

The

# Brilliant Healer's

New Life in the Shadows



3

**Sakaku Hishikawa**

Illustrator

**Daburyu**



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Lily

“All ye elements  
of the air...”

As Lily finished casting Gust,  
her arrows, carried by the wind,  
hit the bull's-eye.



HIT!

“Hi-yah!”

“This is a festival game,  
right?”

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“I will bring you to your knees,  
great leader of the slums.  
No man can resist me.”

Liz







Tentatively, Liz opened her eyes.  
Before her stood a man with black hair,  
dressed in a cloak dark as night.

“Glad I made it.”

Zenos



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# Prologue

Life in a slums orphanage was notoriously harsh.

Children were seen as free labor and treated as slaves. No adults watched out for them, and they were only fed scraps once a day. Each child was assigned a task; things like meal duty and maintenance work were comparatively better, but most jobs, like begging, being sent away for hard labor, or criminal activities, were far from conducive to a child's healthy development. Some were even abruptly sold off somewhere, and no one knew where they ended up, or what became of them.

Zenos's task had been to loot corpses. It was a common occurrence in the slums for people to simply collapse and die; the boy's job had been to quickly spot the bodies and steal anything that might be worth some coin. But he'd had no interest in doing so, and had often ended up burying the dead instead of looting them, only to be berated for it later.

To him, the sight of those people, dead in the street, had been like catching a glimpse of his own future. So perhaps at first he'd been driven by sympathy. Not only did these people fall over and die, they got looted too? Maybe it'd be better if he just brought them back to life, he'd thought.

And so he'd begun observing the numerous decaying corpses in the streets and learned the anatomical structure of various different species, visualizing how they functioned. Despite not knowing how to read the words, he pored obsessively over tattered books on anatomy and magic that someone from the orphanage had picked up from the roadside.

And thus, Zenos attempted to resurrect people. Every day, he'd cast spells on the dead, willing them to return to life. He lacked the know-how, but he had a mental image. Blood vessels, threadlike nerve fibers, muscles, skin. Those things would organically join together, repair themselves, and regain their original functions. He had a strange conviction that he could do it, even though he had no basis for it at all.



Over time, a white light began to envelop the corpses during his attempts. And today, at last, it seemed like it was going to work. The white light shot out, resounded, and the corpse's fingers felt like they were about to move— A harsh smack on his head from behind broke his concentration. The light dispersed and vanished. Turning around, he saw a dirty-looking man with a scruffy beard glaring daggers at him.

“Don't ever use that power on the dead,” the man told him. “That's for the living only.”

And that was how Zenos met his mentor.

\*\*\*

“Zenos?” said Lily, tilting her head curiously. The afternoon sunlight pouring in through the window reflected off her blonde hair, making it sparkle and gleam.

“What is it, Lily?” Zenos replied, snapping out of his reverie and looking up at the young elven girl.

“Um, you were just spacing out, so I wondered if something's up.”

“Huh. Was I?” he said, looking confused.

Lily glanced at the letter in the healer's hand. “Are you reading Mr. Becker's letter again?”

“Oh. Yeah, kinda.”

They were in a corner of a ruined part of the city that had once been decimated by a plague. Zenos was a brilliant healer but unable to obtain a formal license due to having been born in the slums, and thus had secretly set up a clinic here. His intention had been to operate quietly, away from prying eyes, but his days had turned out to be wilder than he'd imagined. Between visits from the leaders of the largest factions in the slums, a royal knight, and a rampaging golem from the Great Human-Demon War, his life had quickly become anything but on the down-low.

And last month, one of only seven elite-level healers in the whole Kingdom of Herzeth had stopped by. That man, Becker, had offered to turn a blind eye to Zenos's illegal clinic in exchange for help with searching for a missing person



from the Royal Institute of Healing. After many twists and turns, an unprecedented mass poisoning attempt, and a case finally closed, he'd returned to his clinic.

The letter in his hands was from Becker—part of the payment he'd received for his troubles—and described the man Zenos had once called his mentor.

"My mentor..." he muttered quietly.

Becker had supposedly once been close to Zenos's mentor, yet even he couldn't remember the man's name or face anymore. According to the letter, this was likely due to a curse. The mentor—at the time an elite healer himself—had paid a steep price for dabbling in the forbidden arts of resurrection magic.

Zenos quietly recalled the furious expression on his mentor's face after smacking him for trying to use resurrection magic on a corpse in the street. He still remembered the man, perhaps because the curse had activated before they'd met. Becker had written in his letter that, if Zenos wanted to know more, he should look for his mentor's notes.

"His notes, huh...?" he murmured.

Lily peered into the letter. "Hmm. Are you friends with Mr. Becker now, Zenos?"

"What makes you say that?"

"Look, it says so right here."

At the end of his letter, Becker had written, *"Zenos, I hope your path as a healer is filled with fortune. Your friend..."*

"Oh, you're right. It does say that," Zenos said. "I see. So we're friends..."

"What do you mean, 'you see'?"

"I haven't really had friends in a while, so I'm not good at this stuff, you know."

Aston and his other former party members most certainly weren't his friends. And he got along with the demi-humans in the slums, yes, but they were also his patients. His mentor had been, well, a mentor, and Umin and Cress from the Royal Institute weren't exactly his friends either.



An eerie chuckle echoed from above. “Not a single friend. What a lonely man you are,” said Carmilla, a wraith (and their housemate) clad in jet-black garb and wearing a mischievous grin.

“You say that like you have any,” Zenos pointed out.

“Of course not,” Carmilla retorted. “No one is worthy of Carmilla, the Lich Queen.”

“True. I doubt anyone can match up to a top-tier undead who’s been around for three centuries.”

“I reign upon a solitary throne. I need no friends. None can domesticate me,” she said, puffing out her chest proudly.

“Yeah, yeah...”

“Oh, right!” Lily interjected, as though she’d just remembered something. “I was thinking of baking a cake tonight. Will you be there, Carmilla?”

“Naturally.”

“Okay. I want you to eat it fresh out of the oven, so come down to the table as soon as I call, okay?”

Carmilla chuckled. “Of course. Nothing beats freshly baked. I shall be here as soon as you beckon me over.”

“Sounds to me like you’ve been thoroughly domesticated,” Zenos remarked, unable to help himself. He then propped his elbows on his desk, and his chin on his hands. “Friends, huh...” he mumbled. “I think I used to have some, long ago...”

Memories came to mind of huddling together in a dimly lit room, fending off hunger. The children he’d spent time with at the orphanage in the slums had been his friends, surely. But now he had no idea where any of them were.

Lily peered intently into Zenos’s face as he reminisced. “Hey Zenos, what am I to you?”

“Hmm? Well...” The healer crossed his arms and looked at Lily, who appeared tense. “You’re like...family, I suppose.”



“What?!”

“I mean, you know, I’ve never had any family, so I’m not sure, but...”

Lily approached him, blushing. “S-So, if I’m family, that makes me your wife, right?”

“Huh? Does it?”

“Yeah! It does! I’m your wife!”

Carmilla chuckled again. “Jumping to conclusions as usual, Lily.”

Lily grumbled. “What about Carmilla, then?” she asked Zenos.

“Uh... A guardian spirit?”

“N-N-Nonsense!” the wraith snapped. “How dare you call the Lich Queen a *guardian spirit*!”

“It’s a joke,” Zenos told her. “You’re family too.”

“Wh— But— I—” Carmilla stammered in confusion, then floated up, disappearing into the second floor.

“What’s her problem?”

“I think she was embarrassed,” Lily said.

As the healer and the elf exchanged glances, the clinic’s door loudly burst open, and three women—the leaders of the demi-humans in the slums—nonchalantly barged in.

“Ooh, what’s happening here? Anything fun?” asked Zophia of the lizardmen.

“I wanna join!” said Lynga of the werewolves.

“Don’t forget about me,” added Loewe of the orcs.

“So, like, why do you guys always come over together?” Zenos asked.

After the temporary closure due to Zenos’s infiltration of the Royal Institute of Healing, the clinic in the ruined city was slowly returning to its usual routine.



# Chapter 1: Night Festival in the Slums

“The doc’s mentor, huh...?”

The usual gang was gathered at the clinic this afternoon, and the demi-human leaders, curious about Becker’s letter, were having a lively conversation.

“Must’ve been an impressive guy to be the doc’s mentor,” Zophia mused.

“I didn’t even know he *had* a mentor,” Lynga chimed in. “I was surprised.”

“He was an elite healer, yeah?” Loewe asked. “‘Impressive’ is right.”

Zenos took a sip of the tea Lily had brewed and nodded slowly. “Well, he *was* impressive... I think...” He’d been quite surprised to find out that his mentor, who’d looked like a dodgy old man at best, had actually been an elite healer. “He taught me to read, told me everything about the world of healing magic, all sorts of things. If I am who I am now, it’s thanks to him for sure.”

“Are you looking into this mentor of yours, doc?” Zophia asked.

“Well, I’m curious,” the healer admitted.

Lynga and Loewe both made a bit of a face at this. “I wouldn’t recommend it,” Lynga said.

“Me neither,” Loewe agreed. “I want to help you, Zenos, but I’m not too keen on that.”

“Why not?” Zenos asked.

Lynga and Loewe furrowed their brows. “I dunno much about magic,” Lynga replied, “but forbidden spells and curses? That gives me the creeps.”

“Tangible problems I can solve with my fists,” Loewe added. “But curses? I can’t punch curses.”

“Guess not,” Zenos muttered, crossing his arms behind his head.

Zophia propped her chin on her hand. “So, curses, eh... What even are they?”

Soon, all gazes turned to Carmilla, who sat at the edge of the table sipping

tea. Noticing the many eyes on her, the wraith slowly raised her head and cleared her throat. “I know not the precise nature of curses,” she explained. “Some say they are a form of divine punishment, others believe them to be the whims of demons, and still others whisper of powerful contract magic from great wizards of eld. Whatever the case, one must know that meddling with the natural laws of the world incurs severe retaliation.”

“Wow,” said Lily in admiration, teapot in hand. “You know so many things, Carmilla.”

The wraith chuckled. “I have not lived for three centuries for nothing.”

“Except you’ve been dead this whole time,” Zenos pointed out as he always did, then let out a small sigh. “Well, it’s not like we can know for sure either way.”

In his letter, Becker had said to look for the man’s notes to find out more. Zenos did recall seeing a black leather notebook back when he’d traveled with his mentor. He’d innocently asked once to see it, been scowled at, and been denied. After that, he’d never seen the notebook again. His mentor had either hidden it somewhere or burned it; either way, it would be difficult to find.

There was actually one clue that came to mind, but even that was no longer a practical option. *There was something I wanted to say to him...* he thought, gazing out the window at the dazzling sunset.

“By the way, doc,” Zophia began, “this is kinda weird, but...”

“Hmm?” Zenos mumbled, suddenly brought back to reality. “What is it?”

“We’re planning a little event, see.”

“An event?” Lily asked eagerly. “What kind?”

The three demi-human leaders exchanged glances, and all said in unison, “A night festival!”

“A night festival?” Zenos echoed, cocking his head.

Zophia leaned in. “See, we’ve been talking, and we’re planning to hold a festival in the slums at night. There’ll be stalls, dancing, games with prizes for people who do well, stuff like that. And we want you to participate, doc.”



“Wow! That’s so cool!” Lily exclaimed excitedly. “It sounds like fun!”

“Huh. A festival,” Zenos mused. “I’ve never been to one, but it sounds interesting.” His former party had once come across a festival in a town they’d passed through; he’d seen many stalls, and dressed-up people dancing away happily. The others had told him to watch their belongings, so he’d been the only one who hadn’t participated.

“Another pitiful tale,” Carmilla remarked.

“I’m pretty confident about my pitiful past,” Zenos said.

“I don’t think that’s something to be proud of,” Lily pointed out.

Zenos scratched his cheek awkwardly as he turned to Zophia. “I mean, sure, why not? I’m looking forward to it.”

“Hells yeah!” Zophia exclaimed. “Make sure you come, all right? We’ll let you know when we’ve set the date.”

With that, the three demi-humans left the clinic with a spring in their step.

Carmilla set her teacup down. “A festival in the slums,” she said. “A place once known only for chaos and the stench of death, now hosting such a peaceful event. ’Tis all thanks to you, Zenos.”

“Thanks to me?” he echoed.

“You should come too, Carmilla,” Lily said. “It’s at night, right? So you can come!”

“Hmph! I, the Lich Queen, making merry at a festival?” The wraith cast a sidelong glare at Lily, then slowly stood, rolling up her sleeves with a chuckle. “None can best me at shooting games and scooping goldfish.”

“Yay! I’m so happy!”

“Sounds like we have one eager resident wraith,” Zenos remarked.

And so, in the slums where bloody conflicts had once raged, a peaceful night festival was soon to take place.

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“Wow! This is amazing!” Lily exclaimed in admiration.

Six days after the festival's announcement, on a night still warm from the day's lingering heat, the young elf stepped onto the main street of the slums. The streets' usual chaotic clutter was gone, replaced by the soft glow of lamps lining the roadside and the soft sounds of flutes and drums, all of which came together to create a magical atmosphere for the festival. The smell of food cooking and the sounds of lively voices rose from the various stalls.

"Festivals are great, aren't they, Zenos?" Lily asked.

"Yeah, they are," Zenos agreed with a nod as his gaze shifted to her. "What's with the outfit, by the way?"

The young elf was dressed in something he'd never seen before—a polka-dotted garment with a collar that crossed at the chest and a red sash wrapped around her waist.

"That, young man, is called a yukata," Carmilla explained close to Zenos's ear.

"Ack! You scared the crap out of me!" Zenos yelped at the sudden voice. He couldn't see the wraith, but she seemed to be following them, keeping her presence concealed.

"A yukata is the traditional attire for festivals in the Eastern nations," she continued.

"Are you *trying* to freak me out?" he asked.

Carmilla only chuckled mischievously in response.

Lily looked up at Zenos, seeming apprehensive. "H-How do I look?"





“I think you look cute,” Zenos said, eliciting a bashful chuckle from Lily.

Carmilla, partially visible, said proudly, “Of course. I dressed her up, after all. Her cuteness was a given.”

“Thank you, Carmilla!” Lily exclaimed.

The wraith chuckled eerily. “’Tis my girl power.”

“A three-hundred-year-old is a ‘girl’ now?” Zenos retorted.

As they walked along the street amid the bustling crowd, a large stage built in the center of the festival came into view. Atop it stood the three demi-human leaders.

“Now then, it’s about time for our opening remarks,” Zophia said in a clear voice. “I don’t like long speeches, so I’ll keep it simple. First of all, thank you to everyone who helped make this festival possible, and to all of you who gathered here tonight. A festival in the slums like this was unimaginable during the era of conflict between us demi-humans.” The lizardwoman cast a sentimental look at the lizardmen, werewolves, and orcs gathered before the stage. “And it’s all thanks to one person that we can do this now.”

Her gaze shifted to Zenos, who stood at the far end of the crowd. Zophia, Lynga, and Loewe all beckoned, gesturing widely for him to step forward.

“Doc, we want you to say a few words for the opening,” Zophia said.

“Sir Zenos, you should come to the stage,” Lynga added.

“Indeed. If anyone should make opening remarks, it’s Zenos,” Loewe agreed.

“Huh? Me?” Zenos asked, pointing at himself in shock as people around him began to cheer. “Man... I’m not a big fan of being the center of attention, though...”

“It’s a special occasion,” Lily pointed out. “Maybe you should go.”

With Lily’s encouragement, Zenos walked to the stage with resigned steps. After a grand round of cheering and applause from the attendees, he cleared his throat. “Uhh...” *Well. Crap.* He hadn’t been expecting this, and so he couldn’t think of anything to say. “Let’s see. Try not to get hurt—” He stopped



midsentence, then shook his head slightly. With a deep breath, he continued, “Never mind. I’ll heal any minor injuries, so knock yourselves out!”

The audience erupted into thunderous cheers.

Afterward, Lynga went on to briefly explain the festival. There were games at several booths, and the winner would be decided based on their total score, with the first-place prize being an item of the winner’s choice.

“Have fun, drink, eat!” Loewe said. “Dance the night away. Game to your hearts’ content. Enjoy yourselves however you want!”

With that, the attendees dispersed to do as they pleased, and the first night festival of the slums had officially begun.

“Phew. We managed to get it started,” Zophia said, relieved.

“Now all we can do is pray it all ends smoothly,” Loewe remarked, similarly relieved.

“Hey, Zophia, Loewe,” Lynga interjected. “I have an idea.”

“Yeah?” the lizardwoman replied.

“Oh, this must be good,” the orc said.

The werewolf nodded slowly, then said solemnly, “Winners in the games get to pick their prize. How about we make the right to confess to Sir Zenos the prize?” Zophia and Loewe stared wide-eyed at Lynga, who narrowed her gaze. “It’s about time we decide who gets to have Sir Zenos. He would likely not appreciate a series of duels, but he wouldn’t object to us competing at games, right?”

After a moment of silence, Zophia and Loewe spoke up. “Huh. That’s a surprisingly good idea, Lynga,” the lizardwoman said, licking her lips. “Sounds fun. I’m in.”

“Ha!” Loewe then exclaimed, cracking her knuckles. “I’ll show you two what I’m made of.”

“O-Oh no,” stammered Lily, who happened to pass by the stage. “This won’t be easy...” She hurriedly rushed over to Zenos and the translucent Carmilla.

“Well, then,” the healer said with a carefree expression, “let’s just relax and enjoy the night.”

Lily shook her head vigorously. “Sorry, Zenos. I can’t just relax and enjoy myself anymore.”

“Huh?”

“I can’t afford to lose this battle,” she declared. With a deep breath, she crouched down and stalked off, on the prowl for game booths with the stealthy steps of a skilled assassin.

“What even is happening?”

Carmilla chuckled. “I could not say, but I have a feeling this will be great fun.”

Suddenly, the festival’s cheerful atmosphere shifted, and a secret battle between the women ignited quietly.

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The first stall Zenos’s group and the demi-human leaders went to was an archery booth, manned by lizardmen. Using a small bow and arrow, players aimed at a target, scoring more points the closer the arrow landed to the bull’s-eye. Each player had three shots, and the player with the highest total score won.

“Hey, there,” Zophia said. “Mind if I borrow a bow?”

“You’re playing, boss?” the lizardman at the front asked.

“Yeah. Things happened, and I can’t afford to lose, see.” Deftly, she nocked the arrows, took aim, and released them with precision. All three of the arrows whooshed through the air and struck the center of the target. Her subordinates all cheered loudly at their boss’s incredible display of skill. “Ha! Easy.”

“I won’t lose to the likes of you!” Lynga said with a grunt, stepping forward for her turn. Despite her bravado, however, only two of the arrows hit the center, the third missing the bull’s-eye. The werewolf slumped to her knees in disappointment. “Ugh! I’m just not used to bows! Making a game like this is unfair, Zophia!”

“The booth guys decided what the game would be, not me,” Zophia pointed

out. “Besides, archery is a pretty standard festival game, no?”

Loewe laughed heartily as she stepped forward. “That’s too bad, Lynga. My turn.” The bowstring, however, readily snapped under her excessive strength. “Ngh! What the...?!”

“Oh, dear,” Zophia said. “How unfortunate, Loewe. You can’t shoot without a bowstring.”

Lynga snickered. “Loewe gets zero points! Looks like I still have a big lead!”

“What did you say?!” Loewe bellowed in frustration. She grabbed the arrows directly and hurled them at the target. Two of them loudly crashed straight through the bull’s-eye, the impressive feat of strength drawing surprised gasps from the onlookers.

“Hmph. You’re tenacious, I’ll give you that,” Zophia grumbled before posing triumphantly. “But I’m still in the lead!”

“Not so fast,” Lynga interjected, gnashing her teeth. “This fight isn’t over yet.”

“That’s right,” Loewe said, clenching her jaw. “I’ll turn the tables in no time.”

“Why are they all going so hard at it?” asked Zenos, standing behind the trio with his arms crossed.

Carmilla chuckled. “Why indeed, I wonder?”

“M-My turn!” Nervously, Lily stepped forward. However, despite pulling the bowstring with all her might, she couldn’t get the arrow to even reach the target, and her first shot scored no points. She clenched her fists, grumbling in frustration.

“Uh, Lily?” Zenos said. “You know you don’t have to push yourself, right?”

“I can’t afford to lose this battle,” the girl repeated.

“Hello? Are you listening?”

“O heavens, O earth, heed the whispers of the wind... All ye elements of the air...” she chanted under her breath, her words making the air around her swirl slightly.

“Oh? Wind magic?” Carmilla said, grinning wickedly. “Elves *are* known to



possess immense magical powers from birth, after all. Hee hee... Truly this is a heated conflict of clashing skills and pride!"

"This *is* a festival game, right?" Zenos asked, cocking his head.

As Lily finished casting Gust, her arrows, carried by the wind, hit the bull's-eye. "Hi-yah!"

"Uh... Lily?"

"Look at that," Zophia said. "Nice going, Lily."

"I see," Lynga mused. "She must've overheard us."

Loewe scoffed. "That makes her our rival, then."

The three demi-humans and one elf, now the center of attention, strode confidently to the next game booth.

"Sorry, but I'm winning this," the lizardwoman said.

"Oh, please," the werewolf retorted. "Sir Zenos clearly would want me to win."

"Ha!" the orc scoffed. "This is getting interesting!"

"I will put you in your place," Lily growled.

"Lily, why are you talking like that?" Zenos asked as the others left him and Carmilla behind.

The wraith once again chuckled. "Ah, the fine scent of a rom-com."

"Am I the only one out of the loop here?"

All four women vying for the right to confess to Zenos arrived at the next booth, manned by the orcs.

"Hey boss. You playing too?" asked the orc at the front.

"I am," Loewe confirmed as she stepped forward, cracking her neck. "I can't afford to lose, no matter what."

Before her was a rock large enough one would need both arms to carry it. Crossing her arms, Zophia looked at the rock and asked, "What's the orcs' game, again?"

“Ha! You’ll see,” Loewe replied confidently, cracking her knuckles. “It’s about breaking this rock with as few hand chops as possible.”

“What the—? What kind of game is *that*?” Zophia said, baffled.

“Who the heck thinks that’s easy?” Lynga asked, astounded.

“Th-That’s...” Lily stammered, confounded.

“Oh? You guys can’t do this much?” Loewe asked casually. “It’s one of the fundamentals of maidenhood.”

“What the hells kind of maiden smashes a rock?!” Zophia interjected.

Slowly, Loewe raised her right hand, and with a loud shout, brought it down in a swift chop. Her hand crashed loudly against the rock, shattering it into pieces.

“Ha ha ha! Behold, true girl power!”





“This is all wrong!” Zophia protested. “You just have stupid brute strength!”

“Who would want to marry someone like that?” Lynga said.

“Hnnngh...”

“Was that Lily who groaned?” Zenos asked.

A new rock was brought over and placed before Zophia. She took two, three deep breaths, then quietly muttered, “*Lizard Shield...*”

The next moment, her right arm was covered in upright scales. She brought down her fist with force, causing the rock to burst into pieces, but a few smaller chunks remained. In the end, it took her two strikes to fully destroy it.

Zophia clicked her tongue. “I used my secret technique and everything...”

“Phew. That startled me for a moment,” Loewe said. “But I’m the undisputed queen of this game.”

“Don’t cast me aside just yet!” Lynga grumbled. “I’ll show you all true strength.” She stepped forward, raising both hands in the air, a solemn look on her face. In them, she firmly clutched her hand axe.

“Hey! Wait a damn minute!” Loewe protested. “Using an axe is cheating, Lynga!”

“This hand axe is part of my body,” Lynga explained. “My claws transformed into it.”

“And you think we’ll fall for that nonsense?!” Zophia retorted. She and Loewe confiscated the weapon.

Hesitantly, Lynga began to chip away at the rock with her sharp claws, but it took about five chops total to reduce the rock to nothing. “Ugh! Don’t think this is over just yet!”

“It’s my turn next,” Lily said, stepping up beside the frustrated werewolf.

“Wait. I don’t think you can do this, Lily,” Zophia remarked.

“I don’t think you should,” Lynga agreed.

“We do have balloons for kids to chop instead,” Loewe pointed out. “You may

want to use one of those.”

“No,” Lily replied, shaking her head with determination despite the demi-human women’s attempts to dissuade her. “It has to be the same conditions as everyone else, or it doesn’t count.”

She flexed her knees, exhaling deeply. The air suddenly grew cold and tense. Someone loudly swallowed in the background.

“Hi-yah!” she exclaimed as her powerful hand chop cut through the air and swung down— *Plip*.

A brief silence followed. And then—

“Owww!” Lily cried out, squatting and holding her right hand.

“Well...yeah,” Zophia said.

“She looked like a master for a moment,” Lynga mused.

“That scared me for a second,” Loewe added.

“Lily!” Zenos exclaimed, rushing to her side. “Are you all right?!” He checked her reddened right hand, then breathed a sigh of relief upon determining it wasn’t broken.

Lily sniffled, drooping her shoulders. “I guess I can’t do it...”

However, a sudden *snap* rang out, and a fissure appeared in the rock’s surface. A moment later, it split vertically with a *crunch*, much to everyone’s astonishment.

Surprised, Lily began to jump up and down. “I-I did it! This is the power of love!”

“N-No way,” Zophia said.

“She’s quite the dark horse,” Lynga remarked.

Loewe grunted. “Elves are terrifying creatures.”

Amid the hustle and bustle, the women rushed to the next booth. Zenos, who had been watching the game from behind them, turned his face to the side, casting a half-lidded glance at the wraith beside him. “Hey, Carmilla?”

“Yes?”

“You didn’t just sneak in a helping hand, right?”

“What?! You think the Lich Queen would resort to such underhanded methods?!”

“Yes.”

“You know me so well.”

“So you *did* do it!”

Carmilla grinned wickedly and chuckled. “I secretly picked up the werewolf’s hand axe and split the rock in two.”

“Isn’t that cheating?”

“Oh, you fool. Since when does the concept of ‘cheating’ apply to the Lich Queen?”

“To be fair, your entire existence is basically cheating.”

“I know not whether to feel flattered or insulted.”

“So you’re siding with Lily, then?”

“Hmph. I merely wish for an exciting competition.” She floated up into the air, crossing her arms proudly. “’Tis far more fun that way.”

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The night of the festival went on as spirits grew livelier under the moonlight, the rousing sounds of drums and the mystical glow of the lamps filling the streets.

“And now for an update!” shouted Zonde, Zophia’s younger brother, from the stage at the center of the festival. “The current standings for the game booth competition are as follows! We have a four-way tie for first place with ninety-six points each! That’s our leader Zophia, werewolf chief Lynga, orc boss Loewe, and the little elf girl Lily!”

Applause erupted from all over.

“Who will win this four-way battle and claim crown and glory?! Keep your



eyes peeled for the result of this epic confrontation! And good luck, sis!”

“Has he always been like this?” Zenos muttered as he looked up at the stage, noticing how the lizardman had just casually cheered on his sister at the end of his announcement of the game standings.

The four women carried on with their fierce competition, remaining neck and neck as they approached the final game.

Carmilla chuckled. “Oh, what fun. This really gets my blood pumping!”

“What blood?” Zenos asked flatly. He and the excited wraith headed to the last game booth.

The battle for Zenos’s affection seemed to be the talk of the festival. A huge crowd had gathered to witness the fight of the century, buzzing with anticipation.

“Get ’em, Zophia! Win this for us!”

“If anyone’s winnin’ this, it’s Chief Lynga!”

“Mistress Loeweee! Show ’em what we orcs can dooo!”

“Lilyyy! You’re so cuuute!”

Each competitor had her own cheering squad, all trying to out-shout the others. Amid all the cries of encouragement, the women headed for the final game booth, manned by the werewolves.

“So, what’s the last game about?” Zophia asked.

“Heh! Check this out!” Lynga replied, pointing to where five dice were placed. The idea was to roll them all simultaneously, and the added total would be the score.

*Oh, that’s right,* Zenos mused. *Lynga and her werewolves run a gambling den.*

“Sounds good to me,” the lizardwoman said. “Whoever is luckiest wins in the end.”

“Agreed,” Loewe added. “Straightforward. I like it.”

“I’m glad this game doesn’t require strength,” Lily murmured.

“The maximum score is thirty, right?” Zophia asked.

“Yes, with one exception,” Lynga said, pointing at a chart written on a signboard. “The total is your score in most cases, but if you roll five 1s, you get a special bonus of ten thousand points.”

“Ten thousand?!” Loewe exclaimed. “That’d make every other game pointless!”

“An absurd rule,” Loewe agreed. “Exactly what I’d expect from Lynga.”

“I want ten thousand points!” Lily said in awe.

That being said, rolling five 1s in a row was unlikely, and so they started the game as usual.

Zophia went first. “Come on...” she muttered as if praying, before throwing all five dice into the air. They landed on the ground, showing four 6s and one 5. “Hells yeah!” she cheered, striking a victory pose.

Twenty-nine points was an impressive score indeed. The crowd murmured at the lizardwoman’s incredible luck.

“Not bad, Zophia,” Loewe said, stepping up next. “But don’t underestimate *my* luck.” The orc tossed the dice high into the air, and they showed the same result: four 6s and one 5. “Ha ha ha! See that?!”

Zophia clicked her tongue in frustration. “A tie, is it? Stubborn woman...”

Lynga was next, stepping up with five red dice in hand. “I’ll be using these special dice.”

“Wait a second!” Zophia protested. “Those are loaded!”

“Why do *you* get to use those?!” Loewe asked.

“H-How rude!” Lynga said. “Do I look like a cheater?”

“You look like the epitome of a cheater! Those are definitely rigged to always roll 1!” Zophia retorted.

“So that’s why you added that strange rule!” Loewe said. “Use the same dice we did!”

Zophia and Loewe ended up confiscating Lynga’s special dice. The werewolf’s

shoulders sagged as she picked up the ordinary dice off the ground.

“Ugh...” She shut her eyes tightly and tossed the dice—four 6s and one 5. Twenty-nine points. Her eyes widened and she began to hop around excitedly. “Take that! I don’t need rigged dice to do this!”

“She just totally admitted to the dice being rigged,” Zophia pointed out.

Loewe grumbled. “A three-way tie...”

The heated developments elicited a mix of cheers and roars from the audience.

Carmilla let out her signature chuckle. “The probability of three people scoring twenty-nine points in a row is incredibly low. No wonder they all rose to leadership among demi-humans in the dog-eat-dog world of the slums. What an incredible stroke of luck. How fun! How will this contest end, I wonder?!”

“You sound way too excited about this!” Zenos interjected.

Finally, it was Lily’s turn. The girl gripped the dice nervously, glanced at Zenos, then took a few deep breaths. “It’s okay. It’ll be okay!” she said to herself, letting out a shout as she released the dice into the air.

Four of the dice settled with the number 6 facing up. The last one bounced on the ground several times before stopping in front of Zenos.

It was a 6.

Cheers erupted all around. “Holy hells!” Zonde shouted. “Thirty points! The winner is Lilyyy! Celebrate, you bastards!”

Lily stood there, stunned, as the audience broke into thunderous applause. “Huh? What? H-H-H-H-Huh?” she stammered. “No way...”

The demi-human women all stared in disbelief.

“Who would’ve thought Lily would take the win?” Zophia mused.

Lynga grumbled. “This sucks.”

Loewe groaned. “So Lily gets the right to confess to Zenos...”

“Confess?” Zenos asked, cocking his head. “What’s this about?”

“Oh, um, well, it’s...” Lily stammered, waving her hands and turning bright red.

Carmilla bent down to pick up the discarded dice with another chuckle. “What a wondrous competitor you were, Lily,” she said with a proud smile as if to extol the girl’s valiant efforts. “I didn’t even need to lend you a hand.”

“Oh, Carmilla!” Lily exclaimed, moved.

Then, the wraith tossed the dice back into their original tray. The five dice tumbled around and eventually all settled with 1s facing up.

“Huh?”

“Huh?”

“Huh?”

“Huh?”

Everyone stood there dumbfounded. Even Carmilla herself let out a gasp of surprise.

“Uhh...” the host Zonde began in confusion. “So, the winner is actually this translucent lady who just scored ten thousand points, Carmilla.”

Strange half sighs, half cheers rose from the crowd.

The women shrugged, smiling awkwardly. “This is what happens when you make up weird rules, Lynga,” Zophia said.

“I didn’t think anyone would actually roll all 1s without cheating,” Lynga protested.

“What was the point of our epic battle, then?” Loewe muttered.

“I think maybe that’s for the best for me,” Lily said, somewhat relieved. “My heart isn’t ready yet.”

Carmilla, when asked what she wanted for her prize, shouted with a hint of desperation, “Liquor! Bring me booze!”

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The riveting competition had ended unexpectedly, and the rest of the night



was spent leisurely enjoying the festival. Zenos and Lily were at one of the stalls lined up along the main street, munching on skewers to the sound of the lively festival music.

“Come to think of it,” Zenos said, “where did the winner of the games go?”

“Carmilla said she was attracting too much attention and went home.”

“Bit late for that, but all right...”

Most of the festival attendees were regulars at the clinic, so very few would’ve been meeting the wraith for the first time. Either way, it seemed she had indeed taken home her prize of fine liquor.

“Having fun, doc?” Zophia asked as she approached him with the other demi-human leaders in tow before circling him.

“Yeah. Thanks to you,” Zenos replied.

The women sighed as they looked up at the night sky. “To think Carmilla would actually win, though...” the lizardwoman said.

“I sure regret making up that one rule,” the werewolf lamented.

“It *was* a luck-based game. Can’t do anything about that,” Loewe mused. “Maybe it’s the heavens telling us it’s not the right time yet.”

“I had fun, at least!” Lily exclaimed. There seemed to be some sort of strange sense of camaraderie among the four.

“In any case, I’m glad everything turned out all right,” Zophia said. It had been the first-ever night festival held in the slums, and the demi-human women who had organized the event toasted each other in relief. “This year, we kept it mostly to our own people, but I wanna make it bigger next year.”

“I think everyone’s gonna be talking about this,” Lynga remarked. “More people will want to come next year.”

“The festival might become a staple of the slums eventually,” Loewe said.

“Maybe people from the city will start coming too,” Lily mused. Her remark was casual, but the atmosphere suddenly turned tense. “Oh, I’m sorry...”

Class was everything in this country, and there was a vast divide between

common citizens and the poor. Though some weren't as discriminatory, like Umin and Becker from the Royal Institute of Healing, they were generally a minority.

Zophia smiled gently and patted Lily's head. "It's okay, Lily. Maybe someday, right?"

"I can't even imagine it," Lynga said in an emotional tone.

"Maybe it'll be the little ones like Lily who bring about change," Loewe pondered wistfully.

Their amiable conversation was interrupted when Zonde came running up, an anxious look on his features. "Oh good, there you are, sis. Mind coming with me for a sec?"

Zophia tilted her head in confusion and stood up. "What's up?"

"Uh, some weird guys have shown up."

"Weird guys?"

"Yeah, they've crashed the festival and are trying to start trouble."

Zophia's eyes narrowed, and Lynga and Loewe rose to their feet as well.

"Zenos..." Lily said.

"Yeah, we're going too," the healer replied, and the pair of them followed after the demi-humans.

As the group hurried along the main street, they noticed a commotion at the entrance to the festival. A group of lizardmen, werewolves, and orcs were gathered, and past them was a sizable group of men. At the forefront was a muscular, tall figure with sharp fangs and a faintly green skin tone, suggesting a mixed demi-human heritage.

"Hey now," he said, looking down at the group. "You guys can't just do whatever you want on public roads, you know. It's a hassle."

Zophia stepped forward and shot him a quiet glare. "And who are you, again?"

"Doesn't matter who I am. Are you in charge here?"

“Sort of. Have we caused you any trouble?”

“A ton of it. I can’t sleep with all this noise, y’know.”

“Sorry about that. We’re wrapping up soon, so please bear with us, yeah?”

“And your stalls are blocking the road.”

“If you want to pass, go right ahead. No one’s stopping you.”

“Hmm...” The man narrowed his eyes, then suddenly struck a nearby stall with the club in his hand. A loud *crack* echoed as half of the stall shattered into pieces, sending the kobold shopkeeper scurrying away with a panicked yelp.

“As you can see, I’m a big guy, yeah? I’ll have to smash all of these stalls to make way.”

“I see,” Zophia responded in a slightly lower tone, without reacting visibly. She crossed her arms. “So you’re looking for a fight.”

“Zenos,” Lily said, tugging at the healer’s sleeve worriedly. “Who are these people?”

“I don’t know, but I think...”

This festival had been organized by the three major factions of the slums: the lizardmen, the werewolves, and the orcs. Normally, an event planned by the three ruling races wasn’t something to be trifled with easily.

“Well, if there’s one group capable of doing this stuff—”

Zophia spoke up before Zenos could finish his sentence. “You’re with the Black Guild, aren’t you?”

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A tense air had begun to seep into the lively atmosphere of the festival.

“The Black Guild,” Lily murmured apprehensively as she observed the men who had suddenly intruded upon the night festival in the slums. “Is that...”

“Yeah, the illegal guild that does anything for money,” Zenos confirmed, prompting a nervous gulp from Lily.

At the very bottom of the hierarchy in the Kingdom of Herzeth were the

slums, known as the forsaken city. Deep within this area was somewhere even darker, known as the depths. There lurked the members of the Black Guild, the very same that the mysterious Conductor behind the golem incident had been a part of.

Zophia, who stood at the forefront, glared at the men. "You people should stick to skulking underground. Why come all the way here to pick a fight? What's your angle?"

The big, greenish man smirked. "Because you guys are ruining things for us, holding such a big, friendly event like this."

"Oh? Feeling left out?"

"Say what?" the man replied, a wrinkle forming between his brows.

"You're like big babies," Lynga said, stepping forward to stand next to Zophia.

"If you can stop throwing a tantrum, we wouldn't mind letting you join in," Loewe added, stepping forward as well.

"I'm saying this is bad for our business!" the man spat bitterly, striking once more at the already half-collapsed stall. The support pillar creaked, then snapped in half. As the stall crumbled, raising a cloud of dust, the green man cracked his knuckles. "Us Black Guilders thrive on chaos, see. Murder, kidnapping, exacting revenge, drug dealing... The more trouble the place's in, the more dangerous the jobs we get. We can't have the slums turn into some sort of bumbling utopia for idiots."

"So that's what this is about," Zophia said with a small nod, her arms still crossed. "It's not like we don't get it. I used to think living on the edge suited me too, you know. But..." She glanced at the lamps lining the street, their warm light illuminating the festival. "Maybe a bumbling utopia isn't so bad either."

The man from the Black Guild scoffed disdainfully. "What nonsense."

Staring at him, Zophia uncrossed her arms. "So, you should make like a utopian idiot and leave without a fuss. Yeah?"

"What am I, your errand boy? I ain't going anywhere just because you say so."

"Have it your way, then," she said, her gaze suddenly turning sharp. "We'll



have to use the less utopian approach.” The tension between the opposing groups shot up. “Don’t mistake us for saints. You clap at us, we clap back harder.”

“I haven’t gotten into a fight in a while.” Lynga rolled her shoulders. “This brings me back.”

“My chance to work off some of this pent-up energy.” Loewe cracked her knuckles. The other demi-humans standing behind them also bristled with hostility.

Zophia shot Zenos a brief glance. “Looks like these guys have beef with our festival. Nothing to do with you, doc, so don’t worry about helping out.”

“Got it,” Zenos said. “Lily, stay behind me.”

“O-Okay,” the elf girl replied.

The moment the healer stepped back, the large man from the Black Guild commanded, “Get their asses!”

Two-dozen-odd burly men all charged upon his signal. Zophia, Lynga, and Loewe, leading the demi-humans, stood at the entrance to the festival, blocking their path. Shouts and the dull sounds of flesh being struck echoed all around, drowning out the festival music as blood sprayed into the night.

The guild members, who made their living off of conflict, were indeed powerful. However...

“Out of my way!” Zophia snapped, spinning around and easily evading their attacks.

“From where I stand, you’re so slow you may as well not be moving!” Lynga mocked, dashing through her foes like the wind.

“You guys are puny,” Loewe said, sending them flying with her powerful arms. “Are you even eating three times a day?”

Having long fought for dominance in the slums and used to bloody conflict, the demi-humans didn’t back down an inch as the fight went on.

“Ugh! Damn it!” one of the guild members said after a while of scuffling.

“These guys are strong!” another said. The men were panting heavily, dropping to their knees one after the other.

Zophia looked down at the prone men and said coolly, “You guys seriously underestimated us. Did you really think a group of—what, twenty, thirty of you?—could take us all on? Today’s a day of celebration, so we’ll let you off the hook, but come pester us again and it’ll be the last thing you do.”

Their big-bodied leader quietly gritted his teeth before chuckling boldly. “Guess you’re better than we thought. I wanted to let the newbies have some fun, but they’re so useless it’s killing my mood.” He turned to his men. “You lot are gonna get it later.” They grew fearful as their leader turned back to the demi-humans. “Whatever. Playtime’s over. Be seeing ya.”

With that, he took something out of his pocket and threw it at Zophia and the others, the glowing red stone arcing through the air.

“That’s a Bomb Stone!” Loewe, who made a living out of mining manastones, shouted out. “Everyone get back!”

Manastones could have a variety of effects, and Bomb was a high-tier, explosive manastone.

The man cackled as the demi-humans turned to run in a panic. “The whole point of this little skirmish was to gather all of you in one place for a clean sweep! Die, you idiots!”

A man in a pitch-black cloak stepped forward slowly between the two groups. “Now, that won’t do.” Zenos caught the Bomb Stone in his right hand.

The large man was dumbfounded by this unexpected move. “Wha—?”

A high-pitched whine like a countdown came from the manastone, and then *boom!* A loud explosion echoed through the air, and black smoke radiated outward, engulfing all present.

As the thick smoke cleared, however, Zenos stood there, unharmed, as though nothing had happened. The demi-humans behind him were similarly uninjured.

“What the hells?!” the man exclaimed.

“Doc!” Zophia called out as she rushed over to Zenos.

“I blocked it with a defensive spell, don’t worry. I wasn’t planning on interfering if it stayed a minor scuffle, but I can’t really ignore people potentially dying right in front of me, so...” he explained nonchalantly.

“H-Hey!” the man said. “How the hells are you in one piece?!” Irritated, he threw several more stones, but Zenos caught them all, and they exploded harmlessly in his palms. “What the... Who *are* you?!”

“Just a concerned party,” Zenos said dismissively. “Oh, look. This one didn’t go off. You can have it back.” He pretended to throw it back at the henchmen, who all screamed and began to flee in terror.

As he turned to flee, the big man pointed a finger at the demi-humans. “You ain’t getting away with this! There’s gonna be payback!”

“That’s our line! You guys started this,” Zophia pointed out. “Next time we won’t be so merciful!”

Her words were met with a click of the tongue, and the men from the Black Guild disappeared deep into the streets.

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As though sorry to part with the enthusiasm, a single drum beat had announced the end of the night festival. Despite the unexpected trouble with the Black Guild’s attack, the event in the slums had concluded in grand fashion.

“Good job, everyone!” Zophia said, the other demi-human leaders raising their glasses to clink with hers, causing the amber liquid within to swirl. They were all celebrating the success of the festival.

“That’s cool and all, but why are you guys doing this here?” Zenos asked. The chosen venue for this celebration was his clinic. It was late at night, and the scenery out the window was shrouded in pure darkness.

“I mean, c’mon,” Zophia replied. “You’re the reason for this success, doc. We wouldn’t even have had a festival without you.”

“Besides,” Lynga added, “this place’s the best for relaxing.”

“Indeed,” Loewe agreed. “This place is like our home.”

“But you do know it’s *not* your home, right?” Zenos said.

“It was originally *my* home, in fact,” interjected Carmilla, who had returned earlier, as she floated down from the second floor. With her arms crossed, she looked down at Zenos and the others and said, “Hmph. You took your sweet time.”

“Well, stuff happened,” Zenos said as he brought his glass to his lips.

The “stuff” in question was the fact a group from the Black Guild had intruded upon the festivities. Those who lurked in the shadows of the slums, thriving in chaos, had seemed displeased with the peaceful event. Dealing with the aftermath of the scuffle had taken some time, but in the end, there’d been only minimal damage. Some of the demi-humans had been injured, but Zenos had already treated them.

“But throwing an explosive manastone out of the blue like that...” Lily murmured, clutching her teacup with both hands and shrinking back slightly. “Those people are scary.”

“Well, yeah,” Zophia chimed in. “That lot has no limits. But I think they were scoping things out more than anything.”

Lily lifted her head. “Scoping things out?”

“I think so, yeah. If they’d really wanted to destroy the festival, they’d have been sneaky about it, sabotaged it here and there instead of brazenly barging in like that.”

“Yeah,” Lynga agreed. “And if they’d done that, we’d have retaliated for real.”

“So this was just meant as a warning,” Loewe concluded.

“A warning,” Lily echoed with a shudder.

Carmilla, floating in midair, spoke ominously. “Hee hee hee... I see. Sounds like our next opponent is the Black Guild.”

The demi-humans, still holding their glasses, gave small shrugs. “Who knows,” Zophia said. “They’re a shady bunch. Nothing like an ordinary guild.”

“Yep,” Lynga added. “They’re not exactly united. I think it was probably the doing of a small fraction of the whole guild.”



“So what you’re saying is that this attack wasn’t representative of the whole guild,” Zenos pondered.

Loewe nodded. “The Black Guild does officially have bosses and leaders and whatnot, but they rarely show their faces. Most members don’t even know who they are.”

“Huh...”

As the healer looked vacantly out the window, the demi-humans patted his shoulder. “Don’t worry, doc. If our enemies are anything like that big green dimwit, they’re no big deal,” Zophia assured him.

“She’s right,” Lynga said. “He was kinda unhinged, but we’re used to dealing with his sort.”

“After all, Zophia and Lynga are experts on being unhinged,” Loewe quipped.

“You’re one to talk,” Zophia retorted.

“I don’t want to hear that from *you*, Loewe,” Lynga snapped.

Loewe laughed. “Right, right.”

“What are you so happy about?” Zenos asked. Was the orc leader that self-aware?

“But you know,” Zophia said solemnly, “in our world, messing with someone else’s turf is basically a declaration of war. The audacity of those people...”

“Yeah. I held back because we were holding a peaceful event,” Lynga added, just as solemnly. “Normally, though? I’d have been out for blood.”

“Same here,” Loewe agreed with a serious expression of her own. “We don’t mess with the Black Guild, and they don’t mess with us. That’s how things have stayed in balance until now.”

“Ah, I see,” Carmilla remarked. “So they have deliberately broken an unwritten rule of nonaggression.”

Zophia nodded slightly. “Maybe something’s going on in the Black Guild that we don’t know about.”

## Chapter 2: The Woman from the Black Guild

The Kingdom of Herzeth, also known as the Kingdom of the Sun, was one of the greatest powers in the continent. At the center of its capital was the royal palace, surrounded by a special district where nobility resided, and further encircled by the town district where ordinary citizens lived peacefully.

The slums were even further out, particularly on the opposite side of the royal capital's main gate—referred to as the “otherside.” Beyond there loomed eerie mountains, home to ferocious magical beasts that would occasionally wander down into the slums. Rumor had it that the kingdom deliberately neglected the slums, using the area as a defensive wall against such threats.

Naturally, this meant that the central government's watchful eye didn't reach that far, so the further away from the heart of the capital, the worse the security and the greater the danger in the slums.

In the sprawling, spiderweb-like old underground sewage system, in an area lined with shacks that rattled at the slightest breeze, groans echoed through the air.

“Stupid bastards,” barked a large man with greenish skin at the multiple others who lay collapsed and bruised, moaning in pain at his feet. “Getting your asses kicked by a bunch of domesticated demi-humans.”

“Oh, dear,” came a strangely syrupy woman's voice from behind them. “What happened here?” The scent of aged honey wafted through the air as her voluptuous figure, oozing allure, emerged from the darkness.

The large man instinctively straightened his back. “Oh, nothing much. Just educating these worthless newbies.”

“So your attack on the festival was a failure, then? You *do* know it's bad form to blame your subordinates for your failures, yes?”

“No, that's not—”

“Oh? Did you just talk back to me?”

“N-No, ma’am!”

“On your knees.”

“Urk...” The man’s enormous frame crumpled, and he collapsed to his knees as if drained of strength.

“So, tell me,” she cooed. “Why did you fail?”

“W-Well, there was...some weird guy. He got in the way. I don’t know how he did it, but he somehow blocked our trump card, the Bomb Stone...”

“Oh? You’re telling me someone can actually do that?” The woman pressed a pale index finger to her red lips, then asked in a sultry tone, “So...was he handsome?”

“U-Uhh...” The large man struggled to find his words as he stared at the sweet-voiced woman standing before him in this corner of the damp underground sewers. “It was dark, so I couldn’t get a good look,” he managed, his tone respectful as he remained on one knee. “He was wearing a black cloak, I think...”

“That’s not what I asked. I want to know if he was handsome.”

“I-I’m not sure. I didn’t get a good look at his face. I think he was human.”

The woman let out a long sigh. “You’re no use at all.”

“I-I’m sorry!”

After a brief silence, the woman continued slowly, “But it is as I suspected. A new leader has emerged in the slums.” She chuckled. “How intriguing.”

“A leader?” the man echoed.

“Don’t you think it’s odd that the demi-humans would suddenly be friendly and organize a festival? They were at each other’s throats until very recently. I had wondered if a new player had entered the scene and brought them together, and this must be him. If he can make the demi-humans stop fighting each other, then he must be quite powerful indeed.”

“I-I see.”

“Have you forgotten the purpose of our attack was to stir up trouble and

draw out their leadership?”

“R-Right, that was why... You’re so smart,” he praised her, lifting his head. “B-But what will you do after you’ve flushed out this new leader?”

“On your knees.”

“Gah! Urk...” The man’s knees suddenly bent, and he was forced into a prone position.

The woman gazed down coolly at his back. “Aren’t you a fool? When the demi-humans were having their little spat, there were too many factions at play, and trying to do anything would’ve meant being dragged into an endless conflict. But now that the slums have come together, we take down the head, and the whole thing comes crashing down.”

“Y-You’re right.”

“I’m going to make him dance for me. All of the slums will be ours. I’m getting quite bored of scurrying away underground.”

As he lay prostrate on the ground, his eyes widened with realization. “Wh-What an amazing plan!”

Pleased with his reaction, the woman snapped her fingers. As if released from a spell, the large man finally managed to stand up, swallowing hard. “He looked like an ordinary guy, but if he could bring together and control that deranged demi-human lot, the bastard must be dangerous...”

The woman chuckled. “A little spice makes him all the more worth controlling.”

Enthralled by her sinister smile, the man blushed. “How many men will we need?”

“Not that many. He’s just one man. All we need is to find him; bringing him to his knees should be trivial.”

“You’re incredible, Lady Liz.”

The woman grinned at the praise.

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A day later, the morning's work had just finished at the clinic.

"Um, Zenos? Are you okay?" Lily asked.

"What do you mean?" Zenos replied.

"I mean, you were zoning out again. In the middle of examining people too."

"Huh? Was I?" Hadn't Lily said something similar to him only recently?

"Were you thinking about Mr. Becker's letter again?"

"Oh, no, not that..." Zenos scratched his cheek awkwardly and leaned back on his chair, stretching. "Just... Last night I dreamed about my old life at the orphanage, for some reason."

"The orphanage in the slums where you grew up?" she asked as she poured hot water into the teapot, the sweet aroma of tea leaves wafting through the air. "What was the dream about?"

"Well... Uh, about how like, all we'd get for the day was water with a pinch of salt. Or how we were so desperate for food, we'd eat strange mushrooms growing out of old pillars..."

"Th-That's terrible."

It was all just old memories now, though. Dark, musty air. Barred windows. Ice-cold, splintered floorboards. Sounds echoing through the air of the children's supposed "instructors" shouting and hitting them. Someone's sobs.

"What an awful place," Lily remarked.

"I guess so, yeah, looking back."

Normally, in a situation like that, the children would band together and comfort one another, but their older "caretakers" had disliked any form of unity among their charges, and had created a system to prevent it.

"They divided us into small groups. If one kid in the group messed up, the whole group was held accountable," Zenos explained. Moreover, the first to report a mistake would be rewarded with sweets and the like. As a result, the children had grown wary of one another, creating a tense, uneasy atmosphere.

"It's amazing you managed to get through that," Lily said, shocked.

Zenos shrugged. “Well, that was all I knew at the time, you know. And”—he paused for a moment—“I was actually one of the lucky ones.”

“How was *that* lucky?”

“No, see, every group had an older kid as a leader, acting like an assistant to our caretakers, bossing the younger ones around.” The leaders had been mostly harsh to those below them, taking out their frustrations over their own mistreatment on the younger children. “But my group’s leader was nice and covered for our mistakes. Thanks to that, our group got along.”

As a result, they’d become friends, or as close to friends as they could’ve been in that environment. Of course, they couldn’t have openly shown how close they were to one another in front of their so-called instructors. Zenos often had gotten corporal punishment for refusing to loot the dead of the slums, thus disobeying the orders he’d received. But his group’s leader had often covered for him, sparing him from worse treatment.

“Oh, wow,” Lily said. “What was the leader like?”

“Hmm. She had long hair and a gentle smile. She was kinda like our big sister.”

“A big sister...” Lily paused, her hands stopping midair, holding the teacup. “Was she pretty? No, I’m sure she was. She has to have been. I just know it.”

“What are you talking about? This is about back when I was a kid.”

“I know. I just *know*, okay? The women who gather around you are all pretty.”

“Lily?”

A chuckle echoed through the air as Carmilla floated down from the second floor. “I see. So our next contender is a demure woman.”

“Our next what now?”

The wraith chuckled again. “Think about it. We have a young elf. A big sister-type lizardwoman. A werewolf with animal ears. An orc sporting a pair of melons. A taciturn knight. An earnest girl with glasses. What could be next, if not a demure woman?”

“You lost me halfway through all of that, but what’s this about an earnest girl with glasses?” Did she mean Umin, from the Royal Institute of Healing? “Also,

why do you always show up when we're talking about this stuff?"

"Nonsense. This is simply the only place where I ever 'show up.'"

"I guess that's true."

Carmilla grinned wickedly. "So this woman was your first crush, was she not?"

"What?!" Lily exclaimed. "I knew it!"

"Have you considered not jumping to conclusions?" he deadpanned.

As a kid, he'd been too busy just trying to survive to even think about such things. Looking back, though, there was no doubt that the girl's gentle smile had been a source of comfort.

Zenos leaned his chin on his hand, gazing out the window. "Hope Liz is doing okay out there somewhere."

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As night fell upon the slums, a lone lizardman stood at the outskirts of the city.

Due to the postfestival attack by a faction within the Black Guild, the lizardmen's leader, Zophia, had ordered her people to patrol the slums. This lizardman had wandered away from the group he'd been with to relieve himself.

On his way to rejoin them, he heard someone call out behind him. "Excuse me..."

Turning around, he saw a woman with almond-shaped eyes, her violet hair swaying in the tepid breeze. The sinking sun shone dimly upon her, casting long, thin shadows on the ground. An overwhelming sense of allure emanated from her entire figure.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Does it matter?" she replied. "Would you like to come with me for a little bit?"

"What? I-I'm working. Besides, who gave you permission to...do business...here...?" The lizardman's words trailed off as his senses were

overwhelmed by a dizzyingly sweet fragrance. Captivated by her enchanting smile, he took her hand, and immediately a sharp pain shot through him. “Ow! What the hells?!” The woman’s nails dug into his palm, drawing a thin trickle of blood. “What are you doing?!”

He tried to grab her, but she pointed her index finger downward and commanded, “Kneel.”

“Urk...” His knees buckled, his back bent against his will, and his hands grasped at the ground. “You... What is this...?” Unable to even raise his head, the lizardman lay there grunting.

Slowly, the woman leaned over him. “Now you can’t disobey me anymore.”

“What are you—”

She chuckled. “I’m bored of the underground. I’ve been thinking it’s about time I take over the surface.”

“Wh-What?”

Her sweet breath stimulated his nostrils. “Now, tell me, who’s your boss?”

The lizardman tried to remain silent, but his mouth opened against his will. “G-Galewind... Zophia...”

“Ah, that’s the lizardmen’s boss. Of course you’d know *that*. What I want to know is who the man rallying *all* of the different races is. The man in black? The one who dealt with my men’s attack so casually?”

The lizardman’s eyes opened wide, and he struggled to speak. “I-I don’t know...”

“Hmm...” The woman brought a finger to his chin and lifted it, her dewy eyes gazing down on him. “Speak.”

“It’s...Ze—” Mid-word, the lizardman lost consciousness.

“Wow!” she exclaimed. “He shouldn’t have been able to defy my command, and yet he resisted so hard he fainted! He *really* didn’t want to tell me.” The woman stood slowly and ran the back of her hand through her hair as it swayed lazily in the breeze.

A large man with greenish skin came out from around the corner. “Maybe he’s just *that* scared of coughing it up?” he asked, swallowing hard.

“It’s really quite the mystery. Now I’m even *more* curious about this leader of the slums. Aren’t you, Gaion?”

“Yes. If he can strike enough fear into these people that they can resist your orders, Lady Liz, he must be very dangerous,” Gaion said solemnly. He pointed at the lizardman lying on the ground. “So, what do we do with him? Drag him back, torture him, make him talk?”

“Leave him. If he disappears, they’ll spare no resource to find him, and it’s still too early for all-out war. Besides, he’s fainted, and his memory will be hazy regardless.”

“Are you sure?”

“Demi-humans have strength in numbers. It would be a hassle to confront them head-on. It’s faster for me to make their leader my puppet than it is to go through all that trouble.”

“I-I see! You’re so smart, Lady Liz!”

Liz’s lips curled into a small, pleased smile at the remark. “The other races should also be on patrol. We’ll try the werewolves and the orcs next.”

It didn’t go as she’d expected, however.

“What’s *happening*?” she groused as she cast a somewhat displeased glare at the orc man now collapsed before her. She’d targeted both a lone werewolf and a lone orc, both out for patrols, but neither of them had revealed the mastermind’s identity.

Standing behind her, Gaion uttered in disbelief, “All three of them fainted before they coughed up a name.”

“How terrified must they be that they’re all resisting my orders?”

“I thought *we* were the specialists at fear and control, but I guess the surface folk can be pretty damn scary too,” Gaion said in a cautious tone before his expression shifted, now with a hint of pride. “But I know what to do, Lady Liz! I

know how to get the guy's name!"

"Oh? Go on."

"I noticed all three of them just said 'Ze,' then fainted."

"They did, yes."

"So that has to be part of the name! In other words, the name starts with 'Ze'!"

"You don't say! Now then, genius, why don't you tell me how many people in the slums have names that start with 'Ze'?" Liz asked coldly.

"D-Don't look at me like that, Lady Liz!" Gaion pleaded, his eyes welling up.

With a sigh, Liz began to slowly walk away. "I'll bring someone smarter along next time."

"B-But..."

Liz glanced at the sky, which had begun to shift in color, before looking back at Gaion. "I'll be heading back underground."

"W-We're not searching for the guy anymore?"

"It's almost morning. I don't want to be exposed to sunlight. It's bad for the skin, you know."

"R-Right."

"And besides, my preparations are in place."

"Preparations?" Gaion asked, staring blankly at her in confusion.

Ignoring him, Liz ran a hand through her flowing hair. "I *will* bring the leader of the slums to his knees. No man can resist me," she murmured with a seductive smile, her index finger resting on her lips.

*Not with my succubus blood.*

\*\*\*

On the second floor of Zenos's clinic, underneath the sky where night and morning collided in shades of azure, Carmilla sat up with a start, groaning.

"I have a feeling," she murmured, slowly lifting her face to glance around. She



sniffed the air, and an excited expression formed on her features. “Hee hee hee... I am unsure why, exactly, but I can tell something fun is about to happen.”

\*\*\*

The next day, in a corner of the cold underground waterway, Liz sat on a black leather sofa, one long leg crossed over the other.

“Well, Gaion?” she asked her lackey. “Have you found the leader’s hideout?”

“I, uh, maybe?” Gaion replied with a worried nod.

“‘Maybe’? Oh, I hate wishy-washy men.”

“P-Please don’t hate me!”

“You *did* do what I asked, yes?”

“Y-Yes, yes,” Gaion replied, nodding repeatedly. “I waited for the unconscious orc’s friends to find him, then followed them, like you said.”

“Right. With their friend unconscious, they would surely bring him back to their hideout in a hurry. Did the orc remember me?”

“N-No, it seemed his memory was vague.”

“Memories do tend to be vague where I’m involved, yes. And then?”

“And then I followed them to the orcs’ headquarters.” He went on to talk about the area where the orcs lived, full of rocky mountains.

“Orcs *do* mine manastones for a living,” Liz mused. “That makes sense.”

“I didn’t follow them in, of course, and just stayed hidden outside.”

“And I presume the information about one of theirs fainting had reached the leader of the orcs in the meantime.”

“Y-Yes. So I stayed outside and waited and waited and waited, and since I had nothing better to do I tried to count these ants I saw, but I can only count to ten, so I—”

“That’s irrelevant.”

“S-Sorry!”

Liz narrowed her eyes and heaved a disappointed sigh. “Around the same time, presumably the lizardmen and werewolves were also informed about their own unconscious comrades.”

“Y-Yes.”

“And since those three races are cooperating rather than fighting, presumably they shared that information with one another.”

“Th-That’s right.”

“And, presumably, they all thought this was very odd.”

“Th-They must’ve.”

“And that would be where their leader comes in,” Liz said, crossing her legs. “He too was, presumably, informed about the three races being targeted.”

“You’re so smart, Lady Liz!”

“However, since he controls them through fear, presumably only the leaders of the three races would be able to meet with him.”

“S-So I just had to wait for the leader of the orcs, Loewe, to come out! And then I followed her to the guy’s hideout!” Gaion exclaimed enthusiastically.

“Look at you, actually using your only brain cell. You remembered what Loewe looks like, didn’t you?”

“Y-Yes. I think she was there during the attack on the festival. She’s this giant woman.”

“That was why I ordered the attack, yes. I’m relieved to hear your brain is at least functional enough to remember her.”

“Th-Thank you!”

“That wasn’t a compliment,” Liz said, slowly standing up. “Now then, did you succeed in tailing her?”

“Y-Yeah. She was sharp, so we had to be careful, but I got a bunch of guys to help, and we managed to—”

“Which means you presumably identified the mastermind’s hideout.”

"I-I think so, but..." Gaion hesitated, scratching his head nervously as he met Liz's narrowed gaze.

"I told you, I *hate* wishy-washy men."

"S-Sorry! I mean, we *did* find it, it's just..." His brows furrowed in confusion. "The place, I mean, it didn't really feel like a big shot's hideout..."

\*\*\*

That night, Gaion led Liz to the supposed hideout.

"*This* is the hideout?" she muttered in astonished confusion. The place was in a ruined area of the city that had been wiped out by a plague, situated between the city district and the slums. "Are you sure this is the right place?"

"Right? It's weird, isn't it?" Gaion said as the two exchanged glances.

Before them was a skewed building, with thin glass window panes rattling in the wind and faded outer walls. It blended in so well with the rest of the ruins that one would walk past it without batting an eyelash.

Gazing at the seemingly crumbling house, Gaion said anxiously, "I-I'm sure that this is the building Loewe went into. M-Maybe I'm wrong, though."

"This could be bad."

"B-Bad?"

"Gaion. When you think about the hideout of a mastermind, what do you picture?"

"U-Uhm, big, spooky, with lots of guards..."

"Exactly," Liz replied, casting a wary glance at the mansion. "But look at this place. It's a deliberately inconspicuous place in an already ruined area. Take a guess as to why that is."

"Uhh, he's broke?"

"No, you moron. If my guess is correct, it means he operates strictly from the shadows."

"Th-The shadows?" Gaion echoed, gulping.

Liz bit down sharply on her thumbnail. If the man had set up base in a place like this, it could only mean he was purposely hiding. He'd been manipulating the slums from behind the scenes, making a conscious effort to avoid his enemies by staying out of the spotlight. Now that she knew this, the building's slight slant took on an eerie aura.

"Our opponent may be stronger than anticipated," Liz concluded. "How much malice swirls inside that house, I wonder?"

\*\*\*

As Liz and Gaion gazed upon the house, within it, Zenos and Lily sat leisurely around the dinner table, the atmosphere tranquil.

"Good work today, Zenos," Lily said. "Have some tea."

"Ooh, thanks, Lily," Zenos replied.

It was a quiet moment of relaxation after a day's work, with the aroma of citrus wafting from the cups and gently enveloping the table.

Lily blew softly at her teacup. "By the way, what did Loewe say?"

"Oh, that. Apparently one of her men passed out while on patrol. Zophia and Lynga also came over and said the same thing."

"I wonder what happened."

"Who knows? Either way, they all were more than happy to eat lunch together before they left. I swear they think this place is a cafeteria or something." Zenos brought the cup to his lips, looking around. "Where's Carmilla, by the way? She always shows up for tea."

"She said she had a feeling and was going to wait on the second floor."

"Is she back on her horseshit again?" Zenos asked. He sipped on his tea, then lifted his head. "Hmm? I thought the tea smelled different, but it tastes different too."

"Does it? I tried some new tea leaves today. How is it?"

"It's good. Refreshing, and it goes down easy."

Lily chuckled. "Yay!"

The mastermind's hideout remained enveloped in an endlessly cheerful atmosphere.

\*\*\*

Outside the clinic, Liz and Gaion's foreheads glistened faintly with sweat.

"Wh-What do we do, Lady Liz?" Gaion asked nervously, peering at Zenos's home from a distance. "Do we raid the place, now that we know where it is?"

Liz glared coolly at her lackey. "You're serious?"

"Y-Yes. I mean, the place's falling apart, so we can crush it."

"Are you daft? The man who controls the slums from the shadows is in there. That appearance must be a bluff. The exterior is most likely just an entrance, leading to a vast underground base."

"I-I see..."

"And besides," Liz continued, loosely crossing her arms, "our objective isn't to *kill* him."

"It's not?"

"How many times do I have to explain it until you get it? Is your head just for decoration?"

"I-I'm sorry!" Gaion replied, shrinking back in fear.

Liz let out a heavy sigh and continued, "If the ruler died, the races' alliance would likely fall apart, and this would render them vulnerable, yes. But that would simply bring us back to the previous state of affairs. Picking fights on three separate fronts is a hassle."

"Yeah, but we're not gonna lose!"

"It would nevertheless take too much time, time that others from the Black Guild might take to intervene and further complicate things for us."

"Th-That's true."

"So, I get close to the mastermind, use the power of my succubus abilities, and turn him into a puppet. That way, control of the slums will effectively fall to me. *That's* the plan."

“R-Right! That *is* the plan!”

Liz stared up at the mastermind’s hideout, looming over them like a shadow in the twilight. “Now the issue is how to approach him.”

“Why don’t you just pay him a visit?”

“Undoubtedly he’ll have powerful guards. It would be difficult to meet with him.” While she could manipulate them one by one, dealing with them all at once would be hard.

“So...what now, then?”

“What, indeed,” she mused. As she was about to speak, the door to the hideout creaked open.

“Lady Liz! S-Someone’s coming out!”

“A guard, perhaps. Hurry, hide!”

The two quickly blended into the shadows and watched as a small girl with blonde pigtails walked out with a broom and began to sweep in front of the house while humming a tune.

“I-Is that a powerful guard?” Gaion asked.

Liz was silent for a moment before replying, “You moron. That’s probably just a caretaker.”

“R-Right, yeah, probably.”

“Hmph. Think about it. Guards kept as caretakers could easily catch you unaware and murder you in your sleep. It makes sense to have a powerless girl close, instead. Keeps the roles separate.”

“Th-That makes sense. What a smart guy.”

“And the girl is an elf. This is no ordinary man if he can keep an elf as a slave.”

“This guy’s no joke...”

“Either way, this won’t be easy. But that’s what makes it interesting,” Liz mused, bringing her finger to her lips.

Gaion was wiping the sweat off his brow when he suddenly spoke up. “Huh?”

“What is it?”

“Oh, uh, it’s just...someone’s looking this way from the second floor window.”

“Where?”

“I-I can’t see ’em anymore, but someone was there!”

“Is it the mastermind? Have we been spotted?”

“N-No, it... It was a woman. Pale as a corpse, gesturing to come closer. I-It must be a trap.”

After a moment’s silence, Liz spoke slowly. “She might be a captive. Rather than beckoning, she could be asking for help.”

“I-I see!”

Liz snapped her fingers as though she’d just had an idea. “We can use this to our advantage.”

“We can?”

“Use your brain. He has an elf girl as a slave and a woman held captive on the second floor. He must be very fond of women. A perfect match for me.”

“Th-That’s true!”

“So this will be simple. I pretend to feel unwell and collapse on the street. His men will find me, take me to his hideout, and present me to the philanderer.”

“You’re such a genius, Lady Liz!”

And then she would simply seize the opportunity once the two were alone and manipulate him like a puppet. Her lips curled into a small smile as she placed her finger on her lips once more and chuckled. “I can hardly wait. However dangerous this master of the slums might be, I’ll devour him down to the very last bone.”

Liz had yet to realize that, within that house, there were individuals *far* more dangerous than she could’ve ever anticipated.





## Chapter 3: Lady Liz's Miscalculation

The following afternoon, on the roadside near the clinic, a woman lay face down, her head turned to the side, her glossy purple hair fanned out on the ground like waves against a shore.

It was Liz, a woman who usually lurked underground, plotting to seize control of the slums.

*Now someone just needs to find me and bring me to the mastermind,* she mused, chuckling internally as she lay there.

The plan was simple: the ruler of the slums appeared to have a strong taste for women, as evidenced by the fact he had a young elven girl at his side and a captive on the second floor of the building. Thus, if she pretended to have collapsed on the street and his lackeys found her, they'd automatically bring her to him as an offering. She could've simply approached him directly, but that would've aroused suspicion. However, being presented as an offering gave her the opportunity to infiltrate the enemy's lair without raising any eyebrows.

All that remained was to wait for an opportunity to be alone with the mastermind, then use her succubus powers to control him.

They hadn't acted immediately after Gaion spotted the woman beckoning on the second floor due to the possibility that it could've been a trap. Liz had decided to wait and see if the woman had spotted her and would report her to the mastermind before doing anything. However, that didn't seem to be the case.

*Hurry and find me already,* she grumbled internally. It was daytime, and she hated being exposed to the sun, but pretending to be unconscious in the middle of the night would've made it less likely that she'd be found. Despite being fed up with the oppressive sunlight and the musty smell of the dirt, if she wanted to seize control of the surface, she had no choice but to endure. Liz was a woman who would stop at nothing for her goals, after all.

After a while, several sets of footsteps echoed nearby. Discreetly peeking from underneath her eyelids, Liz spotted a group of werewolf men.

“Hey! There’s someone passed out on the street!”

“You all right, lady?”

“What do we do? Should we take her to the doctor?”

“Yeah. She’s still breathing. Hey! You okay?”

As a werewolf shook her shoulders, Liz smirked internally at how easily they’d taken the bait. She did think it odd they’d referred to the mastermind as “the doctor,” but perhaps it was some sort of odd power trip on his part.

Not that it mattered. She’d just continue pretending to be unconscious, and have the werewolves carry her to the mastermind’s lair. It was all going according to plan too, but just as they lifted her up, a voice rang out behind them.

“Wait,” said a woman with gray hair and large beast ears, her tone sharp.

“Oh, hey boss,” said one of the werewolves.

“Is something the matter?” respectfully asked another.

*Lynga the Tyrant*, Liz mused in recognition, still discreetly peeking out from underneath her eyelashes. *Leader of the werewolf clan*. The woman roughly matched the description Gaion had given.

Lynga spoke to her men coolly. “I want to know what you’re planning on doing with that woman.”

“Uh, she was passed out on the ground, so we figured we’d take her to the doctor. Should we not?” a werewolf asked.

“You shouldn’t.”

Liz’s heart skipped a beat. *Does she know?* The patrols she’d attempted to control would’ve had vague memories of their encounters with her, after all. Liz continued to silently observe the situation, not showing any outward agitation.

The werewolf men exchanged concerned glances. “H-How come?” one asked.

“I mean, look at her face,” Lynga said.

Liz's pulse sped up as she felt the werewolf leader's contemptuous glare fall upon her. *My face? She shouldn't know what I look like...* Had she underestimated the three leaders of the demi-humans? Sweat began to bead on her forehead, her eyes still closed.

Lynga peered intently at Liz and continued, "She's kind of pretty. Not as pretty as me, of course."

*What?*

The werewolf men also leaned in to examine Liz's face. "Y-Yeah, I guess she is," one said.

"What's the problem, though?" another asked.

"You lot don't get it, do you?!" Lynga snapped in frustration. "That'd just be risking *another* rival. And I don't need more!"

*Pardon?*

Still holding the perplexed Liz, the men nodded in mysterious understanding. "Right, yeah. Makes sense."

"So that's what you mean."

"That *is* what I mean," Lynga agreed. "So just leave her by the roadside."

"Hey! Wait a second!"

"Huh?"

*Oh, crap.* Feeling like she was about to be tossed away for incomprehensible reasons, Liz had accidentally spoken up.

"Wait. Did she just talk?" asked one of the werewolves as the group eyed her suspiciously.

"I think so?"

"But she's totally limp."

Liz kept her eyes shut, desperately trying to play the part of the unconscious victim. She couldn't afford to be caught now. Her performance had to be perfect. Liz was a woman who would go as far as faking unconsciousness for her goals, after all. Yes.

After watching her for a while, Lynga shrugged in exasperation. “Fine. I guess it’d be a bad idea to just dump her. If it’s a contagious disease, Sir Zenos will be mad at us for leaving her to risk exposing others. I don’t like it, but let’s take her inside,” she grumbled, reluctantly instructing her subordinates to carry the unconscious woman into the mastermind’s lair.

*Oh, phew. That takes care of the first step of my plan,* Liz thought, breathing a sigh of relief despite her cold sweat. Things had grown worrisome for a spell, but it seemed her infiltration was successful. *But wait...*

That name Lynga had just mentioned. “Zenos.” Was that the mastermind? The name rang familiar to her, but it might’ve been a pseudonym. She couldn’t be sure.

The werewolves threaded through the buildings of the ruined city and arrived at the hideout. “Sir Zenos!” Lynga called out, knocking on the door. “We brought an unconscious woman!”

As the entrance to the demon’s realm slowly creaked open, sending shivers down her spine, Liz’s blood ran cold. It felt as though she’d just stepped somewhere beyond human comprehension.

She chuckled internally. *Ah, how wonderfully exciting. But it doesn’t matter who my opponent is. As long as he’s a man, I’ll be the one in control.* Liz was a woman who would go as far as playing the role of sacrificial lamb for her goals, after all. The brave member of the Black Guild steeled her resolve as she disappeared through the front door, as though being sucked into its depths.

Liz, of course, had no means of knowing what fate awaited her thereafter.

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*So this is the mastermind’s manor,* she mused as the werewolves carried her. By pretending to have collapsed, she had been able to successfully infiltrate the man’s lair.

Still feigning unconsciousness, she discreetly glanced around through half-lidded eyes. The interior was simple, made of wood and devoid of any extravagant furnishings. She’d expected to see rows of formidable guards standing at attention, but to her surprise, there was no one at all.

This *was* just the entrance, however. It was likely there was a door somewhere leading to underground chambers, and that beyond it, a vast number of enemies lay in wait. And Liz was a woman who kept her guard up at all times, after all.

“Welcome!” came a voice from the back, accompanied by soft footsteps. “Oh! Lynga!”

It was the girl whom Liz had spotted the night before, cleaning the front of the building. She seemed to be a caretaker, someone the mastermind kept close at hand. The guards remained in hiding, and the reception seemed to be handled entirely by the harmless-looking caretaker. This mastermind was an exceptionally cautious man.

Liz felt the elven girl’s gaze shift toward her. “Um, Lynga, who’s that?”

“Oh, she was passed out on the street, so we brought her in,” Lynga replied. “Where’s Sir Zenos?”

“He’s doing his rounds right now.”

“Oh, is he?”

*His rounds?* Liz’s brows furrowed as she eavesdropped on the elf and werewolf’s conversation. What did they mean by “rounds”? Was it code for something?

Lynga’s expression seemed concerned. “When’s he coming back?”

“Umm,” the young elf began, “he said he had a lot of places to visit today and that he’d be home late.”

The werewolf hummed. “I see. Ah, well. I guess we could just dump this woman somewhere, then.”

*What?! What kind of logic is that?!* Liz’s internal screaming was very close to becoming external.

“Let’s lay her down on the bed for now,” the young elf interjected, much to Liz’s relief. “Okay, Lynga?”

“Hmph. I guess,” Lynga grumbled, seeming disappointed for some reason. She instructed her men to lay Liz down on the bed by the entrance door, and they

did so, placing her on her back.

“I’ll keep an eye on her, and Zenos can examine her when he’s home.”

“All right. She’s all yours, Lily,” Lynga said with a sigh, then left with her men in tow.

Silence fell upon the room. With her eyes still closed, Liz pondered her next steps. *They’ll finally take me to the mastermind’s chambers now.*

But they didn’t.

*What’s happening?* She half opened her eyes, and very nearly exclaimed again, narrowly managing to bite back her words. *What the...?!*

The young elven blonde with sparkling hair was staring down at Liz. She tilted her head to the side and muttered, “Hmm... What a beautiful lady...”

Liz shuddered. *Ack! Wh-What’s going on?!* Her spine felt oddly chilly as the beautiful young girl emanated a terrifying, oppressive, icy aura. Liz had thought her nothing but a caretaker and a slave, but it was clear this was no ordinary girl.

“Hmm... And her eyelashes are sooo long...”

*Huh?*

“And her skin’s sooo pale...”

*Um, hello?*





“And her chest is sooo big...”

*Excuse me?*

“And her legs are sooo long...” the girl murmured, gazing down at Liz with contempt.

*Sh-She’s terrifying.* Liz was certain this girl was about to eat her alive.

But then the elven girl’s shoulders slumped, and she sighed, muttering something strange instead. “Why is everyone around Zenos so pretty?”

*What? What is she talking about?* Liz’s mind stirred as she desperately tried to make sense of the situation. And then it hit her. *Oh! She’s sizing me up! This is an evaluation!*

Of course! The girl was making sure that Liz was a suitable offering to the mastermind. That was why she hadn’t been taken downstairs immediately and instead placed on a bed by the door! It wasn’t as though she’d get special treatment just because she was a woman. Only those who passed the test were allowed near the mastermind. Maybe this girl doubled as an evaluator.

Now aware that she was being scrutinized, Liz thought, *Well? Hurry and say what you think! There’s absolutely no way I’ll fail this test. Go on, evaluate me.*

The young girl—Lily was her name—relaxed her posture, seemingly convinced of Liz’s charms. “Oh! Silly me, I can’t afford to stand here spacing out. This woman could be sick! I have to do something! I’m in charge while Zenos is away!” she mumbled to herself as she hurried toward the cupboard.

Liz peeked through half-lidded eyes and saw the girl take out what seemed to be a small, hand-sewn cloak, then hastily put it on.

Lily looked around nervously, slowly climbed onto a chair, and puffed out her chest, putting her hands on her hips.

“Heh heh! ’Tis I, Lily, apprentice shadow healer extraordinaire!” she exclaimed. “I shall cure any illness, any injury, with but a flick of the wrist!”

*Uh, what? I’m not sure what’s happening, but it can’t be anything good...* Liz continued to lay still on the bed, her eyes closed, sweat dripping down her forehead.

And then, unsure whether her mind was playing tricks on her or not, she could've sworn she'd heard a barely contained chuckle coming from the second floor.

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*What in the hells is happening?!*

Uneasy, Liz opened her eyes only slightly. She'd been brought to the mastermind's lair after pretending to have collapsed on the street, but she was still lying on the bed by the front door. She'd seen no guards, and the mastermind himself was also absent; the only person who'd come out to see her was a lone elven girl, presumably to evaluate her.

The girl had observed Liz's form carefully, but without announcing the results of her evaluation, she'd gone somewhere, then returned wearing a small black cloak. "Now then, miss, tell me: what ails you? I, Lily, the great shadow healer apprentice, shall hear you out," she said, making no sense whatsoever.

It was a question of some sort, but Liz wasn't sure whether to answer. Wouldn't it be far too suspicious for her to suddenly open her eyes? It could be a trick question. Liz decided to feign unconsciousness a while longer and see what would happen.

After a moment, the elven girl said in a disappointed tone, "Ah, no good, no good at all. I thought maybe speaking to her would wake her up, but no such luck, I see. Miss? Miiiss!"

Liz felt the girl pat her shoulders, but chose to keep her eyes closed a bit longer still.

"Still no good," the girl lamented. "Well then, this calls for a...*Diagnosis!*"

It sounded as though the girl had chanted something, a spell Liz was unfamiliar with. But...there were no signs of anything being activated. Opening her eyes just a smidge, Liz saw the girl with her right hand held out, looming ominously.

The seconds ticked by painfully slowly, with Liz utterly confused as to what was happening.

After a long while, the girl's shoulders slumped. "Aw, I was hoping it'd activate if I waited long enough, but I guess it's not that simple to see through things with magic... Zenos is just really amazing..." A sigh of disappointment mixed with admiration escaped her. She grumbled, leaned closer to Liz, and muttered, "I guess I should be a proper apprentice and do what Zenos taught me."

*What did the mastermind teach her?* Liz wondered nervously. What could it be, she wondered? Again she peered out from half-lidded eyes, and saw the girl's beautiful face drawing closer and closer, their lips almost touching. Liz recoiled, shutting her eyes tightly. *Um, wait a second! Hold up! I don't swing that way! Wait! What in the hells is that man teaching this girl?!*

"Okay, her breathing seems normal," the elf girl said, suddenly placing a cold palm on Liz's forehead.

*Ack!* Once again, she barely bit back a noise.

"No fever," the elf said, gripping Liz's wrist. She then continued to say things that made no sense. "Zenos said that if the breathing and pulse are okay, they're not at immediate risk of death."

*Hey!*

"And her pulse's fine too. That's good."

*Ah, so it's this type of evaluation! I see!* It made sense. The girl had assessed Liz's appearance, and was now checking her bodily functions. This mastermind was so thorough! Quite the womanizer! Which only made him easier to control, of course. *This is a problem, though...*

Liz could use her succubus powers to ensnare a man without any problems, but they wouldn't work on a woman. If a guard or two showed up, she'd at least have *something* to work with.

As Liz fretted, the elf crossed her arms and muttered to herself, "Hmm, but if she's still not waking up, maybe she hit her head. Which means..." She placed her small palm over Liz's eyes, prying them open, then chanted, "*Glow!*"

"Augh!" Liz blurted out as a bright light flooded her vision.

“Huh? Did that wake her up?”

“Zzz...”

“Wait, she’s still sleeping? Did I hear things?” the elven girl asked, staring intently at Liz. “I was just trying to check her pupils...”

What a piercing gaze! Liz had assumed that pretending to be unconscious would’ve made the mastermind’s lackeys lower their guard, but she was beginning to fear for her life.

Desperate, she continued her act, while screaming internally, *What the hells is this evaluation?! Where are the meeeeen?!*

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In the middle of a house call, Zenos lifted his head. “Huh?”

“What’s the matter, doctor?” asked the elderly patient lying in bed.

“Oh, nothing, just... I thought I heard someone screaming.”

“Really? Maybe you’re just tired, doctor. I’m so sorry for making you come all the way out here.”

“Don’t worry about it, gramps. Your strength isn’t what it used to be, you know? I can’t have you walking all the way to the clinic.” The clinic. Was something going on over there?

Zenos gazed out the window at the setting sun and began to prepare for his return home.

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*No, seriously! Where are all the men?!*

Liz was sweating bullets as she continued to lay still, eyes closed, on the clinic’s bed. She’d been thoroughly examined by an elf girl, who’d touched her here and there before suddenly prying her eyes open to shine a light in them.

*What the hells is this place?!*

She’d been planning to use her succubus blood to charm the male guards, but she hadn’t seen a single man yet.

“Hmm, her pupil reflexes seem fine. Um, what was I supposed to do next, again...?” the young elf pondered, a finger on her forehead as she peered down at Liz. “Oh! Right! Zenos said to check the extent of the coma in unconscious patients!” Rustling sounds echoed through the room as the girl prepared something. “I think...um, right, to check how deeply asleep the patient is, I need to inflict pain. Then... Oh, I know! I’ll try crushing a fingernail!”

“W-Wait! Wait, wait, waaait!”

“Huh? Did she wake up?”

“Z-Zzz...”

“Oh? She’s asleep. Did I imagine that too?”

Sweat was streaming down Liz’s temples at this point as she continued to feign sleep. The mastermind’s lair was way, *way* worse than she could’ve ever imagined. Coming here alone had been premature on her part. This little elf girl, whom Liz had thought was a caretaker, had suddenly begun to act like a torturer! Why, this place was as lawless as the depths of the Black Guild! A paradise for the deranged! No wonder this man had unified the chaos of the slums!

*O-Okay. This is getting bad. I need to “wake up.”* Things were growing dire. Honestly, Liz feared for her life! Surely if she woke up and caused a commotion, one or two male guards would show up? And then she’d have her chance!

But just as she began to slowly open her eyes, someone barged in through the front door, forcing Liz to hurriedly close her eyes again. A man, maybe? She stole a hopeful peek at the visitor, but...

“Doc! Are you here?!” a voice rang out.

“Oh, Zophia!” Lily said. “Zenos is out doing rounds today.”

“Ah, right,” replied the disappointed visitor with black hair tied up in a ponytail. “I forgot about that.”

*Damn it. Another woman.* The name “Zophia” was familiar to Liz—that was the leader of the lizardman faction in the slums.

Noticing Liz on the bed, Zophia said, “Oh. A patient?”

“Yeah, Lynga brought her in,” Lily explained. “She hasn’t regained consciousness yet...”

“Hmm. She looks healthy, though. Are you sure she’s sick?”

Liz’s heart skipped a beat.

“Oh, well. Whatever,” Zophia continued. “I just came over to bring some high-quality meat as a gift.”

“You’re always so thoughtful.”

“I mean, the doc’s always watching out for us, you know? It’s the least I can do. Anyway, I’ll leave it here, all right?”

“Okay! Thank you!”

Zophia set down a package on the desk and left. A tribute, maybe? Liz was in a panic, fearing the lizardwoman had seen through her ruse. Her reputation as leader of one of the three major factions of the slums wasn’t unfounded, it seemed. Liz decided to lie low and continue to watch the situation.

Another visitor walked in. Hoping *this* time it was a man, Liz opened her eyes ever so slightly, but before her stood a tall woman with dark skin. *Another woman?!*

“Is Zenos here?” the visitor asked.

“Oh, Loewe!” Lily said. “Zenos is doing rounds today.”

“Oh, right, yeah. My bad.” Loewe, likely the leader of the orcs, glanced at Liz down on the bed and pointedly remarked, “Who’s this? An intruder?”

Liz flinched, her eyebrows spasming lightly.

The elf girl shook her head. “No, she was out cold on the street. Lynga brought her in. She won’t wake up, though...”

“Oh, she won’t? Maybe I could try to wake her up with a solid punch to the gut?”

*No! No, no, nonononono!* Who in their right mind would just casually suggest such a thing?! Was *everyone* who came here a deviant?!

“You can’t do that, Loewe,” Lily said. “She’s sick.”



“Really? When my men are passed out like that I can usually punch them awake, but all right, have it your way. I’ll see you later.”

“Okay! Later!”

Silence once again fell upon the room after Loewe’s departure.

*Okay. This is fine. Except, Liz thought to herself, there are no men here. Not a single one has shown up. Men. Don’t. Exist. There are truly. Seriously. No men. Anywhere.*

At this point, she was wondering if the mastermind was the only man in his lair. Was there some rule against allowing men inside? But to keep his authority he’d need guards and laborers. How could he possibly not have any men around?

As Liz pondered her next move, the elf girl muttered worriedly, “What do I do? She’s not waking up at all...” She glanced at the clock on the wall, then spoke in a concerned tone, “Sorry. I think only Zenos can help you. He’s probably on his way home, so I’ll go fetch him, okay? Wait just a bit.” With that, the girl opened the door and scurried out.

*Wait, she went outside?* And she’d said something about going to fetch the mastermind. “This is my chance!”

Finally opening her eyes, Liz sat up on the bed. The caretaker-slash-torturer elf girl was gone, and she couldn’t sense anyone else nearby. She’d deduced that this dilapidated house was actually the lair of the ruler of the slums. However, she’d been having far more trouble than anticipated getting past even the front door, and had no idea when she’d actually be brought to the owner of the place. This could be her opportunity to find the entrance to the underground part of the hideout and, if possible, sneak into the mastermind’s chambers. There she could catch him off guard and use him as her pawn.

“Hmph. That was a bit of a hassle, but worth the patience. I’ll be the victor in the end,” Liz said. Suddenly, she felt a strange chill, and brought her hand to her neck reflexively. “No one’s here...right?”

She focused her senses, but still couldn’t feel anyone’s presence nearby. Life as a member of the Black Guild had made her particularly alert to the presence

of others; she couldn't be mistaken.

And indeed, Liz was right. Now that Lily had left, there were no more people in the vicinity.

*Living* people, that is.

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"Um, is someone there?" Liz looked around, but found no one. Was it just her imagination after all?

Slowly, she lowered her feet from the bed to the cool floorboards. Beyond the cracked window, the sunlight took on a crimson hue. Repainted in twilight colors, the sky looked eerily unsettling.

"It's kind of chilly," she remarked, feeling unusually cold despite the fact it wasn't even winter yet. Liz walked around the room, hugging her shoulders.

Besides the bed, the room had an old desk and bookshelf. She couldn't find a path to the underground at a glance, but it could've been cleverly hidden. First, she tapped the floorboards here and there, but couldn't find any spots that seemed hollow. Then, she checked the bookcase, filled with dubious books: human anatomy diagrams, an illustrated guide to bones, manuals on organs... There was no door behind the case, however.

She opened up a cabinet, and a pungent chemical smell filled her nostrils. On closer inspection, she saw bottles containing suspicious herbs and various liquids with poisonous-looking colors.

"Human anatomy? Strange chemicals? Creepy," she murmured.

Could the master of this place be conducting human experiments? And given how thoroughly she'd been examined, was she going to be one of the subjects for said experiments? A shiver ran down her spine.

But there was no hidden staircase in the cupboard either. "I need to hurry. This can't be good." She was going to end up as the next experiment at this rate!

Toward the back of the room there appeared to be a kitchen separated from the main room by a wall. In its corner was what looked like a refrigerator

powered by a cold manastone. After a moment's hesitation, she looked inside, low-key expecting to find frozen, half-dismembered corpses within. Thankfully, however, there was nothing immediately recognizable as an eyeball or a limb—only neatly arranged, meticulously cut pieces of meat.

Liz decided not to think about what kind of meat this was.

She passed through the door and entered a room with a table set at the center. At a glance, it looked like a dining room, but given the kind of deviant that frequented this place, she couldn't take it at face value.

"Hee hee hee..."

"Who's there?!" Liz exclaimed, turning around at the sudden laughter to find...

Nobody. Nobody at all.

"Wh-What the..." Sweat formed on her back, her pulse quickening. Liz took deep breaths in an attempt to collect herself. Once she'd calmed down, she searched the room here and there, but didn't find the secret passage leading underground.

"Eh heh heh..."

"A-Again?!" Liz frantically looked around, and...

No one. No one was there, yet somehow she could hear that voice as though it were *right* next to her. As though she weren't the only one in the room.

Liz swallowed hard. "C-Could it be the voice of a victim of his experiments?"

"Ohh, it hurts! It huuurts!"

"Waugh! Eek!" Liz shrieked, trembling like a leaf in the wind. "I-I see what this room is for..."

So the mastermind conducted human experiments, dissected the bodies in the kitchen, then stored them in the refrigerator. As for the stored meat, well, no doubt it was eaten here—

"It huuurts! Don't eat meee!"

As though coming from the hells themselves, the voice vibrated in Liz's

eardrums. Instinctively, she broke into a run. “N-No, stop!”

“Waaait!” called the voice, chasing after her.

“Ahh! Ahhhhhh!” Liz dived into a space at the end of the corridor—the bathroom. It was moderately sized, perfect to wash corpses in. “Oh, I can’t take this anymore! What is this place?!”

“Remember meee...”

“Gah!” Liz yelped, breaking into another run. At the end of the corridor was what looked to be a bedroom, with two beds next to each other. But she couldn’t be sure of that. She couldn’t be sure of anything anymore! Where was she, and what was happening?! What a terrifying place! She’d underestimated the overlord of the slums! “Ugh...”

She crouched down then and there, trying to suppress her shakes. The enemy was more formidable than she’d thought. Maybe she should flee and try again another day.

“No, that won’t do.” They’d seen her face now, so she couldn’t rely on the same trick anymore. She sat down for a bit, taking several long breaths. Then, she lifted her head, and said, “Fine. Bring it. Do *not* underestimate me!”

Gritting her teeth, she slowly stood up. She was an intrepid member of the Black Guild. She’d manipulated countless men. She would not let something like this stop her! Years spent in the underground depths of the Guild, home to all manner of demons, hadn’t been for nothing!

As she rose to her feet, slapping her cheeks, she stopped trembling. Liz quickly checked the possibly-a-bedroom-but-who-knew-really space, the corridor leading to it, and the corpse-washing area, but found no entrance to the underground.

“What in the blazes?”

Could it be that there *was* no path? As time went on, she grew more and more impatient. Liz hurried back to the room with the beds and noticed a set of stairs right by the door.

“A second floor?”

Wait. Hadn't Gaion mentioned a captive woman beckoning from the second floor? Maybe there was a ladder leading directly to the underground level from there. And if the captive was there, maybe she'd know something.

If she was still alive, that is.

"All right," Liz murmured before slowly heading up the stairs.

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"Oh! Zenos!" Lily called out, running up to Zenos—on his way home from his rounds—on the side of the road.

"Lily? What's up?"

"I came to get you. Lynga brought in an unconscious lady, and I couldn't help her."

"Is it serious?"

"I'm not sure, but she won't wake up."

Zenos stopped for a moment, gazing up at the fading sun. "I have a bad feeling about this. Let's hurry."

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Back at the clinic, now enveloped in the colors of twilight, Liz cautiously climbed up the stairs.

"I'll find a clue this time for sure." There'd been no entrance to the underground on the first floor, so if there was anything to be found, it'd surely be on the second floor. The stairs seemed very old, creaking loudly with every step, as if no one had used them in years. "That doesn't make any sense, though..."

If that were the case, how would the woman Gaion had seen on the second floor have gotten there?

One step. Two steps. Three steps. For some reason, with every step she took, the air grew chillier and chillier, a freezing cold pressure seeming to push back against her body. "I said. Do. Not. Underestimate. Me," Liz muttered as she continued to forcefully lift her legs in defiance of the biting cold.

Finally, she reached the second floor.

“What the...?” Her words trailed off as she looked around at the pitch blackness in speechless confusion.

The second floor was a deep, pure black, and she couldn't see so much as an inch ahead. An overwhelming chill pierced her skin, making her teeth chatter. There was no sign of anyone. She couldn't sense a single living creature. There was only the freezing darkness and silence, so deep it felt like nothingness.

Liz whimpered and felt her breath quicken, feeling a primal revulsion. Overwhelming dread. The muggy stench of death, clinging to her body. A dark miasma swirling in the air, worse than even the depths of the Guild's underground abyss.

“No, really, what...?” she groaned. Liz was scared, her every instinct screaming at her to turn back *right now*. Her knees nearly buckled.

But she frantically straightened them, standing firm despite herself. In the Black Guild, reputation was everything. If she turned tail now and fled, she would lose everything. She knew that.

Her vision was still shrouded in darkness, but from what she could tell, she was in a corridor-like space. She advanced slowly, her hand tracing along the ice-cold wall. There seemed to be several rooms along the corridor.

“Is anyone there?” she asked hesitantly.

No one answered her, of course.

Carefully, she pushed open the door to the room in front of her, the creaking of the old wood ringing like a shriek in her ears. The inside was even darker, and the smell of burnt incense permeated the air. Her hand still on the wall, she walked in, caught on something, and nearly fell.

“Ow! What's this?” Liz felt the object, which seemed to be some sort of coarse staff.

Various other items seemed to be strewn haphazardly through the room. Maybe this was a storeroom? She proceeded with caution until she reached the back wall. Something was on it, like the frame of a picture. Upon further

inspection, it felt like a painting, but it was far too dark to tell what it depicted.

Liz hesitated quietly for a moment before deciding to take the painting with her. It might've been a portrait of the mastermind; knowing her enemy's face in advance could be advantageous. Since it was too dark to see anything, Liz left the room, heading toward the stairs with the painting in search of light.

"Wait, it's not a portrait?" Her vision was blurry from the sudden brightness, but she could still tell that the painting didn't seem to be of one person. Rather, there were multiple figures. It looked very old, with several parts faded, and it was unclear if one of them could be the mastermind. Her gaze drifted to the right edge of the painting, which showed a languid, beautiful woman in black.

"Hands off," echoed a chilling, unsettling voice from behind her.

"Huh?" Liz turned around and a white silhouette brushed past the edge of her vision. "Who's there?!" Was it the woman Gaion had spotted on the second floor?

She set down the painting and chased after the figure as it glided into a room at the end of the corridor. Liz stepped in moments later, but it was pitch-black inside. The figure had *just* gone in, yet there were no signs of anyone's presence.

"Come on! What's happening?!" she cried out as if psyching herself up against the icy darkness.

*Drip.*

"Huh?"

A sound. *Drip. Drip.*

A sense of foreboding rose within her as the sound echoed in the air. "N-No way," she stammered. She didn't want to look, but she *had* to see for herself. With trepidation, she hesitantly raised her gaze to the ceiling.

And there it was. In the everlasting darkness, an upside down face, pale as death, peeked out from the ceiling. From the corner of its mouth, a red liquid dripped down to the floor. *Drip. Drip.*

Suddenly, its eyes snapped open. "I...will...*never*...forgive...yooooooooou!"

“Eeeyaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!”

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Meanwhile, Lily and Zenos, who had met up on his way back, were both hurrying toward the clinic.

“So, what’s the condition of the patient Lynga brought in?” Zenos asked.

“She’s a young woman. I conducted a simple examination, just like you taught me. Her breathing and pulse seemed okay, and her pupil reflexes were fine too.”

“And she still won’t wake up?”

“No,” Lily murmured with an anxious nod.

Zenos patted the elf’s shoulder. “I’ll have a look at her, then. The clinic is just ahead.”

Finally, they arrived at their destination and pushed open the door.

“She’s right here,” Lily said as she walked in, with Zenos following after.

A purple-haired woman was lying on the bed in the examination room. Her long bangs covered her face, but the whites of her eyes were visible in between the strands of hair.

“Huh?” Lily tilted her head. “Was she rolling her eyes back like that before?”

Zenos rolled up his sleeves. He checked her pulse, her breathing, and cast Diagnosis.

“She’s...”

“What? Is it serious?” Lily asked worriedly.

Zenos shook his head and replied calmly, “No, she’s just fainted.”

\*\*\*

“Auuugh!”

After seemingly dreaming about a talking severed head, Liz jumped up from the bed. Breathing heavily, she looked around to see the room’s old-fashioned, yet calming, interior design. It was apparently nighttime, given the darkness



enveloping the view outside the window.

“Wait, what?” she mumbled, her memories hazy. She took a moment to catch her breath and organize her thoughts.

She remembered plotting to manipulate the ruler of the slums for control over the surface. And then, as she recalled, she’d pretended to be unconscious in order to infiltrate the man’s lair, at which point she’d been thoroughly examined by an elven torturer, who had then left her alone to fetch “the doctor.”

Then...what else? She couldn’t find the entrance to the underground, and... Trying to remember anything else gave her a throbbing headache.

“Oh! You’re awake!” said a voice coming from the kitchen.

Liz turned her head to see the young elf girl, peeking at her with a pleased expression. “Th-The torturer!” she yelped.

“Torturer?” the girl echoed in confusion.

“Er, um...”

The young elf called out to someone in the back, “Zenos! The unconscious lady’s awake!”

“Oh, is she?” came a reply. Shortly after, someone walked in from the room with a dining table.

“A man!!!” Liz exclaimed loudly.

“Huh?” the man replied.

“Uh, no, nothing.”

A man! A man had come! Finally, the man she’d been waiting for! At long last, a potential pawn!

Trying to contain her excitement, Liz decided it was prudent to survey the newcomer first. He was human. He had black hair and an aloof air about him. And he seemed strangely familiar.

Turning her gaze to the wall, Liz spotted a black cloak hanging there. *Huh? Wait a second.* A dark-haired man in a black cloak! That was Gaion’s exact

description of the mastermind! *Finally! My perseverance paid off!*

A surprise encounter with the mastermind himself! His face was kinder than she'd anticipated, which had momentarily thrown her off, but this *had* to be him. The only other person here was the torturer elf. The girl had to be capable as a close associate of the ruler, but this didn't mean Liz couldn't find an opening to get closer to the mastermind. All it'd take was a slight scratch on his skin and a drop of her blood and he wouldn't be able to resist her.

"How do you feel?" the mastermind, Zenos, asked as he stepped closer.

"U-Um, I'm fine." Just a little closer. If he came just a *little* closer, he'd be within reach. Her index fingernail grew sharper and extended slightly within her lightly closed fist.

But then the mastermind stopped and stared at Liz's face.

*Did he catch on that I'm planning to attack?* she wondered, stiffening.

"Hey, uh, just wondering, but..." the mastermind began, tilting his head several times back and forth as if to check something. "Are you Liz?"

"Huh?" Liz's jaw dropped open and she stared at him with wide eyes.

The name Zenos had felt familiar. And Gaion's description hadn't been the reason she'd recognized this man's features. No, she *knew* this man. He'd grown taller, yes, but his face was familiar to her, from back when they'd faced hardships together.

She covered her mouth with her hand, then tentatively asked, "Wait... Zenos? From the orphanage? *That* Zenos?"

## Chapter 4: My Childhood Friend, the Mastermind

Many people benefited from what happened in the orphanages of the slums—the children, however, weren't among them. They were seen as little more than laborers, fed minimal meals, and crammed into small rooms with iron-barred doors and walls stripped down to rough stone.

In one such cramped space, several children had been sleeping, curled up against one another. Surrounded by darkness and with no room to even stretch their limbs, the children were chilled to the bone with nothing more than the cold stone to sleep on. The sounds of a child's sobs echoed from the back.

Zenos, wrapped in a paper-thin blanket, turned to the sound. The crying came from Gina, a girl still far too small for the harsh environment of the orphanage.

"Is someone crying?" another child by the wall asked.

"It's Gina," Zenos replied.

"They're gonna get mad at us for making noise."

"I know that, Velitra. Are you okay, Gina?" he whispered, but Gina only carried on sobbing softly.

"Maybe she's cold. Here, use my blanket," a child further back suggested.

"Maybe," Zenos agreed, wrapping two blankets around Gina. "She can have mine too."

With the warmth from the extra blankets, Gina finally calmed down, and her breaths steadied as she fell asleep. But...

"Who was making noise?!"

One of the adult supervisors roughly yanked the metallic door open and slammed his club against the wall. The twisted object, used for nothing but domination and punishment, sent a dull sound echoing throughout the room. "Rule number fifteen of the Dalitz Institute! Private conversations are forbidden! Violators will be punished!"

In the face of the supervisor's menacing presence, the room fell completely silent.

"Who was talking?! Give me names!"

"Um, there must be some sort of mistake, instructor," said a girl with purple hair, timidly, as she stood up. The children were expected to address the adults at the orphanage as "instructors."

"Liz, yeah? You're the leader of these brats?" the instructor replied. "What's this 'mistake,' huh?"

"They were just talking in their sleep."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. When we're tired, we tend to talk in our sleep more often. But that's only because of how hard we work during the day."

The instructor flipped through a stack of papers and snorted in disdain. "I guess this group's work isn't bad."

"And we'll do even better tomorrow."

"Be more mindful of sleep talking in the future." With that completely unreasonable warning, the instructor left the room.

Once the adult was gone, Zenos whispered quietly to the purple-haired girl, "Thanks, Liz." He appreciated that Liz, their leader, was always covering for them.

"No, no. As her older sister, I should be the one taking care of Gina, but I was worried that talking to her would get us all in trouble. Thank *you*, Zenos, and Velitra too."

Her gentle voice was so soothing.

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And today, lying on the bed at the clinic, was that same purple-haired girl. Well, more woman than girl now.

"Zenos," she said, her eyes wide open in surprise. "You're really that same Zenos?"

“Yeah. And you have a different air about you now, so I wasn’t sure I had the right person, but you’re definitely that same Liz, huh?” Zenos replied happily. The Liz he remembered had a more demure, gentle aura; now there was a certain allure about her.

His old acquaintance, frozen, opened her mouth with a puzzled look. “*You’re the mastermind?*”

“Mastermind? What do you mean?”

“Oh, um, nothing,” she replied, somewhat perplexed, before shaking her head. “I mean, he does operate from the shadows, so of course he wouldn’t just admit to it. But...that little boy, an evil overlord, womanizer, and deviant experimenting on humans...”

*Aaand now she’s babbling nonsense.* Well, she *had* experienced a shock powerful enough that she’d fainted, so some confusion was to be expected. Zenos gazed at her familiar features and said, “So, Liz, I hear you collapsed on the roadside in the ruined city? What happened?”

“Um, so, about that...” she murmured hesitantly.

The healer smiled gently at her. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. For now, you seem healthy, so you should be able to go home without any issue.”

Liz looked even more surprised at that. “What? You finally have me in your grasp, and you’re letting me go?”

“Huh?”

“No, don’t tell me... I failed?”

“Failed...what?” Zenos asked. None of what Liz was saying made any sense. Maybe her mind was still hazy because she’d just woken up? “You know, maybe sending you home alone is a bad idea. I’ll escort you, just in case. Where do you live?”

Liz was silent for a moment, bringing a hand to her chin pensively. Eventually, she hung her head and replied, “I’m sorry. I don’t remember.”

“You don’t remember?”

“No. It’s like there’s a gap in my memory.”

“But you remember me.”

“Um, I remember bits and pieces of the distant past...”

“Some sort of transient memory disorder, maybe,” he mused. His Diagnosis spell hadn’t indicated any apparent brain damage, but it was a fact that such symptoms could emerge from psychological shock.

Liz’s eyes grew dewy, and she clasped her hands together. “I’m so nervous about all this. Please, Zenos, if you don’t terribly mind, can I stay here until I regain my memories?”

“Huh?” Lily said in surprise as she walked in carrying a tray with tea.

A troubled Zenos crossed his arms and muttered, “Well, if you can’t even remember where you live, you can’t exactly go home...”

“Please, Zenos!” Liz pleaded, glancing up at him. “Just until I’m better!”

A quick peek at Lily beside her showed the young elf fighting back tears. “I-I think it’s a good idea,” Lily said. “W-We can’t just not help someone in need.”

“Hee hee hee... What an exemplary young woman,” came a sneaky whisper and a muffled chuckle from the second floor.

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The night in the ruined city was quiet. A sort of resigned silence hung in the air, different from the malice coiling in the abyss of the underground.

In a room within the now dark clinic, Liz slowly rose from the bed. “Who am I? Where is this?” she whispered, then gave an amused chuckle. “Just kidding. I remember, of course.”

The young woman, affiliated with the Black Guild, had infiltrated the mastermind’s lair by pretending to have collapsed on the roadside. And...she remembered little of what had happened after that, for some reason, but everything else was very clear. Her claim of memory loss was just a ruse so that she could stay here.

*But still, she thought to herself. I can’t believe that boy from the orphanage is*

*now the overlord of the slums.* True, he'd always had an elusive, unfathomable air about him, but a desire for control like this seemed like such a far cry from the image she'd had of him. It was, frankly, shocking. *People change, I suppose,* she concluded. Liz herself had changed; she was nothing like she'd been back then. *Anyway, for now I should focus on my next move.*

Shifting her focus, Liz began to survey her surroundings. She lay in a room just by the entrance to the building. The mastermind Zenos and his elven torturer had gone to the bedroom in the back, so this was the perfect opportunity for her to act. Slowly, quietly, she lowered her feet from the bed.

And then she stopped. Yes, this was a great time to do something. But...do *what*, exactly? She'd already explored most of this weathered mansion-like building during the day, and hadn't found any suspicious passageways. Ultimately, she'd managed to secure her stay here, but no one had brought her to an underground space, nor had she encountered any of the numerous minions she'd been expecting. There remained an inexplicable sense of dissonance.

"Well, overthinking it won't help," she mused. Liz still had her one and only goal: manipulate Zenos and make him into her pawn. She could force him to answer whatever questions she had after that.

"Liz?" Zenos called out, peeking in through the door. "You awake?"

"Oh! Yes!" she replied, turning around, not letting her surprise at his sudden presence show. With a nod, she continued, "What is it, Zenos?"

"I mean, it's just... Lily's asleep, and I figured maybe we could talk for a bit."

"Ah, of course," she said, nodding with a smile and getting off the bed. She wasn't sure what he had in mind, but this was her chance.

Liz followed Zenos to the dining room. It was likely he'd conquered the slums by force; the demi-humans were a rough bunch and he'd managed to subdue them, meaning he was probably very capable. She decided to not attack him suddenly just yet, and instead observe the situation a while longer.

The pair sat down opposite one another. "So, what did you want to talk about, little Zenos?" Liz asked.

“‘Little,’ huh,” he echoed, scratching his cheek awkwardly. “I’m not a kid anymore, so it’s kinda embarrassing to be called that.”

“Huh? Oh, yes, of course, but to me you’re still that same little Zenos.”

“S-Seriously? I mean, sure, I guess...”

That had been a very harmonious exchange. Nothing about him screamed “villainous leader of the reprobates of the slums.” The feeling of dissonance only kept growing stronger. Or perhaps he was just *that* good at hiding his true personality?

Liz regained her composure and continued, “Anyway, what were you thinking?”

“Well, I was wondering if maybe we could reminisce about the old days?”

She looked at him in confusion.

“I mean, you have some sort of transient amnesia, right? Not my area of expertise, but I was thinking maybe stirring up old memories might help you remember something.”

“Oh! That. Right.” *So this is for my sake?* She’d thought maybe he’d attack her without warning, but apparently not? How odd.

Zenos continued nonchalantly from across the table. “So, how much *do* you remember?”

“Umm... I remember the orphanage was called the Dalitz Institute,” she replied, deciding to play along for now.

“Do you remember anything from after you left?”

“No.” Liz put on a distressed face, bringing a hand to her forehead.

“How much do you remember about the orphanage?”

“Well... A little? But some of it is fragmented,” she said, keeping her words deliberately vague.

“You remember Gina, right?”

“Y-Yes.”



“Well, that’s good. Gina is your little sister, after all. How is she, by the way?”

“She’s...” Liz trailed off for a moment.

Zenos leaned forward slightly. “She’s...?”

“Um, I’m not really sure.”

“I see. I figured you and Gina had stayed together after you left the orphanage, but you can’t remember that either, huh?”

“I can’t,” she replied quietly.

“Do you remember any other kids from our old group?”

“Um, there was you, and my sister Gina. Then there were Marcus, Emil, Lombard, Ashley, Kuja, and...Velitra.”

“Right, yeah. You’re missing a few, but you got most of the ones who were with us a long time.”

“R-Really? That’s good.”

After a moment of silence, Zenos asked gently, “Hey, Liz, you wouldn’t happen to know where Velitra is, would you?”

“Velitra was the one you were good friends with, right? I’m sorry. I don’t know.”

“Makes sense. You don’t even remember much about your own sister, so of course you wouldn’t know.” Zenos crossed his arms and hummed thoughtfully. “Guess it won’t be that simple. Let’s just leave it at that for tonight. Putting too much pressure on you won’t do any good either.”

“O-Okay.”

“How about we go on a walk tomorrow? Since you passed out in the ruined city, maybe you have a connection to this area. Walking around may help you remember something.”

“All right. Thank you.” Was he really thinking of her well-being? Sure, they’d known each other as children, but now she was nothing more than a tribute to him, right? “Say, why go out of your way for me?”

“Hmm? I mean, you took care of me way back when, right? If there’s anything

I can do for you, I will.”

Liz still wasn't sure whether or not he was plotting something, so she decided to subtly probe further. “By the way, what do you do here, Zenos?”

“Me? Uh...” Zenos hesitated for a moment before continuing, “Well, it's not something I can talk openly about.”

“Oh?” Liz leaned forward. “So it's something shady, you mean?”

Zenos's expression was subtly awkward. “I can't deny that, no.”

*So he is the mastermind, then?* The missing basement, the absence of guards, and his demeanor not having changed from what she'd remembered had all contributed to her sense of dissonance, but he was clearly acting suspicious now.

“Do you keep a lot of women around you?” she asked pointedly.

“Um, not in the way you'd think, but I can't deny there are a lot of weird women around me.”

“And you do human experiments, don't you?”

“You're not making any sense, but no? I mean, I examine people's bodies, but not for experiments or anything.”

*There it is! He's the mastermind, all right!* Their conversation had been very confusing, but it was clear he was hiding something. Liz kept her hand under the table and extended her index fingernail.

No. Not yet, she decided. Attacking him head-on without knowing what tricks he had up his sleeve was too risky. It was better to wait for a more guaranteed opportunity.

“Anyway, good night, Liz,” Zenos said as he stood up.

“Good night, Zenos,” Liz replied with a smile, smirking internally.

Yes. Good. The perfect time to strike would be once he fell asleep.

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In the dead of night, when not a soul was awake, Liz's eyes snapped open.

She'd pretended to sleep on the bed by the front door and waited for the perfect moment. It was time. After taking a few deep breaths, she cautiously got out of bed.

"All right. Here we go," she whispered to herself, ready to conclude her brief yet never-ending infiltration. Without a sound, she headed toward the bedroom at the end of the hallway.

Mastermind or no, he'd be defenseless if she attacked him in his sleep.

Liz paused in front of the bedroom door, quieting her breaths, scanning for any presences within. The quiet sounds of two people's steady breaths filled the air. "Now," she said, slowly and carefully opening the door. Her eyes, accustomed to the darkness, spotted two beds—the elf girl slept in the back bed, and Zenos in the one closest to the door.

She silently extended the nail of her index finger, still holding her breath as she approached Zenos's bed. His right hand was sticking out from under the covers, and all she needed was a tiny scratch.

"Do you need something from Zenos?" came a sudden voice.

Liz yelped awkwardly, startled. Cautiously, she shifted her gaze to the bed in the back, where the young elf girl lay propped on one elbow.

"What do you need at this hour, Liz?" the girl asked, expressionless, in a flat tone that only made her scarier.

"Oh, sorry, I was just... I was looking for the bathroom, and..."

"Ah! I see. The bathroom is on the opposite side of the hallway," the elven girl replied in a cheerful tone, seemingly relieved.

"Yes. Thank you," Liz said, backing away from the bedroom in a tactical retreat. *What a terrifying girl. How did she wake up just then?*

Liz chewed on her nail as she made her way to the bathroom down the hallway. She'd thought she'd been sufficiently sneaky, but maybe they were more guarded than she'd anticipated.

*Well, no matter.* Even his elven attendant would have to sleep at some point. All she had to do was be steadfast and wait until then.

And she did. She waited very steadfastly. Liz was a woman willing to wait as long as it took for the sake of her plans, after all. Then, just as dawn began to break, Liz finally crawled her way back to the bedroom.

“Why does this have to be so difficult?” she muttered quietly, cursing under her breath as she opened the door without making a sound. *This* time she made *sure* the two were asleep before approaching silently, and once again extending her fingertip toward Zenos’s right hand.

“What do you want with Zenos...?” the elf girl asked *again*.

Liz froze in place.

But the girl only mumbled in response—she’d been sleep talking.

*Don’t scare me like that*, Liz grumbled inwardly, breathing a sigh of relief. She touched her fingernail to the tip of Zenos’s finger, and scratched it lightly. *Yes! Mission complete!*

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Amid the morning sun and the chirping of birds, Zenos opened his eyes.

He sat up and looked toward the bed next to his, where Lily was still sleeping. One long stretch later, he headed for the examination room. Liz was supposed to be sleeping on the bed there, but when he opened the door, he found her already sitting up.

“Good morning, Zenos,” she chirped.

“Oh, morning, Liz,” he replied. “You’re up early.”

“Well, not so much that. I barely slept.”

“Are you all right? Well, I suppose it’s strange to sleep well in an unfamiliar environment, especially since you’ve lost your memories.”

“Indeed. A lot happened, you see. But it’s okay now.” Liz confidently got off the bed and a fearless smirk spread across her features. “You’ll do as I say now, you see. With this, the slums will be ours.”

Zenos cocked his head in confusion.

Liz smugly pointed at the floor. “Kneel!”

Well.

About that.

Yeah.

After an awkward silence, Zenos tentatively spoke up. “Uhh...”

Liz’s eyes grew wide, and she pointed at the floor several more times. “Kneel! Kneel!”

“Liz?”

“Kneel! Kneel! Kneeeeeeeeeel!!!”

“I mean, if you *really* want me to, I can kneel. Just...why?”

“Huh? What?” Liz mumbled, astonished. “Can you show me your hand for a second?”

“My hand?” Zenos echoed, holding out an open palm. His finger was perfectly fine.

Liz’s eyes widened further. “Um, where’s the wound?”

“The wound? Liz, are you okay? You’ve been talking nonsense...”

Perplexed, Liz stared at Zenos’s fingertip. “Oh, no, I’m sorry. I’m still confused, I think. I had a dream that you’d injured your finger...”

“What a weird dream. Don’t worry, though. I have the habit of instinctively casting a protective spell on myself whenever I feel any sort of impact.”

“What?”

“I mean, this whole area is in ruins, right? Thieves might break in and attack me, so just in case...” And Lily slept further in than he did, so he needed to act as a shield for her too.

Liz was just frozen in place, staring.

“Anyway,” Zenos continued cheerily, “today we go on a walk, like I promised. Hopefully you regain your memories soon.”

“Y-Yeah, hopefully,” she said with a nod and a subtle twitch of her lips.

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“How about this area, Liz?” Zenos asked.

“I’m not sure,” she replied.

After breakfast, Zenos had taken Liz outside to walk around the ruined city. Memory loss wasn’t something that could be cured with healing magic, of course. Since Liz had been found unconscious in the area, the goal was to try and stimulate her memory by having her look around. She seemed unusually subdued, but that was to be expected given her amnesia.

“Losing your memory must be so hard,” Lily, who’d tagged along, said, worried. “Liz, you mistook the bedroom for the bathroom last night, right? Are your recent memories fuzzy too?”

“Y-Yes, they are,” Liz replied with a somewhat sour expression.

The trio continued to slowly tour the area once devastated by a plague. Ruined buildings covered in ivy, decaying homes, overgrown graveyards—they walked past all manner of things, but not a soul in sight. Underneath the gentle morning sunlight, the weathered scenery stood out even more, as though it’d been left behind by time.

“How about it, Liz?” Zenos asked. “Anything come to mind?”

“I’m sorry. I can’t remember...”

“I see.” Zenos crossed his arms and hummed. “Maybe we should expand the scope of our tour.”

“Expand the scope?” Liz echoed.

“You were found in the ruined city, but that doesn’t necessarily mean this place is related to what happened to you. We should check out the nearby areas too.”

Zenos led the way, followed by the elf Lily and his childhood friend Liz. As they walked past the crooked buildings in the quiet stillness, the landscape around them gradually began to shift. Though the homes were similarly dilapidated, a diverse mix of races walked to and fro, and the air slowly filled with the buzz and vibrancy of activity.

“Ah, so by ‘nearby areas,’ you meant the slums,” Liz remarked.

Zenos nodded in response. The ruined city, where his clinic was located, was right next to the slums. He'd figured maybe Liz had wandered into the ruins from the slums, and so taking her there had seemed like a sensible next step.

"Hey there, doctor!" said a lizardman.

"Hey!" Zenos replied with a smile. "Doing good?"

"Oh! Doctor Zenos!" said a werewolf child.

"I hope you haven't been running around as much. Try not to fall next time, yeah?" Zenos replied, playfully tapping the child's head.

"Hey, doctor, two beauties today, huh? Doing anything fun?" a young orc man asked.

"We're just taking a walk. A *walk*," Zenos replied, waving a hand lightly.

The slums were bustling with people coming and going, mostly demi-humans, and voices from all over rose in greeting. Liz observed silently for a while as they stopped to chat every so often, then spoke up with a puzzled look. "Hey, Zenos?"

"Yes?"

"You seem very popular around here."

"Well, I know quite a few faces around these parts."

"People don't seem scared of you at all."

"Why would they be scared?"

"I mean, aren't you ruling over them through fear?"

"I'm doing what, now?"

Ever since their reunion, Liz had been saying things Zenos couldn't wrap his head around. Now she was pressing her forehead, blabbering things like, "What the heck? This is so weird."

They left the main street and took a turn into a mazelike network of narrow alleys. Perhaps sensing Liz's distress, Lily tried to change the subject. "So, like, the orphanage where you two grew up was a pretty rough place, right?"

Zenos and Liz both nodded. "Yeah, it was pretty bad," Zenos confirmed.

"It made jail look good in comparison," Liz added.

"Yeah. At least the detention center in the city district feeds people. We had to fend for ourselves."

Liz chuckled. "We were so hungry we even experimented to find out which bugs were edible, remember?"

"The more grotesque ones often tasted surprisingly good. Winters sucked, since there weren't as many bugs around to catch..."

"But hey, at least we managed to get water by melting snow."

As the conversation between the other two grew animated, Lily lowered her head awkwardly. "Um, I'm sorry for dredging up weird memories."

"Dalitz, the director, was a real piece of work," Zenos mused.

The orphanage's director had been a slender man with a perpetually pallid face. His aura had made him look like death itself, and not only the children but the instructors, too, would tense up at the sight of him.

"By the way, Liz, how's your memory?"

Liz stroked her chin with her fingertips pensively. "Right, that..."

Before she could say anything, however, a group of small children came running across the street, and one of them, too distracted by the excitement, stumbled and fell spectacularly. Clutching a bloodied knee, the child suddenly burst into tears, leaving the others unsure of what to do as they looked on.

"Zenos?" Lily called out.

"I guess running around like that is perfectly fine for a kid," Zenos mused. He and Lily approached the child, and he said, "Come on now. You just took a little fall. No need to cry."

"But it hurts!" the child protested.

With a shrug, Zenos crouched down and lightly touched the child's knee. "There you go. All fixed. Be careful next time, all right?"

"Huh? It...doesn't hurt anymore," the child said, head tilting in confusion. The



grazed knee had healed as though nothing had happened. With an excited, “Thanks, mister!” the child ran off with the others.

Liz, who’d been standing behind the healer, spoke up with a quiver in her voice and an expression of utter astonishment. “Um, Zenos? What was that?”

Zenos turned around, scratching his cheek. “Right, I never mentioned it. I actually work as a healer.”

“Huh?” Liz gaped at him, visibly shocked. “A healer? What do you mean?”

“A healer. Who heals people.”

“You’re not their leader?”

“Leader? What are you talking about?”

At a loss for words, Liz opened and closed her mouth several times before finally managing, “B-But you said you were doing something shady.”

“Well, it’s technically under-the-table work, since I can’t get a license, what with being from the slums and all.”

Finally, realization hit Liz like a sack of bricks, and her eyes widened. “S-So that’s why you operate in the ruined city?”

“Yeah. Less conspicuous that way.”

“And all those medical books and drugs were because of that!”

“Yep. So you saw them?”

Liz stood there in astonished silence.

“Liz?” Zenos asked, peering into her face. She was teary-eyed, not unlike the child from before.

“N-No wayyy...”

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This was the worst. The absolute worst.

Zenos was no mastermind. He was just a healer. *That* was why the demi-humans adored him. No one had told her this! Well, more like she’d reached the wrong conclusion all on her own, but that was neither here nor there.

*What a farce!* she grumbled to herself.

“Liz, is something wrong?” Zenos asked, concerned.

Lily seemed worried too. “Are you okay, Liz?”

“O-Oh!” Liz exclaimed, shaking her head vigorously. “I’m fine!”

What had she worked so hard for?! She *had* felt like something was off, but knowing her efforts had been utterly pointless was almost enough to bring her to her knees. She’d thrown herself into what she’d thought was the lion’s den with a do-or-die attitude, dealt with a plethora of strange women, and even sacrificed her beauty sleep, pulling an all-nighter! And for what?! The man she’d been toiling so hard to ensnare was just an ordinary healer!

“Did you remember something unpleasant?” Zenos ventured, still concerned. “Maybe I jumped the gun a bit by bringing you here. Sorry about that.”

“O-Oh, no, don’t worry about it, Zenos. I’m grateful,” she said with a smile, despite sobbing internally.

Liz had attempted to injure Zenos in his sleep, but some sort of protective magic had kept him from harm. Then she’d joined him on this morning stroll, hoping to find an opening to try again, but if he wasn’t an overlord, then there was no point. In fact, the existence of a mastermind figure at all was now uncertain. The very premise of her strategy to control the slums was falling apart around her, making her feel a little dizzy.

*Wait. No, wait a second,* she thought, lifting her head. “Hey, Zenos, you can use protective magic, right?”

“Yeah, I can,” he confirmed.

“But you said you’re a healer? How does that work?”

“Hmm? Oh, I can use protective *and* healing magic.”

“Really? You can do that?”

“Yeah. Someone taught me once that both types of magic work by enhancing bodily functions, so...”

“Hmm...” It was true that during the attack at the festival, Gaion had thrown a

Bomb manastone, and Zenos had caught it with his bare hands. So his focus had to be on protective spells, with healing spells being something he used on the side.

“Anyway, shall we head back for now, Liz?”

“Um... I think I’d like to stay here a bit longer and see what else I can remember. You two go on ahead without me.”

“Oh? And are you gonna be okay on your own?”

“Yes, I’ll be fine. I just want to be alone with my thoughts for a bit.”

“All right. Just don’t overdo it, yeah?” With that, Zenos and the elf girl disappeared down the street.

Liz stood there for a moment as though fully drained of her strength. With the situation being what it was, there was no point in sticking with Zenos anymore. She needed to rethink everything, including her own course of action. “I need results,” she muttered, biting her nail.

“Lady Liz?” came a voice from behind one of the crumbling walls lining both sides of the street. Peeking through a crack was Gaion, her lackey.

Liz looked around before stepping behind the wall too. “Were you following us?”

“Y-Yeah. Just to check on the situation...”

“And what happened to your face?” she asked, looking over Gaion, whose face and body were covered in bruises.

“U-Uh, I kinda took a beating from the top?”

Liz fell silent.

Gaion opened his mouth to speak, a somewhat frightened look on his face. His lips were split in several places. “Lady Liz, the top’s getting antsy, asking when we’ll have control of the slums.”

“Well, I can’t do much about that,” Liz lamented. Her plan had been to proceed as quickly and cautiously as possible, but... “Besides, he’s not actually their ruler.”

“Huh? He isn’t?”

“You were following us, weren’t you? Didn’t you hear?”

“Oh, uh, no, your voices were too quiet, so I didn’t catch any of that.”

“Then what’s the point of tailing someone?! Do better!”

“I-I’m sorry!”

“Anyway, given the circumstances, I can’t easily just—”

“Lady Liz,” Gaion cut in. “It’s an order from the top. It’s not gonna change.”

Liz fell silent again. Gaion was right. Excuses wouldn’t work; she knew that. Still, the reminder in the form of her lackey’s wounded figure sent a cold chill of realization down her spine. The Black Guild didn’t forgive; merely saying she’d made a mistake wouldn’t cut it.

*Just what do I do now?*

As Liz agonized over this, a loud shout echoed from further down the street. “Someone stabbed him!”

“We have a slasher!”

Liz cast a glare at Gaion. “What did you do?”

“W-Wasn’t me! But, maybe...”

Leaving her lackey behind, Liz took off running toward the commotion. Demi-humans were gathered in a circle around a lizardman lying on his back, clutching his side.

“Hey! You okay?!” someone asked.

“Where’d the attacker go?”

“I-I dunno!”

“Sounds like someone stabbed him from behind outta nowhere.”

Amid the chaotic scene, Liz noticed a small scrap of paper next to the fallen lizardman. She picked it up, and saw a few lines drawn on it that looked almost like a childish scrawl—a code for Black Guild members meaning, “Hurry up.” A message from the top, telling her to get things done quickly, even if it meant

using force. This was how the Black Guild operated. A chilling shudder coursed through her.

Soon after, the crowd parted to the sides. From behind everyone emerged a man in a pitch-black cloak and a young elven girl.

“Where’s the victim?” the man asked.

“Over here, Dr. Zenos,” someone replied. The crowd gathered around the healer.

Liz pocketed the scrap of paper. “Zenos?”

“Huh?” Zenos said. “Liz, you’re here too?”

“Y-Yes, I heard a commotion.”

Zenos knelt behind the injured lizardman. The victim was pale, with blood pouring from his flank, suggesting a major artery had been pierced. Liz had seen enough death during her time with the Black Guild to know this man was beyond saving.

But, well...

“Man, how lucky is it that the doctor was passing through?”

“I know, right? Coulda been bad.”

Despite their comrade’s imminent death, the onlookers exuded an oddly relaxed atmosphere. Even the injured victim wore a somewhat unconcerned expression.

Without batting an eyelash, Zenos placed a hand on the victim’s flank. “Hmm. This is pretty deep. The attacker knew what they were doing,” he muttered, turning his head slightly. “I’ll commence treatment. Repairing the vascular walls and internal organs, rebuilding the peritoneum and muscle tissue, and closing up the skin.”

As he spoke, the hand over the wound glowed white, and a gentle wave of warmth enveloped the area. The shimmering light traced an arc in the air as it flowed into the wound with a dazzling flash.

Instinctively, Liz shielded her eyes, unsure of what was happening but

nevertheless sensing it was extraordinary. And, when the glittering iridescence faded, the lizardman's wound had completely healed. "What?" she mumbled.

"All right," Zenos said. "All good now. Just don't forget to pay me, yeah?"

"Of course! Thank you, doctor. I owe you one." The formerly injured man stood up as though nothing had happened.

"This can't be real," Liz murmured in astonishment. What she'd just witnessed beggared belief. A dark thrill, a mix of excitement and dread, came over her.

Zenos, the boy from the orphanage. Not the ruler of the slums, but a simple healer. And yet his power was *exceptional*. His healing abilities were simply unprecedented. Finally, she understood how the rough-and-tumble bunch of demi-humans had united.

*I... I'm not out of options just yet*, she mused. Indeed, getting this man under her control could still grant Liz her dearest wish. Suppressing her eagerness, Liz blended into the crowd and left the scene. She met up with Gaion, who'd been waiting around a corner, and said, "Tell the top to wait a little longer."

"Y-Yes, of course. Are you okay, Lady Liz?" he asked.

Liz nodded slowly. Her attempt to injure Zenos had failed due to his protective magic, and even if it'd worked, his healing abilities might've repaired any damage before she'd had the chance to infuse him with succubus blood. That meant this particular plan was no longer feasible.

But she had one other option. "I may not be able to hurt him, but I still have my womanly charms."

Using her blood was just generally the easier alternative. She still had a last resort—taking his chastity. Protective and healing magic wouldn't avail him then; she could directly infuse him with succubus magic and turn him into an obedient puppet.

Inferring that Liz had been mumbling about Zenos, a shocked Gaion said, "His...chastity? What do you see in that man?"

"And why do *you* care about that?" she asked.

"I-I mean, I don't..."

“You see, Gaion, I *must* achieve results here, no matter what.”

Zenos was surrounded by women, yes, but they were all weirdos. She was confident they were no match for her in terms of feminine allure. Until now, her primary goal had been to infiltrate the mastermind’s lair and get close enough to scratch him, but this called for a change of strategy.

Now, she would use every last one of her wiles to make Zenos hers.

Liz smiled, bringing her index finger to her lips. “Just you wait, little Zenos. I’ll make your heart beat just for me.”

## Chapter 5: Feminine War Tactics

*Year 304 of the Saint Fabilaus Calendar, July 14th, morning.*

Zenos had returned to the clinic after taking an allegedly amnesiac woman on a walk around the ruined city. “Still nothing?” he asked.

“I’m sorry,” replied the woman in question, Liz.

“Nah, I should be the one apologizing for pushing you.”

“No, thank you for trying. No point rushing things now, though, so I’ll take it one day at a time.”

“That random attack was scary,” Lily, an elf, said with a shudder. There had been an incident in the slums; a lizardman had been stabbed by an unknown assailant.

“I mean, yeah, it would be scary,” Zenos mused. “Things had been pretty uneventful up until recently...” He cast a glance at Liz.

She smiled beautifully at him, an innocent expression on her face. “What’s the matter, Zenos?”

“Oh, nothing. Don’t mind me,” he replied, shaking his head.

“Well, in that case, enough of the doom and gloom! Maybe I should do some cleaning.”

“What?” Lily said. “But that’s my job.”

“It’s okay,” replied Zenos’s childhood friend with a smile. “You’re all being really good to me. It’s only fair I reciprocate. Why don’t you sit down, Lily?” Liz pushed the elf by the shoulders onto a chair, semiforcibly making the girl sit down. Then she rolled up her sleeves, wrung out a cleaning rag, and began to deftly tidy up the place.

In just under an hour, the room was so clean it was almost unrecognizable.

“I think that about does it,” Liz said.



“Whoa, that’s impressive,” Zenos remarked in admiration.

“Wow...” Lily added, similarly awed.

Duster in hand, Liz moved toward the stairs. “I’ll do the second floor now.”

Zenos stopped her immediately. “Oh, no, leave the second floor as is.”

Tilting her head, Liz looked up the stairs. Her expression turned somewhat uneasy, and she muttered, “Right... I don’t know why, but I feel like it’d be a bad idea to go up there.”

*Maybe a traumatic memory flashed into her mind, Zenos mused.*

In the end, she didn’t clean the second floor. Zenos and Lily went out to stock up on food and medicine, leaving the freeloading woman behind. Though it might’ve sounded surprising that Liz hadn’t come with, she’d had a reason. She opened a cupboard and looked through Lily’s sewing tools—what she was doing wasn’t clear until later.

“Sir Zenos! I brought you some fish!” said the werewolf Lynga as she walked into the clinic with a basket full of fish.

“Oh, hello,” Liz said. “Zenos isn’t home right now.”

Lynga scoffed, somewhat surprised. “You’re the unconscious woman from yesterday. Awake now, I see.”

“Ah, you must be Lynga. I’m told you were the one who brought me here. I’m incredibly grateful. Thank you so much.”

“Hmph. And why are you still here? If you’re all better, then off with you. Chop-chop.”

“See, the shock made me lose my memories, and so Zenos has allowed me to stay with him until I recover.”

“What? Zenos invited you to live with him?” Lynga asked, her eyes wide as dinner plates.

“That’s right. We’ve known each other since we were little, and he seems worried about me.”

“What...?” Lynga muttered, biting her lip and clenching her fist. “Ugh... I *knew*

I shouldn't have helped."

Liz chuckled softly. "I'm grateful that you did."

Sparks flew between the pair, and not the good kind.

"Oh?" Liz approached the basket of fish Lynga had brought as though she'd noticed something odd. "Lynga, what is this?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Look, this fish here." Liz picked up a fish and pulled something out. "There's a needle in the gill." Indeed, she had a fine needle pinched between her fingers. Her tone grew a little more emphatic. "So, care to explain?"

Lynga's eyes widened. "I-I have no idea what that is. The fish is freshly caught, from this morning..."

"That's not what I mean," Liz insisted. "Someone could've gotten hurt. Then what?"

"N-No, I didn't mean to—"

"Actually, there was a needle in a fish we got before," Liz interjected, upping the pressure. "Lily almost got hurt, and Zenos was quite cross."

"What? Th-That's..." Lynga took a step back as if retreating. "Y-You've got this all wrong! I didn't do that! I wouldn't!"

With a small cry, Lynga turned tail and fled. Watching her retreating form, Liz chuckled quietly and whispered, "I figured someone would drop by with a gift, so I waited here. This happened yesterday too."

Liz placed the needle back in the sewing box on the shelf, a faint smile playing upon her lips.

"One down. A few more nuisances to go."

\*\*\*

Amid the pitch-black darkness of the second floor of the clinic, a wraith floated before a diary, her lips curled into a grin.

"Ah, so *that* was what the sewing tools were for. She volunteered to clean so that she could figure out where they were kept." Carmilla snickered. "Not bad,

newcomer. A clichéd method, but confusing when the opponent does not expect it.”

She placed a checkmark next to the name “Lynga” on the upper right corner of the page.

“Lynga has fallen back. This Liz is smoothly settling into the role of an imposing wife, taking full advantage of her position as the childhood friend. She may be fighting solo, but what a formidable fighter she is. Zenos’s gaggle of women is quite chaotic as far as feminine wiles are concerned, after all.” Tucking the pen behind her ear, she flipped through the diary. “Now, between the newly arrived old friend and the well-established harem, who shall be the one to win Zenos over? Hee hee hee... I *knew* this would be quality entertainment.”

In the darkness, Carmilla slowly crossed her arms.

*Let the battle commence!*

\*\*\*

*Year 304 of the Saint Fabilaus Calendar, July 14th, afternoon.*

That afternoon, the orc leader Loewe stopped by, accompanied by several of her men. Parts of the clinic’s pillars and outer walls were crumbling, and they’d come to help with repairs.

“You’re a lifesaver, Loewe,” Zenos said.

“Yeah! You guys are all so strong. It’s a huge help,” Lily agreed.

Loewe laughed heartily. “Building repairs are no big deal for us.” Under her guidance, several orcs were carrying lumber around the premises.

“Please, have some tea,” said the freeloader Liz as she walked out with a tray of the chilled beverage. “It’s been warm lately, so be careful not to get dehydrated.” With a cheerful smile on her lips, she acted just as a devoted wife might.

The orc leader took a cup and cast a pointed glance at Liz. “I was surprised to hear you and Zenos go way back.”

“We do, yes. Zenos has always been so kind to me,” the purple-haired woman

replied. "My name's Liz, by the way."

Loewe hummed. "He's kind to *me*," she replied with a cryptic expression.

Liz set down the tray and approached Zenos. "Let me help too," she said, picking up a hammer and nails from the ground and rolling up her sleeves. "I just need to hammer these into the wall, right?"

"Yeah, but are you sure you can do that, Liz?" Zenos asked.

"It's fine. They made me do all sorts of carpentry work back at the orphanage."

"Come to think of it, they did, didn't they?"

Liz positioned a nail against the wall and swung the hammer. Then, with a loud, "Ah!" she made a show of losing her balance, and fell backward onto Zenos.

The healer caught her and asked, "Are you all right, Liz?"

"Oh! I'm so sorry. It's been such a long time. I've gotten clumsy..."



Loewe grunted in annoyance.

“We’ll take care of the house, Liz. Don’t overdo it, all right?”

“R-Right, yes. I’m sorry. I’m so weak,” she said despondently with her brows furrowed, looking at Loewe. “This kind of work is best left for the strong. I wish I had muscles like Loewe’s...”

Loewe grunted even harder as she walked past Liz.

Liz whispered to the orc woman, “I think Zenos likes dainty women.”

With a loud groan, Loewe dropped the piece of timber she’d been hauling over her shoulder and fell to her knees.

“Hey! Loewe!” Zenos called out. “What happened?!”

Loewe let out a sharp breath. “Ugh. I too am weak. This timber is too much for me.”

“You were literally swinging it around just now.”

“A-A feeble maiden such as I can’t handle so much weight.”

“Like, *very literally* swinging it around.”

“I-I’m sorry, Zenos, I seem to be in bad shape today. Hey! You all! We’re leaving!” Loewe took her men and retreated.

“What the heck?” Zenos muttered, tilting his head in confusion.

Liz smirked to herself in the background.

\*\*\*

That evening, the third demi-human leader dropped by.

“Doc! You home?”

“Hey, Zophia. What’s up?” Zenos replied from his desk.

“I hear you took care of one of mine,” the lizardwoman explained. “I wanted to say thanks.” She’d brought fruit as a gift, as well as payment for his treatment services during the random attack incident.

“Did they ever catch the guy?”

“Well, apparently the victim got stabbed from behind and never saw who did it. For shame.” Zophia shrugged in disappointment, then turned to Liz, who had brought tea. “You’re the one Lynga found, right? Passed out on the street?”

“That’s right. My name’s Liz. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“I’ve heard about you, and how you knew the doc back when you were kids.”

“We did know each other, yes. I was very shocked to see him standing there when I woke up.”

“And you’ve lost your memory, and are staying here for now, right?”

“Yes, that’s correct,” Liz answered with a perfectly clear gaze.

Zophia glared at Liz for a moment, then sighed softly. “Well, all right. I’ll come by again soon, doc. Bit more often than usual too.”

“Yeah?” Zenos said.

“There’s just something nagging at me, see,” Zophia said as she stood, glancing sideways at Liz.

As soon as the lizardwoman stepped out of the clinic, someone called out to her from behind. “Um, Zophia?”

“What do you want?” she asked, turning as Liz closed the clinic’s door behind them.

Liz took a look around before lowering her voice and saying, “Something’s been bothering me about that stabbing incident.” Zophia listened quietly, and Liz continued, “I happened to be near the scene and spotted an orc and a werewolf quickly walking away from there.”

“What was that?”

“Of course, they could simply have been unrelated, but I figured I’d let you know just in case...”

“Hmm. You have a great memory for an amnesiac.”

“I remember things that happened after I woke up,” Liz insisted. “I’m being serious.”

Zophia was silent for a moment, then turned on her heel. “Hmph. I’ll keep it in

mind.”

Left behind, Liz watched Zophia’s retreating form. “You do that,” she whispered. “It’ll keep you busy.”

\*\*\*

“Huh,” Carmilla said from the second floor of the clinic, balancing her pen on her lips. “Not bad, childhood friend.”

In just one day, Liz had managed to keep the three demi-humans at bay. Truthfully, the wraith hadn’t thought Liz would go that far.

“Lynga and Loewe, I get, but Zophia is a sharp one. I thought she would be more trouble than that, but you were quite crafty with that little tale.”

Zenos had brokered a reconciliation between the demi-humans, but that was still recent history. No one knew when the conflict might rekindle, and thus by hinting that a werewolf and an orc may have been involved in the stabbing incident, she’d managed to keep Zophia’s hands tied. Now the lizardwoman was forced to closely monitor Lynga and Loewe’s movements, preventing them from coordinating. Liz had subtly sowed misinformation to great effect.

Carmilla hummed. “Now, how long shall I continue to simply watch? There is no entertainment in watching her take over the place.” She flipped through the diary, checking off Loewe and Zophia’s names. Looking at the remaining ones, she smirked. “Perhaps I can afford to wait a bit longer. The battle for heroine is reaching its climax, after all.”

The wraith chuckled giddily.

“Do not be fooled by how weak your next opponent seems, childhood friend. She is not to be underestimated.”

\*\*\*

*Year 304 of the Saint Fabilaus Calendar, July 14th, night.*

As darkness fell upon the clinic, Lily was preparing dinner in the kitchen when Liz walked in, feigning innocence. “What a wonderful smell. Do you always cook the meals, Lily?”

“Zenos cooks often too,” Lily explained. “But when he’s busy, I do it.”



“Shall I help?”

“Don’t worry about it. You’ve already helped with cleaning,” Lily replied awkwardly.

“Oh, it’s no trouble. I was no help at all with the repairs, so please, I’d like to at least do this much.”

Lily hesitated. “But...”

“Why don’t we each make two dishes, then?” Liz suggested with a gentle smile. “That way we can split the work. I feel bad, freeloading like this. Please, let me help.”

“O-Okay.”

“Thank you! Oh, but your apron is too small for me. Maybe I could borrow one of Zenos’s.” She casually took one of Zenos’s aprons from a shelf and wrapped it around herself. Standing at the kitchen counter, she casually hummed a tune as she deftly chopped vegetables, filleted fish, stir-fried meat, and even prepared a homemade sauce.

“W-Wow,” Lily murmured, her eyes wide with awe as she watched from beside Liz, holding a knife.

Grilled vegetables with cheese dressing, pie-crustured grilled wraps, creamy pasta loaded with shrimp, and one-horned-ox round steak. In no time at all, Liz had prepared four dishes, all beautifully plated.

“All done!” she exclaimed.

“Um, Liz?” Lily spoke up. “You said we’d each make two...”

“Oh! You’re right! I’m so sorry. I got carried away.” She stuck out her tongue in an oh-no-I’m-so-clumsy manner, then carried the plates to the dining room. “Well, it’s already done, so we may as well eat up. Zenos! Dinner’s ready!”

Zenos came out of the examination room and took in the sight of the dining table. “Whoa! What’s with the luxurious feast?”

“Aw, stop,” Liz said coyly. “I just used what we already had. Come, Lily, join us.”

Lily peeked out from the kitchen, looking apologetic. “Um, I haven’t finished making my first dish yet...”

“Ah, really? Oh, but it’d be such a waste to let it get cold. Maybe just eat for now?”

“O-Okay.” Lily took a seat at the dinner table and took a bite of her food. “It’s so good!”

“Really? I’m so glad,” Liz said, putting on a relieved expression before turning to Zenos. “By the way, Zenos, I still can’t remember anything from after the orphanage, but I’m starting to remember a lot of things from our time there.”

“Really? That’s heartening,” Zenos replied.

“We were always so hungry we used to sneak out to the mountains to pick berries, remember?”

“Yeah. That sure was...a time.”

“Remember the hidden cave with a spring? We used to go swimming there sometimes.”

“That spring was a lifesaver, since there was no bath in the orphanage.”

“Marcus almost drowned one time.”

“Oh yeah! He saw this unusual shellfish at the bottom of the spring and wanted to grab it to eat.”

“Yes! He got his leg caught in some seaweed, but still wouldn’t let the shellfish go.”

“And in the end it was just a plain old rock. Classic Marcus.”

“Absolutely.” Liz covered her mouth and giggled softly. “Velitra hated water and refused to go in.”

“Yeah, Velitra had an odd quirk or two, that’s for sure.”

Lily ate her meal in silence as the other two reminisced.

Eventually, as the night deepened and all the plates were empty, Lily picked up the dishes and headed to the kitchen, overhearing the rest of their conversation.

“That was delicious, Liz,” Zenos said. “Thanks.”

“It was nothing,” Liz replied. “If you’d like, I can cook every day.”

“Oh...” In the kitchen, Lily’s shoulders slumped. The dish she’d been making had grown completely cold, abandoned in a corner. Silently, she moved to tilt the plate over the trash can, but Zenos stopped her.

“Wait. Isn’t that the stew you always make?” he asked.

“Oh, um, yeah. I was in the middle of making it, but it’s already—”

“Don’t throw it away. That’d be a waste.”

“B-But it’s cold now.”

“So what if it is? Back at the orphanage, even stale bread was a feast.” Zenos took the plate from Lily and gave the stew a taste. “See? Delicious.”

“It’s not,” Lily protested. “Compared to what Liz made...”

“Liz’s cooking was surprisingly good, yeah. But your cooking tastes comforting. Maybe because I’m always eating it.”

“Zenos...”

“Hmm? Why do you look like you’re about to cry?”

“I-I’m not!” Lily wiped her face and smiled. “Next time, I’ll make you something warm, okay?”

Watching from behind the wall, Liz bit down on her thumbnail sharply. “Why? My plan was perfect...”



\*\*\*

A translucent woman further observed the developments from the second floor.

“I see,” she remarked. “First she breaks the girl’s spirit by showcasing how overwhelmingly superior her domestic skills are. Not stopping there, she goes on to reminisce about shared childhood memories that the girl cannot intrude upon, keeping her opponent out while emphasizing her bond with her target. A classic assertion-of-dominance strategy, masterfully executed.”

Carmilla was, admittedly, impressed.

“However, despite how short her time with Zenos has been, Lily’s bond with him is by no means weaker. After all, she has shared in both the hardships and joys of his life since the clinic’s inception. Securing the position of number one will not be quite so simple, dear childhood friend. Hee hee hee...”

The wraith’s lips curled up into a smile for a moment, and then her eyes narrowed.

“Nevertheless, this childhood friend’s tactics are crossing a line. I avoid interfering with the matters of the living on principle, but it might be appropriate to curse her to, say, have nightmares about a headless woman during her stay here.” After mumbling what sounded like a spell, Carmilla rubbed her shapely chin. “Still, I sense a certain desperation in her. Perhaps she is in some sort of pressing situation? Regardless, she does not seem to be the type to give up easily. What shall her trump card be, I wonder?”

And when that time came, what choice would the healer at the center of this circle of women make?

“Stay tuned...” echoed her creepy voice throughout the second floor.

\*\*\*

It had been overcast since morning, the gloomy sky extending overhead.

Lily, with her hands on her cheeks at the reception desk, looked out the window at the gray clouds and said, “Hey, Zenos. I wonder what’s up with Zophia and the others.”

Zenos looked up from an old medical journal he'd gotten from the black market. "What do you mean?"

"It's been a week since they last came to the clinic. This never happens..."

"That explains why things have been so quiet and peaceful."

"Really, Zenos? You're not worried?" the young elf asked anxiously.

"Hmm..." Zenos closed his medical journal. "They're a tough bunch. I don't think they need our concern."

"I suppose not..." Lily heaved a deep sigh. "Liz's memories aren't coming back either. Though she remembers a lot about the orphanage days."

Liz was out shopping currently.

Zenos absentmindedly gazed down at the journal on his consultation desk. "It's true. I wonder if Liz is..." He trailed off.

"Is what?" Lily asked.

"Oh, nothing. Don't mind me." Zenos stood up and gazed out the window next to Lily. "Might rain today."

\*\*\*

The heavy gray clouds extended over the slums too.

In the werewolves' hideout, Lynga was sitting with her knees clutched to her chest, staring blankly at the ceiling.

Her men, concerned, spoke up. "Hey boss, you've been down lately. What's wrong?"

Still hugging her knees, Lynga replied blankly, "I just don't feel like doing anything."

"Did something happen?"

"I didn't put any needles in."

"What are you talking about?"

"Nothing..." Lynga sighed heavily and rolled around on the floor.

"Hey, any of you know what's up with the boss?"

“No clue...”

“What’s gonna happen to the werewolves of the slums?”

As the men exchanged worried remarks, a werewolf came into the hideout, hurried to Lynga, and whispered something to her. Her ears, which had been flat up until that point, immediately perked up.

“Hmph. I see. So that’s what’s happening.”

\*\*\*

Meanwhile, at the orcs’ mountainous stronghold, Loewe was blankly staring into the void. Her cheeks were a little sunken, her features lacking vigor.

Her men surrounded her with looks of concern. “Um, mistress, aren’t you a bit out of sorts?”

Loewe sluggishly turned her gaze toward them. “I’m fine.”

“Something’s off, though. You haven’t eaten for a week. Not even your favorite rice balls.”

“I’m on a diet.”

“A diet, mistress?” The room buzzed with shock.

“And what’s the problem with that? I’m trying to be a dainty maiden here.”

“What?! Dainty? You, mistress? You may as well become someone else!”

Their honest words hit her like a sack of explosive manastones. “Damn, you guys pull no punches, huh? By the way, I’m *really* hangry.”

“S-Sorry!” As the henchmen retreated dejectedly, a different orc came in and told Loewe something.

A faint spark returned to her eyes. “I see. And I almost fell for it.”

\*\*\*

At the same time, in the lizardmen’s lair, Zophia sat cross-legged, deep in thought.

“Hey, sis. What’s going on?”

“Oh, Zonde. You’re back,” Zophia said, narrowing her eyes. She tapped her

arm with her index finger and slowly asked, “Say, Zonde. I’m curious about something.”

“What is it?”

“Do you trust our guys?”

“Of course I do, sis. We go way back.”

“What about the werewolves and the orcs?”

Zonde was silent for a moment, then replied, “If you’d asked me that a while back, I’d have said they were our enemies and nothing else, but things are different now. When I got seriously injured, Lynga and Loewe carried me over to the doc. I haven’t forgotten that.”

Zophia was silent for a moment.

“Why? What’s this about, sis?”

“Just thinking about something. But never you mind that,” she said, staring her brother in the eyes. “Did you find anything else about that little matter?”

“Oh, yeah, kinda.”

After hearing Zonde’s story, Zophia slowly stood up and grabbed her jacket. “I see how it is. I’m going out for a bit.”

“Where are you going?”

The lizardwoman turned back to her brother and said, “Where do you think? The doc’s place, obviously.”

\*\*\*

Meanwhile, in a back alley of the ruined city, Liz—still “out shopping”—conversed with her lackey Gaion, away from view.

“How are things up top?” she asked.

“They’re still saying we need to hurry up or they’ll act,” Gaion replied.

Liz scoffed bitterly. “And to think they had no interest in the surface until recently.”

“Are you all right, Lady Liz?” Gaion asked, concerned. “You don’t look so



good.”

“I’ve been having dreadful nightmares lately. I can’t get a good night’s sleep at all.”

For the past few days, she’d been tossing and turning in her sleep, haunted by dreams of a decapitated woman. Makeup could barely hide the dark circles under her eyes, and pressure from the top was the last thing she needed right now. If this kept up, she wouldn’t last much longer.

“How are things on your end?” Gaion asked.

“I managed to keep the demi-humans away, but that elf is proving to be more of a nuisance than anticipated.”

“S-So what now?”

“I thought about it, of course. I have a plan to bring him to my side.”

“Of course you would, Lady Liz!”

Looking up at the sky, which almost seemed on the verge of tears, Liz smiled softly. “I’m finishing this today. It’s the perfect weather for a confession, after all.”

Her infiltration mission was quietly proceeding to its final phase.

\*\*\*

Half an hour later, beneath the heavy ashen sky, a man and a woman walked the streets of the ruined city side by side.

“I’m sorry to drag you on a walk through the ruins all of a sudden, Zenos,” Liz said with an apologetic expression.

Lily had left on an errand, and Liz had seized the opportunity to ask Zenos to join her on a walk outside under the pretext that she might remember something.

“I don’t mind,” he assured her. “So, did anything come to mind?”

“Not yet, but... I have a feeling...” She narrowed her eyes, gazing upon the decaying buildings. A lukewarm breeze caressed her skin, and the air was damp with moisture. They passed by a deserted house, and a clattering noise echoed

from behind them. “Eek!” she yelped, clinging to Zenos.

“It’s just a cat, Liz.”

The cat meowed and ran off down the street. “Oh, goodness. That startled me,” Liz said, breathing a sigh of relief as she slowly pulled away from the healer. “By the way, Zenos, you’ve grown so much. You used to be so small...”

“I guess I have, yeah.”

Emotion tinged their otherwise casual conversation. They both knew many of the children at the orphanage had never had the chance to grow up.

“I used to hug you all the time,” Liz continued.

“You did?”

“I did. When you cried at night, for instance.”

“I didn’t cry at night.”

“Yes, you did! Sometimes.”

“I did not. I absolutely did *not*.”

“You’ve always been a stubborn one,” she said with a small, awkward smile, peering intently at Zenos.

After going around the ruins, the two made their way back, and the clinic once again came into view.

“So, did you remember anything, Liz?”

“I feel like I’m almost there. I just need something extra to trigger my memory,” she replied slowly, pressing her head with both hands. “Hey, Zenos, there’s one more place I’d like to visit. Could you come with me?”

“One more place?” he echoed. Zenos glanced up at the sky, then turned his gaze toward the clinic. “It looks like it’ll rain soon. Lily might worry if we’re home late.”

“Please, Zenos,” she pleaded earnestly. “If I miss this chance, I might not ever remember.”

The healer looked at her and nodded. “All right. Where did you want to go?”

Liz swallowed hard. “The Dalitz Institute, where our story began.”

\*\*\*

“Zenos sure is late,” Lily mumbled as she sat at the reception desk, gazing at the clock on the wall of the clinic.

She’d gone out shopping and come back to a note from Zenos saying he was going on a walk through the ruins with Liz.

Lily grumbled. Zenos’s amnesiac childhood acquaintance was so close to him. “I’m so worried,” she said with an anxious sigh. She wanted to go look for them, but didn’t want to risk missing each other. “They didn’t have an accident or anything, right, Carmilla?”

“That man would not die from a simple accident,” the wraith, sitting on the bed, replied matter-of-factly. Carmilla looked up at the cloudy sky, a slight wrinkle between her brows, and hummed. “Making a move today of all days... One step ahead of the rest of Zenos’s harem, I see.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, nothing. Just something that has been on my mind,” she murmured, seemingly conflicted. “It was amusing, so I let it play out, but perhaps it is time for me to get involved. But meddling too much with the affairs of the living goes against my principles...”

“Carmilla, you’re not making any sense.”

“Oh, I simply—”

The door opened abruptly then, interrupting her.

“Zenos?” Lily asked as she stood up. Instead of the healer, however, it was a werewolf with twitchy ears that she saw. “Oh, Lynga.”

“Is Sir Zenos home?” Lynga asked urgently. Sweat was beading on her forehead, indicating she’d run here.

“He’s out right now.”

Lynga grunted. “I see. What about that woman?”

“You mean Liz? She’s with him.”

“What?! That’s not good! Where did they go?”

“They’re walking around the ruins. Why?”

Lynga tried to leave in a hurry, but a large shadow blocked the door. “Is Zenos here?”

“Loewe too?” Lily said. “Wait, did you lose weight?”

The orc woman laughed. “How do I look? Dainty?”

“Um, I don’t know about that...”

“You don’t, huh...” Loewe replied despondently. “Anyway, where’s Zenos?”

“He’s out with Liz,” Lily replied.

“What?! That’s terrible!”

“Um, it is?”

Lynga and Loewe were both about to rush out when a third visitor burst in. “Doc!”

“Zophia?” Lily said. “What’s going on with everyone?”

“It doesn’t matter!” Lynga protested.

“Move, Zophia!” Loewe demanded. “I’m in a hurry here!”

“Lynga and Loewe?” Zophia asked. “Why are you both here? I have business with the doc.”

Carmilla laughed heartily at the sudden commotion. “Perfect timing. It seems I need not bother after all. Now, now, all of you. Calm down,” she said, floating up lightly and gazing down at everyone. “Now all of the players have gathered.”

\*\*\*

At Carmilla’s suggestion, the women decided to sort out the situation and all gathered around the clinic’s dinner table.

“This has all seemed odd to me,” Zophia began to explain quickly. “First the Black Guild attacks our night festival, despite our long-standing, implicit nonaggression pact.”

“The fact they broke it means something’s going on in the guild,” Lynga

chimed in. "I was worried, so I sent my guys out on patrol, and there was a minor incident where one of them got knocked out while alone."

"And right after that, suddenly Zenos's childhood friend showed up, claiming to have amnesia," Loewe added.

"The festival attack, our men being knocked unconscious, this mysterious woman," Zophia continued. "When strange things start happening one after another, that means someone could be pulling the strings from somewhere." She nodded. "So I had Zonde secretly look into that woman and the Black Guild."

"I had my men do the same," Lynga said.

"So you two did too," Loewe remarked. The three demi-humans looked at each other, their expressions grave.

Carmilla, with her arms crossed and her lips curled into a smile, said, "I see. So the Black Guild is not the only entity working behind the scenes. You three have been quiet this week because you were waiting for the results of your respective investigations."

A damp wind blew through the street outside, rattling the windows of the clinic. Zophia nodded slowly. "Acting rashly could've painted a target on our backs."

"That's why I just sat in my headquarters, twiddling my thumbs," Lynga said.

"It was the perfect opportunity to go on a diet," Loewe pointed out.

"So, what did you uncover?" Carmilla asked.

"Well, it's not possible to turn every stone there is on the Black Guild within a week, but we did find out that a certain faction that's been seeing a lot of activity lately counts a woman with purple hair among their members," Zophia said.

"We heard she's strangely good at manipulating men," Lynga chimed in.

"Rumor has it she has some sort of special power," Loewe added.

Carmilla chuckled. "I see, I see. She sounds difficult to deal with, indeed."

Lynga scoffed. “I suspected something was off because that woman said Sir Zenos didn’t like me anymore. I was shocked at the time, but then thinking about it, I concluded it had to be a lie. There’s no way Sir Zenos would grow to dislike me.”

“Confident, aren’t we?” Zophia asked.

Loewe nodded. “Yes, that woman also told me that Zenos likes wimpy, dainty women. But if you think about it, that has to be a lie too.”

“I mean, that *could* be true,” Zophia pointed out.

“Impossible. Zenos and I share a mutual affection. Therefore, he can’t have a preference for skinny women.”

“So why did you go on a diet, then?” the lizardwoman probed.

Loewe groaned. “I might’ve been a little self-conscious.”

Carmilla chuckled again. “How maidenly.”

Lynga and Loewe turned to Zophia. “And what did she tell *you*?”

After a brief silence, Zophia gave a small shrug. “Nothing all that impressive. Wouldn’t take a genius to figure out it was a lie.”

The wraith smirked at this, and next to her, Lily—who had been completely out of the loop—tilted her head. “Um, so, what does this all mean?”

“What it means,” Zophia replied, “is that this childhood friend is the woman from the Black Guild, with some ulterior motive for getting close to the doc.”

“What, really?” the elf asked.

“Considering their attack on the night festival, I think their faction within the guild wants to stick their noses into slums business, and that woman is part of their vanguard,” Lynga ventured.

“Indeed. Since Zenos is at the core of our peoples’ unity, taking him down would essentially leave the slums within their grasp,” Loewe agreed.

Lily’s expression shifted to confusion. “What? But then, what about the amnesia?”

“An obvious lie,” Zophia concluded. “She approached him with an ulterior

motive.”

“No way!” Lily exclaimed in shock. Her voice then lowered to a relieved murmur, “I see... That’s good...”

“What’s good about this?!” Zophia asked.

“This isn’t good at all!” Lynga said.

“That woman played us all like fiddles!” Loewe pointed out.

At the pointed remarks, Lily fumbled for an answer. “Y-Yes, but... I’ve just been so happy since meeting Zenos and all of you, and... I’d be so sad if I lost all my memories of everyone...”

After a moment of dumbfounded silence, the demi-humans looked at each other and burst into laughter.

“Ah, I see,” Zophia said.

“Lily’s too good for this world,” Lynga added.

“I have plenty of memories I’d rather forget, personally,” Loewe said.

“I-I’m sorry!” Lily stammered.

The others smiled at her, and Zophia continued, “Well, it’s fine. That’s one of your strong points.”

“You’re fine just the way you are, Lily,” Lynga assured her.

“I wouldn’t want to lose the memories I’ve made since meeting Zenos either,” Loewe said.

Standing up, Zophia cracked her knuckles. “Now then, shall we start our counteroffensive?”

Carmilla called out to the demi-humans and Lily as they began to head out. “Wait. Where are you going?”

“Hmm? To the ruined city. That’s where the doc and the woman are, no?”

“They might not be, not anymore,” Carmilla pointed out. The women looked at her, puzzled, and she continued, “My guess is that the stroll in the ruins was just an excuse to take Zenos outside. I imagine she would not want such a drab

stage for the final showdown. Setting the mood is important.”

“Setting the mood...” Zophia echoed.

“To win this war of feminine wiles, she would doubtless choose a location that is meaningful to both of them.”

“A meaningful location,” Lily repeated in a whisper, lifting her head. “The orphanage?”

The corners of Carmilla’s lips curled up and she nodded.

The demi-humans’ expressions hardened. “Lily, do you know where that is?” Zophia asked.

“Y-Yeah,” Lily replied. “I’ve heard about it before. It’s in the western mountains.”

“Then we’re heading there right away.”

Lily and the demi-humans dashed out as a light rain began to sprinkle down on them. Unperturbed by the drizzle, they raced toward the orphanage.

Carmilla, meanwhile, floated up to the second floor, looking out the window and chuckling. “The ladies’ war over Zenos is reaching its climax. Ah, the beauty of youth.”

She watched as their figures shrank in the distance, smiling faintly.

“Oh, bother. When was the last time I felt envious of the living...?”



## Chapter 6: The Confession

The lively pitter-patter of drops falling from the sky onto the nearby lush foliage filled the air as Zenos and Liz walked along the mountains towering over the outskirts of the western part of the slums.

“Been a long time since I last came here,” Zenos mused as he stepped onto the moss-covered stone stairs, each step rousing a certain feeling—not quite nostalgia—in him.

“I’m sorry to make you come all the way here,” Liz said.

“If it helps jog your memory, it’s worth it,” he replied, turning to her. “But Liz, the Dalitz Institute is already...”

“Yes, I remember that much. But I feel like going there may help me remember something.”

“That’s fine, then, I suppose.”

The building was located halfway up the mountains, deliberately away from prying eyes. Naturally, there was no form of entertainment nearby, and the tall trees only added to the feeling of solitude. In the dim daylight, the two proceeded along the mountain path in silence.

“Hey, look,” Zenos said as he crouched down to pick up something that looked like a reddish-black stone.

“Oh, a hagul nut,” Liz said. “How nostalgic.” They looked like rocks at a glance, but were actually the nuts of hagul trees.

“We used to pick these when we had free time.”

“Yes! We had to, back then.”

Hagul nuts tasted faintly sweet when kept in the mouth for a long while. The ever-hungry children had always carried some in their pockets.

Zenos bent forward and picked several of the nuts up. “Here, for you, Liz.”

“For me? I don’t really need—”

“Come on. These were lifesavers back then. Maybe they’ll help trigger some memories.”

“Th-Thank you,” Liz stammered, staring at the nuts in her hand for a moment before tucking them away.

The two moved further up until they stopped at a rusted gate. They paused for a spell, then started slowly moving forward once more, crossing the iron gate as it swayed forlornly in the wind. Soon, a somewhat open area came into view.

“We’re here, huh...” Liz murmured.

“Yeah, but—”

“Yes. I know.”

In the thin rain, the only traces that remained of the Dalitz Institute were a few pillars and something that barely passed for a roof, surrounded by scattered, blackened debris.

“Do you remember that day, Liz?” Zenos asked.

“I do,” Liz said. “There was a fire, and the place burned down.”

“And that was when we all separated.”

A single fire incident had been enough to bring down the orphanage which had once seemed like an eternal prison. He remembered the instructors desperately trying to put out the flames as screams echoed in the building. In the midst of all the chaos, the children had all run in different directions to avoid being caught. Now he didn’t know where those with whom they’d shared so many sorrows and joys had gone.

“I thought I’d seen you taking Gina with you through the smoke, so I assumed you two were still together,” Zenos remarked.

“Gina is—”

“Did you remember something?”

Liz brought a hand to her forehead, wincing. “It’s...vague. Still unclear.”

“I see. Well, we’re already here. Might as well take our time.”

“I appreciate it.” The pair moved underneath what remained of the roof, avoiding the rain. “By the way, Zenos, what did you think of me back then?”

“Hmm? What did I think? You were like a big sister to everyone.”

“Was I?”

“You were kind and reliable, and sometimes you got mad and that was scary, but I’m pretty sure everyone in our group liked you.”

“Did they?”

“I mean, yeah.” Zenos scratched his cheek. “I particularly remember that one time when the director’s safe was cleared out.”

“Oh! Yes, that happened, didn’t it?”

“Fingers got pointed at me, and the instructors almost had my hide.”

Even the adults of the orphanage had their own monster to fear: the orphanage’s director, Dalitz. The man was like an amalgamation of sadistic tendencies, and his presence had terrified not just the kids, but the adult instructors too. An accusation of messing with that man’s money was no simple matter. There had been talks of selling Zenos’s organs to pay him back, and it would’ve been no exaggeration to say the boy had prepared for the worst.

“But you stood up for me, Liz. I’m forever grateful for that.”

“Come to think of it, yes. Back then, I was still...” Liz’s words trailed off, drowned out by the sounds of the intensifying rain as raindrops began to bounce vigorously off the unkempt weeds. Liz took a deep breath, and suddenly reached out, looping her arm around Zenos’s.

“What’s wrong, Liz?” he asked, turning to face her.

She looked at him feverishly. “Hey, Zenos? Can we go to our secret base?”

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Pelted by the oblique raindrops, three demi-humans and an elf were sprinting through the streets, splashing through puddles as they raced to stop Liz’s scheme.

“Come on!” Zophia said. “Hurry up!”

“I’m already hurrying!” Lynga protested.

“But Lily’s falling behind,” Loewe pointed out.

Zophia looked over her shoulder to see Lily’s form had already shrunk significantly in the distance. The girl was running as best as she could, but seemed out of breath, and kept losing ground.

“I don’t think she can keep up,” Zophia remarked. “What do we do?”

“There’s only one thing we can do,” Lynga said.

“Agreed,” Loewe added. The three exchanged glances and stopped, then ran back to Lily. Loewe lifted the elf onto her shoulders. “I’ll carry you.”

“Huh? Oh, I’m sorry for the trouble, Loewe,” Lily said.

“I don’t mind. It’s a perfect opportunity to regain the muscle I lost from dieting.”

Lynga spoke up as she ran alongside the orc. “No one gets to bewitch Zenos and take over our slums!”

Zophia nodded, her gaze focusing on the mountains ahead, misted over from the rain. “I feel the same way. But remember, she’s with the Black Guild. Don’t let your guard down.”

The rain grew more intense, and thunder roared behind the dark clouds, harkening the climax of the women’s war.

“Is this the mountain, Lily?” Zophia asked.

“Yes, I’m pretty sure this is the one,” the elf confirmed as she and the demi-humans finally stepped onto the mountain on the outskirts of the slums.

“This place...” Lynga mused. “Was Sir Zenos in the Dalitz Institute?”

“You know about it, Lynga?” Loewe asked.

“The place had a bad reputation. I mean, not that there are any well-regarded orphanages in the slums, but...”

Moving like the wind, the group rushed up the moss-covered stone stairs as

the increasingly fierce rain drenched the mountainside.

“I wonder if the doc’s okay,” Zophia said.

“I want to say he is, but I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” Lynga chimed in.

“Supposedly, that woman has some sort of strange power to bewitch men,” Loewe pointed out.

“A strange power?” Lily echoed anxiously.

Zophia glanced up at the elf and said, “Maybe she’s a mutant.”

“A mutant?”

“I forget what the proper word for it is, but that’s what we call them. Very rarely, some people suddenly manifest the ability to use part of a monster’s power. Supposedly it’s caused by a bunch of factors, like predisposition, exposure to large amounts of mana, and other stuff.”

It was said that the demon lord’s army had been destroyed in the Great Human-Demon War three hundred years ago. However, remnants of the demon lord’s mana still drifted across the land, giving birth to demons and magical beasts.

“I had no idea,” Lily murmured.

“Mutants are rare and subject to persecution usually, so many hide their condition,” Lynga added. “Some may not even realize immediately that they’ve become one.”

“I hear there are more than a few of them in the Black Guild, though,” Loewe said.

“If she’s bewitching men,” Zophia mused, “maybe she’s using a succubus’s power.”

“What’s that?” Lily asked.

“A monster that appears in men’s dreams to seduce them. Depending on the type of mutant, the power and the way they wield it can vary, but...” Zophia paused, thinking for a moment, then continued, “What can be said for certain is that a man whose chastity is taken by one becomes their puppet.”

“What?!”

“Unacceptable,” Lynga said. “Sir Zenos’s chastity is mine for the taking.”

“Nonsense,” Loewe retorted. “I’ll be the one doing that.”

“Me too!” Lily exclaimed, blushing at her own statement, when a loud noise came from further up the path. “Huh?”

A massive log was rolling with great force toward them, spinning wildly.

“Eek! Oh no!” Lily yelped.

“I guess this won’t be simple after all,” Zophia said, licking her lips as she leaped over the log.

“Hmph!” With Lily still on her shoulders, Loewe deflected the log with one hand, sending it spinning across the gray sky until it vanished into the dense forest.

A laugh came from just ahead. “Ha ha! Not bad!” said a large, greenish-skinned man standing defiantly on the stone steps as other men began to emerge from between the trees.

Zophia narrowed her eyes at the large man. “You’re the guy from the attack on the festival. If you don’t want to get hurt, I suggest you step aside.”

The man laughed loudly. “You think I’d agree to that? Lady Liz told us to keep the rabble out. You lot! Get them!”

All the other men charged down the steps at once.

“Damn. We’ll have to fight back,” Zophia hissed.

“I don’t think I can hold back this time,” Lynga growled.

“Hold on tight, Lily,” Loewe said.

“O-Okay!” Lily replied.

The Black Guild’s forces clashed fiercely with the champions of the slums, the dull sounds of struck flesh and bone echoing through the air. Though the demi-humans had the upper hand in terms of physical ability, dodging the flurry of attacks and striking back with precision, the men kept getting back up no matter how many times they were hit. It was as though they felt neither pain

nor fear.

The pouring rain drained the demi-humans' body heat, gradually sapping their strength. "These guys..." Zophia said.

"I think they're being controlled," Lynga ventured.

"So these are that woman's puppets," Loewe concluded. "I shouldn't have bothered with that diet."

Catching their breath, the three demi-humans quickly exchanged glances. "Well, we know what we have to do," Zophia remarked.

"We have no choice," Lynga agreed. "Otherwise we'll all be stuck here."

"That settles it, then," Loewe said.

A puzzled Lily tilted her head. "Um, what are you all—" Before she could finish speaking, Loewe grabbed her by the scruff of her neck. "Huh? Huh?! What's happening?!" The orc woman swung her back in a wide motion, and Lily began to panic. "Huh?! Um, wait! L-Loeweeeeeeee—"

"We're counting on you, Lily!" With a mighty swing, Loewe launched the elf into the air.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Lily arced through the night sky, her small frame flying far above the heads of the men blocking the way. After several seconds and many panicked screams, she finally landed on her butt atop a distant pile of mulch next to the stone steps, bouncing off the soil multiple times before finally standing up in utter confusion. "Oof! Augh! Wah..."

The green man clicked his tongue. "You ain't going anywhere!" Before he could give chase, however, a log landed at his feet with a loud thud. He turned back and locked eyes with Loewe as she cracked her neck.

"What kind of idiot turns his back on us?" she asked.

"Tsk!"

"Y-You guys," Lily stammered as she watched the tense scene unfold, realizing with a gasp what her friends were doing: buying her time.

She couldn't afford to just stand there. A rusted metal gate stood before her, and the orphanage likely lay beyond it.





The rain blurred her vision, and Lily wiped her face with an arm repeatedly, running as fast as she could. She called out the name of the one who had rescued her from slave traders. The housemate who had started the clinic with her. The man who had told her she was family to him.

“Zenos!”

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Rain continued to pour, like tears falling from the gray sky. Lily’s heart pounded wildly, her lungs craving air, sending sharp pains shooting through her throat.

But she didn’t stop. She couldn’t.

While she ran, the Black Guild assassin, Liz, was closing in on Zenos. Pumping her arms with all her might, Lily dashed through the orphanage’s slightly open gate.

“Is this the orphanage where Zenos grew up?” she asked herself.

What stood before the breathless young elf, however, were the charred remains of a building. It had seemingly caught fire long ago, and now barely had the shape of the orphanage it once was.

“Wh-Where are they?” She couldn’t see Zenos anywhere. Not under the roof, the only part of the orphanage that could be considered intact. Not behind any of the sparse columns, with gaps between them reminiscent of missing teeth.

“Zenos! Where are you?!”

Her shout went unanswered, and her heart began to race for a different reason. Could it be that they had the wrong destination entirely?

Lily soon shook her head. “No, Carmilla said they’d be here. She must be right!”

That they’d been ambushed by those men was the best evidence of that. But then, where could they be? Lily thought back on the wraith’s words: *“To win this war of feminine wiles, she would doubtless choose a location that is meaningful to both of them.”*

“The secret base,” Lily murmured. At the dinner table, a while ago, Zenos and

Liz had talked about a secret base in the mountains. A special place. That had to be it. “But then...”

She looked around frantically. The pair had mentioned there being a spring near this secret base, but Lily saw nothing of the sort. Maybe it was a ways away from the orphanage, making it less likely to be found by the adults.

“What do I do? What do I do?!” she mumbled, clutching her head as she sank down.

Lily couldn’t give up. The others had bought her precious time—there *had* to be something she could still do. Convincing herself of this, she carefully surveyed her surroundings and found what seemed to be two sets of footprints tracking through the mud.

“Oh! This must be it!”

She sprang to her feet and followed the footprints, which led out the orphanage’s back gate deeper into the mountain. As she exited out the gate, however, the overgrown grass covered the mud, and the trail vanished. Lily groaned as she saw three faint paths, barely distinguishable as animal trails, branching off in different directions.

One of them had to lead to Zenos.

Lily stood there for a moment, listening to the rainfall as she slowly closed her eyes. “Zenos...”

Memories of the days since meeting the shadow healer surfaced in her mind: Zenos saving her the day she’d been shot by a slaver’s arrow. Lying about not being hungry so he could use what little coin he had to treat her to a meal. The two of them, covered in soot after cleaning up the dilapidated clinic. Him continuously healing the demi-humans during their coliseum match. How nervous they’d been when the royal guard Krishna came by. Their group trip to the hot springs. The stew they’d eaten at the Royal Institute’s dorms. Zenos telling her that her cold dish was delicious.

“And there’s so, so much more,” she murmured as the memories kept coming, one after another.

Maybe their time together couldn’t hold a candle to his childhood with Liz.

But Lily knew their memories were just as precious. They were. They *were*.

Finally, her eyes snapped open, and she leaped onto the middle path.

“Zenos is ahead. I know he is!”

\*\*\*

Meanwhile, Zenos and Liz were halfway up the mountain. Beyond the rough animal trail was a small spring, with a dimly lit cave beside it.

“Wow. Our secret base,” Zenos said in an emotional tone as they stepped inside. “This takes me way back.” His voice echoed off the walls, the sounds of the rain outside growing more distant. He gently brought a hand to the faint lines on the rocky surface, thinking back on how they’d all been so ravenous that they’d even drawn pictures of bread. “Our drawings are still here.”

Sometimes, their group had gathered here to avoid their daytime chores. They’d staved off hunger with nuts and berries, washed themselves in the cold spring, started fires with manastone fragments, and shared their woes and dreams. What was it that they’d all talked about, again?

Turning around, Zenos saw that Liz had taken off her jacket. “Um, Liz? Why are you undressing?”

“Hmm?” she replied, now down to a thin layer of clothing. “Oh, my clothes are soaked from the rain.”

“I mean, they are, but—”

“It’s fine. We used to play together naked in the spring as children.”

“Yeah, but we were *kids*,” he pointed out with his hands on his hips. “How’s your memory, by the way?”

“It’s still hazy, but I’m gradually recalling more.” After a moment’s silence, Liz looked straight at Zenos. “One thing I did remember is how special you are to me, Zenos.”

“Me?”

Liz tried to take a step forward and stumbled, falling over Zenos. “Ah!”

“Whoa!” Zenos exclaimed, now with a practically half-naked Liz on top of him.

“You okay, Liz?”

“Yes,” she murmured.

Zenos could feel her damp skin against him as a strangely sweet scent tickled his nostrils. Atop him, Liz gripped his shoulders.

“Hey, Zenos,” she cooed. “Won’t you be with me? Forever?”

\*\*\*

“He’s just ahead! I know he is...!”

Under the never-ending rain, Lily pushed her way through the vegetation, following along the unmarked path. Her feet were covered in mud, the multiple scrapes on her bare skin stinging painfully. But she didn’t care. She kept spurring her heavy legs, gripping branches, forcing her small frame to keep going, until she finally reached a somewhat open clearing.

“There it is!” Ahead of her was a spring, tinted green with algae, the raindrops tracing countless ripples along its surface. Next to it was a small cave.

Heaving, Lily staggered closer to the cave. Just as she was about to enter, however, a voice echoing from within stopped her.

“Hey, Zenos. Won’t you be with me? Forever?”

Lily hesitantly peeked in and saw a half-naked Liz lying atop Zenos. *Wah! Oh! Oh my!* Covering her mouth, she flinched away from the scene, her heart pounding like a hammer. *I need to hurry!*



Well, she knew she had to, at least, but her feet were frozen in place. If Liz really was trying to ensnare an unwilling Zenos, Lily had to put a stop to it.

*But then again, maybe Zenos—* Her mind swirled. Liz was beautiful, thoughtful, good at all sorts of things including housework. Not only that, Zenos and Liz had a strong bond, having grown up together in the harsh environment of the orphanage.

A bond Lily couldn't sever.

*Zenos is... He's...* Her legs trembled. She felt dizzy.

From within the cave, Liz continued, "Now that we've met again, Zenos, I can see how important you are to me. Stay with me, just like the old days—"

Zenos, who had been silently lying underneath her, interjected. "What are you saying? We're kind of already living together."

"That's not what I mean. I want to be with you, just the two of us, somewhere far from here." A sweet scent wafted forth as she spoke, her voice clear as a chime.

Zophia had said Liz could wield the power of a succubus, and whether due to that magic or something else, what appeared to be a powerful aphrodisiac filled the cave. Even Lily nearly succumbed to its powerful draw. Liz's voice, her actions, her breath, everything about her stimulated the senses, making even the elven girl feel as though her brain was drowning in a sea of pleasure.

Liz continued, "I think I could make you happy, Zenos." A sharp pain throbbed deep inside a part of her heart she'd long sealed away. "I can cook delicious meals for you, take care of everything around you, and do even more than that. Anything you desire, I can grant. So stay with me..."

Slowly, Liz's face inched toward Zenos's. Her allure was almost dazzling, and the cave was swirling with the scent of aged honey, the smell flowing out like thick liquid.

Lily needed to move *now*. She knew that, but her legs wouldn't move. *Wh- Why? But...*

As Lily continued to stand there, conflicted, she heard Zenos say, "I can't do

that, Liz.”

“Huh?” Lily blurted out as though waking from a dream as the rain continued to pelt her.

The cool outside air rushed into the cave, gradually neutralizing the pervasive scent. Liz’s puzzled voice echoed from within. “Why not?”

“Before I answer that,” Zenos replied, “there’s some sort of sweet smell in here making my head spin. Liz, are you using some sort of *really* nice perfume?”

“N-No, this is succub—”

“Huh?”

“N-Nothing.”

Still pinned down, Zenos furrowed his brow lightly. “Sorry. I almost lost consciousness for a second there, so I used a mind-enhancing spell to increase my sense of pain many times over and bit my tongue. It’s healed now, though.”

“You did *what*?” Liz asked, incredulous. “You should’ve just passed out!”

“What? I mean, it seemed like an important conversation. Wouldn’t be very nice if I went and fell asleep, would it?”

A stunned Liz watched in silence as Zenos slowly sat up.

“So, about us living together somewhere else... I’m really grateful to you, Liz. You gave *everyone* at the orphanage a place to belong, not just me. Even after all the crap I went through with my former adventuring party, I still had good memories, all thanks to you and my mentor.”

Liz suddenly leaned forward. “Th-Then you—”

“But after my party kicked me out, I met Lily, and we started the clinic. The plan was to just lead a quiet life, but, uh, a lot of stuff has happened since then.” Zenos’s calm, unconcerned tone blended in with the rainfall. “The one thing I can say for sure is that I’ve made that clinic into a place where I—no, a bunch of oddballs, me included—belong.”

“That’s... But...!”

In a somewhat gentle voice, Zenos continued. “It’s just like what you did for



all of us at the orphanage, Liz.” The young woman stopped talking, and Zenos’s tone turned serious. “I’ve gone through many meetings and partings. There might be more in the future. But for now, at least, I want to protect that ramshackle clinic—the place where we belong. So I can’t go with you.”

Choking up, Liz opened her mouth. “I... I’m...”

“Is something going on with you, Liz?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, it occurred to me that maybe your amnesia was just an excuse for something.”

Liz gasped in surprise and straightened up. “H-How did you—”

“So it was, then. I was a bit curious after that luxurious feast you cooked up.”

“Why would my cooking make you think that?”

“I mean, back at the orphanage, we didn’t really have the ingredients to make that kinda stuff. I figured maybe you’d learned to cook after you left. And if so, then it couldn’t be true that you’d lost all your memories after leaving, yeah?”

After a brief silence, Liz said hoarsely, “Why would I lie, though?”

“Well, I figured you had to have a good reason to do something like that. It didn’t strike me as a simple prank, so I wanted to see where you were going with it.”

Silence fell upon the cave, with only the sound of rainfall echoing around them.

*Wh-What happened?* Lily wondered as she quietly peered into the cave. She spotted Liz sitting down, looking deflated. Her slender shoulders began to tremble slightly, as though she were laughing. The laughter, sounding somewhat resigned, grew louder and stronger.

After a long while, Liz’s laughter trailed off and she sighed heavily. “So you knew all along.” Another sigh. “Well, that didn’t work out. I can’t injure you, I can’t seduce you, and I can’t deceive you. What can I even do, then? You’re formidable, aren’t you? Ah, what a joke.”

“Liz?”

“I’m going back, Zenos,” Liz said as she stood up.

“Hey, wait—”

Ignoring him, Liz came closer to the cave entrance. As soon as she stepped out, she seemed to notice Lily, as her eyes widened in surprise for a moment. But then, without a word, she stepped out into the rain.

“Um, Liz!” Lily blurted out.

Slowly, Liz turned around. “What? You saw everything, didn’t you? Why didn’t you try to stop me?”

“I was planning on it, but...” Lily paused for a moment, then continued, “You seemed like you were serious...”

Liz scoffed. “As if. I just figured I’d make use of an old acquaintance, that’s all.”

“But you’re crying.”

Narrowing her eyes slightly, Liz wiped at her cheeks. “It’s just the rain.” With that, she disappeared into the misty surroundings.

“I don’t get it,” Zenos said as he emerged from the cave. “What was that all about, Liz? And, uh, why are *you* here, Lily?”

Lily stared at the surprised healer. “We all came here for you.”

“For me?” he echoed, looking around in bewilderment. “You came all the way out here, in the rain?”

They’d just spoken this morning, yet it felt like it’d been such a long time since they’d last seen each other. But Zenos’s face, surprise aside, hadn’t changed at all. Not in the slightest.

Gazing at his expression as if to engrave it upon her heart, Lily slowly nodded. “Yeah. We came all the way out here, in the rain, for you.” Her body was drenched, but she felt her chest grow gradually warmer. Holding back the tears threatening to spill from her eyes, Lily reached out a hand, smiling brightly. “So let’s go home, Zenos. You’ll catch a cold out here.”

“I mean, you’re way more likely to catch a cold than I am...”

Zenos stared at Lily for a while, then smiled slightly and grasped her hand.

“Yeah. Let’s go back to the clinic. Let’s go home.”

## Chapter 7: Somewhere to Belong

The sky the next day was a refreshing blue, as though it hadn't rained at all the day before.

At the clinic's dining table, surrounded by the demi-humans, Zenos sat solemnly. "Liz is an assassin with the Black Guild...?"

Zophia, sitting across from him, nodded firmly. "There's no two ways about it. The attack on the festival, her sudden appearance, the random attacks—all these events are connected."

Wordlessly, Zenos crossed his arms. Liz had left the mountains saying she was going "back," but hadn't returned to the clinic. She hadn't shown up today either, and her whereabouts were unknown.

"Also, in our opinion, she's a succubus mutant," Lynga said.

"When we went looking for you, a bunch of mind-controlled men blocked our path. There's no doubt that that's what she is," Loewe concluded.

Frowning, Zenos muttered, "Liz is a mutant..." He recalled the sweet scent and the way his head had spun when Liz confessed to him in their secret base.

"Mutants" were humans who suddenly grew the ability to use the powers of a monster. There was no indication that Liz had been aware of this during their time together at the orphanage, but now that Zenos thought about it, the agitated adults would often grow softer when Liz attempted to defuse a tense situation. Maybe she'd been subconsciously using her power.

She must've become aware of her ability at some point after leaving the orphanage, and chosen to move underground and join the Black Guild.

"Doc, I think maybe her objective was to take over the slums by controlling you, because of how influential you are," Zophia said.

Zenos hummed thoughtfully in response.

"And I don't think that plan is thwarted just yet," she continued.

“What do you mean?”

Zophia leaned forward slightly. “See, between yesterday and today, several of our guys have gone missing.”

“Gone missing?”

“I think they’ve been taken hostage by people from the Black Guild,” Lynga ventured. “Despite our warnings that they shouldn’t be wandering off alone.”

“The random stabbing has the younger guys on edge,” Loewe explained. “They’ve probably started looking for the stabber on their own.”

Though the demi-human leaders spoke plainly, their expressions were clouded with concern for their men.

“My, but it sounds like the situation is about to take a turn for the dangerous,” Carmilla said as she sat at the edge of the table sipping tea. “I would have preferred it if this all had ended when the romcom battle was settled.”

“The hells is a ‘romcom battle’?” Zenos asked.

Carmilla chuckled. “Oh, ’tis a private matter. Do not mind me.”

Lynga clenched her fist. “I’m worried about my men, but we have our own hostage too, so the playing field is even.”

“Shh! Stupid!” Zophia admonished her. “You weren’t supposed to tell yet!”

“Oh! Crap!”

“What’s this about?” Zenos asked, puzzled.

Zophia replied apologetically, “Well, yesterday, after we were attacked on the mountain path, we knocked out and captured this big guy who looked like their leader. The fate of the slums is at stake here, so we wanted an ace up our sleeves too.”

Loewe nodded in agreement. “The puppets were small fry, but the bigger guy was pretty strong. I would’ve made short work of him if I hadn’t been on a diet, though.”

“Oh, but doc, don’t worry. We didn’t kill anyone,” Zophia said, waving her

hands as if to defend their actions.

Zenos sighed. “Did he say anything?”

“He hasn’t spilled a single bean, of course. Just threatening him a bit won’t do it; the guy wouldn’t crack that easily.”

“I could’ve made him talk if you’d let me,” Lynga protested.

“You’d go too far,” Zophia retorted. “The guy’s from the Black Guild. We knew he wouldn’t talk easily. If we can use him as a bargaining chip, that’s good enough.”

Lily looked at the healer anxiously while holding a tray. “Zenos...”

“Looks like a lot has happened behind the scenes while I wasn’t all there. Sorry, guys.”

The demi-humans shook their heads. “She was pretty crafty, so it makes sense,” Zophia said. “Just seems we need to get ready on our end too, doc.”

“I hear people from the Black Guild are only loosely associated, so factions act independently,” Lynga remarked.

“But since they lack centralized leadership, it’s hard to predict their actions,” Loewe pointed out.

“Complicated indeed,” Carmilla chimed in.

“Yeah,” Zenos murmured. “But... What I’m worried about is...” He trailed off, staring blankly into the void for a while before eventually unfolding his arms.

“Can I have a chat with this ‘big guy’ you mentioned?”

\*\*\*

In the far depths of the slums lay the underground sewers, its many twists and turns intertwined in a complex pattern like a den of tangled snakes.

“I’m disappointed, Liz.” A man’s voice, heavy and chilling, echoed from one of the sewers’ countless corners. “I waited because you asked me to wait until you had the ruler of the slums under your thrall, but you failed at that. Is this how you repay my generosity? Betrayal?”

Liz dropped to her knees before the darkness and lowered her head. “My

apologies.”

“And he’s not even a ruler, just an ordinary healer? What a joke.”

She said nothing to that.

“Now I may need to reconsider my stance on our little matter.”

Still facing the ground, Liz shuddered. “Please! Give me another chance! Just one more!”

The man scoffed. “Very well, then. I am simply *that* magnanimous when it comes to you, after all. You have one more opportunity to redeem yourself.”

“Th-Thank you!”

“But there won’t be a next time.”

“Yes, sir.”

In the darkness, the man crossed his legs as he fiddled with a knife, the blade flickering with light. “We currently have several of the slums’ demi-humans locked up in the dungeon. Use your power to get them under your control.”

“You’ve captured demi-humans? I thought you were waiting for me to make the leader my thrall—”

“Insurance, in case you failed,” he interjected. “I’m always ready for anything. That’s how I climbed up the ranks and became a Black Guild executive in only a few years.”

Liz remained silent, keeping her head bowed. After a few moments, she spoke up. “What do I do once I have them under my control?”

“That useless lackey of yours is currently being held by the demi-human leaders, correct?”

“Y-Yes.”

“Propose an exchange of hostages.”

“You’re helping Gaion?”

“Don’t be foolish,” he snapped. “I have no use for blundering trash.”

Liz pursed her lips for a moment, then asked, “So what’s the purpose of the

exchange?”

“It’s just a pretext to lure out the demi-human leaders. Before the exchange, you’ll make the demi-human hostages swallow Bomb manastones. Then you have them charge at their leaders.” It would take them all out in one fell swoop, he explained.

“That’s—” Liz struggled to get the words out. “B-But won’t that effectively prevent us from taking over the slums?”

“There’s no ruler to control, so our plan to take over by enthralling him is out the window either way. I considered causing mayhem by making the demi-humans attack one another, but that’d just be reverting to the status quo. However, if all three of the top dogs in the slums fall at the same time, it’ll bring about unprecedented chaos. We’ll take advantage of that.”

“But... The Black Guild has always maintained a nonaggression pact with the slums. Why change that now?”

“That’s not something *you* need to know,” the man replied dismissively as he stood up in the darkness. “But if this goes to plan, all the pieces will be in place. And I’ll consider the matter of your sister. Make sure this works.”

His face came into view in the torchlight, and Liz respectfully bowed her head. “Understood, Director Dalitz.”

The man, once the director of the orphanage and now a mysterious executive of the Black Guild, smirked.

\*\*\*

Near the lizardmen’s headquarters stood a sturdy building made of stone.

Originally a training ground, it had thick walls that could withstand significant impact without cracking. In one of the rooms within was a large man, bound, with his hands chained behind his back.

At Zophia’s beckoning, Zenos stepped inside the room.

“You...!” the man said, raising his head and glaring at the healer.

“Your name’s Gaion, right?” Zenos asked. “We last saw each other during the attack on the night festival.”



“Why are you here?” Gaion spat.

“Well, I wanted to talk to you about something,” Zenos said, approaching the man fearlessly. “We’ve received a proposal from the Black Guild for a hostage exchange.”

“A hostage exchange?” Gaion echoed, puzzled.

Zophia, standing next to Zenos, spoke up. “Looks like your guild faction took some of our guys hostage. We’ve decided to let you go once they’re safely back.”

“Hah! Ain’t that generous?”

“You don’t seem happy,” Zophia said.

“You’re underestimating the guild. If I go back there after getting myself captured, they’ll just get rid of me.”

“I see. Well, that sounds like a you problem.” Zophia’s gaze briefly shifted to Zenos.

The healer sat down in front of Gaion and began, “Besides that, though, I wanted to talk to you about Liz.”

“You think I’m gonna spill?”

“Is that a no?”

Gaion scoffed. “I ain’t giving any info to our enemies’ boss, whether or not the guild gets rid of me.”

Zenos scratched his cheek. “I’m neither a boss nor your enemy.”

“Huh?”

“Look, you guys have, like, all sorts of things going on. Enemies, masterminds, thralls, schemes, whatever. None of that matters one lick to me.”

“Then what the hells are you?!” Gaion demanded with a frown.

Zenos looked him straight in the eye. “Listen. I’m just a guy who knew Liz as a kid.”

\*\*\*

Meanwhile, in a dungeon somewhere in the underground sewers, several demi-humans sat with vacant expressions, their fingertips marred with scratches.

“Now swallow these,” Liz said, handing the men items resembling small stones.

The demi-humans, already under her thrall, did as instructed and swallowed them.

“Once you’re set free, you’re going straight to your bosses, and in your joy, you’ll hug them.”

Glassy-eyed, the demi-humans nodded in agreement.

“The impact of the embraces will detonate the Bomb manastones, killing all the leaders at once,” said a man behind Liz. “In the ensuing chaos, my men will strike, decimating the strength of the three major demi-human forces in one go.”

The man was the former orphanage director and current executive of the Black Guild, Dalitz. He was dressed in a black suit, making him look almost like a shadow.

He chuckled quietly. “And with these results, I’ll rise to an even higher position in the guild. Once that’s done, I can grant you your wish,” he told Liz. “And I can help with your sister too.”

“Yes, sir,” Liz murmured, facing the darkness before her.

Darkness.

Yes, what spread before her was an endless, deep darkness.

After the mysterious fire that had burned down the orphanage, Liz had taken her sister Gina and settled in an abandoned house. With little food, the young Gina had slowly begun to grow weaker. She’d always been a frail child, but her deterioration had been alarmingly severe.

A desperate Liz had chanced upon Director Dalitz on the street. Though he’d lost his orphanage and assets and appeared destitute, a cold ambition still lingered in his eyes. Though her first instinct had been to flee, Liz had been

quickly caught.

However, what Dalitz did was feed Liz and her sister, and get a healer to see to Gina's condition. The cause of it was unclear, but they'd been told there was something malign in the girl's chest, likely widespread and difficult to remove. While medicine was available, all it would do was delay the progression of her illness, and even that was far too expensive for the young girls to afford.

Dalitz was the one to suggest another way. "I have some influence in the underground guild," he explained. "I hear someone who recently became a top executive there can cure any illness."

A ray of hope illuminated Liz's path, but despair soon followed.

"These top executives rarely show their faces, though. Only other top executives can meet with them." Noticing the girl's dejection, he continued, "So use your power to help elevate me to a top executive."

"My power?" she echoed.

Dalitz scoffed. "So you're unaware of it."

He smiled coldly and explained to her that, during their time at the orphanage, when money had been stolen from his safe, a child from Liz's group had been suspected. As the leader, Liz had intervened to calm things down. The adults had immediately ceased their quarrel and stopped hounding the child.

Seeing that unfold, and remembering the multiple similar incidents before, Dalitz had begun to suspect Liz of being a succubus mutant. Properly harnessing that power could've not only compensated for his lost fortune, but also helped him amass even greater wealth and influence. He'd been secretly planning on doing so, but before he could act, the orphanage fire had sent the children scattering.

To build himself back up, Dalitz needed Liz's power at all costs. "I've been looking for you this whole time. I don't care about being an orphanage director anymore. I will rise to glory in the Black Guild." His narrow eyes smoldered darkly.

Liz had no choice. She moved into the darkness of the underground, refining her mutant abilities with a heavy heart. All for her sister.

After joining the guild, she was plagued by doubt, wondering if she was being deceived, and investigated whether there really was a powerful executive there who could cure any illness. And she discovered that there did, indeed, exist such an individual, though it was difficult to meet with him.

Thus, she had no choice but to act. Though her mutant powers were limited in that she could only control a certain number of people and for a certain period of time, Dalitz was cunning, and he used her strength to climb up the ranks in the Black Guild, becoming an executive in only a few years.

Now he was one step away from becoming a top executive and meeting with that mysterious healer. Dalitz had promised Liz to introduce her to the mystery figure and save her suffering sister, Gina.

“There’s no other way,” she whispered into the darkness.

\*\*\*

The sun was about to reach its zenith as it showered the slums with blinding rays of light. The demi-human hostages’ release was scheduled for noon.

Dalitz scoffed as he led the way back to the site where the orphanage had once stood, with Liz following behind him. “I didn’t think I’d ever come back here,” he said.

From this location, in the middle of a mountain, they’d have a vantage point from which to watch the slums. It was secluded, and difficult for outsiders to spot, making it the perfect place to look down upon ground level. Liz remembered Dalitz had once told her he’d had the orphanage built here for that exact reason. The place had been the playground of a man consumed by his desire for domination.

“What’s that?” Liz asked about the tubular object Dalitz held in his right hand.

“Do you remember that oddball in the guild that went by the moniker ‘Conductor’? That’s who I bought this from,” he said coldly, bringing one end of the cylinder to his eye. “I’ve ordered my men to storm the demi-humans’ headquarters as soon as the explosions happen.” A faint smirk played upon his lips. “Today, the slums plunge into chaos once more. And I will rise above it all, promoted to top executive.”

Liz silently stared at Dalitz's back.

Noon was just around the corner.

\*\*\*

In the main street of the slums Zophia, Lynga, Loewe, and their respective underlings had gathered. Gaion sat next to Zophia, bound in chains.

"Once we know our men are safe, you'll be free to go," Zophia told him.

Gaion only scoffed in response.

Moments later, the voice of one of Zophia's men rang out as the missing demi-humans emerged on the other side of the street. "Hey! Boss! We're back!"

They seemed weakened, which was to be expected, but despite the slight stagger in their step as they approached, they seemed to have suffered no major injuries.

"Looks like you're doing okay, all things considered," Zophia remarked. "Honestly, though. This is why I told you not to act on your own. You'd best be ready for an earful later."

At the lizardwoman's words, the men suddenly lifted their heads and started running forward.

"Huh. Lively bunch, aren't they?" she remarked.

The men broke into a full sprint before leaping at their leaders. "Boooooss!"

"Ack! Hey! What are you—"

"I think that's a little *too* much excitement," Lynga said.

"Hey! Calm down, people!" Loewe snapped.

The men clung to Zophia, Lynga, and Loewe as though overwhelmed with emotion. A couple of smart smacks to their heads quickly knocked them flat on their asses.

"Big men like you shouldn't be acting like this," Zophia said.

"I'm your boss!" Lynga exclaimed. "Don't just touch me like that!"

“Well, I get why they’d want to cling to me,” Loewe said. “I do cut an outstanding figure, after all.”

“What the hells are you going on about, Loewe?” Zophia asked, exasperated.

“S-Sorry,” one of the men hurriedly explained, clutching his head. “I was just so happy to see you, boss...”

Laughter erupted all around them.

\*\*\*

While the casual scene unfolded in the slums, Dalitz, from his viewpoint halfway up the mountain, raised his voice in frustration. “Why...? Why? Where’s the explosion?”

Pulling away from the magical telescope, he turned his gaze to Liz, his anger seeping through. “Liz! Did you forget to feed them the stones?!”

“You saw it with your own eyes, didn’t you, Director?” Liz replied, pulling an object from her pocket that looked like a dark red stone. “I made sure each of them swallowed one of these.”

Dalitz furrowed his thin brows. “What? This is...”

“It looks just like a manastone, doesn’t it? It’s called a hagul nut. You can find them all over the mountain. It was an important food source for us, back in the day. But you wouldn’t have known, would you? You had no interest in such things.”

“You little...” he muttered, his tone ice cold. “You tricked me.”

“I did.”

“I see. So you have a death wish, do you?” Dalitz hissed, pulling a sharp knife from his pocket. He swung it at Liz, but his motion was stopped short.

“Kneel.”

At Liz’s command, his knees buckled, and he collapsed to the ground. His eyes widened in astonishment as he lay prostrate. “Th-This is...”

“Director Dalitz. You’ve been making use of my powers this whole time, all while being cautious not to fall prey to them. Always keeping a distance from

me, always keeping your knife within reach. But today, when the success you were so certain of didn't come, you let your guard down."

Noticing a small wound on his left hand, Dalitz twisted his lips. "You attacked me while I wasn't looking? That's low."

"I did. Even if I can only control you for a few hours before the blood metabolizes. Even if you won't become a top executive, and won't be able to help Gina. And even knowing it'd be difficult for me to become a top executive myself."

Liz knew Dalitz's cunning was necessary for her to survive the Black Guild using her power; therefore, controlling him here wouldn't save Gina at all.

"And still you betray me," he spat.

"I can't keep doing your bidding. I feel bad for Gina, though, which is why I'll be sharing her fate."

The silence that befell the pair was soon broken by faint laughter from Dalitz's lips. "I thought I could still use you a bit longer," he said between laughs. "Worthless wretch."

"What?"

To Liz's shock, the man used his knife to sever his own left hand at the wrist. Bright red blood gushed out like a fountain, flesh swelling from the severed end. It squirmed and wriggled, reforming into the shape of a new hand.

Dalitz clenched and unclenched his fingers, then quickly stood up. "That purges your blood from my system. You can't control me anymore."

"Wh-What's the meaning of this?" Liz asked, taking a step back. A swift kick from Dalitz connected with her stomach, sending her to the ground with a groan.

"Heh heh. Let me tell you a little secret, Liz. When I was promoted to executive, I was granted a meeting with a top executive."

"What?!" But...everyone said only top executives could meet with other top executives.

"It was from the other side of a partition. I was given words of

encouragement...and I got to ask about something.”

Liz said nothing to that.

“About your sister, you must be wondering? No, of course not. It was about enhancing my body. There are all sorts of dubious technologies underground, you know,” Dalitz explained as though lecturing an unruly child. “My concern was the possibility of you using your power on me as you just did, even though I’ve raised you like my own child. Thus I figured it was necessary to enhance myself, in case you ever managed to injure me. And it would be useful when dealing with other executives as well, of course.”

Dalitz looked down at Liz coolly.

“The top executive was very open to my questions. He’d been making progress on some research alongside the Conductor. And the two implanted regenerative cells in me,” he explained. “Although I did have to part with all of the money you’d saved for your sister’s treatment. Heh heh.”

Liz stood there in shocked silence as a pair of arms suddenly sprouted from Dalitz’s back, ripping through his suit like twisted wings. The arms’ bulging muscles undulated ominously, a dark red fluid dripping down as the newly created appendages picked up a thick piece of scrap wood from the ruins of the orphanage.

“You see, Liz? It’s not that I let my guard down around you. It’s that I don’t need to keep my guard up anymore.” With a sigh, he stepped closer to her. “As inconvenient as it is, I’ll have to take action myself. Foolish woman. If you’d been good, you could’ve kept dreaming a while longer.”

“You’re right...” she murmured, wiping her face as she stood up. Her stomach throbbed with pain from the kick, but her heart was oddly calm. “But the last time I was here, I was reminded of something.”

“Of what?”

“That when I was at the orphanage, I was like everyone’s big sister. Zenos told me that.” Liz looked behind Dalitz as he silently raised the piece of scrap wood. Beyond lay a lively, sprawling community, despite the poverty. And further still was a ramshackle clinic in a corner of the ruined city. “When I infiltrated Zenos’s



place, it was nothing like I'd imagined. It seemed kind of fun, actually. It wasn't fancy, but people kept dropping by, and the place was full of laughter."

Liz exhaled roughly.

"I always thought I was doing what was best for my little sister. But here, in this place..." She swallowed her words momentarily, shifting her gaze to the burned-down orphanage. "I was *everyone's* big sister."

"And?" Dalitz asked, visibly irritated.

"And I'm going to protect everyone's home," she declared. "I won't let a man like you take it away!"

He laughed. "Pathetic. I'll eradicate every last pest from the surface myself." He swung the scrap wood directly over Liz's head.

*I have to dodge.* Liz knew that, but her body wouldn't move, and her eyes involuntarily closed.

Yet the moment of impact never came.

Tentatively, she opened her eyes, and saw a man, with black hair and dressed in a cloak dark as night, blocking the piece of wood with his right hand. She knew that back, those shoulders—it was a boy she'd once known, now grown taller than her.

"Glad I made it," he said. "Ran like hell using Enhance Legs, but it was worth it."

"Zenos? Why?" Liz breathed.

"We'll talk about that later," he answered simply before taking a step toward Dalitz. "You know, back when we lived here, Liz was always protecting the rest of us."

As the eldest, as their older sister, she would jump in front of the children to protect them. But now that boy, who back then had been far too small, was the one standing before her.

Turning his familiar face to her, Zenos said, "It's my turn to protect you, Liz."

\*\*\*

On the outskirts of the slums, in the western mountains, Zenos faced the man who had once been the director of the now burned-down orphanage. He was still pale as a corpse and just as slender as the healer remembered him, but now had two out-of-place muscular arms sprouting from his back, writhing as though in search of prey.

“Ironical to confront you here of all places, huh?” Zenos asked.

“Who the hells are you?” Dalitz demanded, brows furrowed.

“Huh? You *seriously* don’t remember me? I was here for a while too. Damn.” Liz had said his name and everything!

“Hmph. An orphan whelp. I only remember those who were useful to me—” Dalitz cut himself off, looking Zenos over. “A black cloak. I see. So you’re the healer Liz mentioned. The fake ‘ruler’ of the slums. What a farce.”

“Uh, I mean, that’s on you for assuming, so...”

Dalitz stepped forward, his gaze betraying no emotion. “What does a measly healer want from me? I thought Liz had failed to enthrall you.”

“I’m not enthralled or anything. Normally I stay out of trouble, but this time I came of my own volition.”

“You’ve come all this way to die? How commendable.” Dalitz used the arms on his back to pick up a sturdy piece of scrap, swinging it effortlessly. “You think a lowly healer can do anything?”

“You’re right. I’m a lowly healer. I’m not a combat specialist, and I’m not used to being on the front lines.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I came here because I owe Liz, not because I have a personal grudge against you— Wait, no. No, actually, I have a *giant* grudge against you.” Thinking back, this man was the reason behind the harsh conditions of Zenos’s childhood. “But if you’re good, let Liz go without a fuss, and scurry on back to your underground, I’ll leave you be.”

“Absolutely not. Do not give me orders, boy. You say you were at my orphanage? Show me some respect. I’m the king of this place.”

“Sorry to say, but nobody ever taught me how to show respect. If only there had been adults around here to do that.”

Dalitz stopped, brushing his hair back, his face expressionless. “You said your name is Zenos, right? You see, I don’t like being out in the open.”

“What a coincidence! Me neither.”

“I believe, as someone from the Black Guild especially, I shouldn’t be even hinting at my face, appearance, name, or even existence. Being known is a disadvantage in and of itself.” His voice dropped lower, and he crouched slightly. “Meaning, I can’t let you walk out of here alive.”

“Liz, stay back!” Zenos yelled, covering the older woman just in time to take a powerful blow to the back of his head.

Amid the scattering shards of wood, Zenos turned around, unharmed.

“What?” Dalitz asked, frowning slightly. “You’re fine? But how? Aren’t you just a healer?”

“Just a plain ol’ healer, yes.”

“There’s no such thing as healing magic to nullify damage. What’s happening? Do you also know protective magic?!” Dalitz picked up scattered debris one after another, lunging forward with powerful strikes.

Some Zenos dodged, some he caught with his bare hands, but either way he remained unscathed. But since the impact still traveled internally, continuing to take hits wasn’t wise. And, of course, “You know, getting beat with a stick is bad for my mental health. It reminds me of when I lived here,” he quipped.

*“Enhance Legs.”*

A pale light wrapped around Zenos’s legs, and with the enhancement spell boosting his abilities, he closed the distance in an instant, thrusting forward with an empowered punch.

“Ugh!” Instinctively, Dalitz arched his upper body, and the punch only grazed his shoulder. Nevertheless, it seemed quite effective, as it sent him leaping back a significant distance. He gripped his shoulder, grimacing in pain. “What was that?! Did you just use enhancement magic? What in blazes *are* you?”

“Like I said, I’m just a healer.” But now that he thought about it, the adults at this place never had listened to the kids.

Dalitz scoffed. “No healer can do that! What are you—” Dalitz cut himself off, his eyes growing wide as though he’d just realized something. “I see. That defiant look in your eyes. I remember now. You’re the brat who stole a fortune from my safe!”

“Took you long enough. I don’t like that you remembered *that*, though. That was a false accusation.”

“I’ll eradicate you.”

“Will you just *listen*?”

Dalitz roared skyward, two more arms bursting from his back as the muscles on his legs swelled to more than twice their size. He kicked the ground behind him, the force of the impact sending gravel scattering around as he shot forward like a bullet.

“Uh, what?” Zenos quickly crossed his arms, activating a protective spell. A powerful shock wave shook the air as the two men crashed into the forest behind them, entangled.

“I’ll *eradicate* you!” Dalitz growled, his six arms continuing to deliver blow after powerful blow, mowing down the trees in their path. The sounds of his strikes echoed through the forest as the air whipped around them, grazing his cheeks.

Zenos was protected by magic, but there was no clear chance of victory like this. And since multiple types of magic couldn’t be cast simultaneously, a mistake when switching spells could’ve been fatal.

“*Scalpel*,” he chanted, seizing a brief opening to activate the spell, slicing one of the arms clean off.



“Raaaah!” With a shout, however, Dalitz regenerated his arm from the stump, and the flurry of attacks resumed.

The two emerged from the forest once more, back at the site where the orphanage’s ruins remained. Heaving, Zenos scratched his head in frustration.

“Can you just *chill* for a second?” Zenos huffed. “You could be a little nicer! I *was* one of your old charges, you know.”

“Nonsense. I’m the future king of the underworld. You are but a pebble to kick out of the way.”

“In one ear, out the other. As always.”

“Zenos!” Liz called out. “Dalitz said he’s had regenerative cells implanted!”

“Regenerative cells, huh?” Zenos echoed. “I see.”

“Raaah!” Dalitz shouted as he charged forward again, but the healer dodged, slicing off one of the former director’s arms once more. He scoffed, smirking confidently. “It doesn’t matter how many times you try—”

“*High Heal!*”

“Huh?” A surge of white light wrapped around the severed surface of Dalitz’s arm, its astonishing healing power causing the lost arm to regenerate instantly. “You healed me? What are you trying to—” Before he could finish speaking, his new arm began to grow, rapidly swelling to double, then triple its size. “Guh! Aaaaargh! What is this?!”

“Normally, healing magic aids in the regeneration of damaged cells. Typically, regeneration stops automatically once the healing process is complete,” Zenos explained, his right hand still raised. “But I suspect the cells implanted in you are a type of tumor cell. And the thing about tumors is that they regenerate quickly, without end.”

“Wh-What does that mean?!”

“In other words, if I boost your regeneration with my healing magic, the tumor cells will proliferate indefinitely.”

“What?!” Dalitz’s arm continued to enlarge. Unable to suppress its growth, he

cut it off himself, but Zenos simply healed it anew. “No! Stop!”

“Pass. I’m a healer, remember? I see a wound, I heal it.”

“Y-You bastard!”

As Dalitz continued to hack at his rapidly regenerating limb, he began a furious barrage of blows. Every time one was about to connect, Zenos switched to protective magic and, as soon as there was an opening, he switched back and continued to heal his opponent.

Expansion, collision, impact, regrowth. The cacophony of sounds echoed repeatedly across the stage of the destroyed orphanage as glints of white light twinkled in the air.

“What’s happening?” Liz murmured, dropping to her knees as she stared blankly at the spectacle unfolding before her.

Wrapped in a warm white light, Dalitz roared. “Do not defy me! Do *not* look down on me!” he demanded, flailing his numerous arms around like a child throwing a tantrum. Controlling the rapidly proliferating arms had become difficult, however, and they tangled with each other, failing to coordinate an attack. “I was once in an orphanage! Oppressed!”

“What a coincidence,” Zenos said nonchalantly. “So was I.”

Dalitz’s regenerative ability was gradually weakening—perhaps the implanted cells hadn’t been perfect. The regeneration would stop eventually.

“I won’t let anyone oppress me ever again!” Dalitz shouted. “I’ll be the oppressor!”

“That’s too bad, Dalitz,” Zenos retorted, the corners of his eyebrows sagging slightly. “You of all people should’ve sympathized with the oppressed.”

The former director’s arms, having grown and been severed multiple times, looked feeble as withered branches. Now he was nothing but a frail, pale-faced man. Zenos stopped casting and, heaving, stepped toward Dalitz.

“S-Stay away from me,” the former director said, extending his right hand and stepping back. “I-I know! I’ll hire you! Y-You’ll be treated fairly! I am your king —”

“No, thanks,” the healer said simply, his right fist connecting with the center of Dalitz’s chest.

“Guh!”

“That was for using Liz.”

“Wait—” The next blow stopped Dalitz midsentence, making him choke miserably.

“And that was for me. Payback for all the beatings, punishments, and false accusations.”

Staggering, Dalitz clasped his hands together as if pleading. “I-I understand! I’m sorry! This is enough— Gah!”

“That was for Marcus.”

“Huh? W-Wait, wait, how many more are there?!”

“You don’t know?”

“W-Wait, wait a sec—”

“This is for Emil. And Lombard. Ashley. Kuja. Velitra. And—” A pale light enveloped his raised fist. “*Enhance Arm*. This is for *all* the kids, you tyrant!”

“Guhhhhh!” The full-force punch sent Dalitz’s body flying, and he crashed back-first into the burned-down debris of the orphanage. “Y-You... How...dare...”

“Your dream’s already over, Dalitz.”

The orphanage was a blackened shell. He’d lost Liz’s cooperation. His body enhancements were decaying. There was nothing left for Dalitz.

“Don’t...be...ridiculous,” he rasped as he lay flat on his back. His mouth opened and closed, forming only gasps, his words dissolving into the dry air.

Zenos looked down at the fallen man. “But be glad, former director. Your orphanage’s kids have left the nest...” He trailed off momentarily, shifting his gaze toward the slums at the mountain’s foot and the ruined city beyond, “...and they’re doing great now.”

Leaving the astonished, wide-eyed Dalitz behind, Zenos took Liz’s hand and



began the climb down the mountain.

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Left lying there in shock, Dalitz stared vacantly up at the sky.

He couldn't move; all of his joints were alight with agonizing pain. Yet, perhaps due to the continuous exposure to healing magic, there was a strange warmth deep within him.

Zenos's words during their clash echoed in Dalitz's ears. *"I'm a healer, remember? I see a wound, I heal it."*

The sky above was a pure, empty blue. A gentle breeze blew through the mountains. Sunlight shone down upon him, a little harshly.

And suddenly, a shadow fell upon the former orphanage director. "That's too bad. Looks like Zenos wins this one too."

Gazing up, Dalitz saw a figure completely covered in a gray robe, peering down at him. "You...? The Conductor..."

This was the one who'd performed surgery to implant regenerative cells into Dalitz, under the top executive's orders. Rumor had it that the Conductor had disappeared after the golem incident in the slums.

"Why are...you here...?"

"I came to collect samples," the Conductor explained. "And to deal with the aftermath. Orders from the top."

"What...?"

"Useless as you are, you're still an executive of the Black Guild. Failure isn't an option. They have no more use for you."

"Wait... Please, wait!"

The Conductor looked around the ruins of the orphanage with disinterest. "The top executive was right. This place is miserable."

"Why would...the top..."

"Oh? You didn't know? They came from here too."

“Wh...at?” Dalitz asked, shock plain on his features.

“Well, not that it matters,” the Conductor said with a hint of amusement. “Time’s up for you. Sorry you have to go in a miserable place like this, though.”

“Sh-Shut your mouth,” Dalitz hissed. “This place is not...miserable.” *This is my castle*, he wanted to say, but his voice could no longer form words.

For the briefest, faintest of moments, he was back to the time when the orphanage had first been established, before his sadistic and domineering desires had darkened his heart. He could’ve sworn he was standing there, basking in the bright sunlight illuminating the courtyard, as the laughter of children echoed in his ears one final time.

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After the battle at the ruined orphanage, Liz hesitantly spoke up as she and Zenos descended the mountain.

“So, Zenos, why did you come here?”

“Well, that big guy, Gaion, right? He told me the whole story.”

“He did?”

“I said I wasn’t your enemy, just a childhood friend wanting to repay a debt of gratitude. And then he told me everything.”

Since Gaion was a member of the Black Guild, and knowing Dalitz would’ve likely been watching the slums from afar, Zenos had considered the possibility that the hostage exchange was a trap. Just to be safe, he’d kept an eye on things and cast a protective spell on Zophia and the others, but ultimately, nothing had happened. This indicated Liz had likely defied Dalitz’s orders, Zenos explained.

“Then, I enhanced my leg strength with magic and sprinted all the way here,” he concluded.

“Th-Thank you. Gaion may be simple, but he can be quite perceptive at times,” Liz murmured, bowing her head deeply. “I’m so sorry! I’ve done so many awful things to you and those around you...”

“Honestly, Liz. You call that big guy ‘simple,’ but you’re a big idiot, yourself.”

“I-I’m sorry.”

Zenos heaved an exasperated sigh. “Why go to all that trouble with infiltrating and enthralling and whatnot? You could’ve just asked for help.”

“What?” Liz’s misty eyes widened in surprise.

“Gina’s sick, isn’t she?”

“Y-Yes.”

“And that was why you wanted help from some top executive in the guild who can heal any illness, right? That’s why you did what Dalitz asked.”

“Y-Yes, but—”

“Look. I’m something of a healer myself, remember? I mean, not that I have a license, but you know.”

“Oh...”

The Black Guild was a place where people plotted and were plotted against, used others and were used themselves. Deeply entrenched into that world, Liz had failed to consider the simplest option: just asking for help. It could’ve been that easy.

Liz clutched her chest, as though suddenly remembering something. “B-But, I don’t have any money left...”

Dalitz had spent all of the money she’d saved up to request treatment for her sister from the top executive on his body enhancements.

Zenos crossed his arms thoughtfully. “Well, it’s true I charge for my work on principle, yeah. But for now, why not just let me have a look at her?”

\*\*\*

After that, Zenos followed Liz to a place known as the depths of the slums, where the air hung stagnant and reeked of decay. They entered a home one strong breeze away from collapsing, its interior even more modest than that of the clinic in the ruined city.

“Hi, Gina,” the healer said. “It’s been a while.”

“Is that... Zenos...?” the girl, whose face resembled that of a younger Liz, said

in surprise. Her voice was weak, and although she'd grown taller, her body was thin as a twig.

Zenos quickly cast Diagnosis, and lines of white light scanned through Gina's whole body. "There's a large tumor in her thoracic cavity," he explained. "It's been pressing against her heart and lungs for years, compromising their function."

"Huh? You've already figured it out?" Liz asked.

"But it doesn't seem malignant, so all it needs is surgical removal."

"B-But, they said it's far too widespread across the organs to be removed through normal means..."

"Just gotta remove it while healing the organs."

"You say that like it's simple."

"Well, the procedure is delicate, and I'd be worried doing it here, what with the less-than-ideal sanitary conditions. Let's take her to my clinic."

Zenos hoisted Gina onto his back and carried her back to the clinic with Liz in tow.

"Welcome back, Ze—" Lily stopped midsentence. "Huh? Liz?"

"U-Um, I'm so sorry," Liz said with a contrite expression. "I've done so many awful things to you all—"

"Thank goodness!" Lily exclaimed, relieved. "You were gone so suddenly. I was worried."

"Huh? But I—"

Before Liz could continue, Lily turned her gaze to Zenos. "Who's that girl on your back, Zenos?"

"She's a patient," Zenos explained. "Lily, prep for treatment."

"Okay!" Lily nodded and went about getting everything ready, her movements quick and efficient.

Zenos laid Gina down on a bed with fresh sheets and rolled up his sleeves. "Let's get started. Gina, you good?"

Though they'd discussed the procedure on the way here, the girl didn't respond, instead turning her anxious gaze to her sister.

Liz glanced at Zenos and then, with a reassuring tone, said to her little sister, "It'll be okay, Gina. I trust Zenos."

With a serene expression, Zenos gave Gina's shoulder a light pat. "Well, anyone would be scared of suddenly having to go through surgery like this. We can do it another day, if you're not ready."

"No, it's okay," Gina said. "I trust you too, Zenos. You were super nice to me back at the orphanage."

"Good girl. Now you'll just nap for a little bit, and it'll be over before you know it," he told Gina with a smile as he gave her the sleeping medicine Becker had previously supplied him with. The girl fell asleep in moments. "*Scalpel.*"

A magical blade manifested in Zenos's right hand, and he pressed the tip of it against the center of her chest. Carefully, he made a vertical incision, revealing a lump underneath—the tumor.

"Gina," Liz said, lacing her fingers together in prayer.

Zenos meticulously shaved off the tumor while using healing magic on the healthy tissue and stopping the bleeding with protective magic. He quickly switched back and forth between those and the Scalpel spell, making steady progress. Next to him, Lily was efficiently preparing things like gauze and cleaning water as he worked.

"Wow..." Liz murmured in admiration, her hands still clasped.

Soft white lights twinkled and danced around the clinic, their glow gentle and warm. Despite the tense situation, Gina, enveloped in the faint lights, looked almost blessed. Time passed quickly, and finally, the procedure was complete.

Wiping the sweat from his brow, Zenos said, "It's done, Liz."

"Gina!" Liz exclaimed, hurrying over.

There wasn't a single mark on the girl's chest. She was still asleep, but her usually pained expression already seemed lighter.

"I think she's good now, but just to be safe, let's keep her here for today,"

Zenos said.

“I-I can’t believe this,” Liz murmured. After all her suffering since leaving the orphanage, all in the name of her sister’s treatment, everything had been resolved in less than a day. Drained, Liz slumped to the floor, then lifted her head, hesitant. “Zenos, about the payment...”

“Normally this type of surgery would cost around this much,” he said, showing her a piece of paper with the amount.

Liz clenched her fists. “I-I’m sorry. I don’t have it right now, but I’ll work hard and pay you back.”

“Hmm? Oh, you don’t need to pay me.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Remember back at the orphanage when they accused me of stealing the director’s money? They even talked about selling my organs. And then you came to my rescue. Thanks to you, I didn’t end up with a debt of several million wen.”

“Y-Yes, but what does that have to do with anything?” she asked anxiously.

“That means you’ve paid me already. Way back when.”

Speechless, Liz brought a hand to her mouth, and soon tears began to spill from the corners of her eyes. “Th-Thank you. Thank you, Zenos,” she murmured, her tearful voice carrying across the clinic, the place aglow with bright sunlight.

*Hee hee hee. Ah, the joys of youth,* echoed a quiet whisper from the second floor.



## Epilogue (I)

A week had passed since Gina's surgery, and the incessant cries of cicadas filled the air, heralding the arrival of summer.

Liz stopped by at the clinic in the ruined city, with her little sister at her side and a large man, Gaion, following behind them.

"Hey, Liz. What's up?" Zenos asked as he came out to greet the trio alongside Lily.

"Oh! I just came to tell you something," Liz replied, a bright expression on her features.

"What is it?"

"We've decided to quit the Black Guild."

"Oh, you have?"

The leader of their faction, their boss Dalitz, had vanished. With that, the whole faction was disbanding.

"So..." Liz continued, her hands rubbing together nervously for a moment before her voice took on a determined tone. "I'm thinking of starting an orphanage."

"Oh..." Zenos murmured.

"A lot has happened, I know, but... I want to make it a place where children can smile." The sins she'd committed would never disappear, but she wished to atone, even just a little.

"I see. I think that's amazing, honestly. And I know you can do it." Zenos nodded several times, then shifted his gaze to Gaion. "And you're going with her?"

"What's the problem with that? I'll protect Lady Liz."

"He says that, but he's just following me around. Though we will need



someone strong to do the heavy lifting, and he's a good guard, so it won't be an issue," Liz explained, seemingly concerned. "It's just... I mean, I've been using my succubus powers on him, so..."

A mutant's powers manifested quite suddenly—and conversely, they could just as suddenly become unusable. Now that Gina was cured of her condition, Liz was conflicted about continuing to command Gaion using her powers.

Zenos glanced at the bigger man, then turned his gaze back to Liz. "Speaking of which, Liz, how long does your manipulation ability last?"

"Well, if I do it via blood, it lasts only a few hours before it's metabolized."

"And what do you do when the effect wears off?"

"If I need to maintain control, I reapply the blood before it wears off."

"And when was the last time you did that to him?"

"That was...quite a while ago, actually."

"So he hasn't been under your powers' effect in a while, right?"

Liz tilted her head in confusion.

"Which means," Zenos continued, "he's not doing it because he's under your thrall. He really does want to protect you."

"Huh? He does?"

"Y-Yes, Lady Liz!" Gaion said, looking flustered. "Why did you think it was?"

"Well, you're simple, so I thought the effect of my blood was lasting an unusually long time..."

"M-My feelings..." the big man muttered, looking like he was about to cry.

Gina, for some reason, told him to hang in there. She really seemed to have completely recovered.

"So, Zenos," Liz continued, "will you come visit once we're all set up?"

"Of course," Zenos replied.

Liz stared at Zenos's face for a moment, then glanced at Lily briefly before turning on her heel. "I'll see you around, then, Zenos, Lily."

“Yeah. See you,” Zenos said.

“See you, Liz!” Lily exclaimed.

The healer and the elf saw the trio off at the front door, and Liz gave them a big wave. Behind the pair stood the clinic that had once felt so ominously oppressive, yet now looked so warm and peaceful.

“Are you sure this is okay, sis?” Gina asked as she walked alongside Liz.

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t you want to be with Zenos?”

“Why do you think that?”

“A lady’s intuition. Besides, Zenos got super handsome.”

“Don’t be cheeky, now!” Liz gave her sister’s forehead a light poke before looking back at Zenos and Lily, still standing in front of the clinic. “And, well... There’s no room there for someone like me.”

“Really? It looked pretty spacious to me.”

“That’s not what I mean. But I guess you’re still too young to understand it.”

“Boo.”

Liz smiled at her sister, then turned her gaze back to the road. “Let’s go, Gina. We’ll build our own place.”

A place where children could laugh freely, cry freely, without going hungry or cold, and sleep safe and sound. And then, one day, proudly leave the nest. That was the kind of place she wanted to create.

Bathing in the bright sunlight, Liz said with a bright smile, “I’m *everyone’s* big sister, after all.”

## Epilogue (II)

As evening arrived, Lily called out to Zenos, who sat at the examination desk. “Are you looking at Mr. Becker’s letter again?”

“Hmm? Oh, yes,” Zenos replied. A piece of paper sat on the desk before him—the letter from Becker about his former mentor, whom he’d met in the slums.

During his harsh days at the orphanage, Zenos had taken pity on a vagrant who’d died on the roadside, and attempted to cast a resurrection spell. Suddenly, he’d felt a sharp blow to the back of his head. The man who’d smacked him would go on to become his mentor.

Liz had been Zenos’s protector within the orphanage. Outside of it, away from prying eyes, he would go to his mentor and learn all about magic and the world at large. It was no exaggeration to say Zenos had become the man he was today thanks to those two.

Zenos had read Becker’s letter over and over, but of course, its contents never changed. His mentor had been an elite healer. The man had dabbled in resurrection magic, which was considered forbidden. This had triggered some sort of curse, causing everyone to forget all about his mentor. And if Zenos wanted to know more, he should look for his old mentor’s notes.

“Any new discoveries?” asked Carmilla as she sat upon the bed, her legs swinging back and forth.

“It’s not exactly a new discovery, per se, but meeting Liz and Dalitz got me thinking a lot about the orphanage,” Zenos said, his gaze lifting from the letter. “Things were tense there, but thanks to Liz, our group got along pretty well. And there was one kid I was particularly close to.” He stared blankly ahead, as though recalling something, then continued, “When I mentioned having met my mentor, that kid got curious and came with me, wanting to learn too.”

“Oh? That is the first I’m hearing about this,” Carmilla remarked.

“I didn’t know about it either,” Lily said.

“Yeah? It’s hard to mention everything. So much has happened.”

Zenos had shared many hardships with his friends at the orphanage, and he remembered them well. Liz and Gina, Marcus, Emil, Lombard, Ashley, Kuja...and one other.

Zenos glanced back at the letter on the desk, then murmured, “My mentor’s notes... Maybe Velitra has them.”

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Deeper beyond the crisscrossing underground waterway was a place known as the depths of the slums.

In a lone corner of the depths, a high-pitched voice rang out. “Hey there. I took care of Dalitz, like you asked,” said a figure in a gray robe known as the Conductor, arms spread in a dramatic gesture.

A voice came from the pitch darkness. “All I said was to handle the aftermath.”

The Conductor chuckled. “Discreet as ever. Perhaps I’ve made too many assumptions about such an esteemed top executive of the Black Guild as yourself.”

“You’d vanished from the guild. I neglected to ask why you came back.”

“Well, my plan was to lie low for a while, but my curiosity got the best of me. It’s a bad habit of mine.”

The shadowy figure didn’t respond.

“Besides, I have a debt to settle with Zenos,” the Conductor continued, speaking into the silent darkness. “Speaking of, I believe our interests align as far as Zenos is concerned. Don’t you think?”

A shallow sigh echoed, followed by the sound of papers being flipped through. “Zenos, huh... I wasn’t expecting to hear that name again.”

“Oh? That’s a colder reaction than I expected. I thought you used to be friends,” the Conductor remarked in provocation. “Speaking of curiosity, I find myself aching to know who would win; you, who rose to a high position in the Black Guild using your formidable healing skills as a weapon, or Zenos, an

unlicensed shadow healer with perfect treatments. Especially since, you know, both of you studied healing magic under the same mentor and all.”

There was no reply. Only silent, still darkness, spreading on endlessly.

## Side Story: Bedtime Talk

On the outskirts of the capital of the Kingdom of Herzeth, in the mountains to the west, stood a simple yet warm brick building.

A slender-limbed girl opened a door and stepped into a room lit by the golden light of a fireplace. “Sis, the children have finally quieted down.”

“Nice work, Gina,” said Liz, sitting at a desk in the back of her room. She looked at her sister, now so grown.

Gina shrugged in exasperation. “The boys started a pillow fight. Honestly, they somehow find the energy to kick up a fuss every single day!”

“So they do. Back in the day, I never would’ve imagined kids could be this noisy.”

At Liz’s words, Gina was silent for a moment, then smiled. “Yeah. Me neither.”

Back when the two of them had been this young, even just one word too many could’ve resulted in a fist coming their way.

“So,” Gina continued, “how are we doing this month?”

“It’s looking like we’ll just barely manage,” Liz replied, massaging her own shoulders as she looked down at the ledger on the desk in front of her.

“Running this place is hard. If we’re not careful, the orphanage could go under in no time at all.”

The large man who’d been doing push-ups in the corner looked up. “Huh? Lady Liz, is this place gonna disappear? I-I don’t want that!” he exclaimed tearfully.

Gina put her hands on her hips and glowered at him. “Really, Gaion? I seem to remember you whining about not wanting to babysit a bunch of kids, despite how eager you were to come here.”

“I-I mean, yeah, but I just...” Gaion stopped his workout and sat cross-legged on the floor. “With the way I am, you know, ever since I was a kid, people have

always either looked down on me or been scared of me. But the kids here, they don't care about any of that, and they just want to hang out." He scratched his dry cheek. "This place taught me that I can just interact with people without hitting them or getting hit, so..."

Liz and Gina exchanged glances and chuckled. "It's okay, Gaion. We can cover food and operating costs thanks to you hunting in the mountains and tending to our fields. And the older kids volunteer to help out with all sorts of things too," Liz said.

"R-Really? What a relief..." he murmured with a sigh.

A little girl walked in, clutching a stuffed rabbit. "Liz..."

"Oh? What's the matter, Lyla?" Liz asked, standing up and approaching the girl.

Lyla clutched her stuffed toy tightly. "I had a bad dream. There was a ghost," she said, teary-eyed.

Gina smiled. "It's okay, Lyla. Gaion's face is way scarier than any ghosts."

"What does my face have to do with anything?" Gaion protested as he resumed his push-up routine.

The little girl shook her head. "Gaion isn't scary. Ghosts are scary! Liz, can you tell me a story?"

"Yes, of course." Liz moved to gently pick the girl up and stepped toward the couch in the center of the room. "What kind of story do you want?"

"Umm..." Lyla brought a finger to her chin and looked up at the ceiling. "There was another orphanage here, right?"

"That's right. How did you know that?"

"The older girls told me. They said you grew up there."

"Right. I did tell the older kids about that."

"Was that orphanage fun like this one?" the girl asked innocently.

Liz's gaze turned distant. "No... It was more like a prison. Many children were crammed into tiny rooms like tools, and the best food we could hope for was a

piece of moldy bread every three days. Otherwise, we had to make do by ourselves—dig through the dirt, gnaw on rocks, dive into a spring, and scavenge for anything we could eat, like grass or bugs...”

“Sis, you’re gonna scare her. She won’t be able to sleep like this,” Gina pointed out.

“Oh dear! I’m so sorry,” Liz said, coming back to her senses. “Forget all about that, Lyla.”

Lyla stared intently at Liz. “Poor Liz! But why did you make another orphanage here, then?”

Liz hummed thoughtfully. “Things were harsh back then, but maybe I wanted to start over in this place because it’s where I met my benefactor,” Liz explained with a soft smile.

To craft this into a new place for themselves, they’d cut down trees, cleared the forest, built houses, and expanded the fields. Years had passed since, with many children having been welcomed into the fold, and many others having left the nest.

“Benny-factor?” Lyla echoed.

“Yes. Thanks to him, I could meet you and everyone else here,” Liz explained.

“Ohh. Then I’ll thank him too!” the girl said with a bright grin.

A crowd of children burst into the room shortly after. “Lyla! Finally!” one of them said.

“You were here all along? No fair! I want a hug from Liz too!”

“Me too! I want a hug!”

The room suddenly grew lively, and Gaion clicked his tongue. “Hey brats! It’s bedtime, you know!”

“Oh! It’s Gaion! Are you back from hunting?”

“Play with us!”

“Hey! Wait a second! Hey, now!” Gaion protested, still doing push-ups as the children climbed onto his back, laughing and squealing joyfully.



“Honestly,” Liz said with a sigh.

Lyla smiled brightly. “Liz, tell us more about your benny-factor!”

The other children’s ears perked up curiously. “Benny-factor?”

“Huh? Who’s that? What do you mean?”

“Oh! Liz told me about him,” said an older girl proudly. “It’s her childhood friend, right? They say he became a national hero!”

“What, seriously? Wait, is this—”

“Liz, you know *him*?!”

“What? What? I wanna know too!”

The children’s sparkling eyes all turned to Liz. She glanced at Gina, then sighed deeply. “I suppose I could tell you. Just for a bit, though. Then you need to go to sleep, okay?”

Calling him “a national hero” felt at odds with the carefree demeanor of the man in Liz’s mind. He’d just done what he always did, with a nonchalant expression all the while. The pitch darkness out the window reminded Liz of the coat he used to wear.

The fireplace near the wall crackled and popped, its warm, gentle light illuminating the curious faces of the children.

“That man...was with me in the old orphanage, the one that was here before we built this one,” Liz said in a relaxed tone, as though reading a bedtime story. “He healed wounds, saved people, and set the world right before anyone knew it. Nowadays, people call him a national hero, but I’m sure he’d hate that. He doesn’t like standing out, you see. He’s always been elusive, never the type to push others aside and step forward. He disliked the spotlight so much that he ran a clandestine clinic in the shadows. I misunderstood him at first, and went through a lot because of that!”

Liz chuckled as she looked over the children.

“This is a story about my somewhat unusual benefactor. The tale of a shadow healer in a corner of the ruined city...”

## Afterword

Hello! I'm Sakaku Hishikawa.

Thank you so much for picking up a copy of the third volume of *The Brilliant Healer's New Life in the Shadows*!

They say truth is stranger than fiction, and with how much recent events have indeed surpassed the world of fiction, I'm truly grateful that I could bring this story to you. My gratitude knows no bounds!

And on a complete change of topic, I recently started a vegetable garden in a plot within walking distance to try and be a little more self-sufficient, food-wise. It's a tiny field, but I've been diligent about tilling rows into the soil in my spare time, having conversations with the earth.

I tried my hand at growing strawberries this season, and they turned out unbelievably sweet—to the point that I don't think I can ever go back to store-bought after eating them! There I was, feeling like a strawberry-growing prodigy, happily stuffing strawberry after strawberry into my mouth, when one of them had this strange texture. I spat it out, and lo and behold, a bunch of ants were chilling inside the strawberry.

In honor of this once-in-a-lifetime strawberry encounter, I did not kill the ants, and released them back into nature. Thus concludes my tale of but the tip of the iceberg of the difficulties of agriculture and the harshness of nature.

And now I'm inspired to work even harder in my creative fields as well!

Now then, on to acknowledgments.

Once again, I'd like to thank everyone involved in the editorial department at GA Novel, my editors especially, for their hard work in the publication of this book.

A huge thank you to Daburyu-sensei, who always draws the characters way cuter than I could ever imagine.

And thank you to Ten Junnoichi-sensei, the artist behind the manga adaptation, as well! I always look forward to seeing the world of *Brilliant Healer* in manga form. The first volume of the comic is scheduled for release in August 2022, so please check it out!

Thank you to everyone who's checked out the web version of *Brilliant Healer*. Your comments are very encouraging.

And, of course, my deepest thanks to everyone who's purchased this book!

I hope to see you again in the next volume!

## **Author**

**Sakaku Hishikawa**

In volume three, Zenos runs into a childhood friend from his orphanage days! And she's quite a beautiful lady at that. I'm almost jealous.

## **Illustrator**

**Daburyu**

Hello! I'm Daburyu, and I'm still in charge of the illustrations.

The arrival of a mature lady really had my heart flutter!



# The Brilliant Healer's New Life in the Shadows



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**Sakaku Hishikawa**  
Illustrator  
**Daburyu**



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**Sakaku Hishikawa**

Illustrator

**Daburyu**



The  
**Brilliant Healer's**  
New Life in the Shadows

3





Lily

"All ye elements  
of the air..."

As Lily finished casting Gust,  
her arrows, carried by the wind,  
hit the bull's-eye.

"Hi-yah!"

"This is a festival game,  
right?"


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“I will bring you to your knees,  
great leader of the slums.  
No man can resist me.”

Liz





Tentatively, Liz opened her eyes.  
Before her stood a man with black hair,  
dressed in a cloak dark as night.

“Glad I made it.”

Zenos





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by Sakaku Hishikawa

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