. She knew he couldn't turn down a request from her, but her nerves were taut nonetheless. The Crest on her cheek shone bright red with pleasure as she eased the door open.

"Master...?"

He smiled warmly at her from his desk. He'd evidently been poring over his papers even at that late hour, sparing no expense for her and the others. Smiling back at him with relief, she closed the door behind her, taking the time to put a tiny plant there. The roots rapidly spread deep within the lock, jamming it so thoroughly that it may never open again.

She was a little worried that those sows who called themselves her rivals might try to interfere—but more than that, there was something magical about being locked in alone with him. It was a little fetishy, granted, but she was confident he wouldn't mind. The other members of Yerkchira had been wary of her since their return, and though she knew locking him up in her own little

world was impossible now, she got off with her little pleasures whenever she could.

Besides, Lala now knows he's too strong to lock up normally.

From what she'd seen, he deserved every bit of respect and deference he received. She had thought—somewhat blasphemously—that his time cooped up in the guild with his paperwork had made him rusty. A part of her even assumed he was weaker than her, since she routinely sharpened her skills hunting dangerous monsters and in “friendly” clashes with her guildmates. She was laughably wrong. He was so strong that she wouldn't have to worry about him again. Even the ogre that that treacherous whore Corine was controlling proved fodder to him. If she tried to keep him anywhere against his will, she wouldn't be able to stop him without hurting him—not that she'd ever act against his wishes in the first place.

Laladie was snapped out of her thoughts by Master's voice, this time asking what brought her there.

“O-Oh, um... Lala can't sleep. Can... Can Lala sleep with you tonight?”

She hugged her pillow tight to her chest, tilting her head coquettishly to the side with big puppy eyes. He had finished the day's paperwork already and was likely a day or two ahead of his schedule. The “ornamental” vase of flowers on his desk had kept her very well-informed.

“Please?” She pouted her lips sweetly. “Pretty please, Master?”

She was genuinely concerned about his workaholic tendencies. It was at least ten percent of her reason for being there. The remaining ninety percent was, admittedly, because she wanted to sleep with him, and as per the Yerkchira ladies' unwritten code, she steered true to her desires.

He was conflicted but bent to her will in the end with a polite smile.

“Yay! Thank you, Master!”

Of course, he couldn't refuse her. On unsteady, wobbling legs—despite having gotten much more adept at walking than she often let on—she plodded over to him. After all, if he knew how good she was at walking now, he'd have that much less cause to dote on her.

“Ah?!”

She let out a sweet yelp as he scooped her up—just as planned—and deposited her on the bed to save her the trip. It reminded her of the fight with the ogre and how he cradled her so carefully in his arms. He’d never been quite as handsome as in that moment.

“Hnngh...”

The thought of it caused her mark to glow bright red, and she lost herself in the plush comfort of the bed and Master’s intoxicating aroma.

“Lala’s so tired!” she said, feigning a yawn.

She rolled over so her face was on his pillow and inhaled with all her might. She was careful to make it seem like a coincidence, of course, for fear he might think she was some kind of pervert.

“Hurry up, Master!” she pleaded. “Come to bed!”

His pillow didn’t smell half as good as he did, after all, and she patted the mattress beside her as soon as she had her fill. Master gave her a slight smile as he obediently sat down beside her.

“Ehehe!”

Laladie eagerly grabbed onto him in as big a hug as she could muster, wrapping her slender arms and legs around him and pressing her petite body into him.

“You’re so warm!” She giggled.

She couldn’t let him go now if she wanted to, and not just in a physical sense. His smile brought her true joy, and even touching him like that through their clothes was indescribably arousing. She could feel another wave of lust assault her, and she began to dream again of locking him up in a special little world of her own design.

“You were super handsome today! You saved poor little Lala from that big, mean ogre!”

She tightened her grip as she innocently writhed against him. For the longest time, she had focused on protecting him, cultivating him as she might a flower.

He proved her wrong, however—it was *much* more attractive to have him fight for her.

“You were so manly, that Lala... Lala can’t...”

Lala can’t wait any longer!

Laladie looked up at him, letting her bedroom eyes do the rest of the talking. She’d been practicing that look for ages, and she was confident that her melty, plaintive look yielded sex appeal far beyond what her juvenile appearance might suggest. She had to struggle not to drool, and her heart was beating so hard it hurt. Most maddening of all, however, was the heat she felt far lower, gushing out from deep inside her, and she clung to his clothes more tightly than ever now.

Lala knows Master has superhuman levels of restraint, but he’s still a man! All men love cuddly, horny girls! All she has to do is bait her little trap, and he’ll swallow her hook, line, and sinker!

She stifled a lewd giggle as she imagined what would happen next.

If it came down to it, she knew a few flowers whose pollen was a powerful aphrodisiac. One sniff of that, and he’d be on her like a wild animal. Either way, they needed to be quick about it, or her guildmates would notice something was amiss and come to investigate. She wanted her first time to be a lengthy, concentrated affair, but she would settle for being caught in the act.

“Hup!”

She threw one of her legs over him with startling grace and ease, such that she was mounting him head-on. Her curvaceous behind was planted squarely on his lap, and she stopped to shift a little and make sure it was positioned just right. Her legs were splayed wide, and he might be able to see her underwear in her pose, but she was counting on that to help turn him on.

“Master...?”

She cooed weakly to him, her hands running smoothly up and down his torso as she looked down at him with a pleading smile. Locks of soft green hair fell loosely around her shoulders, which she was sure added to her raw sex appeal. His stomach was surprisingly firm, with telltale signs of muscle, and she teased

his chest with her fingertips. It was a classic alraune seduction, an age-old tradition of her people. They needed to attract men to them, after all, so that they could bear fruit. Surely not even Master could resist her siren-call.



“Wah?!”

To her surprise, however, his smile seemed more forced than ever as he hugged her close to his chest. In an instant, all the sexual tension she’d so carefully cultivated was gone.

“M-Master?! That’s not what Lala meant! She’s happy of course, but...!”

She began flailing about, but she didn’t want to break free of his grasp. Being embraced by him at all, especially since it gave her another lungful of his smell, was too special to give up.

“Huh...?”

He patted her reassuringly on the back of her head. The softness of the gesture gave her a newfound lust for his body, but more than that, she felt at ease. Her ear was pressed flush against his chest, and she could hear every calming beat of his heart. The rhythm had an almost hypnotic quality to it, and she could feel the tension leave her body.

N-No... This is too relaxing. Lala’s going to...

Her eyelids began to droop. The past few days had been extremely busy, and despite being in top physical shape, she must have been more mentally fatigued than she thought. His embrace was the last straw, and she could feel herself slipping into dreamland.

Aww... This was Lala’s big chance...

She was only half-conscious now, and her mind was full of regret. She had fought well to keep Master all to herself over the past few days, but she knew it wouldn’t last. There was no telling when they’d be alone together next, and she wanted to strike while the iron was hot.

“L-Lala’s not... giving up...”

With those lonely last words, she fell asleep, leaving Master to stroke her hair with a soft smile. He wouldn’t dare admit to anyone, much less to Lala herself, that he might have ushered her along with a little sleep magic.

Chapter 35: The Heroes' Return

“H_{mm}...?”

Maho slowly opened her eyes. The last thing she could remember was Master's smiling face, right before he cast the spell to send them home. She hated to leave him so soon, but with his blessing, she opted to return home to her family.

Had the spell worked? She uneasily looked about. The first thing she spotted was familiar, but unlike anything she had seen in that fantastical world of swords of magic—it was a busy intersection, full of great metal vehicles as they mingled through the great clouds of exhaust fumes. She would've hated such a sight in the past, but the distinct reek of fuel nearly brought her to tears.

“I-I'm really home...” She never thought she'd be happy to see cars.

“Are we really back?” said a familiar voice from her side.

She turned to find Yuuto, every bit as moved as she was. They were both okay. Master's spell had worked. They were home, and she couldn't thank him enough.

“We're really back!” he shouted, stretching out his arms to embrace Maho with glee.

He had done his best to be a fitting Hero, but the fate of the world was too heavy for a boy his age to have to bear. There was no war for him to fight here. He was so beside himself with joy that he found himself reaching out to touch a girl. Unlike Longman, he kept well away from women, but he was so happy that he would make an exception.

“Uh, no.” She glared at him, sidestepping his hug. “I get that you're happy to be back, and trust me, I know the feeling. But keep your hands off me.”

“Y-Yeah... right. Sorry.” She was right, of course. It wasn't right of him to try and hug her out of the blue like that, no matter their situation. “That was rude

of me, wasn't it? I mean, we're not exactly close enough to hug."

Maho gave him a blank look. "What? No, nothing like that. I don't have anything against you, honestly."

This time, it was Yuuto's turn to stare confusedly at her.

She rolled her eyes. "I'm a priestess now. Remember? Of Masterism?"

He froze. "Wait. You what?"

"Sisters of Master's faith must offer themselves to him in a spiritual sense, obviously, but also in a mental and physical one. My body and my heart are for Master alone, and I can't stoop so low as to hug another man."

"Uh... M-Maho-san...?"

There was an odd gleam in her eyes and a smile of euphoric bliss on her lips. They seemed to be on the edge of a park at about noon, and there were people all around them, but the aura she gave off made the nearby children flee in terror. He called her name again and again, afraid someone might call the police on her, but she didn't seem to hear him.

"Yes, I'll be busy! Busy indeed!" she cackled. "I must spread the word of Master throughout this forsaken world!"

She ran off to do who-knows-what, and Yuuto had to raise his voice to a shout. "W-Wait! You can't be serious!"

Maho glared back at him, but that was the least of his worries. He had to know what on earth she was planning. It was his job, forced upon him as it was, to make sure she didn't do anything too crazy. His eyes flitted uneasily to her pendant, the one that allowed her to use her magic even in their world. The Holy Sword was still at his belt, but he didn't know if it would work. Worse, what if it did? He couldn't use it before he knew for sure, since he couldn't risk killing her by accident.

He tried to hide how much he was sweating. "Look, you should at least go see your family first. I bet they're worried sick about you."

"My family...?"

Yuuto caught a flicker of reason in her eyes, and he could feel the tension in his shoulders dissipate. She had wanted to go home more than anyone, after all. It was obvious she would want to see them.

Slowly, Maho began to nod. “Yes... First, my family.”

“That’s the spirit! Go let them know you’re okay!”

She was listening to him! With any luck, she’d forget about that crazy cult altogether, and she wouldn’t go make an enemy of the whole world. He sighed with relief. For a moment, he was afraid she was going to turn into a fanatic like that Anat woman. Now, she was back to being a normal—

“I’ve got to spread the good word of Master to my family first!”

“... What?”

The determination on her face and the firmness with which she clenched her fists made his heart sink. He hadn’t gotten through to her at all.

“Thank you for that, Yuuto. If I don’t convert my family, how will the rest of the world follow? I’m glad you reminded me of that before I went and embarrassed myself.”

“I didn’t say any of that!”

“If they don’t listen, I suppose I’ll have to enchant them...”

“You’d use magic on your own family?! Th-That’s not what Master had in mind when he gave you that pendant!”

He already knew there was no use. Anat had perfect control of her mind, and there was nothing he could say to shake her brainwashing loose. Yuuto faced the heavens and begged Master for forgiveness as he wept.

He was snapped out of his penance as Maho grabbed him firmly by the wrist.

“Let’s get going, Yuuto!”

“Huh? Why? I’m not going with you, right?”

“What are you saying? You’re the first soldier of Master’s faith, so it’s only natural you act as such.”

“Soldier of... What are you saying?!”

“We’ll start small—just Japan for now. People here are quite accepting of new faiths, so I’m sure it’ll go well!”

“No, stop! Please let it go poorly! PLEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEASE!!”

Yuuto’s feeble pleas reached the very heavens as Maho dragged him off to convert the unwashed masses.

Chapter 36: The Other Dark Guild

“**C**urses! Foiled again!”

The man slammed his fist on his desk in frustration as the messenger finished the report. Apparently, not only had their latest attempt to destroy Yerkchira failed, but the Hero's Party was no more.

“Longman, that worthless piece of shit! I was prepared for his death, but why did he have to take all three of his companions with him?! Damn him to hell!”

He thought bitterly about the treacherous otherworlder his country had summoned. Granted, the man himself had fired the first shot in his feud with the dark guild, but he never dreamed his designs would backfire so spectacularly.

“Heeheeheeeee!” echoed an irritating, wheezing laugh from his colleague. “Did you think the guilds and our kingdom were overreacting? They call those villains a threat for a reason! And to think that you wanted to have your grunts wipe them out... heeheeheeeeeeeee!”

“Silence!”

He couldn't stand the joker's laugh on a good day, much less under these circumstances. Unfortunately, the angrier he got, the more that infuriating fool seemed to enjoy himself. No threat could silence that buffoon.

“We can sweep the gray guild's deaths under the rug. Your Knights, well, they knew what they were signing up for. But the Hero and his followers? Heehee, rough luck on that one! They weren't your pawns to sacrifice. Even if His Majesty is an idiot, I imagine he'll punish you all the same.”

“I said, shut your insolent mouth!”

The fool only laughed harder, without any care that he was inviting the wrath of the First Prince of the Kingdom of Efan himself.

“You don’t have to tell me that!” the prince snapped, pulling at his own hair in frustration. “I know the trouble I’m in!”

“Oh, but it doesn’t have to be that way.”

“It doesn’t?”

The companion snickered as the prince tried and failed to hide his interest. He enjoyed watching the blue-blood suffer, but he needed him to remain at large.

“Who says you have to take the blame?” he suggested casually. “Isn’t there someone else—a meddling noble, for instance—who you’d prefer be punished?”

“You mean... pin it all on them?”

“Of course! You’re the prince, aren’t you? Why would your dear father expect you to be the perpetrator?” He snickered cruelly. “I can’t say Her Majesty would be fooled, though. She’s frustratingly sharp.”

The prince’s lip curled at the man’s laugh, but he admitted there was merit in his words.

“Bah! Why should I give a damn about her? I am next in line to the throne, and all the real power in the palace is in *my* hands. I can throw her off my scent easily enough.”

“How bold of you, Your Royal Highness! How wonderfully cruel!”

The prince couldn’t be heard saying such things in public, of course, but the joker was the only one to hear his words. Even if he were to talk, nobody would believe him. Though he was an officially licensed adventurer, others knew better than to trust him.

“But if I might ask, what prompted you to target the Messianic Legion? Not that I’m complaining, of course. I should be thanking you, if anything.”

The adventurer chuckled gleefully. The prince shuddered at the sound before replying.

“Just as I’ve hired your people, there’s no guarantee my sister won’t run to the cretins of Yerkchira for aid. Better to crush them now before they can oppose us directly.”

“Heeeheee! Oh, politics, ever a bloody mess! But if you’re so wary of that guild, why not bring them into the fold?”

The prince snorted. “And make enemies of you and your men?”

“Guilty as charged, Your Highness!”

The prince let out a sigh of irritation. He had no grudge against Yerkchira personally, but the joking man himself hated the dark guild with a passion. He was the reason for the whole shadow-war.

“Of course you would choose to side with us!” the joker continued with a snide chortle. “We’re far stronger than those forest-dwelling fools could ever be!”

“You’re certainly more... infamous among the peasantry than Yerkchira, I’ll grant you that.”

“That’s not enough. Not enough at all! Why are all you blue-bloods more scared of those wretches than us?! How could we possibly stand the slight?!”

Most people didn’t even know Yerkchira existed, and yet all the key figures in the major guilds and in the palace alike had an unhealthy fear of them. Yerkchira’s guildmaster was supposedly the reason why they were feared so much as a whole, but the prince doubted any of them knew anything worthwhile about the man. None of them had tales of the master, after all, no justification for their wariness. Most likely, their ancestors were terrorized by him in some way, and over the years, only that pervasive sense of dread remained. A hundred years was a long time ago for humans, and anyone who knew the guildmaster at the height of his strength was long dead. The only information anyone had on the villain now was generation-old hearsay. The prince assumed Yerkchira wouldn’t pose any notable threat as a result, but it was getting harder to explain the deaths of so many of his men at the dark guild’s hands.

The prince sighed frustratedly. “At this point, I think our only course of action against them is—”

“Why, it would be our honor to humble them! Why hire us and not put us to good use, after all? To eliminate your opposition, was it? I’d say it’s high time

we got to eliminating, then!”

The prince expected him to say as much. He wanted to avoid relying on the fool’s organization if at all possible, but he was hemorrhaging options. They were the only ones who could oppose Yerkchira now, and they had to be dealt with if he was ever going to be king.

“Fine, then. I’ll submit a formal request for their heads.”

“How prudent of you, Your Highness! I was afraid you’d say no, and I wasn’t looking forward to killing you.”

The prince didn’t so much as bat an eye at the threat. The joker had far more to lose from their secret meetings, after all, and despite the man’s impressive history, the prince was confident he wouldn’t go down easily.

“I’ll make it official—I want you, the Dark Guild Heinichen, the Steel Matriarch, to dispose of Yerkchira.”

He scrawled the request on a piece of parchment and handed it to the joker, who practically ripped it out of the prince’s hands.

“Done and done! Heeheehee, finally we’ll prove to the whole world which dark guild they should *truly* fear!”

The prince only shook his head in disgust. He never could get used to that horrible laugh, but at least now the fool would earn his keep.

Chapter 37: The Next Target

Yerkchira Guild Headquarters.

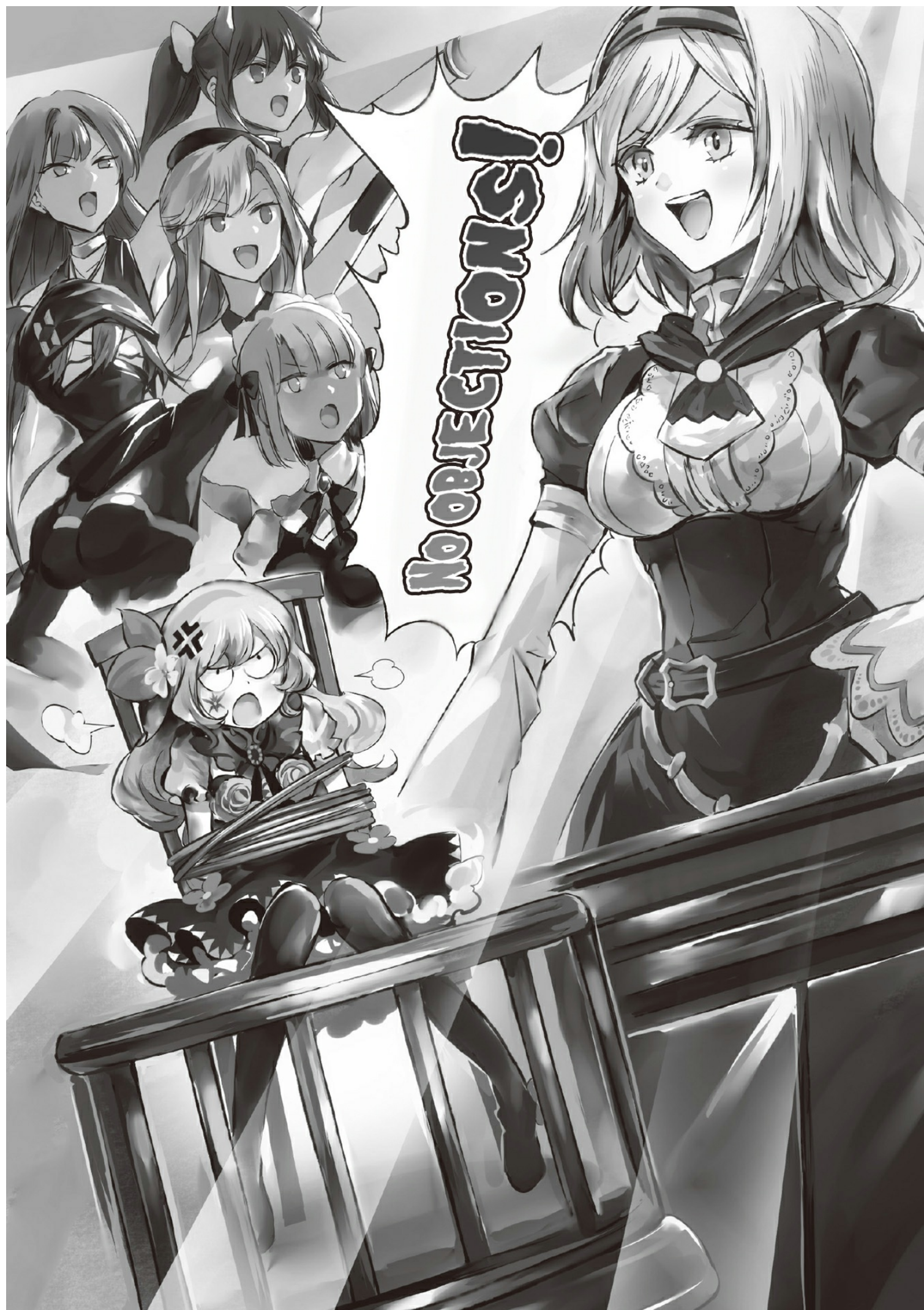
“Without further ado, let’s begin Laladie’s trial, shall we?”

“... Lala’s what?”

The dining hall that had housed the guild’s last monthly meeting had been converted into a courtroom. Laladie was strapped into the defendant’s chair, and Anat smiled down at her from her judge’s plinth.

“Schwarte? Could you list the accused’s charges, please?” the sacred sister asked politely.

Schwarte, the tan-skinned maid-slash-prosecutor, nodded. “Laladie, after finishing your day’s work, you returned to the guild, exposed the one thing this organization cannot survive without—Master—to mortal danger, and dragged him through the woods for over twenty-four hours. Your Honor, I believe this warrants the death penalty.”



“Keep your opinions out of this!” Laladie snarled.

That seemed to be going a little too far, a little too fast.

“No objections,” Ritter added flatly.

Despite the utter lack of emotion in her voice, there was a medley of frustration and jealousy in the black-haired girl’s voice.

“Nobody asked you!”

Vampille nodded exuberantly. “Seconded! No objections, indeed!”

“You shut up, too!”

The joyful ease in their voices rubbed Laladie the wrong way. The whole trial was a farce, and she was ready to invite one of her plant friends through the floor to break it up.

“Jeez, just give her a break already,” said a collected drawl. Laladie turned to see Leiss, a hand pressed to her horned head as if she had a splitting headache. “The first to finish their work got to spend time with Master, right? We all agreed.”

With that, she snapped the ropes binding Laladie to her chair with her bare hands. Laladie’s eyes widened at the sight.

How strong is she?! Laladie was tied up pretty tight!

Not that the ropes were insurmountable by any measure. She could have broken herself free if she had half a mind to.

“Sides,” Leiss continued, looking around the room at her colleagues, “she got rid of the Hero’s Party, right? That’s one less obstacle to givin’ Master the world. I say we call it even.”

Nobody could argue with her. As grave a sin as dating Master was, dispatching the Hero was definite progress. Any of them would’ve gladly murdered Laladie for endangering Master, but the ends did indeed justify her means.

Laladie proudly puffed her chest out at their silence.

“Hold on,” Corine cut in. “She didn’t do a thing. It was all Master. She almost got herself killed for treating that ogre like a pushover!”

The red-haired enchantress puffed out her own chest indignantly, and Laladie could swear she *heard* the monsters on her chest bounce. She glared at her with a killer's eyes. That smug, stifled chuckle alone would've been enough to push Laladie over the edge, but that was the last straw.

"Yeah, fucking right!" Laladie hissed. "That ogre was all *your* fault!!"

Corine scoffed, rolling her eyes. "What? No, it wasn't. You can't prove a thing."

"Demanding proof is just as bad as admitting you did it!"

Laladie finally boiled over, and the two glared at each other with unbridled malice. Their mana was so thick in the room that they could practically taste it. It was nothing unusual, so just as they had practiced so many times before, the others emitted their own malice to counter the pair.

Anat clapped her hands to get their attention, lips pouting. "Come now, you two, don't be like that. If you're going to fight, please take it somewhere you won't bother Master."

Corine and Laladie exchanged one last glare and muttered curse apiece before taking their seats once more. They were irritated to be receiving orders from Anat at all, but she had a point.

Anat herself, of course, didn't actually want them to fight to the death someplace out of Master's view and leave her with one less romantic rival, preferably two. Absolutely not. She'd never even think something so unpriestesslike.

"B-But that's still one less obstacle to deal with," Krankheit chimed in, fingering her long twintails. There wasn't any point in putting on airs with them, so she left out her blustering and posing.

Laladie smirked. "Exactly! Thanks to Lala, we're one step closer to giving Master the world. Where's Lala's thank-you, bitches?!"

"I-I wouldn't go *that* far..."

Still, the damage was done, and Laladie was overjoyed to be validated.

“More importantly, Lala doesn’t have anyone to watch at all now. While you hussies run around doing errands, Lala’s going to enjoy her special lovey-dovey time with Master!” She let out an aroused sigh at the thought.

“WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?!”

Vampille slammed her hands on the table, blood-red eyes flashing.

“No fair.” Ritter narrowed her eyes angrily.

Leiss pursed her lips. “C’mon, Laladie, that’s a step too far.”

Despite being on the receiving end of murderous looks from all corners of the room, Laladie’s heart didn’t so much as skip a beat.

Schwarte cast Anat a cold look. “Anat-san?”

She nodded. “I’m afraid I can’t condone that.”

Laladie only smirked. “Why not? Lala doesn’t have anything else to do. Actually, Lala did so well that she’s bound to be the MVP. You’re welcome to the leftover crumbs of Lala’s success, of course.”

“Like hell you will!” Corine snarled. “Just try it! I bet Master won’t even want a shrimpy little squirt like you getting all flirty and gross with him!”

“That does it, udder-breath! You went too far!” Laladie hissed with rage.

She was the only one to have dealt with her part of the work completely. The others were preoccupied with gathering knowledge on their targets while running interference to ensure their enemies didn’t grow wise to Yerkchira’s designs, something Laladie didn’t have to do. Corine, of all people, didn’t have the patience to baby the alraune for doing less work.

“If you had worked alone,” Anat continued, “I would gladly let you relax. Since you had an accomplice, however, I’m afraid it won’t stand.”

Laladie’s brow furrowed. “Accomplice? Master was—”

Anat shook her head. “Not him. There was another who helped you take on the Hero.”

Laladie was ready to tear into the priestess for spouting more nonsense—but to her surprise, Anat simply turned to her co-conspirator.

“’Twas I, Laladie-dono.”

Sitting there was Soulgros, hands folded neatly on her lap, her back impeccably straight.

“What?! Th-The stalker wasn’t even there! Lala did *everything!*”

The ninja sighed and shook her head. “Stalker...? Thine words sting me so.”

Krankheit raised an eyebrow. *I-I don’t think she can argue with the stalker bit...*

“Soulgros infiltrated the gray guilds and intentionally leaked your information to the Kingdom,” Schwarte explained emotionlessly. “Those filthy villains would never have assembled so neatly for you on their own.”

It was a little frustrating that Schwarte was so cold and aloof with everyone except Master, but when Laladie remembered how irritating some of her other guild members could be, she immediately changed her mind.

Laladie shot a sharp look at Soulgros, her nose scrunching in disgust. “Stop selling out your friends like that, creep.”

Soulgros chuckled. “Mine sole regret is that thou hath survived the encounter.”

“Laladie’s not dying before she’s lived a full, happy live as Master’s wife!”

As cruel as the kunoichi’s words were, everyone in attendance found themselves agreeing with her.

“At any rate,” Anat announced, “you’ll continue to aid us on anything that needs doing. Your alraune abilities are rather useful, after all.”

After a moment’s thought, Laladie begrudgingly nodded. “Fine.”

It’d be best to play along. If any of the others finished their work in the same way, she could demand the same treatment for them. On top of that, it’d be suicidal to make herself the most hated woman in the guild.

“Ah!” Soulgros’s eyes brightened, as if remembering something. “Anat-dono, I must mention that Scrap Metal hath begun to move.”

“Oh~? You mean that dark guild?”

Scrap Metal was a mocking codename of sorts and referred to one of the few other dark guilds, Heinichen. Yerkchira prided themselves on their covert operations and limiting public knowledge of their very existence, but the so-called Steel Matriarch was much more open in their evildoing.

“The prince is sponsoring them,” Ritter offered.

Leiss nodded. “I don’t know the details, but I heard the infighting in the Kingdom’s gettin’ brutal. You know they’ve gone rotten if royalty’s hiring dark guilds... though I guess they never were that great.”

Leiss had been around since Yerkchira’s founding all those years ago, and she was so sure of the Kingdom’s history because she’d lived through it. A few of her guildmates made a few snide inward remarks about her age, but they didn’t say anything for fear she’d kill them on the spot.

“They’ve been getting under our skin for a while now,” Corine grumbled, her hair beginning to rise and flicker like fire with her anger. “I’m getting sick of tiptoeing around them.”

Anat shot her a thoughtful look. “With the Hero’s Party out of the way, perhaps it’s time we got to business in earnest?”

Soulgros nodded. “Might I suggest we begin with mine mark, the other guilds? I hath gathered a great deal on them.”

Schwarte nodded understandingly. “You’re good at skulking around, after all.”

“Thine words art poison to mine ears.”

Not that poison of any kind worked on Soulgros, of course.

“It’s decided, then,” Anat declared with a snicker.

Her laugh was far more subdued than most of the others’ cackling and bickering, but they all obediently shut their mouths and turned to face her as soon as they heard it.

“Our first obstacle for Operation: Give Master the World, that being the Hero, has been eliminated. Next on the docket—war with the dark guild Scrap Metal!”

The master of a darkness guild well smiles today.

SIDE STORY

LALADIE'S
TEST OF
COURAGE

Side Story: Laladie's Test of Courage

“Hnngh...”

Laladie grumbled to herself in her room, head cradled in her small hands. There was only one thing on her mind.

“Is Lala any closer to Master now?”

Whenever she was feeling lost or confused, it was always about either Master or dispatching her guildmates. This time, it happened to be the former.

She and Master had gotten back from their extended date just the other day, and she thought it went rather well. One of the Demon Army's leaders died in the process, not to mention half the Hero's Party, but those were charming highlights as far as Laladie was concerned. However, she got the feeling that she'd been flirting with him less since then... no, it was *definitely* less. She had to find some way to be alone with him again, and soon. Her excuse needed to be perfect, however, as any regular outing would immediately make the others suspicious of her motives.

“What should Lala do...?”

As she mulled over her options, however, she spotted a book lying in the corner of the room. She'd stolen the book from Krankheit to get back at her for trying to kill her, and Laladie had all but forgotten about it. Krankheit was the only avid reader among them, so it had to be hers. Laladie remembered watching her look everywhere for it, but now that she thought about it, she never did return the stolen book.

She peered down at the cover curiously.

“A horror novel...?” With that, everything seemed to click into place. Her eyes lit up eagerly. “Lala's got it!”

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“Yep! A test of courage!”

Laladie had barged into Master’s room with her brilliant idea on her lips. He had parroted the words back to her, but she wasn’t at all upset by his slowness.

“Lala saw it in a book, so she wants to try it. She’s too scared to go alone, though... Can you come with her, Master?”

He pursed his lips as he mulled it over. What was she referring to, exactly?

“Well, according to the book Lala read, you walk someplace dark to see how brave you are. It’s supposed to be fun.”

The book went on to describe that the ghosts or wisps of spectral fire they would see were scary, but Laladie didn’t understand that part. Undead monsters weren’t that tough, and if they saw the mystery fire... well, they’d cross that bridge if they came to it.

It was a stupid custom, frankly, but she could see its applications. It was an excellent excuse to squeal in “fear” and leap into Master’s arms. If she was lucky, she might even convince him to “rest” with her in the shade of a tree, and then the real fun could begin. Just the thought was making her drool.

Finally, Master nodded in agreement.

“Hehehe... Wait, really?! Yay!”

Her eyes gleamed in anticipation.

This is the perfect chance, and Lala won’t let it go to waste!

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They decided to hold the test of courage that very night. Laladie and Master left to stroll through the woods surrounding the guild. It was past midnight when they left, and due to the depth of the canopy above them, many of the paths were cut off from the moonlight and left pitch black. It was completely different from the warm greenery that filled the woods during the daytime. As for Laladie and Master themselves...

“Gnngh! Why is the path so stupidly hard to walk?!”

Master watched her stumble down the dark, root-laden path, a soft smile on his lips. It felt more like a casual picnic than anything else.

That wasn't to say the forest was safe. They were far more likely to encounter monsters than wandering spirits, and at night, powerful undead knights went on patrol. Realistically speaking, however, the monsters were more scared of them than anything. Between a powerful alraune and the kingpin of a powerful evil syndicate, only the most foolish of ghosts would dare approach them.

Are tests of courage supposed to be this boring?

They hadn't seen the hide or hair of any monsters, and the very thought of ghosts made her scoff. If they tried to scare her, she'd kill them, plain and simple. She doubted anything in those woods could scare her, but that wasn't what brought them into the woods. There had to be some way to use the experience to get touchy-feely with Master.

Suddenly, a rustling broke out from the trees above them.

"Hm? A bird?" She looked up at the canopy unaffectedly before finally remembering what she was doing there. *Shit, not like that! Ham it up!* "Eeek. Lala's so scared."

With acting skills that would make a tree cringe, she glomped onto Master's arm. She didn't believe she had fooled him for a second, but since he didn't even try to shake her off, it crossed her mind that he might be genuinely scared.

"S-Sorry, Master... Lala's so scared..."

He smiled warmly at her, saying it was no trouble at all. He couldn't have been more reassuring to a poor, sweet, defenseless little thing like her if he tried.

Hehehe... Master's arms look so thin and frail, but he has so much muscle! Just holding something so girthy makes Lala happy!

He seemed none the wiser about her dirty thoughts, however. The only thought that crossed his mind was that she was holding on awfully tight, but he didn't bother mentioning it.

“M-Master?” She hugged herself even closer to him. “L-Lala’s heart won’t stop racing.”

She was small and slender, but her chest had little lady lumps of womanhood, and her skin was remarkably soft. He got to feel it all a little too well, in fact, as she had started rubbing her chest into his arm.

Laladie smirked to herself in the darkness. She knew he had to be enjoying her supple breasts. He was a man, after all. Any man would be thrilled by her nuzzling, surely.

Go on, Master! Drag Lala into the bushes over there and push her down!

Seconds, then minutes, dragged on without any hint of him being even the slightest bit aroused.

Master could feel her body, certainly, but she was a daughter to him more than anything else, and he couldn’t even imagine acting untoward with her. He assumed her constant shifting was simply because the path was hard in the dark, and she was clearly terrified.

Gnnnnnnnnngh...! Fine, it’s time for Lala’s trump card! She’ll have to break out her special pollen!

Laladie extended her hand surreptitiously to summon a flower. Its pollen served as a powerful aphrodisiac, and even one small whiff could make anyone uncontrollably horny and unable to think of anything except sex. It was an incredibly powerful weapon. She had long avoided using it on him, but a little bit would surely just nudge him in the right direction. In fact, she had a hard time believing it would have any effect on him at all.

She leaned down at the side of the path to grow the flower but stopped.

Hm? Wait... What’s that over there?

There was something lurking there in the darkness. It couldn’t be human since nobody was foolish enough to wander near their guild. They had built it remotely for a reason. Whatever it was, it had fixed her and her alone with a murderous look.

“Wh-What? That’s...!”

She had just barely realized the danger she was in before the mystery fluid gushed down from the branches above her head.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaah?!”

In a panic, she grew a tall plant with broad, strong leaves to deflect the substance. As it slid off the leaves and splattered to the ground, she could hear the ground sizzle as it began to dissolve.

“S-Soulgros, that bitch! How did she even get something so corrosive?!”

The violence of the attack came as a shock, even if she was enemies with the ninja in all but name.

Beside her, Master chuckled at something about the test of courage being unexpectedly intense.

“Nonono, this isn’t how it’s supposed to go at all!”

Laladie broke out in a cold sweat. Soulgros had likely taken measures to ensure Master would remain safe no matter what, but the acid could’ve killed her. They were always careful to avoid infighting where Master could see them, but she must have crossed the line by taking him into the woods at night. She could sympathize with that—if she discovered any of her guildmates sneaking off with Master, she’d try to kill the bitch without hesitation.

But this was different. It was downright evil of them to try to kill *her*.

“Whaaaaaaa?!”

As soon as it was clear Soulgros’s trap had failed, a razor-sharp blade of wind flew out of the forest in front of her, slicing down trees as it went. Just like the acid, it was aimed for her alone, so it was likely more Yerkchira interference. She summoned a plant in front of her to act as a shield.

“Ah?!”

Not even its hard stem could block the attack, however, and it fell apart in hefty chunks. She was unharmed, but the whipping winds tore at her, cleaving away her clothes entirely.

Master’s smile froze awkwardly at the sight, confusion filling his eyes. Laladie looked right past him, however, and could faintly spot Ritter in the darkness

ahead, her hands on her drawn blade.

“It was just the wind,” she muttered.

“This is ridiculous! This isn’t a test of courage; you’re really trying to kill Lala, aren’t you?! She’s just trying to stay alive!”

That was no breeze. If Laladie had been hit head-on, she likely would’ve died on the spot. Having her clothes slashed clean off her body was embarrassing, but oddly enough, it only strengthened her desire to survive.

“Gnnngh! L-Lala won’t die so easily! Not until Master’s had his way with her at least once!”

Sweat pouring from her brow, she began to root through her options with newfound fervor. She could drag him off into the bushes easily enough and force him to take her virginity—but no, she wanted something a tad more romantic than that.

The odd sensation of fabric snapped her out of her thoughts, and she realized that Master must have given her his coat, though she frankly would’ve preferred if the sight of her bare skin turned him on and he tried to take her right there on the path. Still, it was enough that he drew her slight form closer to his side just in case another “breeze” tried to hit her.

“Master...”

Cheeks flushing, she pulled his coat tight around her naked body as she looked up at him. Her heart was pounding inside her chest. She had already loved him so much that she thought she was going insane at times, but that simple action only made her worse. The lingering warmth of the coat, not to mention his intoxicating musk, made her head spin. It almost felt like she was floating, not unlike a head cold. Any thought of forcing herself on him instantly left her head.

“M-Master?”

She stared at him for a long moment, and her eyes began to water as her emotions swelled to overwhelm her. Her lips trembled, then pursed slightly as she leaned in and arched up toward him. Even if she didn’t have the willpower to push him down, she could at least kiss him. Yes, that would be enough.

Before she could reach him, however, a ball of ghostly flame plumed a short way ahead of them.

“Huh...?”

She stopped in her tracks to look at the fire. That must be one of the so-called wisps the book said they would encounter. There was nothing at all scary about it, she thought, but maybe tests of courage were just like that. After she squinted at it for a moment, however, she realized something about it that *wasn't* in the book.

“Why is it so big?!”

It was large enough to envelop her whole, in fact, and would do far worse than scare her if it got too close. Even Master's smile strained at the sight. He'd heard of ghostly fire, he told her confusedly, but he didn't know they got quite that big. Even he had to know it wasn't normal at that point.

Laladie heard a faint cry from up ahead—“This is what you get for takin' Master out at night!” or something similar in Leiss's voice—before the orb of flame started barreling out of the darkness toward her.

“Haha... Lala's never doing a test of courage again,” she muttered to herself with a dry smile.

According to rumor, Master stepped in to block the fireball for Laladie, and her love and devotion for him only increased—but the repercussions of that are a story for another day.

Afterword

Thank you for reading *The Dark Guildmaster's Smile*. My name is Ryo Mizukami, and I'm the author.

This is my first-ever novel. I started on the web novel site Shosetsuka ni Narou, but thanks to TO Books' generosity, it's evolved into something more. I have all my readers from those web novel days to thank for this. Without these three factors all mingled together, none of this would've been possible, and you all have my thanks.

If I remember correctly, the concept for the story was a protagonist who ran an evil organization with many cute guildmembers for him to bang. None of that seemed to click for me in writing, however, and I eventually settled on having everyone blatantly try to murder each other as they dragged him this way and that. Writing can be funny like that sometimes. Their feelings for Master aside, though, I think it's the cute, slightly intimidating design of the characters themselves that really draws them out. Think of them like little gremlins that are adorable but murderous.

Moving on to Laladie in particular, she's an alraune who lived alone in the woods for years before meeting Master. Her people are few and far between, so she didn't even have anyone to talk to for ages. When she first met Master, she wasn't as lovey-dovey with him as she is now, and she was even harsher on him than Maho or her allies. She never learned to trust anyone, so it was only natural for her—especially since Master was always frowning and brooding back then. He protected her from monsters or people who tried to hurt or harvest her, however, and she slowly opened up to him. Hopefully I'll have the chance to write more about the characters' pasts sometime.

I owe Kozou-sama a great deal for the wonderful designs. The characters all turned out even cuter than I imagined, and I couldn't help smirking at them. For Laladie, in particular, it became that much easier to imagine her swearing and screaming death threats at people. I also have my editor S-san to thank for their

aid in the book creation process itself. As I mentioned, this was my first published work, and I really put them through the wringer in the process, but they were kind and determined the entire time. A big thank-you also goes out to everyone who edited or helped get the book out to people in any way.

Finally, a word of thanks to you, the reader. I hope you enjoyed it. The next volume will star Soulgros, and with any luck, I'll see you then.



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