

NOVEL

11

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LONER LIFE ◆ IN ANOTHER WORLD ◆

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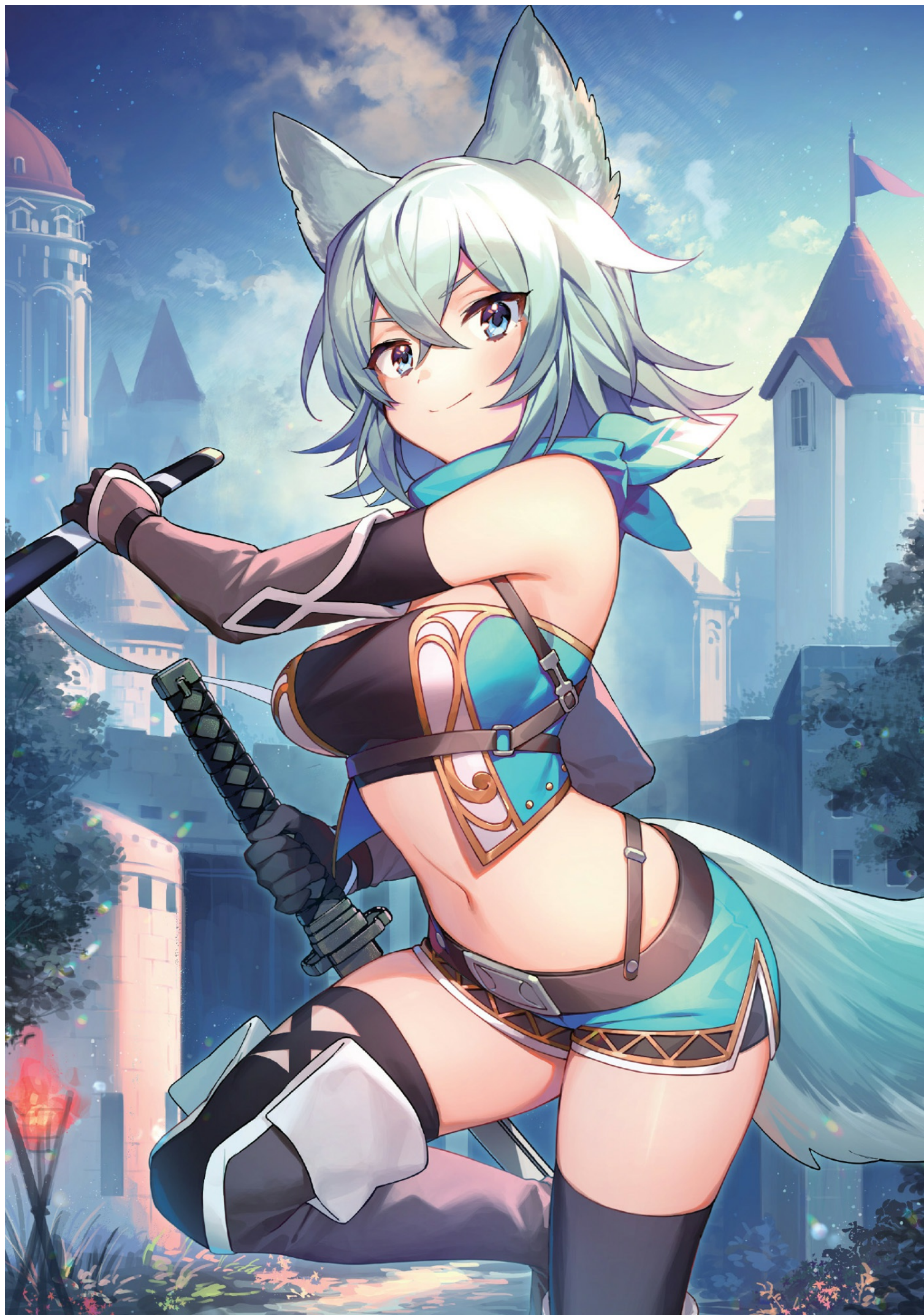
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AFTERWORD

Newsletter



NEFERTIRI

ANGELICA

SLIMEY

HARUKA

There was a glimmer in Haruka-kun's eye that I had never seen before. A fey, golden twinkle. It must have been Eye Mastery—a skill I knew Haruka-kun had never used before. It granted him the ability to read and change minds. By the time the sleeping sisters woke, all memory of these bad dreams would be gone.



 BUNNY GIRL

 WOLF GIRL

Oh, to be the filling in a
beautiful beastgirl sandwich...
We should have stayed at an
inn and booked two separate
rooms after all!

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LONER LIFE

◆ IN ANOTHER WORLD ◆

NOVEL

11

THE PRIEST WHO IS
AN ENEMY OF GOD

WRITTEN BY



Shoji Goji

ILLUSTRATED BY



Saku Enomaru



*Seven Seas
Entertainment*



VICE REP A

One of Haruka's classmates. A cool beauty prone to glaring at the guys when they do something stupid.



VICE REP B

One of Haruka's classmates. A ditzy girl who was voted the most popular student in the class. An Archsage.



VICE REP C

One of Haruka's classmates. A lively ankle-biter who longs to grow up into an adult. She's like a class mascot.



QUEEN BEE

One of Haruka's classmates. Leader of a group of five fashion-obsessed girls. A former model.



NUDIST GIRL

One of Haruka's classmates. A former candidate for Japan's Olympic swim team. Close with Fish Girl, her former swim team member.



FISH GIRL

One of Haruka's classmates. After getting chased around by guys in the fantasy world, deeply distrusts men...besides Haruka.



ERAILIA

An elf. Vizmuregzero's sister. She recovered from a terrible illness with one of the frontier's mushrooms.



SHALLICERES

The princess of the Kingdom of Diorelle. Traumatized by experiencing the half-naked heave-ho of the pseudo-dungeon. Also known as the Royal Girl and Shillyshally.



CERES

Princess Shalliceress's maid. Has served as the princess's guard and body double from a young age.



STALKER GIRL

The daughter of the chief of the Shino clan, a family specializing in reconnaissance. A top-class spy with Perfect Invisibility.



MEROPAPA

The Duke of Omui. An invincible warrior hero known as the Frontier King and War God, among other titles.



MERIELLE

The daughter of the Duke of Omui. Unable to remember her name, Haruka calls her Merimeri, and now so does everyone else.

CHARACTERS



ANGELICA

The former emperor of the Ultimate Dungeon. Haruka used Servitude on her. Also known as Miss Armor Rep.



HARUKA

A high school student summoned to another world. The only member of his class not to receive a cheat skill from God.



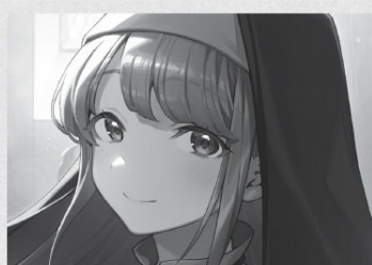
NEFERTIRI

A former dungeon emperor. Haruka freed her from the Theocracy, which used her as a weapon of mass destruction. Also known as Dancer Girl.



CLASS REP

The student council president of Haruka's class. Talented leader. Has known Haruka since elementary school.



VICE REP B

One of Haruka's classmates. An absentminded girl who was voted most popular student in the class. An Archmage.



SLIME EMPEROR

A former dungeon emperor. Acquires the skills of enemies that he eats with Predation. Under Haruka's Servitude.

STORY

Haruka and his classmates traveled to the Beast Kingdom as envoys of Diorelle to secure an alliance between the two nations. After exchanging polite greetings of goodwill at the Gamehlein royal palace, Haruka and his newfound allies hoped to strike out against their shared enemies in the Theocracy—except things didn't go to plan. Instead, the envoys directed their scorn at Haruka!

As level supremacists, the beastfolk respected Haruka's level 100+ classmates, but they had nothing good to say about the level 25 Haruka. The beastfolk chieftains challenged Haruka to a free-for-all fight. Haruka turned the beastfolk's keen sense of smell against them by raining putrid vinegar on the whole assembly! Defeating all his foes handily, Haruka secured the cooperation of the Beast Kingdom—albeit in a slightly more coercive way than initially planned.

Bidding a fond farewell to their new friends, Haruka and his companions set off for the Theocracy. To obtain intel on the church, Haruka disguised himself as a priest before walking in, guns blazing. The not-so-sneaky infiltration was on!

PROLOGUE



WHAT IN THE WORLD? When I received word that Duke Meropapa had returned from his sojourn in the Beast Nation, I arranged for a meeting with the man. He delivered a letter of thanks penned in the King of the Beast Nation's own hand. It began with the words, "We swear to you our absolute and undying obedience, Your Majesty." Again—what in the *absolute* world?

"Duke Meropapa, I sent you and my daughter as envoys of Diorelle to promote a *cordial* relationship between our two nations, did I not?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. We only delivered the message you wrote, sire. If your desire had been for goodwill between us, then we would have gone as envoys of peace. If the message had been a declaration of war, then we would have been harbingers of discord. Don't tell me you forgot what you wrote in your own letter. Heavens. What are we to do with you?"

His perfect monotone undermined his words somewhat. Meropapa also avoided my eyes and pretended he had little to do with this, as was his habit whenever he tried to fool me. He knew full well how this had come about and what it meant.

"I penned a letter offering friendship and aid, sir! Pray tell, why does the king of Gamehlein respond with a vow of submission? What in God's name did you do? Perish the thought, but...don't tell me you conquered them! If either you or Haruka invaded them...! Is the king safe? Tell me you spared his life!"

"It pains me to admit your fears are not entirely unfounded. Haruka did indeed grow quite angry with them and beat them fiercely. The boy is a menace when in a peevish mood."

Duke Meropapa recounted for me the reason for Haruka's ill humor. It proved to be, in fact, the reason he spared Diorelle: the location of the royal castle.

That was it; the one, sole reason. Our castle was a shield for Diorelle's people, whereas the beastfolk aroused Haruka's ire by using their citizens as a shield for their castle. The Diorelle royal line pledged itself as the people's sword and shield. We lived to serve the common man. Thus, our castle was positioned on the border. Likewise, the frontier's ducal palace stood in the thick of the monster forest. Such placements were unorthodox, but Haruka thought highly of our rationale.

"If you knew all along, you bloody well could have told me! At the very least, the king could have included his treatment in his letter... Unless he couldn't. Don't tell me you and Shalliceres joined in beating him!"

Duke Meropapa whistled innocently.

What kind of envoy not only failed to stop the violence but *joined in*? This mission instigated a full-on battle! "Diplomatic crisis" hardly covered it. We were the aggressors now! I had no idea what to call this—a surrender? A peace treaty?—but I knew I had best proceed with haste to clear up this misunderstanding and declare our nation's friendly intentions.

"No, Your Majesty. There is no need. The king of Gamehlein challenged Haruka to a fight, you see, and each of the tribal chieftains followed suit. It is law in Gamehlein that any who are bested in a duel must lower themselves in complete subservience to the victor. You may simply respond with, 'My thanks. I look forward to our future friendship.' It is apt to say that the beastfolk are so terribly frightened of Haruka that they dare not oppose him. Indeed, they feel gratitude and have promised him their undying reverence. This letter is proof of it, Your Majesty; they view him in the same light as they do Diorelle. You would understand if you'd seen them for yourself—the beastfolk, I mean. My people in Omui feel the same. To them, you sent them a miracle. You delivered them the calamity of happiness, which means...this is all your fault. Quit while you're ahead, Your Majesty."

I had feared Haruka, the picture of impropriety, would meet the beastfolk, who value propriety and power, like a lit match meets a powder keg. Ergo, I

named my daughter to be my representative, not him. As the kingdom's finest swordswoman in recent memory, I thought Gamehlein would respect her. But she was young and headstrong to a fault, and thus I named Meropapa the leader of this little delegation. In addition to his other admirable qualities, he was well familiar with Haruka, and the beastfolk still revered his legendary military might. Between the fabled swordswoman of Diorelle and the man who had once rescued the Beast Nation, I thought this party capitally suited to perform their roles.

Oh, how wrong I was!

I had forgotten how Meropapa idolized Haruka. Insulting the boy whipped him into a fury. Anyone callow enough to speak ill of Haruka should fear the duke's quick temper on the subject of the boy. His apparently mild manner was all an act. His air of aged wisdom was false. Inside, the man was as brash and quick-tempered as the day he was born. He could claim it wasn't *his* doing and he knew *nothing* of the affair, but I had grown wise to him. This debacle was his fault!

"Your Majesty, don't scowl so. Everything has turned out splendidly. Why not let the happy end justify the ridiculous means? It is all in the past! Worry not over these trifles!"

"'Trifles'? My good duke, how is routing an ally a 'small' matter? I shudder to think what you consider routine. Razing the country to the ground? What's a bit above average—blowing apart the continent? And big? I shudder to think! Please, let's not talk of cataclysms like that. But then, how to discuss Haruka at all? To him, a kingdom is little more than a minor detail!"

States had power, yes, but one exercised at a lumbering pace—one too slow for this kind of destruction. Powers of state did not turn tragedies into comedies overnight; rather, they were dull and unresponsive systems that strained to keep tragedy at bay at all. It was comparing apples to oranges. We could not even imitate the boy's power.

The frontier's defense had been an expensive, thorny problem from the moment of Diorelle's inception. The solution was simple enough to say: kill all the monsters, take all their spellstones, turn them to cash, and let the crowds come rolling into the frontier. Problem solved. Was the might of the state up to the task Haruka had accomplished? Absolutely not!

"Duke Meropapa, you claim everything is resolved, but I cannot see how this could be possible. Gamehlein's issues are ingrained so deeply it is inconceivable all could be solved."

"Why not? The beastfolk are strong, hardworking souls. If we arm them to the teeth and build them forts to garrison, what slave trader could stand up to them? Gamehlein will not fall—not while it is fortified with weapons, medicines, and a bounty of food. They are stout warriors with the finest agricultural knowledge. Grieve for them no longer, Your Majesty. Gamehlein will stand against its foes."

Gamehlein was blessed with a fortuitous combination of geographic features. It boasted a large floodplain with a nearby volcano whose frequent deposits of ash and silt nurtured a lush woodland. All Haruka had to say was, "Yup, so what if we throw up some walls and carve out a fort or three? Yeah, and then we kind of reroute that river to serve as a moat? Let's get those rocks out of there and let the water in instead. Makes for a better harvest? Win-win? Good thing the Beast Nation's got such great geography," and the problem was settled. Haruka and his companions crafted a defense system out of the land itself. Their chief concern was fortifying water routes for the Gamehlein. However, these waterways wove through the thick jungles, wherein the beastfolk fighters were at their best. Armed appropriately, you could find no finer warriors on the continent. Perhaps Meropapa was right. Perhaps the problem truly was solved.

"We labored over this issue for years. Was it truly so simple?"

"The beastfolk do not love water, and they lack mastery of sailing. Their numbers mean little when the many waterways running through their land prevent them from staging a proper defense. On such occasions they drove

their foes to flee, they lacked the naval ability to pursue the enemy and strike a finishing blow. It is little wonder their forces became so drained. But it is far more difficult to attack a fortified foe from the water, no? We never considered this before, as this tactic was not feasible. Who has ever heard of shaping the landscape into a system of natural defenses? Without such an idea, of course we never stood a chance. Do you see the beauty of it? It is moving mountains with nothing but the power of water. It is as the boy said—‘Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it (oh yeah, and magical abilities), and I shall move the earth.’ Wisdom, Your Majesty. True wisdom.”

One would never think to move a mountain with magic because it was impossible. It would be a waste of effort to try. But if a boulder could be lifted with a lever, then I supposed a land feature could. Levers and magic were a match made in heaven, according to Haruka, who also claimed we had long since lost sight of physics, as we’d grown too dependent on magic. He advised us to consider first what we might accomplish without magical means before defaulting to spells and sorcery.

“Do you see it now? The genius of it?”

“‘See?’ I wouldn’t trust my eyes if I had seen it. This is more extraordinary than any magic I’ve ever heard of.”

One of Haruka’s male companions claimed, “If magic can handle 1% of the work, physics can do the rest.” He and his cohorts whipped up their blueprints and sang the praises of the stick Haruka carried everywhere. What did they call it again? The “almighty lever?”

With such a fantastical theory and Haruka’s overwhelming magical might, he and his classmates transformed one geological feature after another into an enormous fortress wrapping around the entire kingdom. It was something beyond magic. It was Alchemy, an art the church decried as blasphemous and vile trickery. Such a marvelous method, such a frightening feat! When the boys in Haruka’s group saw what he’d done, what did they say? Well... “That’s no fair, man. Magic is cheating!” On the contrary—this was far more extraordinary

than magic.

“Haruka claims the children at the orphanage school will grow up to learn Alchemy. Until that moment, I’d been so euphoric over these twists of fate that I’d have been content to die on the spot. Yet now that I know the frontier’s children will master such feats, I yearn to live forever. To see the future. I wonder how much good fortune awaits us. Only a few months ago, we scabbled for any coveted crumb of happiness we could get our hands on! Ah, what am I saying? We’ve already been blessed with fortune beyond our wildest dreams, and here I am hoping for more. What a greedy creature is man!”

“Speak for yourself. I would not mind dying on the spot. I grow weary of having the daylights shocked out of me every two seconds. I used to think, ‘Surely there can’t be any further surprises,’ but now I’ve given up all hope. I fear I’ll wake up one day and realize this is all a fever dream brought on by my prior illness. No, no. The reality we live in has grown so fantastic that dreams feel more real than waking. The tall tales we used to tell as drunken youths are laughable to recall, now. Even when in our cups, we dreamed too small.”

I sighed. We laughed at our foolish boyhood dreams as the mantle of maturity settled on our shoulders. This laughter—oh, *this* laughter—was that of men on the cusp of madness. We once envisioned a future too fantastic to achieve even with the entire heft of our being placed behind it. Even that future was a paltry, insignificant thing in the face of our current fortune. We once fought to prevent our wispy, fragile hopes from being crushed under the heel of unyielding reality...only for the cruelest of realities to crumble around us. Now a new future stretched out before us, one filled with happiness beyond our dreams.

Oh, damn it all. Perhaps I, too, should swear undying obeisance to the boy. Not now, but soon. I could feel my wits beginning to collapse under the weight of my fortune. Not once had I expected I would long for the day when being buried in work would be a welcome return to mundanity. Mankind was not meant to live with happiness that outpaced our fantasies. It flummoxed us. Such boundless opportunity, such sprawling vision, was a paralytic. It robbed us

of the power of speech.

“The root of this mess is the Theocracy, and even now, I see little we can do about them...”

“Yes. All who try to rectify their evil soon give up hope. The Church is far too complex, far too sinister. But Haruka has no intention of untangling their wickedness. He’d rather bash their collective skulls in, I suspect. At any rate, I must be off to the Beast Nation to continue talks. Do write up a response for the king’s letter, Your Majesty. With haste, if you could.”

Gathering small forces to move a larger, implacable obstacle was foreign to us. Only the calamity known as Haruka would solve an immovable object by destroying it. Frankly, none but Haruka would *want* to consider such an idea.

That child of calamity was now an envoy of Diorelle. Call me old-fashioned, but I had never heard of an envoy who had his kingdom at his mercy... *Oh well*. He was now in the Theocracy. He now spoke with Diorelle’s authority, according to international law—the absurdity! The thought alone made me laugh.

I sent the boy to deliver tidings of friendship to Gamehleim and this, Duke Meropapa told me, made me responsible. I dumped everything on him: the gigantic glory, the herculean honor, the weight of complaints. Even now, I supposed, he was out there saving someone. With all I owed him, bearing responsibility for his actions was a small price to pay. Would that I could repay even a fraction of all he’d done for us! I would gladly have given my head for him. ...*All right—but let us revisit those complaints first*. I could never piece together what Haruka had done by examining his wake. How was I supposed to handle something beyond my powers of comprehension? Yes, Haruka had built a ring of fortifications around the Beast Nation. That was all very well. But what did he mean by “Let’s hope it doesn’t tank the neighborhood’s property values”? And what, pray tell, did “*moe*” mean?

Noble titles were once so coveted in Diorelle that I laughed to hear such jostling for power had fallen out of favor. But it was true. The throne, once hotly

contested, was now *too* safe. *Oh dear*. I hoped this wouldn't be bad for Diorelle. Perhaps I would have to put up signs on street corners: *Aristocrats Wanted*.

No, I knew I had never earned my subjects' respect. Now there was something akin to pity in their eyes when they looked at me. Surely a king shouldn't be pitied! That could not be what was best for a country. Why did everyone look at me and go, "Oh, you poor thing"?! Before long, they would have to put up a whole different sign on street corners: "Kings Wanted! Slackers Punished with Calamity!"

DAY 107

NIGHT

All I'm doing is farming! Like farm-to-fork? So why'd they tell me I should farm-to-go-fork-yourself?

A TOWN IN THE THEOCRACY

A BLACK-CLOAKED FIGURE skulked through the night.

Tentacles jabbed the shadowy ground, puncturing savage holes in the earth. The figure gouged brutal gashes up and down the field. For he was... Yes...!

Planting potatoes.

Which raised the question: how did he manage to make farming sinister?

"Thanks for your hard work, Haruka-kun!"

"Hm? You planted turnips, too?"

"Are these taro roots?"

After the Church army swept through and scarfed up every bit of produce they could get their hands on, these fields lay barren. Haruka-kun had to plant potatoes as an emergency crop. He used Vibration magic to vibrate the rocks and sticks in the soil to bits, Magic Hands to level the terrain and till the soil, and Magic Threads to raze every weed. It looked like farming from hell—the kind of thing you would see in a nightmare. People said gardening can be calming, but I just didn't see it.

"I could pump them full of magic and make them grow faster, but root vegetables grow quickly, anyway. I'm not sure how things are different in fantasy lands, but let's say turnips take a month or two to come up. Potatoes take, what, three months? 'Cause the army yinked all the food in the area, we gotta focus on plants with a quick turnaround. Maybe I should have brought the nerds."

Haruka-kun stuck his hand into the soil and channeled magic into it via Alchemy. That was to make it more fertile. Then he mixed in grass clippings and kitchen scraps and induced decay with magic to hit the ideal ratio of carbon to nitrogen in the soil.

Unfortunately, he said, that was the extent of his agricultural know-how. He was (ostensibly) only a run-of-the-mill high schooler. To do anything further, we needed Oda-kun's friends and their bizarre interest in botany. Granted, Oda-kun and his friends were supposed to be run-of-the-mill high schoolers too. Back on Earth, they didn't attend an agricultural school, right? I'd have noticed.

"We all went to the same school! Who knows how they ended up masters of agriculture and engineering? Remember how excited they were to be teleported into a fantasy world? Maybe they were latent geniuses whose talents wouldn't emerge until they left Earth."

"I could see that."

In the frontier's industrial revolution, the nerds were the men behind the curtain. I suppose it took getting isekai'd for their talents to shine.

Meanwhile, the sinister black-cloaked figure slapped a hand on his waist with all the worldly weariness of an exhausted day laborer...never mind the fact that the Magic Hands did all the work. Haruka-kun just kind of stood there!

"He also used Alchemy to change the soil composition."

"Ah ha. That explains why the plants are sprouting already."

The nerds' knowledge was tantamount to a cheat ability, but knowledge alone was nothing without hands-on experience. They needed to combine their thorough know-how with Haruka-kun's skills to unlock this slapdash farming cheat code.

"I think potatoes are in season right now, but turnips are a spring or fall crop, right? It's probably early summer now? Or maybe it's just warm. But yeah, let's plant it and see what happens? Maybe plants just grow faster on the frontier? I

don't know."

He wasn't wrong. We didn't know much about the world we now lived in. This was a land of sword and sorcery, and even our half-remembered science facts and bits of miscellaneous trivia seemed amazing to the inhabitants of this world.

"Now that we're on the subject, Kakizaki-kun and the other athletic guys don't know the first thing about agriculture, economics, industry... Are we sure they're cut out to be nobles?"

"Don't worry. The macho chicks are nobles in name only. All the governing gets done by the smaller noble houses under them. The macho chicks' families are sort of like figureheads, ya know? A bunch of idiots the kingdom keeps around for military purposes."

Which was Haruka-kun's (long, roundabout) way of saying that he was worried too.

Despite how they postured, the boys in our class cared for each other. They constantly made fun of one another, but it was only playfighting, the way puppies or little kids fought with their siblings. A little part of me wished I could be a part of it. I wished I could see how the boys acted when we girls weren't around; I yearned to join in on their rougher teasing.

Anyway, it turned out that Haruka-kun wasn't much of a farmer. According to him, anyway.

"Don't stress it, Haruka-kun. Most high schoolers don't know the first thing about farming."

"Yeah! I don't think you're that bad either."

"Besides, tentacle-powered agriculture is too weird for *anyone* to wrap their head around! Even you!"

Maybe it was all the magic in the land, but mushrooms sprouted on the frontier like, well, mushrooms. Crops, too. But the further you went from the

frontier, the slower plants grew. Eventually, you reached a point where agriculture proceeded at the same pace it did back on Earth.

Plants just grew—like plants were supposed to, as opposed to the monsters in the frontier forest, which did something closer to respawning. They lived normal, mundane lives, and the trade-off was that they needed to grow their own food. With the church gearing up for war by stripping every town, village, and hamlet of their last crumb of food, that was a real problem.

Even if the church were to reestablish its stranglehold on the spellstones trade, they would only conquer a starving nation. All the money in the world couldn't feed a whole country's worth of people.

"Do you think they can defeat Omui or Diorelle?"

"That's a good question. I mean, they've armed themselves to the teeth. Their armies drill day in and day out."

"Do we stand a chance against the full force of the church?"

"What if they set off another dungeon deluge?"

I wasn't about to say it in so many words, but Nefertiri-san was proof that we were in for a tough fight. Before Haruka-kun used Servitude on her, she was a level 100 dungeon emperor. And the church was powerful enough to capture and enslave her!

"What if they bypass the Beast Nation altogether and attack Diorelle by water?"

"That'll never happen. They'll get sunk by our pirate nerderedoes."

"Yeah. Oda-kun says they have more torpedoes than they know what to do with."

"I don't know. I don't trust that. We don't know the full extent of the church's technology, but most of it looks shabby. They have to be hiding some sort of secret weapon, you know? They must have a crap-ton of dungeon equipment. Where is it? It doesn't make sense for their armies to be so weak if the church

has this many spellstones and magic items. Where's the catch? You feel me?"

I didn't know how it worked—was it some kind of magic item? A piece of equipment? A spell?—but anyway, if all of my classmates lunged at Nefertiri-san and didn't care about making it out alive...then maybe we could have taken her. *Maybe*. That meant the church could be hiding something just as strong as us. Maybe even stronger.

"Still, I thought we wiped out the Church's elite units in the war with the kingdom."

"Yeah. And we didn't let them recover their equipment."

"I'm scared they'll start using disposable weapons. You know, land mines and grenades and stuff."

"If it helps, I've never heard of spellstone-powered grenades."

"Yeah, that'd be a huge waste of spellstones."

"Haruka-kun has some. He gives them out to other people, but he doesn't use them himself. Too much of a waste, he says."

"Yeah, 'cause I make them as part of my side hustle. If I use them, that only means I have to make more? Which is a waste of my time?"

"True."

Plus, we couldn't afford to forget about the Obedience Necklace the Church used on Nefertiri-san. They covered her sarcophagus with oodles of charms and sigils, no doubt to strengthen their hold on her. But the Necklace was bad enough on its own.

We didn't know anything about it, not even where it came from. Was it a piece of dungeon equipment? Some relic from antiquity? Or even a magic item the Church cooked up? Our lack of knowledge was why Haruka-kun didn't want us to go to the Theocracy. If it hadn't been for Arianna-san and the other nuns, he probably would have charged in guns blazing and taken everyone out, be they man, woman, or child.

Even if attacking indiscriminately worked—and I'm not saying it would—countless innocents would die, and Haruka-kun would suffer for it. Haruka-kun would only have chosen that if he'd considered the problem from every angle and decided it was the best option. I knew he wouldn't regret the choice, but it would break him. The responsibility would torture him. I couldn't let him do it. That's why we were all here in the Theocracy with him, Obedience Necklace be damned.

Were we ready to face it? Of course not. Look at Nefertiri-san. As strong as she was, stopping the brutal force of the Necklace's magic from completely taking over her destroyed her body. We couldn't possibly do that. We weren't strong enough, and we didn't have Nefertiri-san's mental fortitude. Worse, we all knew what would happen if a young girl was collared and subjugated—the most tragic thing that could happen to a young girl.

We didn't waver. We needed to follow Haruka-kun to the Theocracy. We couldn't let Haruka-kun shoulder the burden—the pain—all alone. A secret promise burned in all of us. If the horror, our worst nightmare, came to pass, we all swore to ourselves, *I'll kill my friends before they have to be subjected to that. I know they'll do the same for me.*

Haruka-kun couldn't be the one to kill us. We could not be the source of Haruka-kun's pain. And, most of all, we could *never* let Haruka-kun watch us undergo that kind of torture.

Even this late in the game, Haruka-kun labored to build walls and expand fortresses—protect us all—with the little MP he had left. Even with his vast MP reserves, the effort must have caused a skull-shattering headache. Every town had parents, children. Families. After Haruka-kun lost his parents and older sister, he no doubt saw them in every corpse he passed. That's why he refused to abandon any one of us. That's why he anguished whenever he couldn't save someone. That's why...we tackled Haruka-kun in the middle of changing into our armor.

“Nice job, Haruka-kun!” *bwom bwom*

“You’re done already? You’re so fast!” *squishity squoosh*

“Aww! Those fortifications look *great!*” *squoozy squooze*

“You good on MP? Can I get you anything?” *pwomp pwomp*

“You’re sweating, poor thing! Here, let me wipe you down with a nice steamy towel.” *schmap schmap*

“You did it, Haruka-kun!” *wab wub*

Nothing like burying Haruka-kun under a booby pile to make him feel better. Except it didn’t look like it was helping! He looked like he was running for his life, dodging flying girls left and right, a look of perverted glee painted across his face. Haruka-kun was a sucker for our new outfits. He couldn’t keep his eyes—regular or Jupiter—off of us. Wisdom was using up every bit of his brainpower to get this on record, leaving him completely useless at our mercy. All thanks to our miniskirt sailor school uniforms with knee-high socks and stockings!

“Whoa! No, bad idea! Hands off the pants! No wiping the inside of my pants, or I’m wiping out! Steamy towels are too steamy! And before all that, sto—no—keep your clothes on! Before all that, it wasn’t even my flesh and blood body doing actual work! It was all virtual! The metaverse, not meatspace! I have no sweat to wipe, dammit!”

He spent all day yesterday laboring alone in the Beast Nation, constructing his fortresses and apologizing, which explained why he was so quiet today. Well, as quiet as Haruka-kun got. We put him through his fun ordeal with minimal yapping. My point was, he must have been virtually out of MP.

He must have been so drained, so fatigued and pained, that he could barely move. Even now, right by his side, we still weren’t any help. Try as we might, we were more a bother than an aid. If we couldn’t offer anything else, the least we could do was make him feel better. If only he would let us make him smile! *Come on, Haruka-kun. Be a good boy and sit still! Don’t worry, we don’t bite... much.*

“Hey, self-proclaimed bodyguards! Yoo-hoo, dungeon emperors! A little help here? No, don’t bring a fresh towel! Will you stop taking my equipment and running?! Hey, stop—whoa—gwah—Teleport!”

Bwoom!

“Wha—hold the pho—did you just repel my supershort-range ultrahigh-speed Teleport with a booby *bwoom*?! You...you...you made space itself go *bwoom*!”

Ah, nothing like a full-body massage from steamy girls equipped with equally steamy towels, a labor of love (and a fair amount of maidenly curiosity) focused on healing and replenishing the body and soul. *Look!* He fainted with happiness!

We left Nefertiri-san and Angelica-san to handle the R-rated parts of this story. They dragged away their spoils of war with glee. Judging by the expression on Haruka-kun’s face, he was in heaven. Well, he looked dead inside. Close enough, right?

And then, from their lovely lips winked a sliver of tongue that ever so slowly began to lick and suck and slurp in a tantalizing, mesmerizing way! None of us had X-Ray Vision, but Presence Sensing and enhanced hearing gave us a true X-rated vision. *I have to wonder...is there a more advanced form of Presence Sensing? Guess we’ll find out!*

DAY 106

MORNING

Mayday! Major misgivings of a male misfire mishap!

A CITY IN THE THEOCRACY

THAT SETTLED IT. The farther from the frontier, the slower magic regenerated. I still hadn't made a full recovery from building the Beast Nation's system of defenses, so moonlighting as the renovator of this local church for Sister Girl was the icing on the shit-outta-MP cake.

"I have a ton of MP restoration mushrooms, but I should be frugal. I topped up on MP yesterday only for two beautiful girls to suck me dry!"

Smirk. Devious grin.

Last night we rolled out the welcome wagon for itty-bitty sailor suit summer uniforms (miniskirts!), stockings (garter belts!), and fishnet tights (skin!). A female federation of nuns, elves, princesses, maids, and Merimeri tried to peel the clothes off of me—in both senses! It was a harrowing situation for my teenage boyness. They almost creamed me, and I almost creamed my—well, anyway. It was rough out there.

"If I'd blown my load, I'd have blown it! Creaming myself in public is a one-way ticket back to the cave and being a shut-in for life. I'm already a Shut-In!"

I begged my teenage boyness to cool its jets, used Blockhead on it to prevent an ejaculation of agitation, and...lost consciousness. When I came to, I found myself bound in chains and staring at an unfamiliar ceiling. *Like my old buddy Prometheus.*

Dancer Girl crouched between my chained legs, her hands clasped between her thighs and her breathing ragged. Then, next thing I knew, Miss Armor Rep's beautiful buttocks dominated my vision!

Oh, she waggled those plump thighs in my face, and every wriggly writhe was

accompanied by the SFX of gorgeous gasps and pretty pants. There was no time to negotiate terms. The girls pouted and puffed like they weren't into it, but their actions told another story. *Kyaa!* This was too l-l-lewd!

"Wait a minute, I know that trick. Puffing up your cheeks and shaking your head no is one of the most dirty tactics of n-n-naughty girls!"

Smirk. Innocent smile.

Their lips and hot, hot breath ghosted over my teenage boyness. What ensued was another endurance battle of my nether regions versus the sweet stimulation of their mighty mouths!

'Twas a long, long night, and yea, the morning of revenge ne'er dawned. My MP batteries were empty. Revenge wasn't gonna happen. I hoped to get a single counterattack in before dawn, but when I woke up, I *snapped* awake to bright daylight. Miss Armor Rep and Dancer Girl had both risen before me and were now changing into their armor. Yeah, revenge was not happening today!

"You sense something? Wow. I'm surprised they got so close."

"I sense, their presences, concealed."

"Presence concealing magic. Messes with nearby magic."

It was an army; apparently, one with stealth magic items. By the time we noticed them, the army was already lining up in battle formation in front of the town. I hadn't expected word to reach the church and the church to spring into action so quickly. Yes, I knew they had soldiers garrisoned not far from town. But come on! This, after two nights running of my poor teenage boyness's honor slandered, soiled, sundered, and sullied with nary a chance of redeeming his name? Couldn't a guy catch a break? I had pretty girls changing clothes to watch, okay?

Besides, these soldiers were here too early. I hadn't even put up a city gate yet.

"It's a work in progress! I put a sign up that says, 'Construction zone. Do not

enter.’ Maybe these soldiers don’t know how to read—neither the sign *nor* the room. Tsk!”

Once suited up in their armor, the girls assembled and marched off to the gateless town gates. As they did, five messengers came forward from the army bearing a white flag of peace. They appeared to be unarmed, but that made no difference when they had such powerful magic tools covering them from head to toe. They wanted to lure us into a false sense of security and strike at our weakest link.

The girls were all for hearing out these messengers. They kept a wary eye on the soldiers, but the bulk of their attention had been diverted to the envoys. *No sense of tactics!* Messengers could play a crucial role in a bigger operation. Maybe these messengers were scouts seeking intel. Or maybe they were a special strike unit aiming to assassinate our leader. Alternatively, if we accepted their request for negotiations, the messengers could keep us occupied and buy time for the army to perform other moves.

“We come as envoys from the Orthodox Church of Canatia on behalf of His Eminence the pope to convey his greetings to Princess Ariel Ann Aryuca. Should you lay down your weapons and come with us, you have his word that he will not harm a hair on your head. Please, Your Highness. We beg you cooperate with us.”

Despite my concerns, the girls banned me from interceding on their behalf. They insisted on being the main fighting force in this war.

“Pray forgive me, but last I looked into it, His Eminence was not the rightful ruler of this country. I, Shalliceres du Diorelle, act on behalf of my nation to safeguard the Princess Ariel. Diorelle rejects His Eminence’s supposed ‘authority.’ You dare meet us with an army? This is the height of impertinence. Should the pope wish to speak with her, she will greet him as a guest in *her* country. We will not treat with you. I shall deign to forgive your insolence this once. You had best return from whence you came.”

The girls were trying to sever themselves from the chain of command and join the war under their own banner. They must have realized that I had intentionally let her out of the battles at the frontier fort and the battle at the gate, so they took matters into their own hands. But this wasn't fighting monsters. These were people. There was nothing glorious about killing people. Change was coming, as much as I wished it wouldn't. None of us would ever be the same again. The time had come for all of us to take up our swords.

"P-Princess Shalliceres! My gravest apologies for the discourtesy! However, you must understand what a complete violation of protocol it is for a princess to enter another country without notice! I am afraid we have no choice but to bring you before the pope as well."

Oh, snap! Princess Girl pulled the "Don't you know who I am card?" and they did, in fact, know who she was. Back in Japan, everyone had a distinct signature seal for proving their identity. I was fresh out of seals—was a hydra or chickenatrice close enough? But even without them, these church messengers knew it was Shillyshally.

"Why should I need permission from anyone other than the princess of Aryuca? Diorelle maintains a diplomatic relationship with Aryuca through the *king*. Must I remind you that I am not here to talk religion? I thank you to leave the ruling families to discuss matters of state."

"Y-your Highness, His Eminence Pope Bimbyzaal is acting regent, and as such, he is the master of all affairs in church and state. Alas, we do not recognize permission from any other source. Th-this thereby constitutes an illegal intrusion on foreign soil."

They wouldn't recognize our permission, but who cared about permission? What was permission to an enemy of god?

"It is a violation of international law for one outside the royal family to name *himself* king without diplomatic recognition. Speak not of wrongdoing to me when His Eminence stands guilty!"

“The cheek! We have already discussed the matter with the Empire and the Merchant Kingdom. All that is left is formality. Meanwhile, our discussions with the other nations move swiftly apace, and all save Diorelle are in tacit agreement that His Eminence is the rightful ruler of Aryuca. Negotiations between Diorelle and the Aryucan royal family are immaterial. Your Highness, I insist you lay down your weapons and come with us.”

Sounded like a whole lotta polite mumbo-jumbo to me. I lost track of what the hell they were talking about. Who was this Dio-whatsit person? Diarrhea? And who were those three old dudes standing behind the envoys? Why were their eyes fixed on me even while they pretended they were there for the negotiations?

“Why should the house of Diorelle stand down for an unrecognized and illegitimate authority? We have no diplomatic relations with you. This provisional rule is an illegal and open rebellion. You think I make peace with rebels? You *might* insist that I need permission from King Aryuca to visit his country. Very well! But then I demand that you show me the king’s seal decreeing this law. Go back the way you came and tell this usurper, your self-proclaimed master, I will have naught to do with this farce.”

“I must warn you, Your Highness—slander His Eminence, and you will be branded an enemy of God.”

Oh, like me?

The princess and the envoys continued duking it out. Neither side ceded a centimeter in the verbal war, but as the minutes ticked away, the physical front edged closer to our doorstep. The soldiers advanced up to the city gates—or where the gates would be if we hadn’t blown them off. Couldn’t they read the sign? Off limits, people! The place was a literal construction zone!

“Your pope has forgotten the teachings of his own God. He labels the people of the frontier—the very people who keep you and me safe in our beds at night—vile and desecrated souls. He names them affronts to God. Were I fortunate

enough to be born there, I should take it as an honor beyond my wildest dreams! Label me an enemy of God, and I shall take up my sword and strike you down as the enemy I am.”

“Let me speak not as your princess but as an archbishop of Canatia. If His Eminence wants me to come before him against my will, he must acquire a resolution of the twelve archdioceses. Then where, pray tell, is it? His Eminence does not have the right to restrain any of the twelve archbishops without due cause. Thus, on what grounds does he demand I leave with you? He brings an army of the Church to my doorstep, precluding any excuse that he wishes to detain me for a personal matter. This arrogance is grounds for papal deposition!”

The old dudes made a sour face, but I still wasn’t having a good time. Even if this was kind of entertaining to watch, I still didn’t want any old dudes. Especially not ones who couldn’t keep their eyes off of me.

Anyway, Princess Girl and Sister Girl were hopping mad. Princess Girl was all like *rawr rawr* and Sister Girl was like *hrrmph!!!* and they were totally threatening those dudes. It got so tense one of the envoys ran back to the main body of the army. Meanwhile, the other envoys kept being all, *God this, God that*, and finally Princess Girl started being like, “Well, did God say that? Did you talk to him? Oh, I’m sorry, did you ask God directly? No? Well, then are *you* God?” *Get his ass, Princess Girl*. The soldiers were trying to psych us out by creeping closer to the town, and she totally ignored it. She just kept on arguing with the envoys.

“Never get in an argument with a girl. They’re scary! I mean, I keep telling them I’m innocent and breaking out the puppy dog eyes, but it never works.”

Then a hot lady church knight rolled up and joined the envoys!

“Your Highness, I welcome you in your official capacity as princess. Tensions between the Church and the state do little but harm our country and its royal family. His Eminence has sworn to do you no harm, and so I must ask that you

come with us.”

This lady was smoking hot but had some serious resting bitch face. Her armor was frickin’ next level, which suggested she was more badass than baddie. If she was someone I’d be down bad for, then she wouldn’t have been in armor, right? *That’s just logic.* Plus, she was level 49. That was good, compared to the rest of the church army.

“The pope besieges my royal father’s palace with his army, and he says he will do me no harm? Is this a joke? If so, it is a monstrous one. I do not even ask why he sets troops against us. Were there reason for it, the pope would surely have come himself and spoken to our family. Instead, he has sent an army after me and demanded I return to him in chains. Does this man have no shame? When did the paladins of the Church become the pope’s private army? When did you decide to defy God and our nation’s laws? Pray, when did you fall on all fours and become His Eminence’s private guard dogs?”

“W-we serve the Church, Your Highness! Before all else, we do as the Church decrees. Do you object? Are you not archbishop?”

I couldn’t get a word in edgewise. RBF Church Knight Lady was tough, but even she was no match for Sister Girl. Not after all that training. And Princess Girl? Princess Girl could eat this chick for breakfast.

“The Church forces protect God’s teachings. Who told you this translates to being the pope’s private army? Furthermore, ’tis a disgrace that the Church has such ties to the state, even if these bonds are more common law than formal covenant. God teaches that the Church has no country, and this, my dear Leticia, is what I take objection to! Please...don’t tell me you’ve sided with the pope. Not you.”

“Your Highness, the Church’s very existence is at stake! You must understand me. Everything I do is...is for the good of God.”

“It is our duty as His followers to spread the word of God far and wide. The Church is nothing more than the sum of His believers. So long as man believes

in God, the Church will live on. No, do you know what is really at stake? The pope and his conspirators. You dare use the Lord's name in vain for earthly power-hunger? Such blasphemy goes beyond reckoning. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

This looked like it was going to take a while, sooooo... Was there time to go back to the inn and squeeze in a little revenge? And everybody was starving. The horizontal battle lines devolved into vertical sandwich-passing chains.

"Man, I could go for a cup of coffee. But you can't go wrong with a good sandwich and a mushroom tea cuppa. Ya know? I like my coffee black as night and bitter as hell."

(Psst! Aim for the weak-looking dude! He's barely got any levels on him.)

(Hup! Got him!)



(Good, now that we've taken our hostage, let's get the hell out of here. Don't let them catch us!)

(What were they thinking, taking this weakling into negotiations? Buncha idiots.)

(All right, you lot. Move out!)

(Ma'am, yes, ma'am!)

So yeah, I guess I got kidnapped while I was plating up breakfast? I mean, I knew they were coming. I could sense them, ya know? But when they came leaping out from behind a hot babe with RBF and a big sword, there's only so much you can do. For teenage boy reasons, of course.

"Oh nooo! I've been kidnapped! I guess?"

I could've used my wiggly bois (that is, tentacle counterattack hell) but I was terrified of the looks the kidnappers would have given me. So I didn't put up a fight. I just let them pull me into their arms and run off with me while I lay there, helpless and pitiful. Unfortunately, with all this armor, this wasn't the most titillating of kidnappings. But if they were in costume? Hoo mama. *Look, I have tons of costumes, and I can always whip up something fresh. Whaddya in the mood for, ladies? Bunny outfits? Maid costumes? Sailor uniforms?*

"Ahem. Is anyone listening? Is this thing on? Oh. No. I'm so scared. Help me. Like, scream and stuff."

Ah, that was more like it! Finally got a glare.

DAY 108
MORNING

I tried to play the helpless damsel, but that proved to be a damn hard sell.

A CITY IN THE THEOCRACY

THESE THEOCRACY KNIGHTS thought I was a random NPC, so they kidnapped me like a damsel in distress. Uh, teen boy in distress? Point being, RBF Knight Lady came out of nowhere, locked me in her arms, and hauled me back to the enemy camp.

“No offense, but getting pinioned by a chick in armor’s not comfy, ya know? You probably can’t take off the armor either. Whoever made that stuff didn’t know what they were doing. Look at those loose joints! Those things could fall apart at any minute.”

Long story short, I was the teenage boy skin on the damsel in distress fighter. *I gotta wonder, is there any demand for that kind of thing?*

“You can torture me all you want, RBF Knight Lady! You can poke me, prod me, bend me over, tell me to spill the beans and I... I just might! I’ve bean known to spill! Yeah, I’ve bean there, done that?”

Instead, she was like “Don’t move another step, or I’ll kill him!” ...But no one even looked up. Instead, the girls sat around eating their sandwiches and sighing, “Oh, not this BS again.” *Excuse me? Innocent, flexible teenage boys are being held captive as we speak?*

“Uh, hello? Vulnerable high school boy here? I’ve been kidnapped? Yeah, woe is me? You know what they do to kidnapped teenagers in stories like this. Hey, what are you glaring at me for?”

“I hate to do this,” RBF Knight Lady said, “but our hands are tied. Listen here! We’ve taken this boy prisoner! He is clearly a person of great importance, thus, I demand you lay down your arms. Surrender, or else...he perishes, and we

march! What will it be, Princess Ariel?!”

The girls looked back at her in polite, sandwich-eating bafflement. Today’s menu was pork cutlet braised in miso and sesame sauce sandwiches. They were a huge hit with this crowd.

“Nothing? Hello? Not even a ‘Let him go!’ or a ‘Don’t worry, we’ll get you out of there!’? A sexy knight is holding me hostage! I’m in deep doo-doo here! Just think, a poor, defenseless high school boy against a lady who’s gonna make me spill my beans ;) Why are you glaring at me?! I mean, those are some great glares if I do say so myself, but... Uh. Anyhow, back on track. Oh no. Somebody help. Waaah. You know?”

The monotone might not have been doing me any favors.

There were old dudes everywhere, but who cared? I was caught in RBF Knight Lady’s clutches, and clutch she did! If I had my way, I would have preferred being locked in her embrace alone... But no, here we were in public. I guess we were putting on a show?

“Wait, is this some kind of exhibitionist kink thing? Fine by me! You seem like a bombshell babe under all that armor. Now if only we could get it off of you. Yeah, it’s hard and pokey?”

“Oh no! Our local sex pes—I mean, Haruka has been kidnapped!”

“Leticia, what could have possessed you to do such a thing? The boy is dangerous! For so very many reasons... Think of your chastity!”

“If he’s an enemy of god, does kidnapping him equal an act of good?”

“Doesn’t make him any less dangerous.”

“Or any less of a royal pain. We should slap a hazardous materials label on him.”

“He one hundred percent let himself get kidnapped.”

“This court hereby finds him guilty! If a man tried to lay their mitts on him, he would’ve thrashed them to death.”

Uh, rude? More false accusations? Against me, the victim of kidnapping by a woman with a smoking hot bod?!

“Of course I’d thrash any old dude who’d tried to get me in his arms! I’m scared to imagine who *wouldn’t*!”

You had to spell everything out for these girls! This was the most untrue accusation yet! Apparently, we kidnapping victims had to serve as our own defense lawyers!

“Are you sure you don’t care what happens to him? Look, his hair is black as coal. Is he not a guest of the kingdom of Diorelle? Should any harm befall him, the Theocracy of Aryuca will answer for it. I do not make this threat idly! We *will* kill him!”

Again, the look of polite befuddlement.

“Why are you just sitting there eating your sandwiches?! Oh, for the love of—are you going back for *seconds*? Dancer Girl! Miss Armor Rep! Is now really the time to pass around cups of mushroom tea? Weren’t you supposed to be my guard? I guess this fits your track record—you never were much good at being blindfolds either.”

Welp. Now that I was kidnapped, it was time to bust out the tried-and-true tricks of the trope.

“Ahem. Oh no! They’re going to kill me. AHM. Oh noooo? I’ve been abducted. AHM?! Help. I’m being held hostage. *A-hem*. Won’t you come rescue me, my lord? If you’re man enough to handle me, click here to start your journey now. Ya know?”

I really needed to work on that whole “emotions” thing...

All my classmates tensed up. No doubt my anguished laments had moved them. So why were they glaring at me?

“Yeah, we’ll come to the rescue...of the knight! To free her from the sex god she has in her arms!”

“Or his terrible traps that rob you of all your worldly possessions and income!”

“Perhaps the call for help was her sanity begging to be saved from the terror known as Haruka-kun.”

“Yeah, I’m not eager to go running to his rescue when he’s saying, ‘Help me! AHEM HEM!’ with such a big grin on his face...”

Why was the church army tense, too? Maybe they were just waiting for RBF Knight Lady to slip into a calisthenics routine so they could slip their hands into some other places. Hell, I wouldn’t have minded slipping her a tentacle either.

Just then, seizing the opportunity, Dancer Girl and Miss Armor Rep spun into action. There was no forewarning; one second they were still, the next, gone. They swooped in like swallows in flight, armed with shining silver...platters?

“Master. We need, more cutlet sandwiches! And egg ones.”

“Yes! Not nearly enough sandwiches. Everyone, demands more.”

“...Um, okay?” Cue the *schplat* of sandwich on silver.

“Thank you.” Cue the *schwoop* of pretty girls zooming away.

As the swallow beat its wings and wended home once more, so too did Dancer Girl and Miss Armor Rep fly away from me for breakfast to resume once more. My sandwiches were a big hit. Too big, in fact... *Did I make enough? New fear unlocked.*

“Wh-wh-wha—what in Heaven’s name was that? Can someone tell me what just happened? Wha. Wha. *Wha?!?*”

“It was exactly *wha wha wha* it looked like. They were getting their second breakfast. *Ahem?* I’m just a poor slave to my side jobs. Day in and day out, I break my back making them meals and overcharging them out of the goodness of my heart. And they’re always asking for seconds! It wears a man down, *ahem?* Anyway, would you mind taking the armor off? ‘Cause, *ahem*, this really isn’t comfortable for me.”

Now RBF Knight Lady was glaring at me! Damn, she knew her way around a glare. Still, she had a long way to go before she could even hope to glare like the guild receptionist lady. Thinking of the guild, had they changed the signboard yet? *I should check.*

“N-no more funny business, or this boy’s life is forfeit! I-I don’t know what you think you’re doing, but I won’t have it! Look! I’ll cut off one of his arms, see if I don’t!”

That prompted a net zero response from my classmates. Well, outside of a lot of chewing. No movement on the hostage-rescuing front.

“Is not a one of you concerned? What, is this man not one of your number?”

“Kind of? If we’re going to split hairs, I’m technically a loner? I’m just sorta hanging out with them for the time being.”

Yeah, I really hadn’t made enough sandwiches. Sister Girl and her gang had also become big eaters. They were fans of One More Set.

“Throw down your weapons and cede the princess to us!”

Oh look, an old dude. Some old, overweight fogey in flashy armor pushed and shoved his way through the throng over to us. Yeah, he sure wasn’t doing any One More Sets. He barely fit into his armor. If the girls weren’t careful, they’d end up like hi—excuse me?! I was the hostage here! I was *one of the good guys!* How come the girls were all glaring at *me*?!

“Hey, I don’t feel like much of an ally here! You guys are leaving me to die! What if I start warming up to the enemy, huh? Like Stockholm syndrome? Me ’n RBF Knight Lady might get all buddy-buddy and then all boogity-boogity in the beddity-beddity. Problem is, I’ve never been to Stockholm. Do you think they even have a Stockholm in this world?”

“Silence your impertinent tongue! Lay down your weapons, damn you! Should I cut off a few of this fool’s limbs and throw them at you? Or would you rather I kill this impertinent wretch now and order the attack?!”

How about neither? No old dudes for me. Nuh-uh, I only wanted hot young women. And could they *not* cut off my limbs? I mean, I was kind of attached to them. Also, what did he mean by a “few”? I only had two arms! What a weirdo.

“You’re making it sound like I can sprout weird numbers of arms. Please don’t repeat nasty rumors. Not when my sex appeal’s on the line? Yeah, this is a hydra, not an arm?” *Hiss!* “Common misconception. This, here, is a chickenatrice, which is *not* an arm.” *Cock-a-doodle-doo!* “Man, look at this idiot. Can’t even tell a chicken from an arm.”

“Aggh! You’re a monster!”

“Yeah, that crowing thing’s a chicken, and this wiggly, gropy thing’s an arm. *Capiche?* Hey, why’d you faint? I’m trying to teach you something! Listen to a guy when he’s talking.”

“Monster! Kill it with fire!”

C-cock-a-doodle-doo?

Hiss?!

The soldiers around me bore down on me and tried to overwhelm me with their numbers. It was a classic tactic—throw armored men at the problem until the problem’s MP runs out.

“He’s a monster! A-an affront to God!”

“Slay the fiend!”

“Uh, you were the ones who started calling me that. I didn’t wake up one day and go, ‘You know what? I think I’m an affront to god!’ No one even asked me!”

My mass of tentacles engaged to stop the onrushing swords and sweep them clean out of the soldiers’ hands. Meanwhile, my hydra bobbed and weaved through the gaps to get a mouthful of soldier, while the chickenatrice crowed over it all.

“What are you even doing, chickenatrice? Oh, I see. You’re cursing them, huh?”

Cock-a-doodle-doo!

While they were busy, I used Holding to channel Vibration magic down through my feet and crush the soil. I had been working on a handy-dandy moat and reservoir combo with plans to draw in water from a nearby river. ...It's not like I didn't warn them. I mean, there was a sign, right? I *told* them this was a construction zone.

"Wh-what the?!"

"Aggggh!"

The ground split open underneath the soldiers' feet, sending them falling into the depths with ear-splitting screams. What was it with old dudes and getting buried? I guess they liked it.

"Maybe they're trying to be mole people? I mean, if they wanna just stay buried, I'm cool with it. A world free of old men is a prettier place."

The only one left was RBF Knight Lady, who passed out on the spot...while still holding me. First things first, we needed her out of that constricting armor. But for some reason—remember, I was a kidnapping victim—no one came to my rescue! In fact, the couple dozen girls running my way were doing so with glares, snarls, and raised morning stars. You know what? Maybe it was safest for everyone if the armor stayed on.

Anyway, I stuffed some mushrooms in the mouths of the old dudes still half-buried in what would someday be a moat-slash-reservoir. These bad boys were treated with a dusting of Oof Ouchie Paralysis DX and Mega Itchy Scratchy Powder SP—available now at bargain prices! Still, listening to old dudes groaning in agony wasn't my idea of a good time. I would have preferred to Air Walk—Air Tap Dance, more like—back to town.

For the last time, I'm not taking her armor off! Put away the morning stars! I was terrified of a morning star mauling, but I couldn't exactly go back into town while I was still held—*literally* held, I was pinned under her passed-out body!—

hostage. Either way, I was in for a world of pain!

DAY 108

MIDMORNING

A sitrep on the Theocracy, the Battle of Sandwich Mountain, and mayonnaise for mayodays.

A CITY IN THE THEOCRACY

MY CLASSMATES BOUND AND SEIZED RBF Knight Lady before surrounding and dressing down...me. Wait, me? Not the knight? Where was the logic in that?

“Why don’t we follow the tried-and-true methods, the standard course, the way the game is played? Interrogate the lady knight! I’m the one who got kidnapped. What are you lecturing me for? She kidnapped me! Why is she the sympathetic figure?!”

“That’s not the problem. Why were you *sooo* happy to get kidnapped, huh?”

“You literally hung back to make yourself easier to kidnap.”

“You could see the entire battlefield with Jupiter Eye. There’s no way you couldn’t have seen them sneaking up on you.”

“Exactly. You sensed them from a mile away, but you just sat around and made sandwiches!”

“Guilty. As. Charged. We hereby sentence you to extra sandwich duty!”

My classmates had no room in their hearts for a poor, helpless kidnapping victim.

“The audacity. I went out of my way to make you extra sandwiches while I was in captivity, and this is the thanks I get? I made pork cutlet with sesame sauce in honor of our recent sesame seed acquisition, and you seemed to like it!”

“Yup! Make more of that.”

Sandwiches: round two were halfway down my classmates’ gullets, but I

guess I was still guilty. As much as I tried to remain optimistic, I couldn't help but feel that things never went my way here in this fantasy world. Rather than ask me to atone for my crimes, the girls just slapped me with sesame sauce sandwich shake-downs.

"Tell me, dearest Leticia. Why do you pursue such folly? Has the Church done something to—no! Not the orphanage?"

"...Yes. The orphanage. The papal faction has taken control of it. They...they set me against you, Your Highness. After all you've done for me... Please, end my life. I do not deserve to live any longer. They would have me turn from my loyalty to you to save the lives of the orphans. It is only right I apologize with my head. Your Highness, I beg you. Please kill me."

Sister Girl snarled and bonked RBF Knight Lady on the head. She was pissed. With Sister Girl that furious, no one could step in between her and RBF Knight Lady. No one could speak a word in defense. (Although that was because their mouths were full of sandwich. You would think packing away that many sandwiches would pack on the kilo—nope, I didn't say anything!)

"Do you claim that any life is worthless? As you weighed my life against that of the children you care for, so too must you prove to me just how much your life is worth. Take up your sword and face me, Leticia!"

"Your Highness, surely you jest. I am a Knight of the Scriptures! I cannot take up arms against you, not when you've never held a weapon in your li—bwah?!"

The other girls watched with bated breath and masticating molars. Sister Girl's sword flashed by so quickly it shocked RBF Knight Lady. She lifted her sword to deflect the blow in the nick of time before leaping back and standing at the ready once more. At level 49, she was a hell of a lot weaker than Sister Girl, but she had the skills and footwork of a true swordswoman. A flick of her well-trained eyes re-assessed Sister Girl. The two traded powerful blows and ferocious strikes. RBF Knight Lady gave as good as she got, but she couldn't hide the terror in her eyes.

“Your Highness, where did you learn how to fight? I could have sworn you’d never held a sword!”

“I journeyed to the frontier and saw it with my own eyes. There, even the youngest of children arm themselves with cudgels. The brave battle monsters to eke out their existence. Why do you threaten *those* children, Leticia? Why do *you* wield your sword?!”

The overwhelming majority of sword techniques in this world focused on brute strength bashing. Didn’t matter if it was a monster or just a guy you didn’t like; it was all about results, results, results. Proper fundamentals? What fundamentals?

A sword was simply an extension of a limb, which made swordplay not so different from any other martial art. Failing to understand that turned you into mincemeat. Sister Girl had spent the majority of her training being the meat, and now it was time for her to be the butcher. Sister Girl’s fighting style was messed up; no person-oriented sword fighting could stand against that. After mashing monsters and demolishing dungeons, Sister Girl could never lose to someone at a lower level. Without spirit behind it, a sword was no more than a heavy lump of metal.

The frontier orphans worked their little butts off beating up goblins for pocket cash. Not only did that raise their level, it kept them fit! Each housewife keeping a watchful eye on the kiddos could step in and take an Orc King with one hand tied behind their back. So the kids were safe, just so long as they didn’t insult the housewives by comparing them to an orc. Those housewives were far scarier than any orc!

RBF Knight Lady and Sister Girl fought in a whirling dervish of steel, their swords clashing in a bonfire of sparks. Sister Girl moved as elegantly and fluidly as a ballroom dancer. Here was the difference between people who wasted their energy killing one another versus those who dedicated themselves to saving their loved ones from monsters. It was clear who had fought in the dungeons, and who hadn’t.

“What good is a church that has forsaken its faith? What morality is there to be found in the words of a pope heading a godless congregation? Think of the children who fight in the monster-infested forests to keep our world safe! They are *children*—and you, a knight, would take up your sword in the name of the Church’s dominion? Fie! Fie to that notion, and fie to your sword! I will destroy them both!”

The difference was one of defensive power. RBF Knight Lady overextended and lost her balance when Sister Girl parried her thrust. Sister Girl’s sword swept in—a flash, a side stroke of steel—and struck RBF Knight Lady before she had any time to react. Her sword snapped. Spirit severed in twain by the blade, she slumped to her knees...which sounded cool as hell, but the real reason she stopped was that her sword broke. It was an ordinary equipment failure, completely unconnected to her broken spirit—but the latter *sounded* cool, okay?

With that squared away, Sister Girl explained the what’s-what in the Theocracy and how she knew RBF Knight Lady. My classmates ate it up—that, and the sandwiches. Jeez, those girls had an appetite! They were on round six now! Keep it up, and they’d eat straight from morning to lunch. I’d have to put them through Sergeant Billy’s Bootcamp!

Anyway, back to Sister Girl’s story. RBF Knight Lady started life as Little Orphan Something or Other. When Sister Girl volunteered her aid at the orphanage, the two became fast friends. Eventually, the church recognized her budding talent with the sword and apprenticed her into the church’s paladins. Now she worked for the Knights of the Scriptures to help pay for the orphanage’s upkeep. Basically, she was one of the orphans. But like, the grown-up version.

“By the way, I don’t have anything to do right now. Anyone mind if I fill the moat? These old men poking out of the dirt here are driving me up the wall, and I figure it’ll stop if I flush the moat out with water. Should do wonders for the old dude smell, too. Seriously, I wish they’d stop moaning in pain! It’s kind of

gross.”

“Says the person who buried them in the moat to begin with!”

Once RBF Knight Lady grew up, she became a knight and made her money by hunting monsters. She grew strong enough to receive the lofty title of bishop and an honorable rank in the Knights of the Scriptures at an extraordinarily young age. In honor of these accomplishments, the church financially backed the orphanage, which gathered orphans from all over the country to teach them swordplay and theology. Sister Girl, despite being so busy, had helped.

RBF Knight Lady wasn’t as imposing as her name suggested. Turned out she was an ex-orphan and current orphan caretaker.

My classmates enjoyed the story, nodding along while *still* chowing down on those sandwiches. Miso pork cutlet sandwiches were a hit. Shocker, right? Now, if only those old dudes in the ditch could quiet down, we could have a good thing going here.

“They wouldn’t be making so much noise if *someone* hadn’t poured Mega Itchy Scratchy Powder SP all over them!”

“Exactly. Don’t let the water in yet. The powder would pollute the moat!”

“And before you start, can we have some more sandwiches?”

“And dessert?”

“Big yes to dessert!”

It just went to show how terrifying a trap miso and sesame sauce could be. It was almost noon, and breakfast still showed no signs of ending.

“Um, Your Highness? Might I ask who this boy is? I see odd...squirmly things... behind him...”

RBF Knight Lady must not have been a supporter of all things squirmly, because she fainted the second my tentacles and hydra unfurled. Concerned, my chickenatrice popped out, too, and pecked her to see if she was alive. She was totally unaware. Out cold the whole time.

“No more of this ‘highness’ business, Leticia. You may call me Arianna as the others do. Now, this gentleman is the black-haired commander known as Sir Haruka. He is the savior of the frontier, an affront to God, and a maiden’s worst nightmare. Do be careful not to touch him. He’s a terror to us ladyfolk, but I’ve managed to survive relatively unscathed.”

What a horrible introduction! No one had any sympathy for a poor kidnapping victim. Anyway, Sister Girl continued to tell us about the internal turmoil of the Theocracy while the other girls continued their assault of the mountain of sandwiches. Even Slimey had reached his limit, but the platters of sandwiches kept emptying at an alarming rate. *Let me add teriyaki chicken and miso sandwiches to the mayo. Hey, what do you know? These go great with mayo.*

“Any who dare oppose the Empire are destroyed. We stand no hope of resistance, not against the imperial army. Even if the Church appealed to every other nation for help, we could not hope to win on military might alone.”

Surprise, surprise—some shady Empire, the greatest of all the powers on the continent, backed the pope’s faction. The pope also had connections in the western—and most technologically advanced—region of the continent.

“You’re saying that when the pope screwed up the invasion of the kingdom, he had to take the blame for all those casualties, right? So he was going to get kicked off his popey throne? But he freaked out and pulled the old usurp-a-roo?”

“Yes, but you shouldn’t say it like that.”

The nobles in the kingdom who shat on the frontier were in the church’s pocket, which was in the pope’s pocket, which was in the Empire’s pocket.

“Let me get this straight. The pope’s homies used to be in tight with a neighboring nation called something or other. But when that nation criticized the Empire, the Empire torched ’em and took control of their land. So the pope’s faction pulled a 180 and switched allegiance to the Empire. Meaning they’re on the Empire’s side now?”

“Yes. The horrid curs.”

Jiggle, jiggle.

Sister Girl and the other nuns were upset over the church disgracing itself, but my classmates and I couldn't laugh. It wasn't like people were any different back home. Even in modern democratic states, people sold out their countries all the time. We grew up on the internet; this sort of thing was in our faces all the time even if we didn't want to pay attention. History didn't repeat itself—that wasn't how it went. People just never learned.

“A country can't be destroyed from the outside. It always crumbles from within.”

Handing the reins over to a traitor meant the destruction of a nation. If that traitor was the pope, the church became a nest of corruption too. It was probably selling out the Theocracy as we spoke.

“People who can't make anything of their own have no choice but to sell other folks' stuff, ya know? That's why the pope has to keep selling out. They're gonna sell the church, the country—sell their own noses to spite their faces. They'll keep on selling out until they have nothing left, because that's the only thing they have to offer.”

“Wait, is that what's driving this? Money?”

“Yeah. I guess that just goes to show how far the Empire's influence extends.”

“Even so, it was the height of folly to attempt an invasion of Diorelle!” said Princess Girl.

“Indeed, 'twas. The papal faction is but a shadow of its former self, and the pope is seizing the rest of the Church's army his own,” said Sister Girl.

“If the church armies and the Theocracy armies were to clash, wouldn't that simply mean more lost lives?”

“Absolutely. And the Theocracy must maintain some fighting force if it hopes to defend itself afterward, so the situation is even graver than it appears. I have

no doubt this is part of the Empire's plan."

"Similarly, attacking the pope will not solve our problem. Unless we rescue the Church from his faction's evil clutches, we shall have no hope of victory."

"How? If we must fight the Empire, how could we ever amass enough strength?"

The nuns flipped out left and right, scrambling to come up with plans and curse the state of their country. Meanwhile, my classmates were out for the count, clutching their stomachs. They'd rounded off the red bean mochi I made for dessert, ballooning from overeating. It'd been too long since any of us had red bean mochi, so they must have forgotten how filling it could be.

"I mean, I don't know much about this Empire thing, but it's not like they're going anywhere. Why not ignore them? If they don't want us dead, cut them some cake? I mean, a break?"

"Pardon?"

The return of Marie Antoinette! What with fantasy worlds always on the brink of destruction, it was about time someone summoned her in to save them.

"I mean, if the Empire wanted to invade the Theocracy, they wouldn't do it out in the open, ya know? It'd be smarter to pretend they're totally uninvolved but signal they'd politically back the usurpers. If we withdraw our challenge, they'll move in and take the Theocracy. If we don't, they won't either. They'll make a small gamble on the pope, but they won't resort to a full-on invasion. I mean, they don't exactly *need* the Theocracy, you know?"

"What?!"

See, the Empire wanted religious authority. Beyond the church, the Theocracy didn't have a lot in its favor—it barely produced enough agriculture to feed its own people. Now that the church couldn't even sell enslaved beastfolk or produce magic items, the Theocracy was dead weight. Same with the Merchant Kingdom. Heck, the Merchant Kingdom couldn't even feed itself. It was nothing

but an oversized strip mall that called itself a nation.

“If they wanted spellstones, the Kingdom would be their ultimate prize. However, taking the Kingdom first is like grabbing a hot coal. The only things keeping the current balance are the frontier dungeons. The Empire wants to expand, but not at the added expense of maintaining those dungeons. Right now, the Kingdom shoulders that burden, but the Empire would have to dump huge numbers of troops for a self-sufficient frontier. Why would they bother with the expense?”

“That’s true. As wondrous as the Empire’s military might is...”

Exactly. If the Empire conquered the frontier and sunk enough of its strength into dungeon defense, it would lose the troops it needed to maintain hegemony over the continent. That’s why the frontier was the *last* on their list of nations to conquer. Which wasn’t a bad thing. But if the continent were united under one government, every scrap of military power could be channeled into the frontier. That would be ideal, in fact. Aside from the potential pros and cons of that form of government, that would have been my top choice for saving the world.

As I explained my thinking, I grilled up some pork and ginger stir-fry sandwiches. We’d had ginger for a while now, but it wasn’t the same without miso. Now we finally had both.

“That makes sense, but please no more food. I’ll cry.”

“My stomach is killing me...but that smells so good!”

“Oh, the temptation of those delicious scents! Oh, my poor stomach capacity! They’re waging war inside of me!”

“Serve me up some grub, Haruka-kun. I’ll take a big plate, pretty please! I’m one of those girls whose weight only goes to her boobs.”

“You traitor! I wish I was you!”

“*Ugggh*, it smells so good. Maybe just one bite won’t hurt.”

Lunch was served: pork and ginger stir fry sandwiches with a side of pork miso soup—just don't ask what else was in it. Today was a nonstop nom sesh from breakfast on, and the girls were so impressively rotund, I almost thought I wandered into the maternity corps.

At that point, a band of roving soldiers keeping watch near the city noticed the commotion and came over to see what the fuss was about. They didn't do anything apart from size up the situation and turn to leave. I didn't like that—they would no doubt link us to the trouble at the checkpoint and realize the other soldiers were missing. We were effectively pinned in place. We had to stay put to protect the city, and our main forces were too overfed to move. Not like that stopped them from eating more...

I felt bad that the girls were the only ones getting to enjoy a tasty lunch, so I served up some grub to the whiny old dudes buried in the moat: poisonous mushrooms! It might not have been a new dish so much as a new flavor. Whatever!

“Huh! Guess it makes 'em hallucinate. The more you know.”

They lost their minds. Some wept; some yelled. Some were throwing hands; others, holding hands. (BL?) It was obnoxious. I didn't want to sit around and watch old dudes, so I left to work on the city's defenses. I still didn't have much MP, but I did as much as I could.

I hardened the walls and dusted them with status-ailment-inducing spellstone dust. Then I built a gate, watchtowers, and a drawbridge to span the WIP moat. This made it harder to invade or destroy the city walls. Once the moat was done, there would be no way in apart from flying over it or erecting ladders. So long as the nerds didn't do something stupid, it was a solid defense system. I told them not to make anything, but who knew if they would listen? Whatever they might come up with was the biggest, and most terrifying, unknown.

DAY 108
AFTERNOON

My spidey senses are tingling. Someone's dissing me, I can feel it.

OMUI ADVENTURERS' GUILD

OUR POOL OF ADVENTURERS grew larger by the day. Our numbers never dipped. In fact, our ranks swelled so quickly I had trouble recalling just how many people we had at any given time. New recruits were a constant in my line of work; I couldn't keep track of how many young men signed up with us. But I never forgot their faces—or at least, I used to remember them. Too many adventurers lost their lives to monsters and never came home. There were so few of us in the Guild, it was laughably easy to know everyone's face.

Not now. Now...

"Honestly? Without my morning routine (whom I won't name)...things are kind of boring around here. Once I'm done registering the newbies and enrolling them in our beginner's course, there's nothing for me to do."

Once upon a time, you could always find someone crying in a corner or cursing their failures. There was always someone to mourn, and someone else to mourn for them. Now, though... I mean, we were busy, but I still had too much free time on my hands. With such an influx of new adventurers, my workload increased several times over. Fortunately, we hired plenty more receptionists and Guild staff. With all of us working together, the guildhall was a busy and bustling place. I was responsible for training the new staff, but the current new girl was on appraisal duty, leaving me nothing to do until evening. Without the morning rumpus to spectate, the adventurers rushed out the door and left us alone for the rest of the day. It was like getting the old Guild back—the dead quiet Guild.

This was compounded by the orphans' assistance with the paperwork. They

knew how to read, write, and do math! With their assistance, huge piles of paperwork were a breeze, and we flew through the work in no time. Whenever there was a lapse in work—which was often—I fell back into my constant refrain: I was bored.

It was like the past was all a lie. Not long ago, the monsters outnumbered us to a staggering degree. We would summon the whole of our paltry forces and send them out to tackle the quests pouring in: save this village, rescue that hamlet. For ages, the frontier had suffered insult upon injury at the hands of monsters, but now we were on the offensive. We had enough people and more than enough equipment to vanquish dungeons and keep the monsters of the forest at bay. Truly, the past didn't feel real at all.

"Bluhhh. I'm so bored!" cried my coworker.

Now the frontier was reborn, and every morning its adventurers sallied forth with the resolve to protect their homeland, delve into dungeons, and slay the fiends infesting our forest. If they didn't, they insisted, they weren't worthy of calling themselves adventurers. If they didn't, all the weapons and armor the Guild had given them would mean nothing. They understood exactly why we could equip them at such low prices, and so they set forth to protect the frontier in honor of all the young men who had lacked the gift of these arms.

"If you have the time to sit around complaining of boredom, then you could do your paperwork! Just look at that pile of pending items in your tray."

There was an empty plot of land behind the Guild where we buried those who had given their lives to defend the frontier. In the old days, you could always find someone crying there. However, as time went on, the criers dwindled until it became a place of quiet. Now, the only people who went there did so to lay flowers on the tombstones of those who had long since passed on.

These days, everyone came home from quests alive. Sometimes an adventurer would fail and come home bloody and broken, but alive. *Alive*. Once upon a time, every single one of us had given up on life but still got out of bed

to take up our swords and defend those we held dear. We were walking corpses. We struggled to turn the tide of destruction long after we had abandoned all hope inside. But now? Now there's a spring in the steps of every man and woman here. None of us would ever dream of abandoning hope again.

Looking back on it now, I remembered the day everything changed. But it happened so suddenly, I didn't realize what was going on. On the day the boy with the black hair and dark eyes appeared, the moment we understood what was going on...the room grew so quiet you could have heard a pin drop.

Earlier that day, we buried six young men and women who had joined the Guild just days previous. Those of us who survived felt wretched. We were both furious and helpless. Those six were too young and too poorly equipped to venture into the untamed wilds. Prior to coming to us, they were members of their village's monster defense militia. Once they reached level 20, they came to Omui. Promising youths, all of them—snatched from us too soon.

While on a quest to slay the monsters threatening a village, they were descended upon by a herd of monsters, who slaughtered them. They had not been taken unawares. No, they chose to stay and fight to protect the villagers and buy them time to escape. These young men and women armed with no potions, broken swords, and cracked armor were felled one by one, but the last of their number refused to drop until the final villager made it to safety.

The village fell, but the villagers escaped with their lives. They came to Omui and the Guild to tell us of those brave souls' final moments. The six had no belongings to their names, and we were unable to retrieve the bodies. We buried air.

It was moments after the funeral when everything changed.

Ofter was a friend of the guild master and one of our most skilled adventurers. He and his party stormed the guild master's office to yell out their frustrations. The rest of us could only listen in stupefied, shell-shocked silence, and it was at this moment the black-haired boy walked in. I had signed up four

other boys with the same hair color a few days prior, so the color of his hair and eyes wasn't new to me. It was the expression in those eyes. They terrified me.

So soon after the cruel loss of those six youths, none of us was eager to see another young man go to his death. This one was a paltry level 9, even. One of our most veteran adventurers barked at him in the hopes of scaring him off... only to fall to his knees and back away, quaking and apologizing, with eyes full of fear. The terror of that moment has stuck with me ever since. Puzzlingly, I couldn't recall what it was that rendered all of us so frightened.

Like a miracle, the woods fell silent. As the monsters that had plagued us dwindled, the boy suddenly disappeared. We received word that he had singlehandedly descended into the deepest, most dreaded dungeon in the entire frontier. The guild master and Duke Omui expected the worst, but they made a show of organizing a rescue party on the miraculous off-chance that he was alive. They knew he wasn't. It was impossible for him to have lived. We didn't have the forces to take on the dungeon ourselves, but we assembled a rescue party nonetheless. Not one who was invited had refused, even though they knew they would never come back alive.

Why? Because none of the boy's companions gave up hope. They delved ever lower into the Ultimate Dungeon in their efforts to reach the bottom floors and rescue their friend. So how could we, the people of the frontier, give up on him? He was a stranger, but he was our savior. He was the boy who rescued us from the monster attack from the forest. How could we have ever given up on him?

The Guild descended into a flurry of activity. We finally had the resources we needed to assemble competent parties, and our first goal became constructing a supply base for these brave youths. We planned to make it to floor 30, if not lower, and build our base there. We were just preparing to take the plunge when...he turned up at the mouth of the dungeon looking none the worse for the wear. If anything, he seemed mildly puzzled to find us there. All he said was, "Uh, hi again?"

The boy reappeared as suddenly as he had vanished, and he seemed perfectly fine. The dungeon, on the other hand, had been destroyed. This boy had singlehandedly descended to the darkest depths of the Ultimate Dungeon and clawed his way back to the surface once more. This boy was a conqueror of dungeons, and when I looked into his eyes, I finally realized why I had been so scared when I first met him. Here was a boy who physically could not give up hope. Here was a boy for whom turning back was a foreign concept.

Hence my fear. I saw myself reflected in his eyes, and the image was of someone who had long since given up on everything. I had passed the point of resignation long ago. But this boy *refused to accept my resignation*.

The following days were a nightmare. The Guild drowned in work, and no matter how much I labored to keep up with the work, the tasks kept piling up. I'd never seen anything like it. The boy dumped mountains of spellstones upon us, and merchants wore through the welcome mat coming and going in their efforts to buy them up.

Meanwhile, Omui was awash in healing mushrooms and affordable equipment. The nearby monster hordes grew weaker on their one-way trajectory to extinction. The tables turned; the scales tipped in our favor. The threat of annihilation became a thing of the past.

Overnight, the frontier grew rich. Goods materialized on our store shelves; we had too many jobs and not enough people to perform them. It was a dream come true. There was a smile on every child's face and a happy tear in every elder's eye. And through it all dashed the boy, stopping in periodically for odds and ends as he went on his dungeon-destroying way.

We didn't pray to God here on the frontier. Life was too harsh to believe. Too hopeless. We didn't have the hope necessary for eradicating the monsters. We lost our ability to dream or pray for miracles. So by the time we looked up and realized what was happening, we were already in the middle of a rapidly spreading miracle of joy.

Hindsight and distance gave me the ability to see it for what it was. Not being an adventurer myself gave me the perspective I needed to acknowledge the wonder of this phenomenon. The adventurers couldn't comprehend the color returning to the world around them and the tears of sorrow melting into tears of joy. By the time they realized what was going on, it was too late. Happiness was here to stay.

Later, war threatened to snatch that happiness away from us once more. History stood poised to repeat itself; tragedy to play out once more. By then, we had all forgotten what it meant to give up hope. To give up on the frontier. It was so ingrained in us it didn't bear saying—if any of us gave up, we would have had to face the look in Haruka-kun's eyes once more. Oh yes, we all knew it well. We knew he would not allow us to forsake ourselves, not with those dark eyes that had seen hell in the caverns of the Ultimate Dungeon and *came out the other side* to deliver us our miracle.

The boy would not allow us to go to war, either. He stopped the battle in its tracks before it ever touched the frontier. And as the once-miraculous transformed into the everyday, miracle after new miracle rained down on the town. It was like living in a dream.

Peace and prosperity flourished, as did the Guild's increasingly busy workload. The graveyard's visitors dwindled to all but those leaving flowers and tales of our newfound peace to our long-departed loved ones. In the graveyard out back, there stood a tombstone that bore the words "In Memory of the Frontier's Protectors." Now that peace had come to stay, I laid flowers on the tomb in honor of every adventurer who had kept us safe until we could reach such happy days.

"Haruka will be all right."

"Of course he will. He's Haruka. If the Ultimate Dungeon and dungeon emperors couldn't kill him, who could? Worrying is a waste of your energy. If you have time to wring your hands over him, then you can get to your paperwork!"

Everyone said he would be all right. How could he not be? The only reason the frontier, once home to every calamity on the continent, had waved goodbye to danger was because he had destroyed every threat that plagued us. He would be fine.

“You say that, but I see you looking at the bulletin board. Remember how he used to come here every morning? I bet you’re worried for him.”

“I most certainly am not. I just wonder, what possessed him to think we post adventurers’ quests on that bulletin board?”

Whenever the Guild accepted a quest, we assigned it to a party of adventurers based on their schedules and the quest’s particulars. I wasn’t sure, then, why he thought we would post quests on our bulletin board! Our entire purpose was to provide a place to commission adventurers and assign the right party of adventurers to those quests. Posting quests to a signboard defeated the purpose of a guild and could only lead to unruly fighting over quests.

“They’re just help-wanted ads for the general public... Of course they don’t change often.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t stop him from coming here every day. *Every* day... You would think he would have understood by now!”

His companions never explained it. He also hadn’t asked me how it worked, so I hadn’t volunteered the information that these were not, in fact, Guild quests. Just odd jobs, the kind anyone could take regardless of Guild status. Thus, the bulletin board never changed, but we had developed the odd daily custom of watching Haruka come in to complain about the lack of “new quests.”

After enough repeats, we began to take it for granted. It became part of our morning routine, and without it, none of us quite knew what to do with ourselves. Goodness knew I didn’t want this odd custom persisting longer than it had to, but unfortunately, the people of Omui had stopped posting help-wanted ads. After so long without a change, no one had the courage to post a

new listing. And thus our bulletin board remained exactly as it was on the day our miracle came to town.

DAY 108

EVENING

Are we not in a European medieval fantasy? Where the hell did they learn Eagle Claw Fist from?!

SISTER GIRL'S CITY IN THE THEOCRACY

TURNED OUT, the church was amassing an army and sending them east—our way. Aka, all the troops they prepped for their war with the Kingdom had now reached the eastern end of the Theocracy. But the army was kind of a mess. Didn't they know the importance of their supply line?

"Tsk, tsk. They just don't see how crucial logistics are. Even the loot they drop sucks."

It was sad, but there was only so much I could do about it. With a heavy heart, I picked up all their cheapo swords and armor lying abandoned in this cool warehouse I found. Horsie and I were on an urban scouting expedition among the various towns and cities in the eastern part of the country. Checking my map as I went, I wandered hither and thither while bumping into church soldiers stationed at intermittent points.

"Sister Girl turned out to be Theocracy Princess Girl all along. She declared intent to depose the pope, which you'd think would make soldiers from all the other factions come crawling out of hiding. But everywhere I look, all I see are enemies. What's up with *that*?"

Jiggle jiggle.

It was only a matter of time before the pope discovered that Sister Girl was back. After battling the church once, anyone smart would have cottoned on. Actually, did they have cotton in this world? How about cotton candy? If they were truly smart, they would have cottoned on to both, and sleeping on a cotton cot would have caught-on (candy) by now.

“The church may have a numerical advantage, but that’s the only thing going for them. Their only equipment to speak of are these cheap, shoddy magic tools. Do they really expect to go to war like this? The Kingdom could mop the floor with them.”

Nod nod. Rattle rattle. Bobble bobble.

The Kingdom may have been outnumbered, but their better equipment and higher levels gave them the advantage. However, a single powerhouse could tip the scales in the church’s favor. War in fantasy stories was like *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*; you didn’t read about one average guy in there. That was what made war so risky. Winning was easy enough, but one unexpected hero up the church’s sleeve could have spelled the end for one of my classmates.

Furthermore, the sheer number of hostages made waging war in the Theocracy a bad idea. Everywhere we turned, we bumped into someone Sister Girl knew personally. The average Theocracy citizen or follower of the church was, essentially, a hostage. The pope had taken a number of people in Sister Girl’s faction under arrest. If I knew where they were being kept, I could’ve swung by to pick them up. Problem was, I didn’t.

“And how do we tell the difference between friend and foe anyway? Which of these church people are bad guys, which ones are unaffiliated randos, and which ones are laypeople? It’s too hard to tell when they all wear the same damn clothes.”

“Is impossible, from looks alone. Any people, attack us, those are enemies.”

“If run? Civilians. If attack? Enemies.”

Wiggle wiggle.

That was fantasy war 101, but real life wasn’t so neat. All believers followed the teachings of the church, which made all of them our enemies. What was worse, everyone dressed the same and ran away from us—*especially* the holy head honchos. Yup, and a lot of them were based in urban areas. Tracking them down was an unbelievable pain in the *tuchus*.

“So, you’re telling me you don’t know who Sister Girl is? Yeah, ’cause she’s also a princess, but she’s not Princess Girl. She’s Sister Girl. Her name’s... Heck, what is it again? Aerial? Well, I don’t care if they went by land, sea, or air, but can you tell me where the rest of her crew went? If you tell me ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ one more time, Imma snicker-snack your head off with this scythe... Wait—aren’t I the hero of this story?! I don’t sound like one.”

“J-j-just who are you people, huh? Wh-wh-what do you want with us?!”

A freestyling priest! What if he outclassed me? He was trying to strike a chord, and I was just a minor!

“Wh-wh-what you talking about? We’re kn-kn-knocking suckers out. We’re askin’ the questions, so give us the directions. I’m not here to chat. Tell me, where the nuns at?”

“I-I will have you know I am a bishop and commanding officer of the local church forces. I do not know who you are, but you have no right to be here! Out with you!”

“Really? I was sent here and everything. Yup, this town looked like the seediest one on my list, so I sneakily broke through the wall and came across some soldiers trying to assault some chicks, so I beat ’em up and demanded to know where the rest of them were hiding, and they said the rest of their company could be found in a bar, so I went to the bar, and I found that the soldiers had beat up the bartender, so I beat up the soldiers and demanded to know where the rest of *them* were hiding, and *they* said the rest of *their* company could be found in the barracks, so I went to the barracks, and I find some soldiers trying to have their way with some girls they kidnapped, so I beat *them* up, and demanded to know where the rest of *them* were hiding, and long story short they told me to come here?”

Thanks to the convenient layout of this town, it was easy to find my enemy—I stumbled upon evil soldiers everywhere I went! Also convenient, everyone I met was an enemy, so I pummeled my way through all of them until I wound up

here. This *was* a seedy place after all—they'd left the streets so unsafe no ordinary civilians dared to walk around. That was good news for me, because it meant I didn't have to worry about accidentally beating up an innocent civilian. If I simply went around thrashing everyone who looked evil, I'd eventually end up putting down every bad guy in town. Easy-peasy, lemon squeezy.

"It was nothing, really. Not with two lovely ladies in their new leather dresses walking around town. They reeled in a huge catch of horny dudes—hell, I almost fell for it, and I've spent enough time on the Internet to know I should never take the bait—and wrecked them all. In fact, they're extinct due to overfishing. This place looks like a ghost town now."

Since this was the church army, their behavior must have been in line with the church's teachings.

"So you'd better start talking while you still have a working mouth, got it? See this? I call it the True Mega Itchy Scratchy Powder Nyoom Nyoom SP, created from studying the agonized cries of numerous gross old dudes. Satisfied customers rave—it's like hell on earth!"

The bishop tried to scream, but no sound came out. I figured he was going to be obnoxious, so I'd already shoved a cushion in his gaping maw. He began to beat himself against the wall before dropping to the ground, writhing in pain. But he couldn't confess his sins. The gluttonous bastard was too busy chewing on that cushion.

The last thing I wanted to see was an old dude writhing and moaning, but we don't always get what we want. Anyway, he eventually coughed up some intel: the pope trained a portion of the church knights from childhood to be his private guard, and they were the ones in charge of this whole region. They had gone to the capital ten days prior and would no doubt be back soon. The timing seemed fishy. They must have been the ones who kidnapped Sister Girl's pals.

The useless old dude priest choked, sputtered, and spasmed. If luck was on his side in a major way, he'd only lose his mind. I mean, he was the perpetrator,

wasn't he? If he was the leader, it was only right he be held responsible for all those corpses dumped in the back alleys and byways of the city. It was his duty to suffer like every one of his victims. *Eww.* His skin started to puff up hideously. He shivered and raked his nails down his face, leaving bloody trails behind. He looked like a monster. Before long, all the fight went out of him, and even his breathing grew faint. He subsided into the faintest of twitches.

"Pray to your god, why don'tcha? See how far that gets you."

What was it the church taught again? Oh yeah, "love thy neighbor"? Surely a priest of such a peaceful, loving religion had faith he'd go to everlasting peace! Was he in hell? Guess he was the problem.

"That took longer than I wanted. It's getting dark already. You guys wanna head back? I think we got all the good loot already."

Nod nod. Rattle rattle. Jiggle jiggle.

Tonight, I had all three of the dungeon emperors with me. That wasn't ideal—I didn't like leaving the girls unprotected. But they insisted on pulling their own weight. They only got involved in this war because they involved themselves... even though things were about to get ugly.

"I don't want my classmates to have to kill people, you know? No teenage girl deserves to have that blood on her hands. Murder's the kind of thing that haunts you when you reach the end of your life as a dried-up—I mean, a distinguished lady of advanced age."

Wobble wobble.

I said that because we now stood on the frontlines of the liberation movement. Freeing cities from the occupying church armies reduced the number of people the church held hostage. It also made it easier for church soldiers to desert. We knew a lot of them were fighting only because their families would be hurt otherwise. Once we outnumbered them, we figured most soldiers would lay down their arms and run. Unfortunately, each city we liberated only added another location to our growing list of places we needed

to protect.

“We could scatter our forces throughout each city and employ guerilla tactics all throughout the eastern sector of the Theocracy. That spreads the church army thin, trying to fight on a million fronts at once. It’s not a bad idea, but I don’t know if the church will react like we expect them to. Ah, well... If things go tits up, we can always retreat or cut off their other options. We can make them do whatever works best for us, you feel me?”

Wiggle wiggle.

The Theocracy had a whole lotta land and a whole lotta people. At least when compared to the Kingdom. Maybe the Kingdom was just small. It looked big on a map, but it was mostly wilderness dotted with a smattering of towns and villages. It wasn’t the most populous place. With so many monsters, people kept dying all the time. The Kingdom couldn’t field nearly as many soldiers as the Theocracy.

But the Theocracy’s soldiers were kind of weak? I mean, if you picked a random soldier, even one of our orphans could run circles around them. To be honest, they would probably lose to a baby. They were barely level 10. They couldn’t even handle weak-ass goblins.

Anyway, once we got back to Sister Girl’s city, we stumbled upon a fistfight. Our army was turning on itself.

“They say hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. Unless it’s multiple women scorning each other, all over level 100.”

“Hiiii-yah! Hi-ya-ya-ya-yah! Huff, huff, huff!”

Yeah, I taught Dancer Girl and Miss Armor Rep tai chi and systema because I thought it’d be funny. Next thing I knew, they were masters of both. They then went on to teach my classmates, who executed each graceful move while spouting vulgarities.

“Looks like it’s hand-to-hand combat training today. Yeowch. These girls fight

dirty.”

Jiggle jiggle.

The one-more-set revolution had now advanced to the girls learning martial arts. Tai chi was a Chinese martial art that focused on body breaking. A tai chi master could completely destroy someone and prevent them from ever fighting again. It’s like violence taken to the next level. You might call systema a more modern version of tai chi.

“Systema is a famous modern martial art used in actual combat. It takes ancient martial techniques and modernizes them into a combat sport intent on pulverizing the opponent. However, the art focuses more on training a fundamental theory of manipulating your own body versus executing formal techniques. Still, I dunno about that huff, huff, huff stuff... Save that for the bedroom!”

Wobble wobble.

Breathing, relaxing, continuous motion, and perfect posture made up the foundation of tai chi and systema. From there, systema added modern logical principles—although systema isn’t a single martial art. Instead, there are infinite variations on systema designed for all sorts of situations, just as there are infinite combinations that can form *kata* in other martial arts. I learned all about systema in my second year of middle school—the prime time for such edgelord behavior—but I didn’t know any systemas myself.

“I mean, I know it on a theoretical basis—I watched videos and read books out of curiosity. Then, here, I let Wisdom edit and compile my knowledge into a fantasy world version of systema. To be honest, I was just messing around with my gun tonfa. Trying my hand at gun-fu, you know? And then, yeah. This happened.”

I didn’t think my creation was a legit systema, but who cared? People had the same anatomy here as in the real world. Therefore, it seemed reasonable to assume you could physically destroy people in the exact same ways. It stood to

reason systema worked the same way, too. Anyway, Dancer Girl and Miss Armor Rep pounced on it. Call it tai chi or systema—whatever it was, it was a powerful attack. It was definitely a martial art—not a sport. They gouged eyes out, crushed windpipes and kneecaps, snapped necks... *Yeesh!* Girls were scary!

“I guess it’s better that they’re all girls...but damn, what’s with all the crotch shots? My jewels are running for cover!”

The girls’ training included mock battles. They simulated situations when they were forced to drop weapons when one of their friends was taken hostage. They feigned surrender as a ploy to get closer and curb stomp their opponent the moment the enemy tried to touch them. Then, she used their foe’s lifeless corpse as a shield to protect themselves against the next girl running in. This was preparation for one-sided brawls, killing sprees at ranges too close for swords. Attempting to kidnap one of these girls would be lethal!

Speaking of deadly, they were all dressed in sexy gun-nun outfits. They started off equipped with tonfas, and next thing I knew, they were pulling out pile bunkers they’d hidden under their clothes. Oh, those sexy slits up the thigh were as perilous as they were on the cheongsams. Pity the fool who got close enough to see them, for those would be the last things they’d see.

“Yeah, tai chi and systema are great. The sole drawback is the strong focus on precise footwork and rigid posture. Yup, no high kicks? No sweet, sweet leg spreads? You just get peeps, *hints*, of them juicy thighs and luscious buttocks thanks to our best friend, the thigh slit. But no full look at what’s underneath. The frustration’s enough to ruin a guy’s focus. That’s what makes martial arts so deadly!”

Jiggle jiggle?!

If all of our enemies were teenage boys, one terribly, terrifically tantalizing thigh-tease thirst trap would do all of them in.

“When a girl gives a teenage boy the ‘come hither’ gesture and the thighs give us the ‘come slither (up under my clothes)’ gesture, we get distracted. Then we

get kicked in the 'nads. That's Teenage Girl Fist in action—the nutshot. Every teenage boy's worst nightmare.”

“Please stop talking about our thighs! We're not that juicy, we swear!” my sobbing classmates insisted.

Meanwhile, the brawl against my balls continued. My classmates formed their fists into a shape like an eagle's talon, à la *ying zhao pai*—Eagle Claw Fist. If I had been any slower, those sharp talons would have neutered me. I could avoid them with Future Sight, but they were still terrifying. I could feel my sack shrinking in fear!

“Wait a minute. Tai chi and systema have more than just nut shots, guys! I don't think there's a martial art that's so laser-focused on the testes. That would be horrifying!”

“*Hii-yah!* Huff huff huff!”

Men everywhere would have run in fear from this teenage girl testes torment (featuring tonfas). Since these were gun tonfas, avoiding the literal nutshots became a matter of mastering gun-fu.

Rhythmic Gymnastics Girl was a pro at hand-to-hand combat. No one could outclass her. However, Book Club President and Class Rep came close. Nor could I ignore the threat of Fish Girl and Nudist Girl—the swimming club combo—or Elf Girl. Yeah. I was screwed.

“The volleyball club girls are great too. So are the Vice Reps. As for the mean girls, well... They're not *bad* at hand-to-hand combat. Their strength just lies in other areas? They're tough, but this isn't their forte? The more I think about it, the more I realize I should give up. If I don't have the level advantage, I'll never beat them!”

Outside of the Book Club President, the art club girls weren't strong physical fighters. They didn't have the strength or stamina for it. On the flip side, they were absurdly good at fighting with concealed weapons. Same with Sister Girl and her gang.

“Those weapons scare me! Especially concealed iron claw Eagle Claw Fist strikes aimed at my nether regions! This is psychological warfare! Also, if you guys want to use iron chains, hit me up. I’ll make you some. You just tell me how long and heavy you want ’em. Dancer Girl can show you the—*ha!*—ropes.”

“Yes, please!”

After the training sesh came a postmortem sesh. The summary: these techniques were vicious. Their ability to cause close combat confusion prevented the effective use of hostages. Call that a scrotum-shriveling success!

“I knew the trick, but I still fell for the Shadow Crows anyway.”

“Same! I totally goofed on the difference between Shadow Incarnation and Incarnate.”

“Isn’t that a kind of Sorcery?”

“Mm-hmm. Incarnate is. You see, following Incarnate, you use Shadow Incarnation to *actually* control the arena. When you sense a tiny presence, you need to be careful not to get caught by it.”

“Aw, poop. I didn’t get that.”

“Haruka-kun barely dodges any of our attacks. It’s only when we go for his crotch that he leaps out of the way, big time.”

“Big time? I don’t like thinking about big, crotch, and Haruka-kun in the same sentence.”

“Is...this a little over the line? And—”

“Wait, hold on?! You actually got a hit on him?!”

“I barely grazed him! Yeah, I did! It took everything I had.”

“*Girl!!! Spill!!*”

The girls were sure deep into their conversation. They must have been talking about Sorcery strategies to use against the church. But if this was a strategy meeting, what was up with those creepy smiles?

My classmates were plenty strong, which was exactly why we had to prepare for deception. Unlike in dungeons, weird stratagems to throw our human opponents off guard were more effective than brute force. Hence the sexy nun costumes. They offered less protection than armor, but they hid my classmates' fighting capabilities.

To make these dastardly disguises, I coated thread in spellstone dust, wove in mithrilized wire, and wove it into cloth via my knowledge of magic circles. Ta-da: magic, sexy nun armor. I was still worried, but at least my classmates couldn't be hurt by ordinary means.

"And just to be on the safe side, I reinforced the thin lining with a mithrilized chain stitch."

My classmates were all (ostensibly) innocent, beautiful young women, so I knew the church soldiers would salivate to get their ugly mitts on them. I could have put a sign up a sign like a dirty movie theater sold tickets, we'd sell out every night. That's how good the girls looked in these habits. And could you blame these theoretical seatfillers? Just look at those thigh slits. *Dirty theater or no, sign me up!*

DAY 108

NIGHT

What would one-more-set nirvana entail anyway?

SISTER GIRL'S CITY IN THE THEOCRACY

THE GIRLS STUFFED their faces with boiled taro, soy-sauce marinated fish, miso soup, and teriyaki chicken. Tears rolled down their cheeks. I could already see it now—the return of this morning's stuffed stomachs.

"It hurts so bad!" one sobbing classmate whimpered.

"But it's too yummy to stop eating!" another wailed.

"It tastes just like home," a third wept.

"My tummy feels like it's about to burst, but this food is just too good."

"I was never much of a fan of traditional Japanese food, but now...! What makes it taste so *gooooood*?"

"I feel like I'm going to explode! Why am I going back for seconds?"

The taro alone made them weep bitter tears of homesickness. Their stomachs cried out in pain, begging them to stop, but they couldn't fight the instincts that demanded they shovel down more. So, in defiance of their swollen stomachs, they gorged on the rest. They looked like a club of would-be mothers. When were the little ones due? Any day!

"It tastes better than my mom's cooking. I didn't even think that was possible!"

"*Waaah*. I'm not crying because I'm homesick. It's just...*waaah*...so darn tasty!"

"You can say that again. It's super-duper good."

"You couldn't even find food like this at a five-star restaurant. If your mom was as good a cook, she'd be headhunted as a Michelin reviewer."

Where were the girls finding the space to keep packing away more?! Their stomachs were close to reaching their physical max. The only thing keeping them from exploding was the strength of being over level 100!

“Darn it, Haruka-kun! I was going to skip dinner, and now look what happened! It’s all your fault. Urgh! Make up for it by bringing me another bowl.”

Thanks to that killer combo of miso and soy sauce, the girls had been eating sandwiches nonstop since morning. I thought the binging would have killed their appetite for supper, but apparently not. By nightfall, those tummies were still bulging, but they licked their plates and asked for more. At this stage, they were ready to induce.

Finally, the girls waddled off to one-more-set their way through sword drills. The fierce exercise helped burn calories and reduce some of the bulging. When they were done, they had a hot bath to take care of the rest. But there were a *lot* of calories still to burn... I decided to be nice and make the girls a sauna. Maybe they could sweat off the rest of the excess weight that way.

It turned out some of our nun and monk friends lived in this city, so they went home to their families. I had some...concerns. I mean, knife licking? What if they tripped and fell on the way home? They could lose a tongue if they weren’t careful!

“Ahh, bath sweet bath. Look, I know I have better things to do with my time than build bathtubs, but a guy’s gotta have his bath. Cleanliness is next to godliness, as they say. A step or two above, if you’re being totally honest. It’s better to build a bath than a shrine for some old fart.”

Jiggle jiggle.

I couldn’t afford to use my MP willy-nilly. A full night of rest would be just enough to fill my personal MP tank, but my MP batteries and my insatiable item bag were another story. It wasn’t even half full again, and that was with me using my MP sparingly today. Maybe I simply had too many spellstones in my

MP battery bag.

“I have a whole heap of high-quality spellstones in there. This thing can pack, what, a couple thou MP? Couple ten thou? If I’m really unlucky, a couple hundred thou? That would make sense. I mean, I put up defenses around the whole freaking Beast Nation. Imagine how much MP that must have taken.”

Wiggle wiggle.

Most people, or so I was told, would struggle to build so much as a house out of magic. I thought that might have been a knowledge issue—not everyone knew the basics of building a frame from two-by-fours or prefabbing building components. Constructing buildings one by one versus churning out construction with a standardized method required vastly different levels of skill, effort, and MP. By having Wisdom control the entire assembly line, I optimized the process. If Wisdom had been a person, it’d be one of those min-maxing A-holes who gets on your case to “get good.”

“What’s the good in being wise anyway? Outside of bragging rights? ‘Wisdom’ isn’t even spelled right. What do you mean, that’s exactly how you spell ‘wisdom’? I’m not talking about w-i-s-d-o-m. It’s spelled wrong in the original Japanese! Try to keep up. Anyway, it’s not the wisdom that’s, you know... regular insight into knowledge. This spelling means more like prajna, the Buddhist concept of discerning the true nature of things. Which I definitely don’t have. Trust me, I’m nowhere near enlightened!”

Wiggle wiggle.

Jupiter Eye analyzed everything it saw without my command. Combine that with supercomputer Wisdom, and I had the perfect cheat skill for my side gigs.

“Truth is, all I have is an item bag and two skills. Nothing fancy.”

That’s why I asked other people about the things I didn’t know. The Book Club President was a great source of knowledge on all things practical. For anything *impractical*, whack-ass bonkers, or best left undiscussed in polite company... Well, that’s what the nerds were for.

Once I had my info, I mulled it over. To navigate the disordered maze of my jumbled-up thoughts, I reorganized all the many possibilities into the most straightforward and logical conclusions. The latest subject of my hyperfocus? Defense. Specifically, skill nullification. In the end, it all came down to the laws of physics, not the laws of magic. You could write every skill onto a piece of cloth, but if they were all nullified, that cloth was nothing but a stained rag.

“Hmm. I think even first-generation para-aramid Kevlar fibers are beyond me right now. But I could try making a fantasy version of Kevlar. I can coat twisted threads in spellstone dust, right? And then what if I weave them together? I need to run some numbers. Hmm.”

Bobble bobble.

If the textiles themselves wouldn't cut it, then there was only so much else I could do to reinforce the cloth. Still, the real world had bulletproof and knife-proof armor. It therefore stood to reason that I could replicate this somehow. Right? Yet when I asked the Handicrafts Club Girl, she said she didn't know anything about Kevlar. And if she didn't, who would?

“I could use more mithrilized wire, but the more I add, the heavier and stiffer the clothes get. If it gets too stiff, it'll restrict movement. Most importantly, it needs to be skintight and stretchy. The girls need to be vacuum-sealed into their clothes, or I'll riot.”

Wiggle wiggle.

I needed to flip the board and look at the problem from another angle. When it came down to it, what was nullification anyway? If I knew that, I could nullify the nullification. I'd done it before—no idea how; I'd done it on the spur of the moment. Still, it was technically possible. Therefore, there was nothing stopping me from creating nullification-nullifying clothes. *Boy, the things you had to learn when freelancing.*

“I'm not sure what the best approach is. Neutralize the nullification effect? Or destroy the nullifying element? Either way, it's technically possible to make

something that screws with nullification skills, right? Oh no. If there's a nullification nullifying skill, then that means there must be a nullification-nullifying-nullifying skill."

Jiggle jiggle.

It finally came together for me why the church had such shoddy equipment here in the Theocracy and why equipment was so strong on the frontier. It suggested that a metal's resistance power stemmed from the magic content inherent in the metal.

"Think I could make a brand out of it? One hundred percent made in the frontier?"

Spellstones were just crystallized lumps of pure magic. Therefore, the solution to my problem was simple: just make armor with as many spellstones as possible. In fact, I was already doing something similar. I coated all the armor I made in a composite spellstone dust coating. Basically, a recrystallization of the spellstone.

"What if I shaped that coating like a piece of clothing? Would that do the trick?"

If this worked, it would be ground-breaking. The armor's performance would shoot up, and before long, all our new equipment would put our old kit to shame. I would have to recall and refurbish everything we owned, giving me a staggering amount of work!

"If its base material is spellstones, I could probably use magic to harden it. I can weave in a cloth layer underneath and harden the outside to make undies... Or bras. Wait. I shouldn't just stop there! Sure, you wanna protect the goods. You gotta keep a close eye on those assets. Boobies are important, okay?"

Jiggle jiggle.

Come to think of it, some of my classmates had suggested dress armor before. Three guesses who, and the first two don't count. Yup, it was the nerds.

“I should’ve listened, but they were too annoying! And smug!”

I wove spellstones into fibers and used those to make fabric. It worked, but it was too stiff. Until I improved the technology, it could only function as outerwear. On the plus side, the clothes held their shape during the manufacturing process.

“That’s why those ball gowns were such good armor—I used a metric shitton of padding to make sure they didn’t lose their shape. Coincidentally, those corsets had a bunch of spellstones in them too. No wonder the effects were so good. The ball gowns could have been considered regular armor. Too bad they used so many spellstones in production.”

Wobble wobble.

I got out of the bath, still envisioning my new designs, and discovered a dance exercise class just beginning. Terrifyingly, those tummies were already back to flat. The girls burned off all the excess calories and thus decided it was time to put those belly buttons on display via bikini leotards.

“Those one-more-sets are something else! Wait, since when was RBF Knight Lady with us? She looks like she’s fighting to keep up... Why is she wearing tiny gym shorts?”

“One more set! One more set!”

Alas, society had a lot of things to say about a teenage boy who ogled leotards, none of them good for his sex appeal.

“Yup. Back to my room I go. I made us all individual rooms when I refurbished this church. It never hurts to be prepared, right? Don’t tell any of the priests.”

Jiggle jiggle.

The girls were going to discuss our strategy, but first they had to get their aerobics in. A little bird told me they would be at it for a while. Things were getting kind of steamy. Kind of juicy and jiggly. The girls were going at the one-more-sets for hours, switching off between aerobic and anaerobic exercise in

one heck of a hardcore routine. At this rate, they would be able to fight their way through the church's entire army in a single day.

"I only hope the church doesn't try to starve us out. We'd be goners! I'd better stock up on food now."

Wiggle wiggle.

There was no end in sight to the one-more-sets. Every finished exercise was reborn minutes later in this cycle of exercise samsara. Since everyone planned to get in the sauna afterward, I figured I might as well get them some ice cream. The girls showed no sign of breaking out of the one-more-set cycle anytime soon.

"Guess I'll figure out our strategy myself."

Jubbe jubbe.

The Theocracy didn't have a lot of magic in it. Maybe that was why it was a holy land—magic equals black magic equals evil, you know? I found this inconvenient. The disgustingly strong, like me, were at a disadvantage here. War became a numbers game where high levels and strength meant nothing. Without a way to replenish my MP, I would simply run out of juice. This tied my hands and forced me to pick and choose which skills to use. Not fighting wasn't an option, but this was now a basic test of muscle power.

"I should have brought the meatheads, not the girls. I could have ignored skills altogether and let the meatheads go around punching things. A lack of MP can cause dizziness and head injuries, but the meatheads are already too smooth-brained for that to be a problem."

Bounce bounce.

The meatheads fought on intuition and unconscious instinct. They were creatures of conditioned reflexes and, in some sense, the best choice for the job.

"The nerds would have been useless. Those guys have nothing but their skills.

They're ninjas of nerddom, gurus of geekery, professional poindexters. Without MP, they're the manifestation of meaninglessness."

Wobble wobble.

Coming up with new designs for my side hustles was no fun when I had to curb my MP spending. I enjoyed pumping out prototypes of whatever odd thing came to mind, but without those, I couldn't collect the data I needed. Now, crafting new gear was just downright stressful.

Still, I could run calculations, aggregate them, and analyze the data rigorously. When enough potential designs were shuffled and reshuffled under this lens, I stumbled upon new ideas and missed opportunities.

"As fun as it is, rapid trial-and-error R&D's not a great habit to get into. Maybe I need to slow down and plan things out once in a while... Hey, look at this! I can make bustiers!"

Jiggle jiggle!

Once I had a design for the garment's structure, the rest was simply a matter of finding a way to produce it in a hard fabric that wouldn't restrict movement.

"Imagine if I gave Class Rep a bondage dress. Ha! She'd beat me senseless."

Wiggle wiggle.

On the one hand: yes please. On the other hand: we were basically video game characters. She would massacre me. Still, I liked this work in progress. What if I made a prototype bondage dress, just for kicks? Oops, my hand slipped.

It was at this point that Miss Armor Rep and Dancer Girl wandered in, their cheeks tinged a light pink from their bath, resplendent in yukatas.

"We're back."

"Argh! How I swore this would be the night of my revenge! Oh, how I vowed, how I promised...but I need to conserve my MP! *Ohhh*, but how those curves push the thin fabric of the yukatas to a breaking point! The cloth is stretched so

thin it's practically translucent. I can't tear my eyes away from those curves! Hubba hubba—wait a minute, this is a trap!"

Behold, the ultimate weapon: the kind of yukatas they gave girls at inns. That's right, those paper-thin, slightly damp, skin-clinging wonders. The ones girls wore when they're buck naked underneath. No two ways about it: this was a trap.

"If this is not a trap, then why do I feel steel jaws gripping my heart? Why else would I be ensnared? Girl, are you a glue trap? Because I'm so stuck on you it's killing me."

Miss Armor Rep's hair was in a ponytail; Dancer Girl had hers up for the night too. This exposed their long, slender necks, and I could not tear my eyes away from this seductive sortie. At last, I finally wrested my visual organs free, only to goggle at the cleavage poking out from the yukata neckline. The boobage, the orbosity, the colossal curvature rudely thrust the fabric aside and swelled outward. It jiggled and jived, pushing upward to free itself from the yukata in a horrible, terrifying, awe-inspiring rack attack! Indeed, this was an act akin to violence. Nay, 'twas violence itself. The boobas strained to be free from their fabric prisons with such force that they all but exploded out of the kimonos. Only a thin piece of fabric held these fiends back from surging out in a bahunkas blitzkrieg.

In my addled state, I threw off my armor—had to save my MP, ya know—decided I'd stick to internal Vibration magic and no more and threw myself into the battle of the bodies.

"Yup, you guys got me! I was so beguiled by your boobs I signed a contract. Fair terms, my ass. It's two against one! This was never fair to begin with!"

Smile smile.

Face-splitting grin.

And the traps didn't end there. Oh, no they didn't. Those wet, faintly translucent yukatas were but a part of their evil plan! "Oh, they're wet because

they just got out of the bath,” you thought. Wrong! In fact, they had covered themselves from head to toe with creamy, dreamy body lotion!

“I can’t get a grip on you! My hands slide right off!”

“You cannot hope to match, might of body lotion!”

Then, when the front of their yukatas spilled open, I was treated to the dazzling sight of their glistening bare skin. Clothes flew everywhere; luscious legs wrapped around me. The girls almost cackled with glee they were so proud they’d ensnared me. As it turned out, the object of every teenage boy’s fantasy *did* exist, but you had to go to the depths of a fantasy world dungeon to find it.

“If the teenage boys back home got wind of this, there’d be a mass exodus of high schoolers getting themselves isekai’d. Next thing you know, we’d be out of Ultimate Dungeons.”

I grabbed hold of one of the sisters of slime, reveling in the intoxicating effect of her flesh, and pinned her down beneath me. Finally, I had conquered Miss Armor Rep. She was so close. Pressed into me. As one with me.

And it was because Dancer Girl was on top of *me* and squeezing her boobs into me with such force that we were all completely pinned.

Now that I was past level 25, Sex God was a much more powerful beast, and I let ‘im rip. With the surging, roiling virility of a tireless warrior, I set foot on Miss Armor Rep’s inner soil and let my teenage boyness take the wheel. The teenage boyness launched a storm of blows right and left, huffing and puffing until she was down for the count. Yeah, I could see the whites of her eyes?

Then I turned my attention to Dancer Girl. She was still stapled to me, so I fainted—making it seem like I was shoulder-blocking—before I slipped out of her hold completely. I stopped her with the Pump-Handle Slam and while she was bent backward, I dropped her in a Bronco Buster before setting to her with a fury and a speed a woodpecker would have been jealous of.

As the battle raged, enemy reinforcements arrived, but I prevailed and took

up the fight with this new company too. In the end, the battle of the sexes (get it, because we had multiple rounds?) ended in my favor. Yup, they were both completely down for the count.

Whereupon the teenage boyness sprang back to life, ready for round two (or three or four or five hundred), and it threw down the gauntlet before Miss Armor Rep's beautiful naked bod! Tonight, I was king of the ring against this tag team duo! I didn't know where or when, but Wisdom had picked up on every technique, and was ready to throw down! Oh, the night was sure to be long for a teenage boy like me!

DAY 109
MORNING

I may be into some real freak shit, but I draw the line at age play!

SISTER GIRL'S CITY IN THE THEOCRACY

BREAKFAST WAS BANNED TODAY. Or rather, I was banned from making it.

“Hey, you guys were the ones who chose to overeat. I didn’t hold you down and force you to demand seconds. I was even ready to switch up the sauce so you wouldn’t get tired of the same sandwiches. But *nooo*. *Some* people don’t know how to appreciate kindness.”

“Your ‘kindness’ is the exact reason we asked for a light breakfast!” my classmates sobbed.

“Yeah! But you gave us this instead! It’s too good, and now we can’t stop!”

“By the way, can I ask why the power duo look dead tired this morning?”

“Yeah! Why did you work them to the bone when we’re in enemy territory? Must you really start a pro wrestling match every time Angelica-san and Nefertiri-san get new sexy clothes?!”

Hey, I was bone tired too! I never expected Dancer Girl and Miss Armor Rep to pick up my Brazilian jiu-jitsu (aka BJJ) techniques that quickly. Then it was 2v1, and I was the sore loser. They put me in an arm lock, pinned me down, and started licking and teasing the bejeezus out of my teenage boyness. Sex God had improved when I reached level 25, but the dungeon emperors were over level 50. Thus, the battle proved long, hard, and oh-so-sweet. When morning came and the time’s-up bell rang, I was ready for the sun to set once more. Or maybe we could destroy the sun with one of our skills.

“Well, I *had* to make sure Dancer Girl and Miss Armor Rep were pinning technique pros. How else could they teach them to all of you? And if that

required me getting all up in their business to do it, then so be it. Exercise is important, kids. Sound mind in a sound body and all. Yup, and now we're wiped out."

"Um. Please don't teach them the sexy kind of pinning techniques..."

"Those aren't helpful on the battlefield."

"And how does that lead to a sound mind or a sound body?"

"Actually... I suppose it wouldn't hurt to know joint locks if we ever end up needing to grapple someone."

"True! BJJ is pretty cool, come to think of it. Using logic to destroy the moving parts of someone's body is kind of metal."

"Maybe so, but it doesn't have many uses outside of grappling."

"Sure. That's jiu-jitsu 101: you need to be steady to grapple an opponent."

"Still, I'd love to add it to my tool kit."

I didn't get the sudden interest. What else would you use martial arts for, if not fighting? Pinning moves were too dangerous for war. In one-on-one combat? Amazing. Showstopping. But on a battlefield with a million other enemies? Nuh-uh. And two-on-one combat? Cheating. Cheating, I tell you!

Therefore, it was better not to let anyone grapple with you at all. Systema and tai chi had their various joint locks too, but in both cases, those involved bringing down a standing opponent within a matter of seconds. Alternatively, some arm locks let you maneuver an opponent to use as a shield against blows from a third foe. But that's not how jiu-jitsu arm locks worked. There, you used your own body weight to pin your opponent to the floor. And that could make for a heated contest—just add lotion! Nothing better than smooth body lotion on a curvy pair of thighs. It was a close match, and I enjoyed every second of it. What a way to start the day!

Anyway, we wrapped up breakfast and left town. The dungeon emperors and I took my horsey to scope out the neighboring villages. Finding our way through

that one town had been a piece of cake yesterday, but I didn't expect that would be the case everywhere. Many of these places welcomed the church armies with open arms, which made robbing and pillaging a much less attractive option to the soldiers. We didn't want to go around town causing trouble when we didn't know who our enemies were. That was a one-way ticket towards the whole town turning on us. Instead, I sneaked around and snapped up any valuables I could get my sticky fingers on. Unfortunately for my adhesive appendages, most of the loot in the church armories sucked. Alas.

Now that we had liberated Sister Girl's city, we were effectively stuck there. The church should have noticed eventually—they would have lost contact with the soldiers stationed there—but it made no sense for that army to have turned up on our doorstep within a literal day. Sister Girl's city was a trap.

We moseyed about to get a good lay of the land before turning Horsie back towards home. We saw a huge army heading the same way, so we followed them from behind. They came with hostages. Shocker.

"Looks like the girls took the bait."

"Miss Arianna...and Miss Class Rep, stepped out the gates. Army has them, surrounded."

"I sense, unfamiliar presence. They fell for, hostages."

The church knew Sister Girl would come back here eventually, so they had prepared a trap for her. She couldn't flee, not when the church had hostages. And if there was one thing the church didn't lack, it was hostages.

"Let me get this straight. The church dudes came and said they wanted to negotiate. Sister Girl and the nuns took the bait, and the girls came running after them to keep them safe. Then, the girls took back all the hostages—sounds like a trap to me."

"Yes. They fell for it."

"Once hostages taken back, can't move. Our friends, stuck in place."

The girls reclaimed the hostages in no time flat, but now that they had innocents to protect, they were sitting ducks. The church army had them surrounded, and my classmates couldn't do a thing. They had to protect the hostages.

"How big is this army, do you think? Five thousand people?"

"Yes. Trap, executed perfectly."

"Class Rep knew it was trap, too. But, couldn't stop herself."

My classmates couldn't switch from defense to offense, because they had to keep the hostages safe. The girls and the army were equally powerful; none could overwhelm the other. It was, effectively, a stalemate. The church army rained an unflagging shower of arrows and spells upon my trapped classmates. The girls were stuck, and bad.

"The church may want to wear them down over time, but I don't know how well that will work out... I *may* have looted their entire stash of supplies from their baggage trains. I mean, no one was using it?"

"That's, clearly not loot!"

Problem was, feeling trapped *mentally* put the girls at a disadvantage. Enough stress over a long period of time would wear away at their powers of reasoning. But what could they do? They couldn't move from where they stood. Yet another reason for reflective armor and shields.

"The girls got the hostages back, but that ruined their offensive capabilities. At least they're immobile because of military matters instead of culinary matters. My classmates can hold their own in any long battle, but starvation tactics are another story!"

If not for the hostages, my classmates could have destroyed the church's army without breaking a sweat. Five thousand people? That was child's play for them. Even bulging out of their clothes, my classmates could trounce an army.

"Speaking of clothes, all the girls are dressed in nun habits. No bulging there..."

But with bellies that big, you'd think we'd see some straining cloth!"

"Never mind, about that. Friends defend hostages, to bitter end. Even if, puts them, in bad situation."

The church armies might have been able to overrun the girls in terms of sheer numbers, but the girls had a major level and equipment advantage.

"I mean, the church soldiers are only about level 10. They would lose to kids on the frontier."

Nod nod. Rattle rattle. Jiggle jiggle.

But the hostages were weak and needed protecting. People died all too easily, so my classmates were stuck in a defensive deadlock. They couldn't attack for fear of the worst.

"The girls have magic barriers up because the church is trying to inflict Poison. My classmates are too high level for it to affect them, but it could kill the hostages."

This ate up the girls' MP. I had to congratulate the girls on their smart thinking, though—they scarfed down so much food that they were well-padded against starvation tactics. This morning, they insisted they wanted something light. When I complied and brought out miso soup, they hoovered it up and demanded miso-marinated meat.

"May we, rescue them?"

"Promised, leave the fight to them. But, is sit back and watch, really okay?"

Mystery was, how come the dungeon emperors out-ate the girls and didn't have the bellies to match? Those abs were six-packed, those bosoms globular. Just think what nestled sleeping inside those flesh spheres... Hopes, dreams, the desire of every teenage boy, all crammed in there... Which raised the question: where'd they put away their breakfast?

"Cannot, stand, sitting back. And watching. Is boring."

"Yes, let's step in. Wrap it up fast. Then lunchtime."

With Jupiter Eye, I used Clairvoyance to survey the battlefield through the whirling clouds of dust and sand. The girls put up a solid defense for their reclaimed hostages, all of whom were women. If I had to guess, these were the nuns who had been kidnapped from Sister Girl's crew. They sat bruised and battered on the ground, refusing to move as their clothes clung to them in disheveled tatters. Sister Girl mopped the mud and tears away, sobbing tears of her own as she worked.

"Look. Let us kill them, break our promise. Promise was...bad idea."

"No, we won't break promise. We promised not to fight. But this, not fighting. This cleaning up trash. Filth that, pollutes air with, every living breath."

Boing boing.

Oh, now they were *angry*-angry. Even Slimey was hopping mad. They were ready to slaughter a foe or two...or five thousand.

"I have, plan! Surround Church army. Destroy them all! Kill them all! Slaughter them, where they stand!"

"Um, what?"

Jiggle jiggle.

Where did they learn those dry responses from? Me? *Hey! I'm the only one who can give a wooden delivery! That I delivered with my wooden stick—bang!* Where were the interrobangs, people?! The shock? The exclamation!

I supposed this wasn't a shock. Slaughter was, after all, a dungeon emperor's calling.

DAY 109
MORNING



SISTER GIRL'S CITY IN THE THEOCRACY

WE COULD FIGHT, we insisted. That's why we split off from Haruka-kun and wound up in this mess. What else were we supposed to do? It was our duty as girls. Were we supposed to leave the nuns to their fates, with torn clothes and soldiers drooling over them? Abandon sobbing, broken, and battered women whose habits were little more than rags? We knew it was a trap, but we could never stand by and allow this injustice.

It may have been tactically the wrong move, but refusing to intervene would have been disgustingly cruel. These nuns had been kidnapped, brutalized, and left to starve. Could we allow this violence to happen if we could stop it? Watch as the soldiers beat any who tried to resist them? No. Of course not. Nothing could have stopped us.

That was exactly how we fell into the soldiers' trap. They surrounded us on all sides. We were complete fools, and if they laughed at us for it, fine. Let them. Let them chuckle as they cut off our retreat. Go ahead, laugh. Our victory would have been easy if we had left these women to suffer another moment. You know, we probably would have finished the fight fast enough to save the nuns after.

Here's the thing: even if they survived the ordeal of being treated like the soldiers' playthings, they would have still died a *mental* death. Could you imagine the despair you would feel if someone knew what was happening and left you to it? Intervening like we did was reckless. It was risky. But if we didn't step in and help, then we'd no longer be fit to be called women! Oh, these soldiers were *dead*. Soon, not one would get my mercy. But...not yet. First, I had

to protect these women.

“What if we fight back with spells?”

“Nuh-uh. Defense comes first. Conserve our MP, girls!”

We turned out to be useless. Even with all our levels, all our newfound strength, it was the same as ever.

“But if we don’t do something, things’ll only get worse!”

“If only we could purify the poison!”

We knew none of the tricks to surviving a fantasy world, so we always let Oda-kun and his friends handle everything. They couldn’t help us right now. We *insisted* we’d be just as helpful as the nerds, and look where it got us! We couldn’t do a thing!

“P-Princess Arianna...”

“Shh. It’s all right. It’ll be all right.”

We let Haruka-kun bail us out of scrapes and pamper us with products. When Haruka-kun flirted with death, we panicked and rushed to get stronger. In the end, we still failed. We truly could not do a thing for him.

“But we must protect these women. We must.”

“Of course! We will!”

When I learned how broken Haruka-kun was, body and soul, we panicked all over again in our rush to protect him. We collectively fought to become stronger and yet, again, we proved worthless. The last thing Haruka-kun wanted was to kill anyone ever again. And yet look at us!

Idiots. Complete and total idiots. Haruka-kun was looking down on us from somewhere and laughing at our stupidity. He had to be tired of our antics. I could accept that. If he lost his respect for us, I understood. Maybe it was better this way.

“I’m sorry, Haruka-kun,” I whispered.

As unbearable as it was to be useless, we still couldn't have left these women to their fates. Nor could we let these soldiers get away with their crimes. This was our only option.

I said, "I'm so sorry for even asking, Haruka-kun. But could you help us? Haruka-kun, we couldn't do it. We just couldn't do anything. It's the same story, over and over."

I didn't have to shout my prayer to the heavens because I knew he was watching. He watched everything. He saw everything. He knew our failures, our incompetence, our utter idiocy.

"Nah, I wouldn't say that. You kept them safe, didn't you? Yeah. You saved them, right? You did what you could, and that's enough—actually, it's not possible to do more, if you think about it. 'Sides, I suck at guard duty, but I can do one *killer* killing job. Especially against a bunch of old men."

I didn't see him, but I heard him. He must have manipulated the soundwaves with Vibration magic to send them directly to my eardrums, a trick I think he picked up by playing with his hydra. And then—and then—and then it was all over.

The threats of the encircling brutes—done. The catcalls, the bluster and raving—done. Oh, they could *say* anything they wanted. They could try anything they pleased. If they thought to repent on their knees—fat chance—they could try. It made no difference. These people had been conjugated into past tense. If only they had the decency to die quietly.

"You know what Sun Tzu says. If you have double their forces, split in two and flank them. If you want to surround them, you need ten times the soldiers."

"Mm-hmm. But once you have them surrounded, you don't want to descend on them and massacre them. It's better to let them have an escape route, rout them, and pursue them."

"Oh, now I remember. Didn't Oda-kun's group teach us that?"

They sure did. And you know what Haruka-kun said? “This is a fantasy world, people. If you think one plus one still equals two, you’re a moron.”

“A hundred sheep led by a lion is better than a hundred lions led by a sheep.”

“Right? So, who would win: five thousand loser soldiers led by a loser, or three of the strongest people in the world led by the king of calamity?”

It was a done deal the moment Haruka-kun showed up. The enemy soldiers were packed in tight to prevent us from slipping through their guard. Now, that sprawling army was trapped by another ring of four people. Sun Tzu would have crapped a brick, but who gave a damn what Sun Tzu thought?

I knew that Haruka-kun must have taken one look at the nuns in their slashed habits and grown furious. The facial swelling from where they’d been beaten only added interest to the anger building inside of him.

If Haruka-kun had *wanted* to kill the soldiers, he could have done so in the blink of an eye. Between him and the three dungeon emperors, it would have been like taking candy from a baby. Well, maybe not for Haruka-kun. He would have had a harder time against the baby. To Haruka-kun, massacring an adult foe took less effort than breathing.

“These soldiers are hopeless, huh?”

“Cut them some slack. They don’t know they’re trapped yet. I mean, what normal soldier would suspect four people could trap a literal army?”

“Yeah, and one of them’s not even a person! He’s a slime, for crying out loud!”

Haruka-kun, Angelica-san, and Nefertiri-san stalked closer on slow, deliberate feet. They cut down any in their wake—any brave challengers, any who put up their shields in defense—with the same easy indifference. As they advanced, the trap cinched tighter around their prey. I doubted any of the soldiers knew what was happening, or that they had nowhere to run. When they tried, either Haruka-kun or a dungeon emperor took them out. The indomitable four waded

through the sea of five thousand fools without once breaking their stride.

Angry shouts transformed into screams of terror. Vile jeers morphed into pleas for mercy. The only constant was the clamor of combat and, on its heels, the silence of the grave.

“Now’s our chance! Let’s heal up, girls!”

“*Ja*, ma’am!”

You might think there were only four people, so how hard could it be to circle behind them and take them then in the rear? Very. Very hard. Once trapped by these four, the tide of battle couldn’t be turned, and escape became impossible.

And that’s all because these four were the strongest beings in the entire world. They were a group of kindred spirits—kind, bumbling, awkward goofballs, every one—and you never, ever wanted to be on their bad side.

It was over for the soldiers. I mean, they made Haruka-kun mad. What more was there to say? They upset the fatal four, the cataclysms that devoured smaller disasters. The frontier’s tragedies couldn’t stop them, so what chance did these soldiers have?

“Whaddya think you’re doing, you bums? Get in there. Kill ‘em!”

“Quit pussy footing around and surround the bastards, dammit!”

Screams. Wails. Begging. Bellowing. The army of thousands scoffed—what could a mere four people do? They turned a thousand men to dust underneath their feet. That’s what.

“Agggh!”

“I-I don’t understand! How is this happ—guh!”

“Ahh! No, stop! *Stoop!*”

Frenzy. Panic. Terror. By the time the soldiers sensed the danger and tried to scramble away, it was already too late. A thousand losers morphed into a

million chunks of flesh and flying spurts of blood.

“M-monsters! They’re monsters!”

“Help! Help m—*aggh!*”

Stupefaction. Alarm. Utter despair followed by understanding. *They* were the ones trapped.

The last three thousand soldiers banded together and launched a mad charge at Haruka-kun, hoping to overwhelm him with numbers. A thousand heads rolled. Only two thousand men were left standing.

They were plenty brave when capturing and defiling innocent women. But when it was time for justice, they tried to negotiate for their lives. Fear took them the moment Haruka-kun descended upon them and did not relent until their heads rolled off their necks. They sobbed. They pleaded for mercy. When those pleas fell on deaf ears, they cursed us as murderers and swore we’d never get away with this. Forgetting all their own crimes, they condemned us in the name of their god. A thousand worthless souls declared their consciences were clean before falling to the sword, and then were snuffed out.

Which left the final thousand. It was a sizable fighting force; the earth would quake under their feet if they all charged at once. What daunting military might! But these were no fighting men. They were little more than cowards whose only skill was sobbing. These creatures cowering before us, dribbling tears and snot, would have been a pitiful sight had they deserved human pity.

“You abandoned everything. Even your own worth.”

“That’s right. When the girls begged you to stop, did you stop? Or did you stand there and laugh? When they cried and pleaded for someone to rescue them, did you help, or did you find it amusing? You know the answer.”

Because there was nothing of value left in these pieces of complete shit who assaulted women crying for mercy. If they threw away the value of their lives, well, then, they could just die.

“Stop, I’m begging y—*arrrgh!*”

“G-god, save m—*aaaah!*”

With so few people assaulting them, I didn’t think it was quite accurate to say the soldiers were “surrounded.” “Surrounded” implied a lack of gaps in the line, and gaps usually meant an opportunity to break for freedom. But the moment the soldiers thought they had escaped, chains slithered across the ground and sliced off their legs while invisible Magic Threads toppled heads off shoulders. Everything within Haruka-kun and the dungeon emperor’s web, even the very air itself, was chopped to bits in a whirr of Sword Flashes.

When the headless torsos crumpled to the earth, our local living gelatinous blob gobbled them down whole. The grim reaper’s scythe whizzed through the air. Sun Tzu says you have to be ten times stronger if you want to surround and massacre an opponent. This may have been a match of five thousand to four, but an accurate assessment of the arsenal of moves our four wielded—we could have taken fifty thousand. It was five thousand versus infinity. The difference in strength was so large that it was transcendent.

Once it was all over, a black-cloaked figure walked across the silent, corpse-strewn battlefield, scythe in hand. He approached the kidnapped women in complete silence before bending down, examining each, and whispering to them a word or two. The nuns’ tear-streaked faces relaxed before the women slipped into a dream-like doze. Tentacles washed clean their bodies, faces, and hair before taking careful measurements and whipping up new clothes and undergarments for them. They looked as if nothing bad had happened; like it was all a bad dream. The women nestled together and slept peacefully in their clean, pretty clothes, masks of innocence upon their faces.

There was a glimmer in Haruka-kun’s eye that I had never seen before—a fey, golden twinkle. It must have been Eye Mastery, a skill I knew Haruka-kun had never used before. It granted him the ability to read and change minds. By the time the sleeping sisters woke, all memories of these bad dreams would be gone. Their sleeping expressions were so peaceful. They were free from

torment at last.

Nothing bad had happened here. Right? Of course there were a few eyewitnesses—just five thousand or so—but they wouldn't breathe a peep about what they saw. We living certainly wouldn't, and it wasn't like these five thousand corpses would get up and start talking. Furthermore, all the monks were currently guarding the gates. That meant that the only lecherous perv to see these women naked was...Haruka-kun!

"Thank you so, so much, Haruka-kun. I'm sorry. After everything, we were still useless."

"Nah, you guys did fine. You did what you were supposed to, which was to call for backup. I wouldn't have shown up if you hadn't given me a holler. It's fine. It's *fine*. You did just fine, and it all turned out fine because I made it in fine? I mean, time?"

Wiggle wiggle.

I looked back at the nuns and the expressions of peace upon their sleeping faces. Those expressions were lies. Kind lies. Maybe it was better that they live happy lives and go to the grave never knowing the truth. Maybe, in a sense, that happiness was still genuine.

As for the liar himself...he'd definitely snuck a peek at those naked nuns. I could *feel* it.

DAY 109
MORNING



SISTER GIRL'S CITY IN THE THEOCRACY

TOGETHER, THE DUNGEON EMPERORS and I routed all the soldiers while conserving our MP. My classmates often enjoyed the “surround ’n pound enemies” tactic, so the four of us wanted to give it a shot ourselves.

“I even brought Horsie for backup, just in case. But no one made it past us. Horsie was upset that he couldn’t get in on the action.”

Neigh!

“Don’t worry, I’ll give you a snack later. But I gotta ask—hey, why would you wanna chomp on a cutlet? That’s not for horses! Is it okay to feed your horse this much meat?”

Wobble wobble.

“I guess he eats everything you put in front of him, even monsters. So maybe it doesn’t matter. And it’s a fantasy world, so, why not? When in fantasy Rome?”

Jiggle jiggle.

“All righty, now that I’ve made the nuns some clothes, let’s take ourselves a little nappy-nap. This Eye Mastery thingymajig sure is draining. It’s a pretty dangerous skill.”

Memories and identity were formed by signals running endlessly through the complex circuitry we call the human brain. Overwriting them required understanding every centimeter of that circuitry, running multiple series of computations perfectly, and reconstructing an emulated copy of the target brain. Trying to read someone else’s mind with a human brain would be suicide.

But I dumped that task on Wisdom and managed to pull through. Even so, it was draining—too draining for me to practice. My head felt like it was on fire. I wouldn't have been shocked if smoke started pouring out of my ears. If only Heat magic could cool me down...

“Let me put some miso glaze on a revival mushroom and grill it up... Well, it sure tastes good, but it doesn't do a thing for the headache. I guess I gotta fake it till I make it?

“Doing one person was bad enough. But doing all dozen, or... Actually, how many nuns were there, anyway? Whatever. Point is, it was kind of stupid for me to take this on. I hope my brain cells eventually come back online. But not if they come back stronger than ever and turn into meathead brain cells! The last thing I want is to be dumb as a stump.”

Wiggle wiggle.

It was time to catch some Zs. I went back to my room, flopped into bed, and tried to get a little shut-eye. I could feel a kind soul stroking my hair, which soothed my pain a smidge. Made it a little easier to...sleep... *Hmm*, what was I going to do about dinner?

As I dozed off, I heard a far-off voice singing an unfamiliar lullaby to me. It must have been one of the tunes they sang to kiddos here in this world. The gentle notes soothed me... *Hey, is this what age play is like?*

DAY 109
MORNING

You can't escape the food feuds even in feudalism.

SISTER GIRL'S CITY IN THE THEOCRACY

THERE'S NO SUCH THING as perfection. I did everything I could, pulled out all the stops, and tried to make the result as good as could be. But it wasn't perfect because there's no such thing.

"I ran the calculations and simulations a second time, and I'm still not seeing the problem."

It looked like the ordeal left lingering effects on the nuns. I didn't know if it was a faint wisp of memory—and I'm not sure how that would work, as they remembered nothing from their abduction—but either way, they were left with one thing: a fear of dudes. They kept their distance from me and threw nervous glances my way every few seconds. See? Totally traumatized.

Or maybe it was my imperfect use of Eye Mastery. I never expected it to be flawless, but I didn't think it'd be *this* useless. Seriously, the nuns were bright red and everything.

"Morning, Haruka-kun. Or, uh, evening, I guess. Is your head okay...?"

"Morning to you too. First up—if my head's not okay, then I'm definitely not! Where's this sudden diss coming from? Am I in danger of getting promoted to one of those high school boys who's messed up in the head? Just think what that'd do to my sex appeal! How come I'm mentally okay while my poor sex appeal's the polar opposite? What's that all about?"

Dissing me outta nowhere—where had these isekai rap battles come from? And sure, nobody had ever told me my head was healthy, but still! Her words of power still ate at my HP. Worse yet, my poor sex appeal was plummeting.

“Oh, don’t be like that. We made dinner and everything.”

“Yeah. The nuns say it’s not good for little kids to have feasts every night.”

“The Theocracy can’t sustain this level of luxury eating on the daily.”

“But...doesn’t *everyone* eat like this on the frontier? At least that’s what it seems.”

“Now that you mention it, everyone in Omui’s got a taste for comfort food... You’re right!”

When I awoke from my nap, I thought I should start throwing dinner together. But I guessed the girls couldn’t wait for me.

“Just like how it used to be on the frontier, spices are luxury items here.”

“I hear most food is hard to come by these days.”

“Cooking Club Girl became our supreme commander and martialled us in our cooking efforts.”

“Yup! And I did, like, a super good job. Gosh, it’s been ages since I’ve done any real cooking.”

Jobs could negatively impact talents, but the rule had loopholes. You could just not use skills or magic, or any magical tools with special effects. You still wouldn’t be incredible, but at least your whole project wouldn’t go tits up. Disabling your skills was the main trick.

“For a poor backwater like the frontier used to be, a lot of eateries popped up.”

“Totally. I thought it was new shops springing up ’cause of Haruka-kun, but that’s not it. The frontier has so many people who can’t cook for doodoo because their jobs make them walking disasters in the kitchen.”

“Wait a sec... What does that say about all the housewives in the frontier?”

Of course, it wasn’t easy to turn off innate skills. Jobs were specialized talents, but they couldn’t be developed without the proper resources. Jobless NPCs

didn't exist in this world, at least, as far as I could tell. Even if they didn't do it as a whole nine-to-five thing, there were still Villagers and Townspeople. *Bleh. Pass.*

"That's that. Our battle plan is ready to go."

"Yup. We're good to hold down the fort here."

"Haruka-kun, you're free to go once it's light out. Don't worry about us."

"Even if we mess up again, we won't lose. We'll be okay."

"We can fight, we promise! Have faith in us."

Fair enough. The girls could have won that fight even without our help. With levels that low and equipment that wimpy, those soldiers could have had every tactical advantage there was and still never defeated my classmates.

But they could have killed the helpless nuns. My classmates, being over level 100, would have been fine—at least physically. Maybe not in spirit. A person couldn't witness something like that and ever be the same.

"And that's why I've made *shiruko*—red bean and mochi porridge—for dessert. Wh-what's with the looks?"

Those looks could kill. If they'd had buckets, I bet the girls would gulp down porridge by the bucketful. No doubt they were struggling with tough emotions in the aftermath of this, but I didn't expect to see fury and elation warring in their eyes!

"Not this! Not after I worked so hard to burn off the blubber!"

"Oh, damn it! I was going to cut back on the calories today. Small meals, I told myself! Small! Why does he have to bring out the shiruko?"

"If you don't want it, more for me! Funny, I never gain weight when I eat."

"No way! Hands off my dessert!"

"All the calories go straight to your ches—hey, get off me!"

I didn't have much mochi rice, so I made the shiruko mochi with a combo of

rice flour and dumpling flour. I guess it was sort of like shiruko dumplings.

“In the Kanto region of Japan, the soupy combination of red beans and mochi is called shiruko. Non-soupy versions are called *zenzai*. But in the Kansai region, shiruko is the soupy stuff with *smooth* red bean paste, whereas zenzai is soupy with *lumpy* red bean paste. Without the soup, it’s called *kameyama* or *kintoki*. So...what do we call this thing we’re eating? Schrodinger’s shiruko?”

“Don’t know! Just don’t call me late for seconds!”

I used smooth bean paste and a soupy syrup—objectively the perfect form of shiruko. I get this is a huge point of contention back home in Japan, though, so don’t get mad at me! All shiruko is valid!

The girls were believers in the power of dumplings. Me, though, I was on team mochi. I felt kind of left out. Last night, the girls caught me sneaking a snack of mochi with sweet soy sauce and nicked my sneaky snacks with a snicker-snack. Resistance was futile against the terrifying look in their eyes. If I was mochi, I would have been shaking in my sticky mochi boots. I was one step away from becoming a red (has)bean!

Before long, even the dumplings were driven to extinction by disappearing mochi rice despite me adding more and more rice flour to the mix as I went. Even the illustrious shiruko soup, née red bean paste, stood moments away from complete annihilation, done in by demands for seconds, and thirds, and fourths. Now the girls wanted extra red beans!

DAY 109

NIGHT



THE POPE'S CHAMBERS WITHIN THE CATHEDRAL

THE PAPAL CHAMBERS were buried in gauche ornamentation and a barbarian's sense of éclat. The once-dignified sanctity of the place had long since vanished. Perhaps there was no better way to signify the evil conducted within these walls than the base opulence in which it clothed itself.

"Simply because there were no known survivors does not mean our troops were destroyed. What could possibly defeat the most elite warriors of the Church? Come now, use your brain. No known survivors means *deserters*. Make an example of them. A public execution for their families!"

So spoke the owner of these apartments, a man so far removed from the notion of humble poverty as to be its antithesis. He preached humility and hard labor as his ugly jowls twitched under a perverted snarl. His slimy voice rose into a shriek at the end of his sentences.

"Your Eminence, we cannot. To murder your people in cold blood would sully your holy name, which would only incite deserters and jeopardize your reign. I beg of you: let the commonfolk know of your authority, but *gently*. Gently, Your Eminence. You must give them the time to accept your rule."

In the streets, the commonfolk laughed at the farcical play *The Foolish King and the Black-Haired Jester*. Yet this—this foolish king and his band of clowns—that was no joke. Now that the worst pope in all of Aryucan history had seized power, the rise of a new and even viler king hovered on the horizon.

"Then we must find them with our spies. Give them a taste of torture. Remind them what it means to disobey he who speaks with God's own voice."

In a de facto sense, the vile monarch was already crowned. Already, he gripped us in his evil clutches; all that was left was to claim the formal title. Were he to capture the Princess Ariel and make her his bride against her will, he would, by law, be our uncontested, diabolical king.

“Yes, Your Eminence. At once.”

Make no mistake, dear listener. The pope was as unwilling to rule righteously as he was unfit. In the mummer’s farce, power rendered the foolish king of Diorelle its plaything. Because he understood the gravitas and responsibility of authority, he found himself overwhelmed by it. It drove him to commit folly after folly. But *here*—here in the Theocracy, a mad king was on the cusp of being born. One who would sell the lives of his people and the future of his country for mere personal glory. Here stood a man who hungered for power so that he might use it as a toy.

Even when he learned that a company of the Church’s paladins, a group akin to his personal guard, had gone missing, he thought little and less of their safety. His mind considered naught but treachery and conspiracy. He could trust no one. Everything was treason in the mad convolutions of his brain. Every other word from his mouth demanded executions to make examples of the latest perceived traitor.

To assassinate him would have been a trifle. One only had to gain an opportunity to stand close enough to his person. His vestments may have been shot through with magical implements of all sorts, but my sword was stout. I knew myself to be a match for this senile old man.

Yet even if I was to strike him down, it would mean nothing. Not if someone else snatched up the crown for their own amusement. And with the Cathedral such a labyrinthine fortification, could we ever be sure that we had routed every thrice damned villain hiding in its walls?

Even if I murdered him, this passel of madmen would restore the Church to power faster than a winking eye. As strong as I was, I knew I lacked the might to

cleanse these halls of every dotard who used the Church's sacred relics for their personal advancement.

"Lord Commander, our suspicions were correct. We've received reports that Princess Ariel has made it back to the city safely. Furthermore, while the Church itself claims ignorance, the entire army of knights has perished. I...I fear Leticia was one of their number."

Here in this isolated Cathedral, the madmen ranted, willfully ignorant of the outside world. Devil take them all! I wanted to cut down—perforate, quash, raze, slaughter, *trounce*—every one of those accursed fiends! But I could not. Not when they could capture the Princess Ariel. There needed to be someone to set her free. I could not die before then, but every waking moment was agony. I wanted to ghost, harrow, impale, just *kill* the curs!

"I see," I said. "What...sorrowful news."

When I finally left those vile, opulent chambers behind me, a knight—one of the Church's paladins—fell in step behind me. If not for my fears of the Princess Ariel's capture, I would have bequeathed my command into *her* capable hands. She was still wet behind the ears and had all the foolishness of youth, but she had a good eye. She...she had been sent to take the life of the princess to whom she owed so much. The pope, may devils take him, had taken her orphanage hostage.

"Done in by the incompetence of the Knight Commander... A man so weak he could not save even this child's life. Dead. She is dead."

Such a tragic end for a life so brief. *I am so sorry I failed you*, I thought to her. *My dear Leticia.*

DAY 109

NIGHT



SISTER GIRL'S CITY IN THE THEOCRACY

IT WAS BASICALLY a custom at this point. A rite of passage. An initiation ritual, if you would. Leticia-san swore her sword to Arianna-san to take back the orphanage and Arianna-san, in turn, asked us for aid. It was the first time she'd ever asked anything of us—asked us to become involved in her war. That's how we became comrades, sisters-in-arms, which led to this rite of passage. As it turned out, even women of the cloth weren't immune, if the moaning and panting were anything to go by.

See, Haruka-kun was making their armor, and he meant business. And the tentacles—oh, the tentacles. People's lives were at stake, so he would not cut corners. He would, however, get rather Magic Handsy.

"Uh, if the earsplitting screams are anything to go by...I'm guessing he's still taking their measurements."

"Yuuup."

Haruka-kun wouldn't settle for anything less than perfection. He sought the ultimate in output, endlessly drafting plans right on their bodies and tweaking the designs just so. When faced with such detailed measurements and scrupulous work, even the most innocent of maids would turn into a blushing, twitching mess.

"From the sound of it, she's got Magic Hands taking her measurements, the tentacles planning a mock-up, and Magic Threads putting it all into action."

Ah yes, a rite of passage for all us maidens—pass out from sweet vulgarity and awake only to bliss out again. In the name of custom-made undergarments,

we endured a full-body tentacle measuring spree!

“If she hasn’t lost her voice yet, it can’t be *that* bad.”

“True!”

In exchange for truly transcendental garments, we would be driven out of our minds with writhing agony. To maidens like us, these measurement sessions brought about a certain kind of feeling. You know the one. They were as terrible as they were incredible.

“Before long, she’ll be out of breath.”

“Yup. And that’s when the fitting starts.”

“Oh my god. When you feel that sensation in *literally* your entire body? Who knew it was possible to... You know. Without being touched down there?”

“I know, right? Good luck to her.”

I could see it now—Haruka-kun fighting for dear life against the blindfold committee, eyes clamped firmly shut, cheeks red as a fire engine, doing his darndest to act like nothing was happening while running calculations that would make anyone’s brain dribble out of their ears.

“I never used to think it was possible to feel so much pleasure you pass out.”

“No kidding. I’m just happy it didn’t, like, mentally break me.”

“Dude, same.”

The blindfold committee claimed to find it cute—*it* being Haruka-kun turning into a blushing mess, that is—but when you were in the hot seat, you didn’t have the mental bandwidth to look at his face. You were too occupied with... other things, physically and mentally.

Another high-pitched scream trailed off into a garbled, happy whimper. Her voice quivered, and I could hear a sob mixed into the moans. No doubt she was already limp, her legs long since given out. The only thing holding her up, at this point, were Nefertiri-san’s chains.

“Hmm. That’s the sound of the readjustments just before the final correction stage, don’tcha think?”

“Gosh, he really is taking his time.”

Well, it wasn’t like this was a cakewalk. He wanted to prevent them from ever thinking, “I’m good as dead; what’s the point?” He never, never wanted them to give up. He always wanted them to have a shot at survival. And with that bizarrely protective attitude, he put his whole heart and soul—not gonna lie, too much—into making full, custom-made armor that fit down to the micrometer.

“And it’s the first measurement for her. It’s not like he has any prior info to work from. So, ya know, it’s a longer session.”

“Yeah, he’s gotta be real thorough about measuring her... So much better! No wonder she’s going wild.”

“I can only imagine how difficult it is to fit clothes on someone who’s writhing. From the sound of her voice, she’s probably got the tentacles all coiled around her.”

“She’s really bringing her A-game. Dang, girl. You can *still* scream?”

“I didn’t expect her to last this long.”

“Maybe she’s just not a passer-outer.”

There was no end to the moaning. Her warbling voice and ragged breathing echoed around us. She squeaked. She squealed. She screamed.

“Damn, she’s hanging in there.”

“Maybe it’s because she’s a nun. You know, all those hymns they sing? All the sermons they give and whatnot? Must be hard for her to lose her voice.”

“Sure but... She’s a nun. She’s gotta be a virgin, right? Like I know she’s a grown-ass woman, but still.”

She was twenty-eight, in fact, and raised as a princess prior to being a nun.

That sorely limited her opportunities for fooling around. If anything, that sheltered life probably decreased her tolerance for Haruka-kun's shenanigans. That's why she sank deep into the bath water every time we held a girls' meeting in the bath. And so when she—poor, innocent Arianna-san—marched off to a Haruka-kun fitting with no fear whatsoever... I mean, even the dungeon emperors were putty in his hands. She could give it her best shot, but did she ever have a chance?

There went another wail, followed by rapid, labored breathing.

As it turned out, Leticia-san was just as virginal. I guessed swearing your life to your sword, faith, and an orphanage's protection would do that to a gal.

"Not like knowing what you're getting into helps. The anticipation's killer."

"I guess the earlier you get broken in, the better."

After, we went to Haruka-kun and extolled, with great earnestness, the importance of equipment and the danger Arianna-san and Leticia-san were in. We may or may not have all worn miniskirts and said, "Please, pretty please, with a cherry on top?" while burying him in a pile of teenage girls. We even secured the referral discount.

One final scream rent the air, signaling they reached the final adjustment stage of the fitting. No doubt the screamer was experiencing a fine, maidenly moment, which meant it was just about time to mount a rescue. I could hear sobs mixed in with the keening and gasping for breath. She probably felt like she'd forsaken her virtue, but I'd never seen "Thou shalt not make clothes" or "Thou shalt not be felt up by tentacles taking your measurements" in any of the scriptures. She hadn't done anything wrong, doctrinally speaking. Besides, from what I could tell, the church didn't have a thing about abstinence. Just a regular old caution against putting out for too many partners. Tentacles and snakes didn't count, right?

"Great job, kiddo! You all done now?"

The clothes fit perfectly, adhering to every line of Arianna-san and Leticia-

san's bodies. They were a tight fit—showing off the suppleness of the fabric—transforming our sweet, innocent sister into a sinful seductress.

“Okay, the armor, habit, and dresses are done, and I’m finishing up the underwear right now, so if the blindfolds could *refrain* from prying my eyelids open, that’d be swell, thanks! I’m closing. My. Eyes. Can we please get someone else on blindfold duty? These two are committed to opening my eyes! Who hired them? Well, anyway, we’re done, that’s a wrap, that’s in the bag, that’s settled? They’re both down for the count!”

The new habit clung to Arianna-san so tightly it was like a bathing suit. It left nothing to the imagination and made her natural figure even more alluring. Piety? Nope. Innocence? Check in the back, 'cause we were all out. No holiness to speak of, but it was a work of art regardless. The skin-tight fit was a product of its extremely efficient defense and low MP consumption. You could not wedge *anything* between those clothes and her body. It was practically painted on her.

Arianna-san and Leticia-san were gasping and making expressions no god-fearing church girl should ever make. Angelica-san and Nefertiri-san took the perpetrator, marched him away, and shut the door behind them. Before long, we could hear them gasping and moaning too.

Be careful, Haruka-kun! You keep that up, and they'll get their revenge on you tomorrow! And was he using too much MP! Based on the mewling I was hearing, Haruka-kun was using his full arsenal. Haruka-kun was in the zone... The bone zone!



DAY 110
MORNING

The girls aren't fans of my trip down... What was that road called again? Oh yeah, Memory Lane!

SISTER GIRL'S CITY IN THE THEOCRACY

DELEGATES FROM NEARBY TOWNS and messengers from factions whose members had fled to the far fringes of the country started flocking in at first light. The two princesses in our party had their hands full taking care of it all. Even RBF Knight Lady joined in on crowd control. Maid Girl directed the throng and kept the chaos to a manageable level, but the line of people waiting to see Princess Girl and Sister Girl never abated.

"If we bundled them with meet-n-greet tickets, think we could sell any (mushroom) frontier pennants, my slimy pal?"

Wiggle wiggle.

I gave my winning idea a whirl, but for some reason, no one in the thick crowd wanted to buy a meet-and-greet ticket for the princesses. The opposition factions wanted a figurehead to unite under, and who better than Sister Girl, the princess of the Theocracy and church archbishop? That's why the church attacked her no matter where she went.

I knew diddly-squat about the church hierarchy or the Theocratic aristocracy, so I had no way to help. Two Viscount Whozits struck up a violent argument over faction leadership something-something, who would serve as the princess's advisor blah-blah-blah, and a lot of other bull. I wasn't clear on the details, but before long Princess Girl stepped in to break it up and someone slipped a tiny tanuki from Whatchamacallit High a piece of candy. Yeah, it was chaos.

"While you're standing there giving a running commentary of events and

acting like a complete stranger, I'd like to remind you these are your *friends* you're talking about!"

"How do you not know the name of her high school?! She's literally your classmate!"

"Oh my god, did you forget the name? How did you find your way to school when you *didn't know its name?*"

The girls ganged up on me to dose with another morning's helping of glares.

"Morning, all... Wait, are we not complete strangers? I guess we might have met—we invaded them and all—but it's not like we super need the Theocracy. If Sister Girl wants to take the throne back and rule it by herself, she has to figure out this mess on her own. We have nothing to do with it! Also, I used to get to Whatchamacallit High just fine. All I had to do was get off the bus at something or other. Can't miss it. It's the one right after Wheresawhatsit Hall. Missing your bus stop is a real wheresawhatsit hell!"

"Why is *this* what you're worried about?"

We knew nothing, so of course we were strangers. Outsiders. Total intruders. We didn't know what sorts of cities there were, what rivers flowed through. We couldn't fathom the local songs or famous cuisine. Heck, I didn't even know the Theocracy's real name. To be involved, a person had to know the Theocracy's sordid past and still want to put in the work to fix the place. Me, though... I guessed learning the country's name would be a good start. *It might be on the test!*

"What are you not getting? Haruka-kun, you gave Arianna-san top-secret weapons and armor. You even gave her the friend discount. You're involved! You're her friend!"

"Look, I can't speak for Arianna or her mama or Arianna's mama's llama. I'm just a helper. She's the one calling all the shots and planning this coup. I won't be involved with running the place afterward, so I should keep my mouth shut. I mean, I won't die for this country. Why should I plan its future? I don't know its

name, let alone what its future should be! I'm a total stranger, ya know?"

The only reason Sister Girl's new equipment was top secret was to stop anyone from learning its weaknesses. It wasn't deep. I just wanted to be careful, because an enemy could still break the girls' armor if they followed all the right steps.

Unfortunately, my MP still hadn't fully recovered. The batteries were stuck at around the 90% mark. Measuring was hard work for a teenage boy, after all. Afterward, my teenage boyiness went whole hog, and a whole hog consists of a lot of beaten meat. My tentacles, hydra, and chickenatrice joined in the brawl. I opened the spigot on my MP and let it all gush out. Pretty soon, I even had the dungeon emperors writhing and moaning with tear-stricken faces. It was an ordeal and a half, let me tell you. Cleaned me right out.

I didn't figure it out until I cleared the level 25 level wall and got better at battling and going about my daily tasks in my new body. Rather than sit around and do nothing while I waited for my MP to refill, my MP came back faster when I used it with reckless abandon. The late-night Lovemaking sessions replenished my MP, but aside from that, my constant use of Qi Wizardry restored a lot of MP too. The effects of qi activation really blossomed with Qi Wizardry. Last night, I put qi activation to the ultimate test—huffed and puffed, which was basically all it was, but it did the trick. It's no wonder that Sorcery leveled up and my MP came back faster. But I couldn't say the same for Miss Armor Rep or Dancer Girl—the two of them didn't come out of their sex stupors until morning.

Since they were still out, I made a buffet spread for breakfast. After chowing down, I went outdoors for a workout. I started with radio calisthenics before moving into a cross of tai chi and systema. Then I tried *tongbeiquan*, *baguazhang*, and *baiquan*, three sports I was currently learning. As I blended them with one another, I found better ways to morph them all into one singular technique. Well, by "I," I mean Wisdom. *Delegation is the best!*

From there, I transitioned into Cane Mastery and a trial run of a new

technique: switching between the two sword disciplines of *kenjutsu* and *toujutsu* instantaneously. Each had their distinct purpose. Kenjutsu used the weight of the sword for chopping cuts, while toujutsu focused on singular drawing and slashing motions. Putting the two together seemed like just the thing I needed for big group battles.

Just then, Fish Girl passed by—out on a walk, I guess—and challenged me to a fight. Nudist Girl waited in the wings behind her, ready to spar me in round two.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hold the phone. This goes beyond a little light morning exercise!”

Both had the Sword King titles. Worse, they were among the top five sword users in my class. They even had Miss Armor Rep’s stamp of approval.

Fish Girl was the best of the best. Her sword flashed in a line of glimmering silver, every move precise, ordered, and flowing. It was poetry. She wasted no effort and never seemed to work up a sweat. She executed the most suitable cut for every given situation, her moves the portrait of efficiency. She left no gap to exploit, no spare movement for her foe to take advantage of. Her sword glided with an elegance that made it seem like an extension of her body, every stroke was a martial arts masterpiece. She came second to none in her command of technique. Beauty. Perfect, frightening efficiency.

“Gah! This is the closest anyone has ever come to fighting like Miss Armor Rep! She says you carry yourself like a master fencer. Behold, the bewitching swordswoman, cursed with the cruel fate of being born to fishy parents!”

“I most certainly was not! Can you please quit making up weird stories about me? First of all, my parents are barely swimmers, let alone fish. And wait a sec—why are you using your sword like a butcher knife? Don’t tell me you’re trying to fillet me!”

She parried each attack with ease before changing her sword’s direction mid-flight. The weapon jumped in her hands like it was alive. I was dazzled by the disconnect between the way she moved and the trajectory of her blade. It

made it impossible to track the quick lightning flashes of her attacks. Here was a style of swordsmanship both orthodox and fantastic. The impromptu flips and twists reminded me of a fish on the line. Behold, the birth of the fish school of kenjutsu! A terrifying art! I didn't want to be her catch of the day!

"Oh, quit muttering to yourself! And stop giving things stupid names. Seriously, drop the fish thing! Don't I think I didn't hear you, mister—you *totally* just said, 'Gah! What is this? Fishy-Wishy Fighting?' If you're going to name a martial art after me, the least you could do is use my real name!"

Regular swordplay wouldn't cut it against her. So I tried throwing a couple unorthodox techniques into the mix. However, she blocked both my real sword and my limp, wiggly sword. (My tentacles! I meant my tentacles!!!) Hell, I cheated and whipped out my snake (hydra!!!), but she saw through that one too. The coc—I mean, chickenatrice tried to have a go at her as well, but as it turns out, it's pretty difficult to hold a sword in your beak. And blow darts went against the rules, or so I was told. *Yes, I may be shading the Skull Lord.*

I knew the girls would be pissed at me if I self-destructed, so Life or Death was off the table. Besides, Life or Death was literally an all-or-nothing. With all these skills entangled in it, even my plain wooden sword was super dangerous. With that said, going ballistic and slashing at will—while firing blow darts—apparently didn't count as proper swordplay. Back to the drawing board I went.

"Come to think of it, I don't have any special techniques. You know, the cool, exciting kind. Like something to rival Fishy-Wishy Fighting... Tentacle Technique? No, wait. I have it. The natural counter to the fish school of kenjutsu—Chickenatrice Combat!"

I had my chickenatrice cock a few doodles, but it cock-a-doodle-didn't stop Fish Girl's onslaught. She glided right up to me with practiced movements, her sword driving me ever back. I danced out of reach of her weapon.

"Ah, so this is the secret to Fishy-Wishy Fighting: Swim like a fish, filet like a fisherman. Long has this mantra been passed down through your fishy clan!"

Her grunts of exertion turned into a scream of rage. The sword rampaged in a flickering, flashing storm of blows.

“I keep telling you, you’re completely wrong. Now you’re making up a whole *backstory* for me?!”

Cock-a-doodle-doo!

Huh! Guess I was wrong.

“You sure? I don’t think my cockatrice buys your cock(atrice) and bull story. Even Nudist Girl is going ‘Say it isn’t so!’”

“Don’t fall for his tricks, Fukunuki-chan! Wait—you’ve literally met my parents! They weren’t fish, and you know it!”

“R-really?”

See? Nudist Girl was just as confused as I was. When searching her memories, she probably found too many fish to recall Fish Girl’s parents. *Fish all look pretty similar.*

Eventually, tired of screaming her lungs out, Fish Girl swapped out for Nudist Girl. Fighting Nudist Girl was no cakewalk either. She may have lagged behind Fish Girl’s technical prowess, but with her natural physical abilities and keen senses, she was still a proud member of the Meatheadess Monarchy. She had more spring in her step, giving her a longer reach than Fish Girl, and better agility for twisting and bending. Nudist Girl had the body of an athlete—but stripping and showing off *had* to be against the rules.

“I’m not stripping, for crying out loud! Look! I am covered from head to toe. You’re going to make me cry!”

Nudist Girl preferred shorter swords than Fish Girl and slashed with an even faster frenzy. She outperformed Fish Girl when it came to lightning-fast strikes, but she lacked Fish Girl’s defensive and parrying capabilities. Since she was a solo swim racer back on Earth, she tended to charge headlong into everything as fast as she could. She therefore struggled to maintain a good balance

between offense and defense, and it was never pretty when she tried to switch between the two. That's why I focused on low attacks and tried to knock her off her balance. Once I broke her combo, it threw off her entire rhythm. Like Fish Girl, she couldn't turn on a dime and protect herself if she needed to.

Understandable—balancing offense and defense was inherently tricky—but anyone who couldn't manage the switch would soon find themselves up a creek without a paddle. She also needed to stay on her guard even when she was in attack mode, or else a counterattack could wreck her. From there, it was a one-way ticket to total panic.

Cock-a-doodle-doo!

Hissss!

Wings spread wide, my cockatrice crowed like a rooster while the hydra created waves to dazzle her. My tentacles...turned into kitty toys and tried toying with her. It certainly surprised her, and I used that opportunity to whoop her butt.

“That's no fair! Haruka-kun, you filthy cheater! You're utterly shameless. I always knew you were after me for my body. Is that all I am to you? Just another piece of meat? You're literally hitting on me! What have I done to deserve this!”

“Hey, listen! The only piece of flesh I want is a nice hunk of fish. Although I guess you could say sashimi is pretty naked. It's fish's version of stripping.”

I had to wrap this up, and quick. Here came Rhythmic Gymnastics Girl, and I didn't stand a chance against her in close quarters. Even in the best of circumstances, she was a formidable opponent for me. Besides, I wasn't keen to get the stuffing knocked out of me by a bunch of high school girls. That would be bullying! Indeed, my sex appeal was so low they had resorted to bullying me for it... What a cruel, cruel fantasy world we lived in! Here, the more the girls over-ate, the more they trained with the dungeon emperors. The more they trained, the stronger they grew. The stronger they grew, the more formidable

they became. *It's a trap!* And trust me, there was no shortage of overeating.

Wait, why was Nudist Girl shrinking away in fear? Probably some teen girl thing. Being a teen girl was tough.

“There you are! Haruka-san, we’ve been looking everywhere for you. The rough draft of the battle plans is ready. Well... It’s more like an outline of our basic plan of action.”

“Action? What, we’re not trying to avoid the fighting? That’s the thing about civil wars—even if Sister Girl wins, the Theocracy will still take a beating. Everyone loses.”

“After what happened yesterday, our position has changed. We now see the situation quite differently.”

By the time I showed up back at the church, I found that the war council had started without me. Their grand strategy? To hold an all-out, decisive battle for the kingdom. To that end, they had drawn up a series of plans to execute the perfect war.

Elf Girl attended all the discussions at Sister Girl’s side. Thanks to her Emotion Sensing, she could detect if any messengers told lies or wanted to lead Sister Girl into a trap. This allowed Sister Girl to collect cold, hard facts, analyze them, and make careful decisions.

During the uprising in the Kingdom, Princess Girl joined my classmates with the intent of bringing down her own royal family. She wanted to save her people, and for that, she won the girls’ cooperation. Now, we didn’t have the option of a low-casualty happy ending. Nevertheless, what did Sister Girl choose?

“Oh, Haruka-kun! There you are. The, uh...the plan has changed. Unless we can drain the corruption, the Theocracy will never recover. That’s my understanding,” Class Rep told me.

“Take it with a grain of salt. We got our information from Theocracy

dissidents. Still, even if only half of it's true, I feel terrible for the people here. The situation's horrible."

"Yeah. It's not just the pope and his faction. The whole sect has gone bad, and we need to crush it with an iron fist. Seriously, if this keeps up for much longer, the whole church will be destroyed."

"Worse comes to worst, I fear we may need to wipe the church off the map to save the Theocracy."

Once the pope launched his coup d'état, he wasted no time showing his true colors. The masks were off. The pope began acting as if he were the true monarch. At its heart, the church was a repugnant entity, so it hardly surprised me to hear of the pillaging, raping, and executions it led. With every city in a state of civil war, refugees fled the heartland in a mad rush to find somewhere, anywhere, that was safe. That's what happened whenever there's a nightmarishly "great" church.

This led Sister Girl to her decision: holy war. A crusade. With Sister Girl, Princess Girl, Merimeri, and a Slimey guard as the main force, they vowed to go from town to town attacking the usurper church faction and liberating the countryside as the Rightful, Orthodox, Legit AF Army of the Church. I wasn't wild about the name, but hey, at least it was descriptive. *It's exactly what it says on the label.*

Meanwhile, my classmates were to act as a "reserved force." Well, not super reserved. Their job was to help rout the enemy army whenever Sister Girl's group needed help. Miss Armor Rep was to go with them. Whenever possible, though, they were going to let Sister Girl play the hero's role—to minimize the postwar confusion, basically. What didn't make sense to me was why. My classmates couldn't be any less reserved! Someone in this room needed to work on their naming schemes.

Finally, Dancer Girl and I would be scouts. That involved a lot of sneaking in and around enemy bases. But they said by the time we went and returned, all

the fighting would be done. What was the use of intel, then? This was the fishiest scouting mission I'd ever been on. Even weirder, they called us the Shock Force Scouting & Slaughtering Squad. *Yeesh*, what a mouthful! Who could remember a name like that? I couldn't even tell what the hell our mission was supposed to be from that title. I was just innocent reconnaissance! Right?

"Sister Girl, didn't you say you wanted to go to the royal palace? If I'm making a trip there anyway, I might as well bring you along."

"'Twould be a lie to say that I am not worried for my family. I fear I am such a coward, a part of me wishes to accept your assistance and leave this war for my father to fight. Nay—I must refuse. I am a princess and an archbishop, and as such I have a responsibility to my subjects and my congregation. You all have been kind enough to name my undeserving self as your friend; thus, I must fight. I must not bring shame to your name."

She looked me straight in the eyes as she spoke. Her gaze was commanding and intense. She was a far cry from the nun I once knew. And I could say the same for her habit! *Hoo* mama, she was smoking hot in that get-up! Sister Girl had undergone a massive positive transformation, both inside and out, and now she was one hell of a dynamite gal in that vaguely fantasy European way. The super tight habit took sexy to a new level!

Anyway, my job was simple: go in, have a look-see, and report back. Finally, the time had come to put Corporate Proactiveness to use. Thing was, they didn't even want my intel. And yet they asked me to be a scout? This made no sense.

DAY 110

MIDDAY

My chickenatrice is a fowl shot with her blow darts!

THE PLAINS OF THE THEOCRACY

I LENT HORSIE to Class Rep and the other girls, so we set off at less of a gallop and more of a jog. Oh well, what could I expect? I was a scout. Just a meek little errand boy.

On the frontier, the poorly made carriages limped along slower than the average person could walk. Much of the frontier lived in poverty to begin with, so carriages were few and far between. The Theocracy, though, had more carriages than they could use. This was good news for us—sneaking into the country in our disguised carriage was a brilliant move, if I did say so myself! We'd never been caught once, but for some reason, my classmates kept bullying me for my flawless stratagem. What was the problem? Nobody took a second look at us!

It usually took a lot of argument to determine who would go with whom, but we solved that problem quickly this time. Miss Armor Rep and Slimey trusted Dancer Girl to come with me, and from all appearances, she looked grateful for the assignment. We didn't get alone time with one another often, if you knew what I was saying. Now was our first chance in ages to enjoy each other's company for a long, interrupted stretch...but this wasn't the time for hanky-panky. For one, the plain plainly lacked swank hotels.

We trundled along, swinging by towns on our map of assignments. If we stumbled upon soldiers up to no good, we beat 'em up. If they made us mad? We beat 'em up twice for good measure. If we found old dudes? What the hell—we beat 'em up too! I also made a point to stop by the towns' armories and warehouses to swipe any spare loot. Point was, it took us ages to get anywhere even though we ran fast. We blitzed past the coaches oozing along like snails on

the road leading to the capital. If Horsie had been here, we could've had a much easier time of things.

“Our intel tells us the next town is a critical stronghold for the Theocracy military. It's ruled by an influential archbishop aligned with the pope. We have to be sneaky, okay? No standing out. No catching attention. We'll be in and out before anyone notices. That's the whole point of scouting, remember?”

To play the part, I was dressed like a priest; Dancer Girl, a sexy nun. It was the perfect disguise. A flawless tactic.

“Alarm bells, ringing. Soldiers gathering. Lining up for battle. Too late to sneak. Well, may have been too late, once you started, flying and raining meteors.”

The folks in this city seemed to belong to a primitive sect of the church. Executing the opposition, mounting heads on pikes to serve as an example, governing the city through fear... There were heads everywhere—in front of the church, before the barracks. Even if those heads belonged to old dudes, that didn't excuse the church's actions. Everyone knew you had to *bury* old dudes, not leave their heads on spikes to rot!

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Soil to soil, old dudes into graves six feet under. Also, loot into my pocket. I knew someone once said, “What's mine is mine; what's yours is also mine.” Who was that again? I didn't remember, but either way, once I started burying the town in a rain of meteors, the soldiers came crawling out of the woodwork. I was impressed. I didn't expect so many soldiers to extricate themselves from the rubble of their crushed barracks.

I would have been slapped with a fine for destroying the peace if I was within the town limits, so I stayed outside and let the soldiers come to me. They marched in file, a horde of them in full armor. They looked like they knew a thing or two about what they were doing, and their equipment and levels were nothing to sneeze at. They were an elite force and too big for their britches, to my mind. Being elite didn't give them the right to put people's heads on pikes.

Time to bury them all in one go. A few of those heads out front were too small to belong to anyone but orphaned children.

“I want to conserve my MP. Let’s sneak in, hold the gate, and kill the soldiers one by one until they’re all gone. Sound good? And stuff?”

We waited the eternity it took for the soldiers to leave town and form up to battle us. I thought they wouldn’t take us seriously—there were only two of us, you know?—and not deploy the whole army. To prevent that, I made two thousand puppets from Earth magic. These soldier types were awfully cautious—these were only mud puppets. It would have been a waste of MP to make puppets from anything else. These weren’t even full mud golems. All they could do was drum the earth with heavy logs to make an ominous rumbling. I had originally designed them to be mochi pounders. There’s nothing quite like freshly pounded mochi.

Anyway, the army finally began to march in a close formation. They slowly picked up speed as they advanced on us and smashed into the mud puppets in that tight, defensive rank. Thing was, I had stuffed those mud puppets full of sticky birdlime. When the Theocracy army smashed into them, the soldiers lost their footing and fell all over each other in a sticky heap. They went down like dominos.

“Now’s, our chance! Go!”

“Yup, just be careful. You’ll get stuck if you step in the birdlime.”

Dancer Girl waltzed into the remnants of the flattened army. She whirled, twirled, and swirled through the mix. With enemies aplenty on every side, who cared if she attacked without looking? Dancer Girl mowed down the left flank while I came in from the right to make heads roll. The speed of our charge carried us right to—and through—our opponents.

“You don’t need strength when you have speed. Let momentum take care of the rest.”

Refined qi cycled through my whole body. I didn’t need more power. Just

speed and then technique. With many a slash and a mince and a parry, I whirled into the fray, slicing here, stabbing there.

High-Speed Thinking slowed time to a crawl. The air became a viscous liquid that clung to me as I passed. Here in this world of blue, the chaotic swarm of bodies moved in slow motion. I lopped off the head of a pikeman inching towards me, whirled away, and slew another soldier lumbering in my direction. With so many old men to fight, the slow motion did *not* make this a fun scene to look at. I would have killed for a skip button. *Bleh!*

In reality, it was over in the span of a few seconds. In that short eternity, I sliced and diced with my heavy body an infinite number of times. Then I reached the city gates, burst through, and spun around. There was no going back to town, not for any of these soldiers. If they wanted to run, I'd let them. The birdlime was poisoned, so they wouldn't make it far. They either had to try and come back to town or die out in the wilderness. They could try and make it to the next closest town, but god knew if they'd succeed. I'd met their god, and that old dude was an idiot. So who was to say what that guy knew? The church taught that good little boys and girls reached salvation, and only the naughty ones died. I hoped that would give the soldiers comfort through their long, agonizing deaths.

"Hey, Dancer Girl? You see that dude with the big, black sword shouting way at the back? Let me take him. I don't like the look of his sword; it gives me the creeps. Besides, he's an old dude, so he's bound to smell like wet grandpa. Better keep your distance."

Her large shield and curved sword danced. Her chains wheeled, knocking soldiers off their feet before a final Shield Bash sent them flying. For whatever reason, none of the girls (save Shield Rep) knew how to use their shields properly. Which *kiiiinda* sounded like a problem.

"Okay. But, be careful. That black sword, has the darkness. Dangerous."

Called it. I got bad vibes from that thing, but I hadn't been sure if I was just

imagining things. We weren't in a dungeon, you feel me? I didn't think we'd find the darkness up here. But here it was. The sword was a monstrously huge blade of deepest black, just like the sinister darkness. At this distance, Appraisal gave me no more than the name: the Replicant Sword. It intimidated me, and it was steeped in a shadow so thick it would have been impossible to see at night. But it was perfectly bright out, so it was like a hole in the world.

Dancer Girl and I stood shoulder to shoulder as the church army swarmed us, each soldier clad in full armor with enormous shields and spears pointed straight at us. However, none of their equipment stopped them from falling with bewildered expressions on their faces. Yup, my deadly precise chickenatrice sniper shot blow darts into the millimeter-thin gaps in their armor and helmets. Then Petrify kicked in, and while the soldiers lay immobilized, their allies surged over them and smashed them to bits. Yup, my chickenatrice had even mastered the signature glare from *Golgo 13*. I would have given her some corn as a reward for a job well done, but wouldn't that undermine her dignity as queen of the serpents?

"Take that? You know? Hii-yah? Or something?"

A spear jabbed at me, and I cut it down. A sword came crashing toward me, and I batted it away. Dancer Girl and I were secure with the strong city walls on either side of us. The only foes were directly in front of us. The gate was narrow enough to allow no more than one carriage or six men to enter at a time, so even though there were three thousand foes to defeat, we never had more than six to handle at any given moment. They may have been the best of the best, but the poisoned bird lime was kicking in, and they swept towards us on the wave of their frenzied allies. Soldiers fell and were trampled under their comrades' feet.

"Step one: make them stampede. Step two: dig a moat. Step three: old-dudes-falling-into-the-moat profit."

Flattened. They fell one after another, pushed and trampled and knocked over into a pile of increasingly crushing weight.

The poisoned, panicked army's coordination fell apart entirely. At this point, they were far weaker than a monster mob. People were soft and squishy. Once they could no longer fight, death was not far behind. That's why humanity invented stuff like weapons, armor, and fighting formations, none of which could save the soldiers now. Their iron armor was designed to protect them and made them feel invincible, but now its weight pushed them deeper into the moat. Their armor was the source of their self-confidence, but when I cut through it with ease, they died with baffled stares on their faces. They couldn't comprehend how a wooden stick could cut through armor. I mean, that was a mystery to the wooden-stick wielder, too. But worrying about it would probably make it stop working, so I didn't.

"These guys are wearing thin steel plate armor with Physical Resistance (small) and Status Ailment Resistance (small). Compared to the prismatic clothing people wear on the frontier, that's like wearing a suit of papier-mâché."

The soldiers were armored from head to toe, which imbued them with the confidence to charge at us without attempting to dodge. Sister Girl told us that the church knights originally began as a squad that hunted monsters on the frontiers. These days, no one ever went to the frontier or learned to fight in real battles. They trusted their armor to carry them through fights although their armor was flimsier than everyday frontier clothing. That trust led them right to their deaths.

"These guys couldn't even beat a horde of goblins or kobolds."

Nod nod.

The church knights slaughtered ordinary people without proper armor. They let their confidence run away from them and carry them to their deaths without fully understanding why they died. They had never fought with an equally powerful foe, let alone a stronger one. That's why they challenged us with such cockiness and died, their confidence and equipment shattered with the same killing blow. Understanding never came to them. I didn't think they were

incompetent or idiotic. Honestly, I just pitied them.

“You were told this is the kingdom of god, huh? With god’s personal protection? And you’re the strongest knights in all the land, so even if monsters flood in from the frontier, nothing will desecrate these sacred grounds? And you *bought* that load of bull?”

That made them even more pitiful. Even when Dancer Girl used only a fraction of her MP, the soldiers couldn’t so much as touch her shadow. She wasn’t going all out, either. Her baseline physical prowess and skills were advanced enough that the soldiers never stood a chance. Their incompetence, their sheer stupidity was comical at this point. I knew my chickenatrice’s heart ached over how pathetic they were.

“Speaking of the chickenatrice, when did you turn yourself black? Are you trying to match me? I wasn’t going for an all-black look, but it just sorta happened. Comes with the whole dressing like a priest thing, you know?”

Cock-a-doodle-doo?

The final thousand soldiers rushed us in a bid to escape into the safety of the city’s walls, but we stood in their way. We would not let them pass. Great, ominous scythes protruded from the ground behind us and on either side. Yup, those were my cute demon scythes and darling archdemon scythes. That paper-thin armor stood no chance against these dungeon-king-class demonic monsters. *Plenty* of soldiers the world over managed to coexist peacefully with civilians—but not these. That was a crime, and they’d pay for it. This army deserved to die in apology for the kids whose heads they had cruelly rammed on pikes. They loved their god, so I hoped they would be happy—they would be meeting him soon.

Finally, from the rear of the column, approached a unit dressed in ostentatious regalia. The poison had done nothing to them, and their armor was a cut above the other soldiers’. They must have sacrificed the rest of the soldiers to wear Dancer Girl and I down. We did our best to look utterly bushed

for them. We dyed our hair white and set up a couple of folding chairs to sit hunched up in so we'd look old and tired. But the fancy soldiers didn't take the bait, maybe because we got up to some teenage canoodling while we waited for our hair dye to set. That might have tipped them off. But it was all over-the-clothes stuff! Even though Dancer Girl's habit made me hugely horny, she was off limits.

"They, aren't coming. Told you so! What was point, of white hair?!"

Well, so be it. If they wouldn't come to us, I would go to them.

"We dyed our hair white and griped about how sore we are...and they still didn't come? The people in this world don't know their tropes."

For my first move, I whipped out the Dimensional Slash I had been practicing. The controlled, weakened power of the attack sliced through the vanguards' shields. Dancer Girl jumped in after me and whirled her way through the enemies, performing a dicing dance of death. Her chains and sword described parabolas through the air, preventing the guy with the black sword from getting near her. If I were him, I would have wanted to keep my distance too.

It was time to quit worrying about MP preservation. I channeled MP into my Universe Staff, which pulsed with magic and transformed into the Seven-Branched Sword. I wasn't sure if my opponent's sword was cursed or holy, but this would let me combat either. We exchanged blows—and by that, I meant I was outleveled and sorely outclassed. I thought the old dude would let his equipment do all the work, but he was a formidable foe even without it.

"Level 62, huh? The strongest military man in Theocracy history... The higher the level, the more odious the old man. But maybe that's just my bias talking."

He faced off squarely in front of me and drew his black sword. He crouched low, his eyes fixed on me. *I guess I should give you-know-what a try.* In one fluid motion, I charged forward and stabbed at him. He pivoted and performed a sweeping counterattack. *Ah ha!* That was a polished kenjutsu skill reminiscent of a two-handed toujutsu technique. The form reminded me of the Skull Lord's,

sans a blow gun.

We both took a half step forward, closing the gap, and traded a furious volley of blows. Sparks flew from our swords. Every aggressive move traced a precise arc, one meaningful move after another. The storm of swords refused to abate until the final stroke cut one of us down. And then it happened. It was so inescapable, it was almost beautiful. He swung his sword downwards as if *it* were to suck me in. It was the same *thing*, the same *shadow*, that affected the Skull Lord. Certain death by the demon sword.

It meant victory. The final, perfect blow after a brilliant display of swordplay. Thing was, though, I knew this trick. I had already seen beautiful, ultimate swordplay deep in the bowels of the earth...and so I killed this knight dude. He couldn't hold a candle to the Skull Lord. So I cut him down and shot him full of blow darts for good measure. *This* was sword fighting, even if it didn't feel legit.

"Damn! He barely grazed me, but it took a huge chunk out of my mithril shoulder funnels. This sword is brutal! I think it's cursed, but who cares? A little curse never hurt anybody."

Appraisal said this definitely-not-cursed blade was the "Replicant Blade. All stats +30%. MP Absorption (large). HP Absorption (small). Equipment Fracture (large). Penetration. Sundering. Weapon Copying (only applies to currently equipped weapons). +Attack."

"Yeah, there's no way a sword this kickass could be cursed. Hey, check this out!"

The knight had an extra sword sheathed at his waist. This one was the "Venom Longsword. Causes psychic damage and mental abnormalities; the user is not immune to these effects. Malignancy. Instant Death. Certain Death. Paralyze. Spirit Pollution. Mental Abnormality. +Defense."

So the Replicant Sword had copied the Venom Longsword? I tried Weapon Copying to see what it'd do and found myself holding two versions of my staff. I channeled magic into the copy staff, and it turned into the Seven-Branched

Sword. It really was a perfect copy. Problem was, I now looked like a tool carrying two wooden sticks.

“Oh, no! I’m a drummer!”

I didn’t want to consider what might have happened to me if I had been hit by this thing. This sword wasn’t connected with the darkness after all, but it did a number on the brain. Simply being near it could addle the wits. Funnily enough, my wits were completely unaffected.

“I guess my General Health is responsible. Malignance, Instant Death, and Certain Death never affect me. Finally! The world is acknowledging how mentally and spiritually sound I am!”

“Master, your mental state, already too far gone. Going downhill from here... impossible!”

Out of curiosity, I went over to one of the old dudes who tried to get his gross mitts on Dancer Girl and discovered his “Plunder Glove. Speed, Dexterity +40%. Equipment Plundering (requires physical contact). Skill Copying (limited to one effect. Requires physical contact). +Technique control.”

“Wait a sec. From the way this guy is dressed, is he the archbishop? He was kind of pervy for an archbishop.”

Nod nod!

Still, I couldn’t hate. Who wouldn’t want to give Dancer Girl a rub? But during the day, I used every bit of my willpower to keep my hands off of her. She was off limits! *We’ll save that for later.*

“The church has some wild equipment. I mean, a groping glove?”

Copying skills left the original owner’s skill intact. This glove didn’t have a lot of uses, then—beating a master of a skill at their own game was impossible. Imagine trying to copy Miss Armor Rep’s skills. Anyone capable of groping Miss Armor Rep was liable to be hired as a dungeon emperor! If the church had someone like that in their ranks, they could have taken over the world.

“With how useless my skills are, it doesn’t matter if anyone copies them.”

My skills were all useless or only effective in combination with other skills.

“Using this on the girls might be bad news... Mainly because it involves groping teenage girls, which society tends to frown upon.”

Nod nod.

No one wanted to grope teenage boys. At least, I hoped I was safe!

DAY 110
AFTERNOON

Sleeping bag play?! That's intents!

THE PLAINS OF THE THEOCRACY

“THERE WAS A GUY who had a glove, and Plunder was its name-o! But! !! Can't use it! But! !! Can't use it! But! !! Can't use it! Yeah, it is kind of lame-o!”
Catchy trumpet time

Despite the name, equipping the Plunder Glove and touching Dancer Girl did little to remove her armor—and not for lack of trying. It was fun, sure, but not effective otherwise. Unless making Dancer Girl mad was one of the effects. Innovation always came with hardships.

However, I barely touched the mountain of old dude corpses, and the glove stripped them all of their equipment, inventory, and moolah. What a useful tool for a brigand like me! But seriously, disrobing the old dudes was super gross. *I bet it's easier to steal their equipment if they're dead or unconscious...*

I didn't want to feel up a couple thousand old dudes, so I came up with a stroke of genius: put the glove on my tentacles and let *them* do the touching (and robbery)! Once they finished, I was left with a mound of half-naked geezer corpses. *Into the ground you go!* I was less concerned about the whole sanitation angle. Really, it was the visual that bothered me. It did a bigger number on my brain than a curse! I knew I shouldn't waste MP, but with Geezer Mountain in front of me, now was not the time to be pinching MP points.

“I made out like a bandit, The black sword is a great find, but now I need to bring my broken shield funnels in for repairs... And I don't like the look of my mithril stock, either. I must have used too much of it when making all those sexy nun habits. Oh, who am I kidding? That was mithril well spent in the pursuit of horniness! Ya know?”

I got a glare for that. It was times like this when I missed Slimey's usual *jiggle jiggle*.

I always fell back on Slimey in truly chaotic brawls. Even Miss Armor Rep, as powerful as she was, couldn't beat back endless waves of bad guys. There was power in numbers. Even if she managed to kill them all, she would still struggle against the army's momentum.

Slimey had his own ways around that. After all, he was a slime. He nommed up gobs of skills, digested and absorbed them, and added them to his repertoire. He was the ultimate lifeform *and* a little cutie-wootie. And because cuteness was justice, evil (or stinky old dudes—take your pick) should be vanquished! That's why Slimey was guarding Sister Girl, Princess Girl, and Merimeri. He was the best Guardian you could ask for.

We went into town and conducted a quick search for any lingering soldiers. Nada. We saw some people who looked like the city guard, but they were hiding with the townspeople. I figured they weren't with the church.

"We came here to pick up loot, bury old dudes, and chew bubble gum. And we're all out of bubble gum, so let's vamoose."

Nod nod.

We had a whole sneaky scout mission ahead of us, and we'd fulfilled our scouting quota here. I thought it was safe to say there were no enemies left. Problem was, what was the point of a pair of scouts who already had a dossier of compiled intel on each town they visited? I mean, why would you need more information at that point? The girls didn't understand the point of scouting.

We sneaked our way through towns, breaking into buildings, beating the bejeezus out of people, and scooping up goodies as we ventured further into the heart of the Theocracy. We got held up at checkpoints a handful of times, but our flawless disguises carried us through with no trouble—wait. They didn't? Okay, never mind. The guards protested, so we gave them a sound drubbing and carried on our sneaky way. The nerve! How dare they insult our

perfect camouflage? Didn't they know a good disguise when they saw one?

"This, not sneaking!"

"It's not our fault their eyes are too bad to recognize impeccable disguises. Let's beat them all up! Man, what is it with fantasy worlds and their fifteen million checkpoints anyway?"

Once I composed myself in the wake of whomping soldiers, I speedwalked away in my totally airtight costume. For some reason beyond my powers of understanding, guards kept yelling, "Hey, you there! The unwholesome one!" and trying to stop me. So I thrashed them all and carried on my way.

"How many times do I have to tell you? These are perfect disguises! Is there something wrong with your eyes? How can I look fishy if I'm the picture of a priest, hm? What do you think I'm wearing a disguise for, idiot? This is really opening *my* eyes—you're just a bunch of old god fetishists!"

These soldiers were a pain in my behind. None of them, not one, seemed to understand that I was perfectly wholesome. *Tsk! Church soldiers are really declining in quality.*

"Don't make me pout, 'cause I will! Put this down on the report: this garrison has no enemies either. Funny how all these places seem to have no enemies. I'd question the validity of this scouting mission, but what's the good of a scouting mission when you don't need intel in the first place? That said...we're about to run into a big group of soldiers. I bet they'll have powerful skills and magical tools. So be quiet now, 'kay? Ya know?"

Dancer Girl complied. She was so silent, she didn't even nod. I would have preferred some acknowledgment... (At least a glare?) Whatever, I got the gist of her silence. She wanted to tell me off, and I was *perfectly* fine not hearing it.

We carried on, still finding nothing interesting, and finally, out of the endless loop of fields, small villages, and soldier skirmishes, a fortified city appeared far off in the distance. It was one of the first of the smaller cities ringing the capital of the Theocracy. A group of tall buildings competed with one another to see

who could send their spires soaring highest; they were probably all churches. With all these magic items, you would think they would have invented a magic elevator.

It was a cycle: monster invasions caused society to regress. Then, once recovered, civilization grew corrupt and decadent until another war or invasion broke out. To make matters worse, the church hogged all the knowledge of magic items, preventing others from developing new tech. They didn't even have elevators! Why make their buildings so damn tall, then?!

The complete monopoly and lack of competition were to blame for the cultural stagnation. Since church goods always sold with no effort on their part, they'd never invested in R&D. Since they only passed down their current knowledge to the next generation, the sum of the church's wisdom—the thing that'd give rise to any innovation—continuously shrank. Unless the church destroyed the frontier, the days of their supremacy were numbered. They were rapidly losing the power to compete, hence why they labeled me an enemy of their god. That and a personal grudge for ripping them off, no doubt.

Now that I had seen a good chunk of the Theocracy, I realized that the church had no technological know-how left—just a series of instructions they followed by rote to make certain tools. They couldn't improve their existing magic items, let alone develop new ones. Small-scale manufacturing and big business could coexist, but they never played well together.

“Is this the reason I've had to climb so many *bleep-bleeping* stairs in this *bleep-bleeping* world? It's all the church's fault! Oh, the pain! The cruelty! The inhumanity! Which sick sonofa-*bleep* decided to make buildings with over five floors and no elevators? Dungeons are the worst culprits. I would never say this to Miss Armor Rep's face, but her dungeon had one hundred floors—*big* floors with high ceilings. That staircase went on *for-eeeeee-ver*. The true boss of the Ultimate Dungeon was its stairs!”

“Shush! We're supposed, be undercover!”

We ran down a street that grew thicker with carriages as we went. Pretty soon, we were drowning in carriages. There was a ton of foot traffic too. We were on the verge of a full-blown traffic jam because these roads were teeny-tiny.

Just then, I heard a high-pitched scream.

“Kyaaa! Somebody, help me!”

Straight out of the isekai playbook, “*kyaa*” and all. You never heard much “*kyaa*”ing back on the frontier. When some bad guy from who-knew-where showed up, the kids and housewives always went at them with clubs. If anyone was yelling “Kyaaa!” it was the bad guy.

“Please, help me, Fa...ther...???? Sister...??? Help me, whatever you are!”

A group of soldiers was roughhousing a peddler-looking chick—that much was clear. But why was she confused about what we were? We were dressed as a priest and a nun! Why didn’t anyone believe us?!

“Oh for the love of... Listen, if I’ve said it once, I’ve said it a million times. We’re in priest and a nun costumes, so of course we’re a priest and a nun. What’s not to trust, huh? As you can clearly see, our disguises are perfect, which makes us a priest and a nun, respectively. And that’s that!”

People in this world never understood a word I said. It made me wonder if their ears didn’t work quite right. Now I had their eyesight to worry about.

“Y-you! Who the hell do you think you are?”

“Buncha shifty kids. I say we bring ’em in!”

“Whoa. Look at the buns on that nun.”

“Hot dang! She’s smoking!”

Uh, Dancer Girl? Now’s not the time to do an “Oh, you! Tell me more,” pose. How many times had she pulled that same pose today? Was it truly necessary to repeat it every time?

“Wh-whaddy think you’re doing, priest? Quit givin’ me the evil ey—*gwagh! Geeargh!*”

Thwack thwack thwack thwack...thwack thwack?

“Curse you, bast—waagh!”

Bonk bonk bonk bonk bonk bonk. Bonk, bonk, bonk bonk!

“Shh shh. Calm down. Is okay. Soldiers, they move no more.”

I thought the church said everyone was equal, so what kind of messed up form of discrimination was this? How dare they discriminate against a priest solely based upon the evil look in his eye! Lies! Slander of the highest order! My eyes were cute and innocent! Time to burn them bald! With two sticks for thwacking and bonking, I could rack up a sixteen-beat whack combo. My thwacking was so fire it burned the hair clean off their scalps. *I knew they were bald-faced liars!*

“F-Father...? Th-Thank you for saving me. And Sister, uh... Can I just say, you’re awfully sexy for a nun? Father, why do you give off a terribly sinister aura...? Are you sure you serve God? You most certainly don’t respect Him!”

“Hm? What were you doing? You’re clearly stronger than these baldies. You could have defeated them! Don’t start telling bald-faced lies yourself. You still have all your hair!”

“These so-called baldies weren’t bald until you intervened! Thank you for helping me, though. I’m just a poor, nameless peddler. Completely inconsequential. I don’t even have a name, that’s how inconsequential I am!”

It didn’t seem like she was on the run from something. What was she doing, then? Was she a spy? What was that armor under those loose robes?

“Wait a sec... I recognize that armor you’re hiding. Isn’t that from the nerds? *Ah ha.* Let me guess. You swindled them? Ripped them off? Bullied them? Or, no! Don’t tell me. You honey-trapped them? Curse those nerds! I’ll nerd them to their doom! Hey, Dancer Girl? I just forgot—I have something really

important to do back in the Beast Nation, so I'll run back and take care of that real quick. Yup! Just gonna nerder some nerds ASAP. How dare they get honey-trapped by hot girls with animal ears! Wait for me, honey trap! I want a turn!"

She was the first ever beastfolk girl I had talked to—a bunny girl. I mean, I couldn't see her bunny ears or bunny tail, but she was a bunny girl through and through. Thanks to the nerds, a well-armed bunny girl.

"Huh?! H-h-how did you know I'm one of the beastfolk? And how did you realize that Mr. Oda lent me—oh, wait! Your black hair! Y-y-you must be the commander! The one everyone says is scarier than the most fiendish monster! The one who could make even an atrocity run away sobbing! Mr. Oda says you're a good person, but you're also the evilest man alive, and girls should keep their distance if they know what's good for them."

"Hey, Dancer Girl? Leggo? I have important things to do! Now that I know who is responsible for the lack of hot animal girls in the Beast Nation, I need to burn all the nerds for the crime of depriving me of my fluffity-fluff. That'll keep me occupied for a while. If you want, destroy the Theocracy without me, go ahead. Who gives a hoot about the Theocracy anymore?"

Dancer Girl bound me in place. I thought the Prometheus Chains couldn't be used in broad daylight. I mean, bondage on the side of a road?! I knew I was a perv, but this was too much! At least get us a tent! Sleeping bag play was a thing!

"Would you *please* listen to me?! Everyone is looking at us! We need to get out of here. Come on."

Bunny Girl had a nerd-made concealment and shelter barrier, the secret weapon of nerds—they were best at running away. Bunny Girl had learned it from them. I couldn't blame the nerds, not when the swindler had a bunny tail. What could any self-respecting boy do in the face of that? Heck, I was willing and ready to follow her right into a honey trap! The Prometheus Chains may have been a bit more honey than I was ready for, though. *Could you let me out*

of these darn things? It's a little hard to fall for a honey trap when you're tied up!



“I’m so sorry. I broke my promise to Mr. Oda. He bequeathed me such a valuable item, and I still let myself get spotted. I’m so, so sorry.”

I had a hard time following Bunny Girl’s story because the nerds hid all their info about the beastfolk girls from me. When we got back home, I was going to give them an earful—or a stickful of dynamite. At any rate, Bunny Girl told me her name (which I promptly forgot) and said she was a knight of the rabbit tribe. After failing to protect her loved ones from slavers, she was forced to go on the run. That’s when she bumped into the nerds. They let her climb aboard their pirate ship and sailed off for adventure to recover her captured friends. They successfully saved many women and children from Merchant Kingdom slave ships or harbors, but Bunny Girl’s little sister wasn’t among them. So she borrowed equipment from the nerds and set off for the Theocracy. She promised she would go no further than the border between the Theocracy and the Merchant Kingdom. It was only when she heard news that her sister had been taken into the Theocracy that she followed the trail all the way here.

“Don’t worry about it. The nerds are pros at getting extorted, so it doesn’t matter if you swipe their equipment. You should be more concerned about the church. How did you get through all the checkpoints?”

“We of the rabbit tribe are skilled at detecting sounds and vibrations. I used my racial skills Super-Speed, Leap, and Stealth. From there, I was just very, very careful. But please, how did you ever manage to make it this far, Fath—Commander?”

“Can’t you tell? We’ve been undercover this whole time as a totally normal priest and nun. We beat up everyone who says otherwise! It’s the perfect spy operation.”

Wait, you two don’t know each other...right? What’s with the matching glares? At long last, a glare from a girl with animal ears. Finally, my arrival in this world had some meaning! Well, it was meaningful every night, too... But this was a whole new perk, and a brand-new kind of perkiness. You know?

DAY 110
AFTERNOON

Before we go down this particular rabbit hole, we need a nutritious meal. None of that rabbit food!

THE PLAINS OF THE THEOCRACY

MINE WAS A LONG, long journey. I searched far and wide, but I was always one step behind my sister's captors. At last, my search carried me close to the central city of this human land. Too close. With so many humans about, I had nowhere to run, no place to hide. Inevitably, a group of soldiers spotted me and backed me into a corner. I could fight them off, but if I did, I would be forced to flee afterward. That meant deserting my sister. But just then, a priest—or, well, a man dressed as a priest who was *definitely* not a priest—spotted me. With his *black eyes*.

When I first began pursuing my sister, I tracked the men who had attacked my village back to a Merchant Kingdom tavern. With my superb hearing, a product of my ancestry, I overheard the slavers discuss bringing my sister to the Theocracy. What a pity, they grumbled, that they couldn't have their fun with her here and now. No, they could not, for she had already been sold to an eminent figure in the Cathedral. She was alive—with both her body and chastity intact—but if she were to make it as far as the capital, to say nothing of the Cathedral, I stood no chance of rescuing her. I could not turn back then. I could not give up.

How could I leave my dear sister? Not after she guarded the rear while my village ran from slavers. She fought with fury until the very end so we could all get away safely. We'd been together for as long as I could remember. We were family.

I had to remember that I was in the Theocracy. If I fought back here, that spelled the end of any hope for my sister's rescue. Something possessed me—

some unconscious part of me yearning for a savior—and I called for help. I knew no human would ever come to the aid of the beastfolk. I could plead for help until I was out of air and never receive it. But perhaps, if they didn't know that I wasn't human...

It would all be over the moment they found out. I would never see my sister again, and the mere thought of that destroyed me with fear.

Of course, all the passersby lowered their eyes and hurried on their way. They wanted no part in this. They were just happy it wasn't them, and they fled as fast as their feet could carry them. Save one. One man who did not look away. Did not drop his gaze. Did not run. One man who looked like a priest...and *most definitely* was not one.

Questionable priest status aside, this man was different on a fundamental level. His eyes posed a question to me. *What is it you want? What is it you seek?* I'd never seen anything like the emotion buried deep in the dark pools of his eyes. It was the way he looked at me as I cowered there, on the verge of tears, that made my mouth cry out of its own accord. *Help me. Even if you're a human. Even if you're dressed as a priest. Even if there's no universe in which anyone would ever come to my rescue!*

In an instant, time stood still.

I was frozen in terror, but the man's icy cold gaze was trained on the soldiers, not on me. They were nightmarishly, insanely devoid of compassion. Cold to the point of a total absence of heat. The weight in *this* man's eyes alone was enough to make *those* soldiers shake in their boots and babble.

"Wh-whaddya think you're doing, priest? Quit givin' me the evil ey—gwagh! Geeargh!"

"Curse you, bast—waagh!"

It took no more than a second. The dozen-some soldiers fell as one man, crying out in agonized death throes. By the time I registered movement, everything was already over. The only man left standing was he, the black-

robed...priest...?

“Shh shh. Calm down. Is okay. Soldiers, they move no more.”

Beside him was a goddess. At least, she was a woman so beautiful I suspected she was divine. Certainly, no nun had any right to be that sensual. No, she was no nun. It didn't make any sense for a woman to be so beautiful or so strong. My animal instincts told me she was bizarrely, wildly, fantastically strong. Literally impossibly strong.

“F-Father...? Th-thank you for saving me. And Sister, uh... Can I just say, you're awfully sexy for a nun? Father, why do you give off a terribly sinister aura...? Are you sure you serve God? You most certainly don't respect Him!”

Ignoring the priest for a moment, it simply didn't make sense for a nun to be that seductive! She could have put a goddess to shame with her sublime face and enchanting proportions. I couldn't think straight as I tried to thank them, and it came out all wrong. It didn't make any sense. They had saved me, but I...I was of the beastfolk.

I sensed no strength at all in that decidedly unpriestly priest-like figure. That's what terrified me. It was impossible to sense no strength in a person. Even a newborn babe had some strength, which made the complete lack of it disorienting. All beastfolk could discern strength, those of the rabbit tribe best of all—we were ill-suited for combat. In spite of my abilities...there was nothing. Yet there he stood.

“Wait a sec... I recognize that armor you're hiding. Isn't that from the nerds? *Ah ha*. Let me guess. You swindled them? Ripped them off? Bullied them? Or, no! Don't tell me. You honey-trapped them? Curse those nerds! I'll nerd them to their doom! Hey, Dancer Girl? I just forgot—I have something really important to do back in the Beast Nation, so I'll run back and take care of that real quick. Yup! Just gonna nerder some nerds ASAP. How dare they get honey-trapped by hot girls with animal ears! Wait for me, honey trap! I want a turn!”

He discovered my true identity! He knew I wasn't human! But how?

Ultimately, that mattered little—it didn't seem like he would hurt me. Why was he going to “nerder” Mr. Oda? Even though he made such threats, I saw no enmity or hatred in his eyes. He looked far off into the distance, as if he could see all that lay between here and his faraway target. It gave me the chills. Perhaps it was for the best that he wore a look of such complete apathy. That meant he wasn't truly inclined to hurt Mr. Oda or his friends. And how funny that an expression so bored could be so kind, so trustworthy. I'd never seen anything like it before. No expression, not even a half-smile, was so mysterious as this.

The people of the Church loathed us. They claimed we were but animals aping the ways of man. Even those who did not practice such open discrimination treated us with visible pity. For as long as I'd known humanity, I had always seen some sort of negative emotion in every human eye. Never, not once, did they look upon us with open, friendly eyes—never, that was, until I met Mr. Oda and his companions. They may have been terrified to talk to me and refused to make eye contact, but when they finally managed to meet my eyes, I saw no pity or disdain in them. Just friendliness. Confusion. Apprehension over what to do next. I knew those eyes well because I had seen them on many a beastfolk warrior. Those were eyes that had known tragedy.

“Huh?! H-h-how did you know I'm one of the beastfolk? And how did you realize that Mr. Oda lent me—oh, wait! Your black hair! Y-y-you must be the commander! The one everyone says is scarier than the most fiendish monster! The one who could make even an atrocity run away sobbing! Mr. Oda says you're a good person, but you're also the vilest man alive, and girls should keep their distance if they know what's good for them.”

A few strands of black hair, just visible from under his cowl, fell across the man's face as the all-too-beautiful nun grabbed his arms and pinned them behind his back. Every time she gave him a mighty shake, more hair slipped free. It was the same raven's black as Mr. Oda's hair. Now that I thought of Mr. Oda and his kin, I realized their eyes shared the same dark hue.

That was when the memory returned to me—a time on the boat when Mr. Oda had attempted to cheer me up by making (awkward) small talk with me. In between all the “um”s, “uh”s, and ramblings, he told me a certain story that had stuck with me long after the rest of the conversation faded from memory.

Mr. Oda spoke of a friend of his, a boy called the black-haired commander. This man was selfish to the extreme, absurdity writ large, villainy in tangible form, and the worst, most terrifying person I could ever hope to conceive. He made horrible messes beyond my imagination. He was a nuisance. A dreadful, walking disaster. His every act was rash and nonsensical, every mote of him tyrannical and impulsive. Mr. Oda had nothing good to say about him, but his bearing told a different story. The emotion in Mr. Oda’s voice told me more than his words ever could. This boy, this black-haired commander, was a good person, said the smile on Mr. Oda’s lips. In his heart of hearts, the smile promised, Mr. Oda believed in the commander’s goodness.

Even so, making the master of the Ultimate Dungeon scream and moan every night certainly sounded terrifying to me. Mr. Oda said the boy had dungeon monsters in his thrall, and monster stampedes ran back *into* the dungeons when they saw him coming for fear of being massacred. And, on top of all that, he was a good person. Just...someone girls should avoid. Apparently.

“Hey, Dancer Girl? Leggo? I have important things to do! Now that I know who is responsible for the lack of hot animal girls in the Beast Nation, I need to burn all the nerds for the crime of depriving me of my fluffity-fluff. That’ll keep me occupied for a while. If you want, destroy the Theocracy without me, go ahead. Who gives a hoot about the Theocracy anymore?”

The passersby gawked. I scrambled away from those two and hid myself with a magic item Mr. Oda had lent me. It was worth more than my whole tribe put together, the kind of wonder that existed only in fairy tales. If I had sold it, it would have made my entire village rich beyond our wildest dreams. Yet, in spite of its rarity, Mr. Oda lent it to me. He said it was worth it, if it meant my sister could come home safe. And I... I’d...

“I’m so sorry. I broke my promise to Mr. Oda. He bequeathed me such a valuable item, and I still let myself get spotted. I’m so, so sorry.”

I had let him down. I had betrayed his trust, the trust he had placed in me when he gave me such a treasure. I had come here, despite his promise. I opened up and told the black-haired commander everything: how I broke my promise, how I wanted to save my sister, how Mr. Oda had helped me... Everything.

“Don’t worry about it. The nerds are pros at getting extorted, so it doesn’t matter if you take their equipment. You should be more concerned about the church. How did you get through all the checkpoints?”

I thought he would yell at me, perhaps even throw a punch at me. But he truly didn’t seem to care. He didn’t take away my equipment or my barrier. He focused on such trivial things. Why wasn’t he mad at me? Why did he look at me with such kindness in his eyes? His eyes were so very, very gentle, they almost made me cry.

“We of the rabbit tribe are skilled at detecting sounds and vibrations. I used my racial skills Super-Speed, Leap, and Stealth. From there, I was just very, very careful. But please, how did you ever manage to make it this far, Fath— Commander?”

I didn’t understand why Mr. Oda’s friend and commander would be here in the center of the Theocracy dressed as a priest...and why he would be burning soldiers’ heads. Absolute nonsense.

“Can’t you tell? We’ve been undercover this whole time as a totally normal priest and nun. We beat up everyone who says otherwise. It’s the perfect spy operation.”

I never would have thought. This outfit that spat on the dignity of the Church and God, this risqué and threatening get-up...was a disguise?! My jaw dropped.

It stayed dropped. The commander said I stood out too much in my current robes, so he made me a habit of my own! It might not have been as skintight

and sexy as the other nun's, but it certainly was a snug fit. The enormous slit running up the side didn't belong on a habit. I had the sneaking suspicion I was *far* more eye-catching now. But it came with great skills and defensive capabilities; plus, it was light and breathable! I was told that the customary measurement process was even more impressive than the habit itself, although I wondered why the other nun's eyes glazed over as she said that.

The commander informed me that using "nerd equipment" would "infect me with nerd cooties," so he whipped up two daggers, a pair of long gloves, and a pair of even longer boots in the blink of an eye. Then he handed me a sword, and I almost fainted on the spot. Not even the king of Gamehlein had such a fine blade. How many skills and enhancements could a single weapon have?!

The commander watched me give it a few experimental swings before fine-tuning it and the rest of my equipment to fit me better. Before long, the gloves and boots (the habit was already a work of art) were unlike anything I'd ever seen. The commander, however, thought nothing of it. He barreled right along to his next concern as he said to me, "If you wanna rescue your baby sis, you need better equipment and a good meal."

He produced a smorgasbord of delicacies of a quality I had never before laid eyes upon, let alone eaten. He urged me to eat, so I did. The flavors made me sob. I wept for my sister, as I wished she could have shared this delectable feast with me. I thanked him a thousand times as I stuffed my cheeks before I finally sat back with a sigh and cried one last time.

The commander patted me on the head and said, "Let's find your sis and have dinner with her. Double fluffy-fluffness for me! I can't wait to fluff around and find out!"

He spoke with such a relaxed tone that it sounded almost like a casual invitation for dinner. I smiled, because he made it all sound so simple. He was coming with me.

We aggressively sneaked into the heart of the city. Using so-called stealth

(incredible violence), we pushed and shoved and hacked and slashed our way through many a checkpoint and guard patrol. No one stopped us on our rampage, our “stealth mission,” through town.

Now I understood why Mr. Oda and the others pulled such odd faces when they talked about the commander. I was practicing the face myself. My eyes were glazed over as I stared far off into the distance with an exasperated glare.

DAY 110
AFTERNOON

Nerd knowledge is needlessly niche and nonsensical!

THE PLAINS OF THE THEOCRACY

OPERATION: HOT FLUFF! PART DEUX, a mission no self-respecting fluff admirer could dare avoid, was a go. It was a mission to save Lil Bun. With Big Bun at my side, I was on a quest for a rabbit, dagnabbit. I wanted to grab it!

“Let’s hit the road. Hm? What’s the hold up? Why are you being a slowpoke?”

“I-I’m not normally this slow! It’s just... Do you really expect me to go out in this garment? It could not be any tighter! I’m ashamed that everyone can see the outline of my body in such stark contrast. Even my tail sticks out!”

“Yeah, and? Say it with me: bunny tails are hot! Why hide it? These disguises are flawless. Dancer Girl and I walked all over the damn countryside in these things, and we never got caught. They’re flawless.”

Based on her skills, Big Bun was a sword fighter. Her body type lent itself to a faster build, so I made her a set of double-edged, aerodynamic daggers for her to give a shot. She was strong, like most beastfolk. Human legs just didn’t work like that. She was an order of magnitude more agile than any human I’d ever met; heck, human soldiers of the same level wouldn’t have stood a chance. And at level 49, she packed a pretty good punch. Or—well, she *was* at level 49 before the equipment test. She tried out her new weapons on Dancer Girl and gained major experience. And tears, I guess. That’s what she got from fighting one of the strongest people in the world.

Big Bun’s natural flexibility and agility made her a talented sword fighter. With all the strength in her legs, she could *nyoom* around the battlefield like nobody’s business. She still got her ass handed to her. Big Bun put her all into fighting, but Dancer Girl had more all to give. When Dancer Girl’s onslaught

washed over her, Big Bun's latent talent awoke. She grew faster and more talented. Her daggers locked with Dancer Girl's weapon as the two grappled at close quarters for supremacy, their captivating curves swathed in cloth of the cloister smushing together in a truly marvelous fight for dominance. That sweet, bouncing tail? Chef's kiss. The juicy thighs wrapped in fishnet stockings, visible through the generous slit whenever she bounced around in this high-energy fight? Perfection. That slit was doing god's work. Putting her next to Dancer Girl wasn't fair—Dancer Girl could outshine anyone—but Big Bun was no slouch. With some training, she could be a top-class fighter. Don't even get me started on Big Bun's—well, big bun. I could have stared all day at the battle of the beauties, eyes glazing over at that cute round tail, those cute round boobies, and cute round booties. But we had better things to do. Guess what? Lil Bun was Big Bun's younger twin! That's right! *More* boobs to ogle!

“Off we go! Detective Haruka's on the case for the Search of the Missing Bun. If there are twice the bouncing boobies to be had, she must be found at once! Finders, keepers!”

“Shut, the hell, your mouth!”

Big Bun and Dancer Girl finished their forced-leveling sesh. Without any monsters for us to fight, the only option was to drill skills until Big Bun's level rose. Now it was up to level 66, and it was time for us to get moving. We needed to search every city from top to bottom or I would lose all my street cred as one nasty motherfluffer.

So, clad in our perfect disguises, we broke into a house or three, beat up their occupants, turned the whole town upside down in the search, and then set off for the next city. We snuck in, looked for signs of life, gathered intel, and thrashed any old fart we could get our hands on.

“Why is it that everywhere we go, we keep getting gatekeepers with awful eyesight who try to stop our secret spy mission? We've bashed and bonked our way through how many cities now? Seven?”

“Because you’re whacking first and asking questions later! You’re the problem!”

We went through yet another gate (as one did), said “hello” to the gatekeeper (as one did), gave the gatekeeper a stern talking-to (or beat them up, but who was even keeping track anymore?), and snuck into the next city. We each felt tense, as befit such a sneaky spy mission, as we crept up on the largest building in town. We had business here—namely, picking up loot with my name on it.

“Huh? Why are we waltzing through the gate like we own the place?”

“Why not? Our disguises are perfect. Besides, sneaking over the walls is sus. The trick to going undercover is to attract as much attention as possible.”

Duh. Even Dancer Girl tsk tsk’ed such a stupid question. Big Bun clearly knew nothing about the fine art of sneaking.

“Yet you get stopped every time. Now all the gatekeepers are bald and rolling on the ground in agony.”

“Yup. Must be divine punishment. It’s the old god dude’s fault, so I’m innocent, so I didn’t do anything wrong.”

What I didn’t understand was this: How come they refused to realize I was nothing but a humble, wandering priest? I was even dressed like a priest and came equipped with two super sexy nuns! Worse, all this ass whooping was making me work up a sweat, and these clothes were hot. On the upside, tongbeiquan proved surprisingly effective against the old geezer crew. I told Wisdom to run some numbers on it. *Of all the weird things for the nerds to know...*

“What, was that? Teach me! Never seen before, you knock down man, with heel of palm.”

“I’m still working out the kinks. I get the basics, and I’ve seen it before. Wisdom can do the rest and fill in the blanks At least, that was the plan, but I

don't think I have enough background knowledge. You know? The nerds probably know too much about it, but chances are, asking them will get me a whole buttload of BS along with the real info. You know what they had to say about tai chi? They tell me to entangle dynamic qi in my right hand, static qi in my left hand, and clap them together. It's impossible! I've never seen anything like that in any tai chi book. I almost believed them and tried it out! That was one close shave, I'm telling you!"

All that crud about focusing qi on the soles of your feet to walk on water? *Impossible*. Simply impossible! Plus, I could always use Airwalk anyway. I almost fell in the water and caught a cold before I came to my senses.

Dancer Girl trained tongbeiquan as we walked along, and Big Bun copied her. This technique involved puffing out the chest, straightening the back, and stepping forward while rotating the lower body and chest. It used the reach of the shoulders to strike an opponent with a full-body club, from the palm of the hand to the sole of the foot. With all those puffed out, rotating chests, there was enough jiggle action to make me double over, clutch my teenage boy bits, and refuse to move from the spot. *No! Could it be? Is this...a long-range attack?* It certainly did a number on my crotch. Oh, what dangers those jiggling jugs be!

As we went along, the girls practiced their new technique on patrolling soldiers. They cracked their arms like whips, in a flexible, lightning-fast, long-range strike attack, characteristic of the art. But for some reason, when I consulted this move against my stock of nerd knowledge, I found it was supposed to include a powerful stomp and a spiral-shaped manipulation of one's qi in the palm of the hand to double the thrust at the moment of impact. *Hm. That didn't sound right.*

"I mean, I can do qi cultivation and stamping. I could even add Gravity magic if I really wanted. But when I try it... Nah. I only hit one old dude, so why did it knock ten of them off their feet? I don't think this counts as a fist strike anymore."

Big Bun was a force to be reckoned with. She picked up all of my moves just

by watching—heck, even the breathing techniques and qi manipulation tricks. Even though this was only an imitation of a real art that I was making up as I went along, she managed to make it look graceful. The swaying thighs and chesticles helped. No wonder humanity oppressed the beastfolk! I shook in my boots as I watched her shake. She wasn't wearing a bra! *Jupiter Eye! Jot this down; we have to get this on record!*

As Big Bun beat up soldiers, she broke level 70 and became even more of a lean, mean, ass-kicking machine. Her hourglass figure only grew more pronounced, each bulb bulging out more above and below her beautiful tiny waist. She had the best of both worlds—no shaggy animal fur here, just the smooth skin of a hot young woman!

“Her only fluff is on her ears and tail. As a known fluffernutter, I prefer my girls with a bit more fur. But my teenage boyness isn't complaining, because she's as beautiful as it gets!”

Eventually, we arrived at the oldest church in town.

“C'mon, pretty please? Let us in? Don't make me beg, 'cause I won't. As you can see, we are a perfectly ordinary priest and nun duo here on business, so let us in? See ya later? Alligator? Fare thee well? *¿Adiós?*”

“Wha—excuse me, where do you think you're going? Father! Father, get back here. Father—wait, you're not a priest, are you? You're dressed like one, but, uh... I'm not sure how I know this, but you're the farthest thing from a priest.”

“M-m-may I ask what business you have here, Father? Uh...sir? Why are you dressed like a priest, sir? And could we perhaps have your lovely companions, ahem, preserve their modesty just a *tad* more? Many of the monks in this monastery are at a rather, *aherm, sensitive* stage of their training. It's just, well, if most nun outfits looked like that, our church would never want for believers.”

Aw, for the love of Pete. Why did every gatekeeper have to give me the third degree? Eh, well, it could have been worse. They were doing everything in their power to stop me short of physically restraining me or attacking me. So not all

that much.

“I have here a letter for the archbishop’s hands only. From a Sister Girl who may or may not exist. Schrodinger’s Sister Girl, if you will. And hands off the cute nuns! You know how many times I’ve tried to sneak a squeeze and got my ass handed to me? It’s not happening, buddy. If your monks want to sow their wild oats during those, *aherm, sensitive* moments, they ought to go to the dungeon. I hear there’s something down at the base of the Ultimate Dungeon that’ll suck the desire right out of you. Yeah, she’s wicked good?”

I flashed the letter from Sister Girl, and the guards finally tore their eyes from the slits in Dancer Girl and Big Bun’s habits long enough to look over the letter. I was impressed at the willpower that took. With skills like that, these were no run-of-the-mill gatekeepers.

“Egad! This coat of arms belongs to Princess Ariel, the Archbishop Arianna! She of the two names! Such a premium find! An SSR!”

“I-I shall inform the archbishop at once, Father. Messenger. Whatever the hell you are. Would you please wait here in the reception room?”

Why did everyone keep going out of their way to deny my priesthood? I had half a mind to give buddy boy a friendly tap (read: bludgeon this curmudgeon), but he skittered off down the hallway before I could get a chance. *I thought you weren’t supposed to run in a church...*

This church was housed in a modest, yet solid stone building. Its design prioritized simplicity and sturdiness. The church had been taken care of well, its flagstones and walls worn down to a sheen after decades of scrubbing. This gave the church a sense of honesty. Function over form. An eschewing of vanity. It was, in simple terms, a poor-ass hovel.

“I don’t sense any beastfolk here. Besides, I think they’re Sister Girl’s buddies. I doubt they’re in the pope’s pocket or hate beastfolk, so relax. They’re just a bunch of old dudes.”

“B-b-but, we’re about to meet an archbishop! Isn’t he a very important

person? W-we're a part of the Church too, you know. The Beast Nation converted long ago."

When the door opened, I expected one of the usual middle-aged old farts to come in. However, this old fart had 1.75 doddering feet in the grave. *You're telling me a guy this old has a fetish for that old god dude?* The depth of the church's depravity continued to amaze me.

"Thank you for waiting, my child. I have the honor of heading this humble congregation. Call me Stecater. No, no, my dear girl, there is no need to bow to me. We of the Church have done much to your people deserving of apology, but nothing that would ever justify *you* lowering yourself before *us*. So, too, for the people of Diorelle. These old shoulders are bowed not under the weight of my title but the gravity of our collective sins. There is no need for you to fear me, my dear girls and boy—well, I see you are not bowing at all. Or listening, apparently. Never mind; it is of no matter. Archbishop Arianna sends me a letter, I hear? May I—excuse me, might I ask why you're dressed like a priest?"

"Huh? It's my flawless disguise."

"..."

"Hey, why'd you go silent and turn away? You got a problem with my fantastically flawless Father façade?"

"The clothes, flawless. Clothes, not the problem."

"Oh...my goodness. Are you sure? Was all that about seeing through our disguise...*serious?*!"

"No, no. You misunderstand me. Your garb is exceptionally well made, my son. It is only... Well, I have served the Church since I was a lad, and in my time I have seen many thousands of priests come and go. There are priests of every color and cloth, indeed many priests with every peculiarity and idiosyncrasy in God's creation. But I have never met a priest like you, my son. It is a puzzling thing. In every respect, you look like a man of God, and yet I cannot picture you ever serving God at all."

Was that a diss? What good would serving god do me? That old fart was useless—worse than useless! Good god, what good was god?

DAY 110

EVENING

Did you know? Tongbeiquan is named after the tongbei ape of legend, who snapped his arm outward like a long, flexible whip.

THE CHURCH IN AN IMPORTANT CITY IN THE THEOCRACY

ARIANNA—a fellow archbishop who had departed for the frontier—sent me a letter; yet the envoy reportedly spoke in such riddles that none could make sense of his words. I half-wondered if this letter had been sent by the pope and his minions, but the town guards assured me that nothing could be further from the truth.

“No, Your Excellency. That messenger has nothing whatsoever to do with the Church. I’d swear on my life!”

“I’ve met many priests unfit to wear their robes, aye, and priests who look best in vestments. But never have I laid eyes on a priest who cuts such a devilish figure. This man is not of my Church, no sir!”

Thus, I asked if the envoy was perhaps a charlatan.

The guard swore up and down, “Absolutely, Your Excellency! I’ve worked for the Church since I was but a wee’un, and I’ve never seen a more transparent group of con artists than that shady priest and those buxom nuns!”

I decided I had best see these envoys with my own eyes. In her letter, Arianna claimed it was right and holy to throw away her life for the frontier, that land teeming with devilish beasts. I could not accept such words as truth—not from the girl I had mentored. I could only pray that she was safe, wherever she was.

“See, you gotta *read* letters, not *eat* letters. Elementary mistake. That’s what happened in the Beast Nation with the goat ambassador dude, and then a fight broke out. You know? You picking up what I’m putting down? Be like me

instead. The greatest of all time! Yeah, I'm goated."

This boy dressed in priest's vestments who most certainly had nothing to do with the Church—and thus the pope—was, as unlikely as it sounded, exactly who he appeared to be. So too were the nuns who accompanied him, although if any church had nuns such as this, I thought we'd make plenty of converts. Such earthly beauty was not made to serve God. None so provocative in their manner of dress—no doubt meant to mislead men from the road of celibacy—would do so in service of God. I knew not what to make of the trio. They aroused suspicion, but I could not fathom why anyone would send three individuals so blatantly suspicious save for some attempt at a ruse.

"Pray forgive me, my child, but I must ask you to be silent. I am reading."

I tried to direct my attention back to the letter, but I found myself distracted by the lovely young lady in front of me slapping the boy priest as he extended a hand towards her. Though she was dressed in a garment like a nun's habit, the word did not do her costume justice. Habits were not so very sinful, nor their wearers so miraculously seductive. Such a siren was she, the whole country could fall—the whole world, even!—and I would not think it a loss, for the world had already produced the pinnacle of beauty. At her side, too, sat a beastfolk girl of surpassing loveliness. Her face was fair; her figure, full. She possessed all the lithe grace of her kind. Had I been a man fifty years younger, the letter in front of me would have been the last thing on my mind.

As these girls sat across from me, I could not help but catch glimpses of captivating skin through the deep slits in their clothes. I could not tear my eyes away. But I knew I must, for my gaze had another place to reside: the letter. Focus, focus—oh no, the legs! The legs! No. Focus, focus!

Grieving the pitiful state of the Church, Arianna renounced her religious titles and named herself in this letter only the Princess Ariel. I could feel her determination through the page, her every word brimming with sincerity. I was obliged to read it with equal care, and yet... Oh heavens, I was distracted again. *My dear child, please don't roll up the hem! Were I a mere forty years younger,*

my vision would be fogging. I was old and wise, and I most assuredly was not looking. Focus, focus, focus.

As I read on, I realized that the black-haired boy of whom she spoke was the very same young man in front of me. Furthermore, her stories of the frontier—the things she had seen with her own eyes, the words she had heard with her own ears—were true. Thus was her grief for the Church’s miserable state all the more profound. On the frontier everyone down to the youngest child battled against monsters. Even the ordinary townswomen in that realm marched into dungeons for conquest and derring-do.

Arianna was of royal birth and admired by many for achieving the post of archbishop at her tender age. And yet, for all those who had idolized her, she lacked a single friend. That was, until now. Happiness all but exploded from the page; gratitude and respect reverberated in every sentence. Complaints about the boy currently sitting in front of me punctuated every paragraph...although I admitted I did not know what to make of them. What, pray tell, could “He took me to the dungeon and swung me around” possibly mean?

“Well now, I do believe I’ve finished reading. I must thank you for all you’ve done for Arianna.”

Her letter was a pledge—a proclamation to oust the pope from his ill-won seat and bring the Church back in line with its fundamental teachings.

“Before she left, she received counsel from every quarter begging her not to go due to the danger. We grieved for her, as we knew she would not return home safely. We begged her, ‘Do not go the frontier.’ She ignored all our warnings and set off with resolve. It is evident to me now that the frontier is a far cry from the ruinous place I have heard it to be. She has even, if I may be so bold, enjoyed herself on her journey. Arianna’s sole pursuit was prayer—begging—to God, yet I see she now stands on her own two feet. She pledges to raise a revolution and transform the Church and Theocracy by her own power, both as princess and archbishop. The girl I knew who left for the frontier is no more, and in her place is a new woman.”

Yes, for the sweet child I knew possessed such a tender heart she could never ask for bloodshed and violence. The frontier had taught her warfare.

“Thank you very much, my son. After what you’ve done for her, I can rest easy knowing my final duty is complete.”

I knew I must send word to the Knights of the Scripture, but I was under guard night and day. I could not set foot outside my walls. It was imperative I find a way to slip past the soldiers’ watchful eyes.

“No, no, no. She’s not telling you to fight. She wants you to stay out of trouble; you following me? Like, say you were in the Cathedral with the pope and his popey party peeps. I wouldn’t be able to tell the difference between you and the bad guys. I don’t have time to figure out who’s my friend and my foe when you all wear the same damn clothes. You old geezers look the same to me. The only good geezer is a geezer who’s never been born, you know what I’m saying? People already tell the nuns to stay away from me because I’m dangerous, and I don’t really care if I lay waste to every old dude at once— I’d rather lay every nun at once. And stuff?”

“Old man, not understand. Shut up. Let me. Old man, you must, leave pope and army. Get far away. Is too dangerous.”

I gathered from the girl’s faltering speech that Arianna wished for every opposition faction to make their loyalties known now. Thus, Arianna and her new followers could defeat the portion of the Church army loyal to the pope. Were she to combine her forces with the pope’s opposition and the Theocracy’s secular armies, she stood a chance at rivaling the pope, but the Church would never fall to outside forces. The pope may have burrowed into the Church’s rotten core from within, but Arianna would be stymied by the Cathedral itself. The building was an ancient, holy relic, and one could not hope to take it by siege. Arianna should have known better.

Just then, a guard burst into the room. “A-Archbishop!” he stammered. “Th-there’s an army of soldiers on our doorstep!”

So soon? Had they come to capture the envoys? Had these beautiful young women aroused unnecessary attention? Our young friends needed to escape, but we were trapped! I had no means to secure their egress.

Before I could think further, the air was rent by a scream of agony.

“No, no. It’s not *tong*, *beiquan* or *tongbei*, *quan*. Where are these commas coming from?”

Only then did I understand what the letter meant. The responsibility was too much for my old, feeble bones and wizened brain to bear. Arianna was not asking me to join her battle against the pope. Nay, she wanted me to secure the escape of the non-combatants! I knew now why her letter so baffled me at first blush—not due to the words she chose to employ, but the sheer oddity of the message. I’d lived my long, long life here in the Theocracy, and perhaps the years had placed blinders upon me. Arianna traveled to the ends of the earth, broadened her horizons, and saw the truth of the world with her own eyes. The words of the young were too difficult for me to comprehend.

“Difficult, yes. But you, must respond.”

“Exactly. A promise is a promise.”

Swords rang against steel, and the soldiers’ shield walls collapsed at once. The boy did no more than thrust his hand out, but it knocked multiple grown men in heavy armor skyward with all the power of a runaway horse.

Such an absurdity was it that it occurred to me—what absurd creatures we believers of the Church were! We heard of women and children fighting monsters and looked on in shock. But what folly. The boy and girls before my eyes romped and bounded, *playing*, and in so doing flattened the army of soldiers like it was a triviality.

Now I had witnessed it for myself. Now I understood. I knew the truth of the world, the foolish nature of the Church. We thought we shepherded the world under the crook of our faith, but our every achievement was weak and foolish. The narrow view of the world we possessed was nothing more than a flimsy

pretense that could be tossed aside like a sheet of paper.

These strong soldiers who occupied cities and terrorized commonfolk were nothing more than toys in the hands of the boy and girls in front of me. The youths batted them about and tossed them aside. To the people of our city, it was like waking up from a nightmare to see the loathed soldiers laid to waste, figures of absolute fear reduced to nothing. They were revealed to us as no more than ordinary, frightened men. When the battered, once-opulent armor was peeled off, inside were sobbing, terrified men.

“Tong...bei...quan!”

“Agggh!”

“Tongbeiquan! Um, am I doing this right?”

“Gwuh!”

“Tongbeiquan and stuff?”

“Gworrghbblblbl!”

Here was the true reality. For those who thought we wielded ultimate authority, we were delivered to humility. No doubt the soldiers believed in their own righteous power, for such had been the history of the Church for eons. We’d been fools. The Church’s dignity was a sham. The children of the frontier were an awesome might. The frontier itself was great and terrible. No wonder its denizens were likewise fearsome and mighty! We could see now—only fools could deride that place!

“No, don’t lift your arm while you throw them. That’s *shoryuken*, which is a whole different thing. Could you stop killing them in midair? Quit lifting your arm!”

“It’s harder than it looks, okay?”

An end to knights... The people of the city rushed the soldiers, stripped them of their swords and armor, and beat them with timbers and fire pokers. The soldiers sobbed and howled with pain. The Church’s reign of terror ended as the

townsfolk realized their tormentors were human. These knights were supposed to protect all believers of the Church, but instead, they chose to oppress their charges. The time had come for the oppressed to rise up and take recompense for what was due. Now that they knew the truth about their tyrants, there would be no stopping them. The Church held no more power here. Not when it could be beaten by children. Not when its strength was little more than fiction.

“Tongbei kick!”

“Agggh!”

“Wait, there’s kicks too?! What was that just now?”

“Tongbei. But with foot, instead hand.”

“Say what?”

Day in and day out, these children of the frontier fought monsters, and now they were at play. The Church’s long history of dominion was swept aside, our fetters and supposed knowledge trampled and sundered by play. As they traveled up and down our country, the children delivered the message—the Theocracy was nothing more than a child’s game devised by the Church, that we were naught but haughty, pompous fools locked away in our own closed universes. We knew nothing of the world, and the world...was a great and terrible thing.

Yes, great and terrible—much like the view up the young lady’s skirt when she performed her tongbei kick. Oh, if only I were thirty years younger! I would have loved to sit and have a nice chat with her, perhaps get to know her. A great and terrible thing indeed.

DAY 110

NIGHT

With a complicated backstory like that, one of Bunny Girl's parents could win the Lecherous Wolf of the Year Award—grand prize, getting beaten up by their spouse!

THE CHURCH IN AN IMPORTANT CITY IN THE THEOCRACY

I DIDN'T KNOW IF it was due to the whole “vow of poverty” thing or if they were just broke. Either way, the church was a gloomy place at night, with only a few candles to light the entire space. You'd think a church in the Theocracy would have magic illumination, but nope. The candlelight flickered over the stone walls, which whispered of eons of history gone by, as the town outside buzzed with a festive air. I couldn't have told you what they were celebrating, but they were making a racket and a half. Speaking of noise, all the soldiers got tongbeiquan'ed into next week. Afterward, the townsfolk got their hands on them and added a thrashing of their own. It was a battle royale. Yeah, this town was dangerous. Not the kind of city to take a stroll through at night.

The archbishop dude reread his letter for the umpteenth time. His brow furrowed in wrinkles, and his once mild-mannered face twisted in agony. *Oh no! Don't tell me it's one of those chain letters.* I hadn't even sent it to one hundred people!

The old man took his sweet-ass time reading and parsing the contents of the letter. *It's fine if you digest it, but don't eat it.* Paper wasn't safe for old-dude stomachs.

I told him that I was on a quest to find Lil Bun, so he showed me a map and ran some numbers for me. Sheesh! These church carriages were snails compared to my Horsie. He could have covered that distance in less than a day.

“Oh? Then I daresay you may have already overtaken them. All carriages and

goods that enter the capital or its satellite cities must first pass through one of these fortresses. I would assume the poor girl's captors were headed towards Eastgate, the fortress city upon the riverbank. They allow traffic to come and go even in the dead of night. However, you must be careful. Eastgate garrisons a standing army of thousands."

Turned out we were in such a hurry to catch up that we shot straight past them and went down a different road. Commercial traffic took other routes, apparently.

Big Bun listened attentively, her round tail twitching. "And you say that's where my sister is? Mr. Haruka, I must be off at once. I cannot thank you enough for everything you've done for me, and I shall never forget your kindness."

She had a look of tragic heroism about her that made Dancer Girl half-grimace. As tough as beastfolk were, they were hella weak. Beastfolk could brawl, but their low magic resistance made them weak to spells and magic items. That's what got them in such a bind in the first place, you know? Naturally, the ultratight habit with mega-long slits ft. fishnet tights and garters had magic resistance, physical defense, and physical attack boosts to compensate—also, it looked great! The habit on this rabbit showed off the curve of her hips, and when you stuck her next to Dancer Girl, we were in sex pheromone city. Even His Oldness, who was so withered and dry he'd burst into flames at the first spark of passion, kept sneaking glances. They were that much of a dynamite duo! Plus, those tongbei kicks had set off a jiggling the world had never seen. With such swaying, those vibrating, stomping techniques packed quite the kick!

"Cool. Let's go as a group, then."

According to a random map we picked up, there was no feasible route to the fortress city. But, according to His Oldness, we simply took the wrong road. Furthermore, the fortress city was one of the targets on our scouting mission, and we weren't about to skimp on our duties.

“Hm? But I’m off to Eastgate. I know we’re too far in human territory for there to be any hope of rescue, but...I can’t let that stop me.”

“Yeah, and? That’s where Dancer Girl and I are going too. What’s it called again? Yeastgate?”

As a real furreak, it was my duty to keep abused animals safe; abusing old dudes was my personal mission. Besides, warships along the river used that city as a home base. C-sides, being a trade hub, the city must have been full of loot! Unlike a dungeon, I couldn’t make any money unless I picked up the goods myself. This was *scouting*.

“No, no, no. I... I know it’s futile. I know I don’t stand a chance of getting my sister out alive. It’s just... If I have to die, I want to go down with her.”

“I mean, even without her, I still have to go spy there. Why not sneak in with us?”

“Futile” only meant “not likely,” and most problems could be solved with a little work. In my time, I had heard a few breathless voices saying it was hopeless; they couldn’t take any more. Pretty sure I’d said that one or two times myself. Anyway! *Let’s hit the road*.

“No, Mr. Haruka! It’s impossible! There are thousands of soldiers. We couldn’t possibly fight so many.”

“Who said anything about fighting them? If I’ve said it once, I’ve said it a million times: we’re sneaking in, got it? The whole point of sneaking is to avoid fighting. I’ve never fought in my life!”

Why bother fighting when it wasn’t necessary? Why sneak around only to blow our cover and fight? How come nobody in this world understood what a stealth section was?

“Uh, well... If we’re still going to wear our priest and nun disguises, are...you still planning on doing the you-know-what? The telling all the gatekeepers, ‘Working hard or hardly working, bud? I’m just an average priest. Nothing to

see here!’ If you’re going to beat them up anyway, wouldn’t it be faster to skip the song and dance and...you know, fight?”

Whisper whisper... “You’re, wasting breath. He *wants*, be sneaky. No one expects, he succeed.”

No doubt under that whispering, Dancer Girl was explaining the grave importance of stealth to Big Bun. No one in this world knew how to solve their problems with anything but violence. Outside of Stalker Girl’s clan back in the Kingdom, too few appreciated the importance, the *crucialness*, of stealth. Heck, if Stalker Girl’s clan hadn’t joined the frontier, the frontier would have been done for. All the duke did was charge into battle headlong.

His Oldness recommended we spend the night here, but spies were meant to melt into the darkness and work in the dead of night. That’s the trick to being sneaky, passed down from the wise men of old: “I can sleep when I’m dead!” That’s why they called it being laid to rest.

DAY 110
LATE NIGHT



THE WALLED CITY OF EASTGATE

MY JAIL WAS DARK, cramped, and frightening, yet this frigid cage kept me safe. As they hauled me along, the gross human men leered at me but could not reach me through the bars of my prison. By now, I'd long lost track of how much time had passed since my capture. I had lost the ability to think at all.

"I'm tired," I mumbled to myself. "I'm scared. I just hope my sister's okay."

Just then, another man—a boy, rather—stepped up to the bars to ogle at me—but not with depraved lust. He looked...shocked? This boy wore odd clothing for a human male. He looked young, and while I recognized the words coming from his mouth as the continental lingua franca, everything went in one ear and out the other. Maybe I was too scared to parse language. Too tired.

"In a shocking twist of fate, Big Bun's baby sis is a wolf girl! I doubt you know what I'm talking about, but you're a real live wolf, not a wolf in sheep's clothing or the figurative wolf cried by the proverbial boy, unless you're secretly a wolf who ate the bunny in the other cage and not actually the product of an embarrassing family secret? Yeah, a literal wolf in wolf's clothing!"



In my utter exhaustion, I could swear I saw my sister in these final moments. Even if she was no more than a dying dream, I was so, so glad to see her alive and well. She was crying, yes, but there was color in her cheeks and fine clothes on her perso—holy shit, what kind of floozy outfit was that?!

“My wolf sister did *not* eat a rabbit sister! My rabbit mother won our wolf father’s hand in marriage at the end of a long dispute between their two tribes. My sister and I are of mixed blood. I take after the bunny side of the family, and she takes after the wolf.”

I thought I would never see my sister again, my dear sister who had been with me as long as I could remember. But now, I saw her in a vision. Oh, what a wonder dreams could be! The boy took a wooden stick and slashed through the bars of the magic cage that no other human could break no matter how hard they tried. I thought I would never leave this cage alive, but he chopped the bars to pieces with ease.

And then, and then—my sister caught me up and took me into her arms. I could not have asked for a better end—there, dying in my sister’s embrace. What a mercy. I prayed my real sister was out there somewhere, safe and happy.

“All righty, eat my mushroom: the Theocracy edition.”

“*Mggrrpmphh!*”

From there, the dream became a nightmare. I knew it was still fiction, for my sister was impossibly present and...dressed in some oddly revealing clothing. What’s more, this inescapable relic of a cage was broken to bits by a boy with a wooden stick who proceeded to cram a mushroom into my mouth. Then, when I stepped out of my former prison, I found myself wading through a sea of soldier corpses...all of whom were stripped down to their underwear?! This had become a nightmare!

Alas, the nightmare refused to end. Did you think we fled immediately? Ha! We ransacked storage room after warehouse, my sister clinging to me and

crying all the way while the boy yammered on about something of which I could make neither head nor tails. He was giving me some sort of explanation, that I understood, but as to what? Lord knew! Dreams never made much sense, but this was farfetched even for that. He said he sneaked into the city to save me, stealthily broke through the walls, and, while we made our hidden escape, searched for loot or treasure in every storehouse in town. Really, this dream was puzzling. And yet it was so wonderful (a wonderful nightmare—what an oxymoron!) that I never wanted to wake up. What a thrill to watch the fortress fall around my ears!

It had to have been a dream, for the woman who rescued me could not be real—not when she was nightmarishly beautiful, ghastly strong, and hauntingly powerful. Not when she gave the teeming mass of soldiers bearing down on us a light tap that sent them all flying. Bafflingly, my sister claimed she could do the same and sent her own squad of soldiers skyward. Then she turned back to me and hugged me all over again with a proud grin and tears streaming down her cheeks.

I was dead on my feet, having not had a proper meal in days, and riddled with wounds from the moment when I was captured. But even so, here in the dream, I found the energy to hug my sister back just as tightly as I ever did in reality.

A nightmare it may have been, but I enjoyed it all the same. The boy patted my sister and me on the head and gave us candy out of a fantasy. My sister and I devoured it as we sobbed in one another's arms. Meanwhile, around our bubble of dream-like happiness, the city went up in flames like the nightmares of hell.

A dreamscape, a nightmare—in the end, this *was* reality. Which meant... Wait, my sister was *actually* wearing such provocative garments? Goodness! Who knew she could be so sexy?

DAY 110
LATE NIGHT

Fantasy tongbei is evolving in a tong-babe direction...

THE WALLED CITY OF EASTGATE

SPYING WAS A NASTY, unfair business. How come every place I infiltrated came equipped with soldiers who beelined to me yelling, “Stop!” and “What do you think you’re doing?” My disguise was perfect! These cruel soldiers had no sense of tact whatsoever.

“It’s not that hard, people! Gatekeeping 101! If it looks like a priest, walks like a priest, and quacks like a priest, it’s obviously a priest. No need to stop me!”

At the fortress city, we repeated the usual routine. The gatekeepers made a big stink about us being shady characters (in spite of my priest cassock) and we gave them a stern dressing down—and a full beat-down—for their incompetence. Even though it was late at night, the streets were filled with drunk old men who reeked of booze and old-man stink. It was high time we cleaned up this mess. *Burn ‘em with fire!*

“You’re just itching at the bit to attack, Mr. Haruka! The guards didn’t even raise the alarm yet. *Ugh!* I can’t believe you. I think you just wanted to double-bop them with your sticks!”

This city served as the checkpoint for all traffic on the eastern side of the country. It also boasted a garrison of soldiers and an inspection station for the many goods that flowed through it. Yeah...what was this place called again? East Gays?

“Well, if it’s a logistics hub with a garrison, no shops, and nothing but soldiers...then I say it’s an old dude hell!”

The town had nothing but filthy soldier after filthy soldier. Maybe that’s why they all took one look at Dancer Girl and Big Bun before falling all over themselves to get their mitts on the girls. It was their fault our cover was

blown!

“Who the hell are you people?”

“G-god damn! Check out the chicks!”

“*Hoo-wee*, now that’s a pair of lookers.”

“What do you mean, who the hell are we? As I keep saying, I’m wearing a priest cassock so I must be a priest. Let me ask *you*: what else could I possibly be? And Dancer Girl, do you really have to go ‘Who, me? *Kyaa!*’ every time they pull this schtick?”

Who, me? Kyaa!

Apparently so. The old men pushed and shoved each other out of the way to get at her. Maybe her feigned bashfulness failed to convince the old dudes, or maybe she was simply too beautiful. Either way, she took the entire herd of horny old men and launched them skyward with tongbeiquan.

“Was that *real* tongbeiquan, though? Dancer Girl, you can’t just slap the word ‘tongbeiquan’ on any move that sends people flying.”

“But, is more fun this way.”

The town was a warren of old dudes, rife with hoary hecklers and indecent intimidators who were better off dead. The kind whose vocabulary included such awful phrases as, “Wasn’t my fault the slave girl died! All I did was give her a little taste test.” Or “Damn that beastfolk girl and her sturdy cage. You know what? I don’t think we oughta feed her, boys.” Or “*Heh heh*, let’s make a wager. How long of a train can we run on those girls ’fore they give out on us?” I didn’t detect any civilians—just a garrison full of sleazebags. No wonder Big Bun shook with fear and concern for her sister. I sent the Death Scythes out to guard her, and then I got down to the business of killing.

“Begone, old dude cluster! Eat my tongbei meteor!”

Huh. Dancer Girl was right. Turned out, putting “tongbei” in front of anything sent foes flying. It must have been the placebo effect. I just so happened to

have a few giant boulders in my bag, so I tried launching a rain of flaming rock hellfire.

“*Strrrrike* on lane six! Ooh, one got away in lane two. That’s a spare.”

“Me, next! I call this big rock!”

The big rock in question was as wide as the entire road, so a gutter ball wasn’t possible. It bowled through and squashed everyone flat, save for two people. My only gutter-related concern was keeping my mind out of the gutter. The view of Big Bun’s thighs every time she tongbei-kicked was a cause of much worry for me. I needed to keep a very close eye on her, naturally.

Soldiers screamed. Old dudes wailed. Cowards yelled for help.

After I cleared the area of old men, the girls glared at me hard! *What? I thought naming anything tongbei was fair game. All I did was a little tongbei meteor bowling!* This was bullying! Ostracization! Although, me being a loner and all, I guess it was to be expected.

Finally, I picked up the presence of a beastfolk girl.

“Now I’ll have the complete Big Bun and Lil Bun set. *Tongbei hi-ya!*”

With absolute secrecy, I smashed through a wall and tiptoed into the building. Before long, I spotted where the soldiers kept their cargo. Then, with all due caution and quiet, I obliterated the lock and door in one go. There, haggard and weak on the floor of a cage, lay a wolf girl. She was covered from head to toe in wounds, most of which oozed sickly pus. Boils were erupting on her arms and legs, and her body was a maze of ghastly scars. That’s right. You heard me. A wolf?!

“In a shocking twist of fate, Big Bun’s baby sis is a wolf girl! I doubt you know what I’m talking about, but you’re a real live wolf, not a wolf in sheep’s clothing or the figurative wolf cried by the proverbial boy, unless you’re secretly a wolf who ate the bunny in the other cage and not actually the product of an embarrassing family secret? Yeah, a literal wolf in wolf’s clothing!”

Unfortunately, the cage had self-repairing properties, and I didn't see anything that looked like a keyhole.

"My wolf sister did *not* eat my fictional rabbit sister. You see, my rabbit mother won our wolf father's hand in marriage at the end of a long dispute between their two tribes. My sister and I are of mixed blood. I take after the bunny side of the family, and she takes after the wolf."

"An 'Everlasting Cage: Unbreakable,' huh? Why are they using a treasure to hold captured slaves? This item is much more important than all of the soldiers' armor put together!"

As valuable as it was, the Everlasting Cage worked more or less like an ordinary cage. It couldn't be shattered, but it could be cut. I put one hand on the side of the cage and used the Universe Staff to slice through the bars in a single stroke. Yup, with the Spearshield Gauntlet on my right hand, I nullified the cage's Unbreakable skill. Alas, the staff didn't break the cage. It just made a horrible pain shoot up my arm. So I...*dun dun dun*...blasted it with Dimensional Slash instead.

"This thing's hard as a rock! I almost broke my hand there."

The violent recoil shredded the flesh of my left hand and produced a bone-shattering noise.

"No use! Cage, won't break!"

"Oh gosh, your poor arm!"

It was reckless, but I knew that if I used force to bulldoze my way through, I could make it work. Come to think of it, a bulldozer would've helped with the old dude traffic jam outside. As I destroyed the last obstacle standing between Big Bun and her baby sis, Big Bun ran past me sobbing and tackled the wolf girl for a hug. Meanwhile, Dancer Girl glared at me.

"I mean, it wouldn't break unless I did something stupid. Don't stew-pid over it."

My arm could already bend again, thanks to super-fast Revival. If I didn't get a move on, Wolf Girl wasn't going to make it. The situation was more dire than it first appeared.

"All righty, eat my mushroom: the Theocracy edition."

"Mggrrpmphh!"

There. Now she would be fine. Even the idiots could regrow arms and legs with the right mushrooms; these mushrooms could cure anything but idiocy. The Wolf Girl wasn't brainless, so she'd be fine. Maybe I could offer her some stew-pid.

"Yup, I got to her just in time. Now she's taking a mouthful of my perfect mushroom so she'll be a-okay."

Wolf Girl may have been fine, but I still had a mangled hand in the process of healing itself. My body was growing weaker the farther I went from the frontier and its strong source of magic. Maybe the low magic in my surroundings weakened the enhancements offered by Qi Wizardry and Lovemaking. Or maybe my new, tougher body simply grew weaker without sufficient magic. This sounded like a job for late-night exploration, experimentation, and general getting to bottoms of! Those sessions were more taxing than real battles!

"Huh. Even Revival is slowing down."

If MP Absorption was operating at a snail's pace too, potentially causing a cascade of weakening, then maybe I shouldn't have brought Dancer Girl along. I didn't know how much MP a Dungeon Emperor needed, but it never hurt to be cautious.



Wolf Girl had now recovered physically, but I could tell from her odd reactions that she still wasn't all there upstairs. She was half awake, and she kept muttering to herself like she was in a dream. Therapy could wait; first things first, we needed to get the poor girl clean. Bad hygiene only impeded recovery and could even worsen her mental state. So rub-a-dub-dub, plunk this wolf in a tub. And we had to get her some new clothes! Good thing I had just finished another sexy nun habit that would fit her perfectly.

With the help of a Water and Heat magic collaboration, I whipped up a steamy bath and got her squeaky clean. Add some diluted bubbly body soap and my tentacles, and *voilà!* A clean and changed Wolf Girl. Of course, Dancer Girl took on blindfold duty (read: held my eyelids open so I could get an eyeful of the rated R magic). It continued to baffle me how no one in this world understood the lofty profession of blindfold duty.

"Since they're twins, I figured they would be the same size. Problem is, I thought they'd both be rabbits. Now I need to remake the tail hole."

For the underwear, I made the sisters a set of all-purpose sportswear. All I had to do for Wolf Girl was adjust the tail hole and fit the garment to her once she put it on. As I worked, soldiers kept storming in on us, but Dancer Girl took care of them with her tongbei skills. She was having fun, too, from the looks of it. She spun, weaving spirals, transforming straight lines, and turning points into lines that shot through the press of soldiers. She synergized her magic, qi activation, and skills into some weird martial-arts-looking thing, complete with a shockwave. But last I checked, tongbei didn't involve stamping.

"There's a world of difference between the tongbeiquan I know of and the tongbeiquan the nerds talk about. Dancer Girl is definitely practicing the latter version!"

Nerd knowledge won out in fantasy land, but something about tongbeiquan just didn't seem like *fantasy*-fantasy to me. Yet that thought, much like the soldiers, was soon gone with the wind.

“*Aggggh!* What is this? What am I wearing, and why is it so revealing?! Why is my sister wearing another one just like it?! An unmarried beastfolk girl shouldn’t be showing so much skin! Nor should she be washed and dressed by a strange man!”

Ah, so Wolf Girl had finally come to her senses. *Don’t worry; it was my pleasure.* With a body like that, I should have been thanking her for the honor of dressing her.

“It’s all right, I promise. These clothes are disguises...ostensibly. That’s what he keeps saying! Oh gosh, what are we thinking wearing this in public? No self-respecting man would ever agree to marry us after this.”

Bunny Girl and Wolf Girl were not fit to be spies on this super serious, solemn, stern spy mission! No proper spy would ever be embarrassed by their disguise. We were in the heart of enemy territory; if only they could quit being silly and grow up! Like me! Not that there were any enemies left here in the heart of enemy territory, but it was the principle of the thing!

“You may be wearing these outfits in public, but we’re culling all the eyewitnesses as we speak. What’s the problem? Apart from adding eyewitnesses to the endangered species list.”

We blasted some old dudes into a wall, and the wall all but exploded behind them. *What can I say? That’s tongbeiquan for you.*

“I-I’m really not following your logic, but it doesn’t matter. Thank you so much for saving my life. Your kindness has rescued me in both body and so—*mmrph!* Yum-num-num!”

I shoved an apple pie into her mouth to get her to stop talking. We were behind enemy lines. What if the church soldiers heard her? Wolf Girl would jeopardize our entire mission. Not that you could hear her over all the screaming soldiers and exploding walls, but it’s the principle of the thing. Also, did tongbeiquan always make explodey noises?

“Let’s put a pin in exploring the complicated family secrets leading up to your

birth. Remember, we're undercover until we can make a clean break for it. Constant vigilance, okay? I know there are no enemies left, but you have to stay quiet and sneaky the whole time you're in enemy territory. Hug the walls, crouch when you move, and keep your head on a swivel. That's the trick... I don't know if it works, but that's how spies act in movies. You know?"

I equipped my tentacles with the oh-so-handy Plunder Glove and swooped up all the armor off of the defeated old dudes. I also nipped into a few warehouses and grabbed all the loot I could carry.

"There are magic items too, but look at this armor. It sucks! It's not like it's made out of bad metal, but the design? *Yeech*. The final touches? Ew. This barely taps 30 percent of the armor's potential. What a waste of steel! This needs a good Franken-smithing into something better."

And for all that, the only holy relic I got my hands on was the cage. Virtually everything else the soldiers had—supplies and loot—were weapons and foodstuffs. No valuables apart from the gold I pocketed. Even now, I could still hear far-off screams and explosions. Dancer Girl had fallen in love with tongbeiquan. Or rather, fallen in love with the thing she insisted was totally tongbeiquan.

"I was willing to look the other way and pretend you could, theoretically, have such a thing as a tongbei kick, but no way in hell is there a tongbei Prometheus Chain! That'd be news to Prometheus!"

The girls were going to be in for a world of hurt once they resumed their beat-down sess—I meant, training sessions. Miss Armor Rep favored more classic fighting styles, but I bet she would enjoy tongbei tomfoolery too. You know, this had frightening potential! If tongbei spread to the rest of the girls, Vice Rep B would be an especially powerful force to be reckoned with. Her tongbei *bwom* would produce such violent jiggling I would have the time of my life! No teenage boy could ever avoid such a hit, which was what made this such a dangerous weapon. Even monsters couldn't bring themselves to dodge that swingage! *Should we be scared?*

DAY 111
EARLY MORNING

The best way to silence a wolf is shoving a ball of carbs into her mouth. Call that a hushpuppy.

OUTSIDE THE RUINS OF THE WALLED CITY OF EASTGATE

I BUSTED OUT VILLAGER A'S TENT for the first time in days. The blast from the past inspired a twinge of nostalgia while I cooked up dinner, and I whipped up some fruit juice for the beastfolk girls. They offered to help me cook, but I insisted they relax in the tent under Dancer Girl's watchful eye. Wolf Girl looked better—at least physically—but I knew she was far from full health.

As of right now, the church had no way to confirm if any large army was on the march. Pretty hard when all their patrols between here and the front were dead. This explained why all their elite forces were still garrisoned in the central region of the country. Therefore, only the smaller units posted in the countryside were potential threats against Sister Girl and her town. Since I had pocketed all their food and weapon supplies, these soldiers had no way to supply a protracted war. I didn't know how many other troops could be hiding around the Theocracy, but I figured I could keep them in check. After all, the quickest way to Sister Girl's town was down the river I now sat atop of.

There was one last city upriver of this town marked with a skull on my map. All trade through the eastern portion of the Theocracy passed through their port, and unless I cleared it out, Sister Girl could be taken in the rear by any foes stationed there. Thus, alas, regrettably, unfortunately, I needed to sack the city, perfect disguises be damned.

"Still wouldn't hurt to sneak in, I suppose."

"No need! No point in sneaking! Takes too long, too!"

Wolf Girl's health had taken a beating from the forced starvation and sleep

deprivation. I imagined it took a mental toll, too. She would need proper treatment for that later, but first, she needed her rest and a good meal.

Being a wolf and all, I assumed she was a carnivore. However, as it turned out, Bunny Girl was the meat muncher of the family. Wolf Girl preferred fish or veggies to a big, juicy steak. And Dancer Girl? Dancer Girl would eat anything that sat still long enough. Finally, it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that all three girls loved sweets. They would soon be fa—I mean, in dire need of one more set.

“Eat up, eat up. Or eat down. Eat upside down? Speaking of upside down, when you flip an A on its head, you get the symbol ∇ from set theory and formal logic. That means ‘for all’ aka for all food x , there exists a girl g such that g eats x . Wolf Girl gets a mushroom-centric diet, though. *Bon appétit!*”

She wolfed down her food with tear-pricked eyes. It wasn't anything fancy—just porridge, a light meal for those in recovery—but she sobbed her heart out. It must have been days since she had gotten any grub. I might have given her one of those slabs o' meat you see in anime and manga, but I didn't think her stomach could handle it. The porridge was just a test run before a full meal, but she seemed to like it.

Pretty soon, Bunny Girl joined in the chow fest. Both the girls and their clothes were soon stuffed. Even the slits began crying for help!

This recovery meal was a fusion of Western cuisine and Chinese cooking. Basically, it was all mushrooms. Wolf Girl's recovery was my top priority, but I threw in a handful of other ingredients to spice up the meal.

“Thank you so much for saving both of us. To us beastfolk, this is a debt that we will owe for the rest of our liv—om nom nom.”

Yeah, I shoved *manjuu* in her mouth the moment she started flapping her lips.

Beneath the tears, they seemed to be enjoying the food. It looked like Wolf Girl could handle some dessert, and since the Beast Nation's food was kind of Japanese-y, I made manjuu. Wolf Girl seemed to love it. I had just given away

my share of the last manjuu mountain I made my classmates. I wanted to squirrel those away to have as snacks for the next several days, but the best-laid plans of mice and men and all... Hopefully, there would still be some left for me.

I forced Bunny Girl and Wolf Girl to bunker down for a nap and camouflaged the tent with the nerds' concealment and shielding barrier. In the meantime, I gave the demon scythes peach jam as a reward for their mission intel and asked them to stand guard so we could rest easy. Dancer Girl and I left the beastfolk girls in the tent and set off to scout out the last town along the river. This was an original target before these side missions, and we had to get the job done. But it still didn't make sense to me—if we were here to scout, why were all our targets marked with skulls on our map?

Anyway, once we were done, we could confirm that this town had no enemies. The gates were closed, but before I could dazzle them with my perfect disguise, Dancer Girl used a tongbei morning star to smash both gate and town to bits.

While the city had its own garrison, it was mainly a port town. Which meant, in all likelihood, civilians. Dancer Girl showed no mercy in her destruction. This was a city of soldiers and slavers, and if they got caught in her rampage, that was their own fault. It was god's will. If they had an issue with it, they had to take it up with the old guy. Of course, we took care to avoid hurting any kids along the way. But we otherwise razed the city to the ground. I saved any enslaved beastfolk we encountered, wreaked total destruction, and pocketed every coin I could find from the slaver businesses, leaving them destitute.

“If any slavers try escaping with the non-combatants, they'll come home to find their fortunes vanished.”

A number of the slavers resisted with private mercenary armies, so we buried them in a tongbei building avalanche. Dancer Girl and I made quick work of the fight before we turned to the bedraggled beastfolk, stuffed mushrooms in their mouths, bathed 'em, clothed 'em, stuck 'em on magic boats, outfitted 'em in

good armor, and sent 'em back home to the Beast Nation.

I mean, after such inhumane treatment, why would they trust me, a human? Because I'm totally human! Right? *Right?*

"I can't tell if Dancer Girl got so mad at the slavers she blew them to kingdom come or if she just likes tongbei'ing things. Either way, she was on fire. Halfway through, I left her to it while I sat back and made the beastfolk eat my mushrooms. One of these days, I'll get my turn in the spotlight..."

Big cheesy grin.

Things were about to get real as we headed closer to the center of the Theocracy. Problem was, Dancer Girl and I were using too much MP. But we couldn't ignore this city—it was a key point for goods and soldiers coming down the river.

"We have to make sure the church doesn't send reinforcements and supplies to the army on Sister Girl's doorstep. That means two things: lootin' and shootin'. We need to bust up every building between here and the port. The city will be flat by the time we're done with the—oh. Or now, I guess. The city is already in ruins!"

Even cheesier smirk.

From here, all the beastfolk had to do was follow the river upstream. It was a well-trafficked route, so I imagined they wouldn't run into much trouble. Still, it was better to be safe than sorry, so I gave any beastfolk who looked fit to fight the weapons and magic items I looted from the town. I also loaded them down with all the food they could carry and tasked them with getting the boats home safe. I didn't think any of the beastfolk would rest easy until they were back in their homeland. I would have liked to send Bunny Girl and Wolf Girl home too, but given the urgency of the situation, I ultimately decided we didn't have time to go collect them. The main group of beastfolk needed to go home ASAP.

"They're grateful, Master. You made, right choice."

The river ran parallel to the road we came in on, so I knew no more church armies remained upstream. The beastfolk would be safe. The last of the church forces were bearing down on Sister Girl's city, so the river was free of hostiles. It'd be a nice, cozy boat trip sans battles.

The boats set off with little further ado. The beastfolk still looked jumpy and terrified—like they didn't know if they should celebrate yet. They didn't quite believe they'd been rescued. Even so, they kept bowing to me...even though I was a member of the species that had abused them. The boats sailed away upstream and vanished into the distance in a flurry of bobbing beastfolk heads. They sure were a polite bunch! Of course, I also gave them all the money I picked up off the slavers. They'd be set on funds for a while.

"If I had known this would happen, I would've brought Bunny Girl and Wolf Girl and sent them home, too. Welp. Screwed the pooch there."

Maybe it wouldn't have hurt to ask the beastfolk to delay departure...

"They were, frightened. Could not, wait longer. Poor things. Sending home, quickly, was right thing to do."

Even rescuing them, treating their wounds, and giving them food had not been enough to dispel their fear. They were hurt somewhere deep inside, and that kind of wound didn't heal easily. At this stage, humans like me had no further help to give. The best thing to do was let them go—go somewhere far from any human.

"Well, apart from the nerds. The nerds are still trawling the rivers in the Beast Nation. But there's nothing scary about a nerd. If anything, bullying the nerds could be good a stress reliever. They make great stress balls because they just bounce back!"

"Beastfolk still bowing, even now. I'm sure, they understand, your feelings."

Point was, I wasn't worried about the boats anymore. My concern was the thing rising alongside the sun far, far off on the eastern horizon. Clairvoyance could just barely make out a slender column of smoke—a signal. War. Death

and destruction, far, far off in the distance—where all my classmates were.

“Are you, truly worried? There is, still time. We can, still turn back.”

I watched the distant plume of smoke, and the responding beacons lit one after another. They signaled the start of the fighting—the beginning of far-off war. Bloodshed many leagues away.

“Yeah, I’m worried, and I’m sick of it. If I could put a stop to this, I would. But Sister Girl made the choice to fight, and that’s got to mean something. You’d think? Maybe? Maybe it means something.”

The girls were out there on the battlefield where people killed their fellow human beings like idiots. Teens going to war like staining their hands with blood was not a crime.

“Of course it is. I don’t care when the nerds do it—they’re already kind of effed up. You feel me? It’s not even like they can’t act normal; they just don’t know what normal means.”

My classmates and I had no plans to go home. So long as we stayed in this world, nothing but endless killing would await all of us.

I wished it was just me here. Me and the other stupid guys.

“Even if I still don’t get why Sister Girl cares so much about this stupid country, I can accept that it’s important to her. If it’s so important she can’t give up on it, then I can’t stop her—even if nothing in this world has a point.”

Because if it did—if the world was such a beautiful place that everything had a purpose—then there’d be no way in hell that Dancer Girl and Miss Armor Rep were ever trapped in the deep, dark places of the world. It just didn’t add up. Hell, I questioned if there was even any merit to saving this world.

“Sister Girl...she still thinks it’s a world worth fighting for, huh?”

“Yes. She has resolve. Determination. She thought long, hard, came to her decision. That’s why, everyone, respects her choice.”

That’s why I couldn’t stop her. It just wasn’t right for me—or any other

outsider—to stand in her way. When someone looked into their heart and resolved to do what’s right, no one had the right to tell them they’re wrong. It was the same for all the girls—each was responsible for deciding what she held important. All I could do was worry from afar. Even after all this time together, I still didn’t know who they were deep down. I mean...I didn’t even know anyone’s name. Shit, I couldn’t tell you which of the Vice Reps was the actual Vice Rep of our class.

“Man... You really think you know a person till you don’t. Know what I’m saying?”

The last time I saw the girls, they looked like completely different people. It’s like their faces belonged to strangers.

It wasn’t like the skill was perfect to begin with, but if I had used it any more, the girls would have found out. It was also dangerous, but I had no choice...! Oh well. The jig was up. It was stupid of me to have used Eye Mastery back there to keep them from worrying about me. They’d figured it out.

That’s why the girls’ faces looked so different—they were twisted in fury!
Yipes!

DAY 111
EARLY MORNING

*Hell hath no fury like a tricked, toyed with, and scorned teenage girl...unless it's
twenty of them!*

THE PLAINS BEFORE SISTER GIRL'S CITY IN THE THEOCRACY

WE FACED THE OPPOSING ARMY across the sprawling plain. Each side named itself and its mighty cause in great shouts. The stage was set, the pieces moving, and for only one purpose: war. Unavoidable war. Once casual footsteps turned hurried; the air grew tense. The antagonism slowly mounted like so much falling snow building up in great drifts upon the ground. Every man and woman walked with leaden feet, our steps heavy as if some invisible force dragged at our heels.

“Is this it? Is it starting?”

“Yes. It is.”

We had assembled an army from all over the country, comprising of any who opposed the pope. Our rag-tag, eclectic force of some four thousand knights stood in battle formation under the banner of Her Royal Highness Ariel Ann Aryuca. However, the princess did not hold the command. Princess Shalliceres du Diorelle and Her Grace Merielle sim Omui acted on her behalf, leading from a tiny base camp in a tiny city.

An ocean of human bodies surged towards us, threatening to wash over and drown us. Their battle lines extended to the horizon. Every one of these soldiers belonged to the church's papal faction; they easily numbered over twenty thousand. It was a city's worth of people on the move mustered from town garrisons all over the country. This overwhelming force encircled our city, besieging us, with the goal of taking us into their custody to bring us before the pope.

“Holy cow. Look how many people there are!”

“Right? It’s one thing to know the number, like, intellectually. It’s another to see it.”

I could feel the stress levels rising, and I struggled to breathe. There were too many people and not enough air. My imagined lack of oxygen did nothing to stop the opposing force roaring a merciless battle cry that rippled out to cover the entire plain. The mighty weight of their footsteps shook the ground. This, somehow, broke the tension, and battle fever spread across the warzone. The sonorous war cries blanketed the plains and made me think to myself, *Perhaps all of us, friend and foe alike, would be too frightened to take a human life if we weren’t gripped by the madness of battle.*

“It’s just a number, girls. It’s not even thirty thousand. Haruka-kun handled thirty thousand men on his own. If we can’t stop—what, twenty thousand soldiers, give or take?—do you think Haruka-kun will have sympathy for us? Do you think he’ll dry our tears?”

“No. I know he won’t.”

Our cavalry columns began to move, which was my signal. I turned to my unit, a group of twenty-one girls attached to the right flank as a mobile search-and-destroy force.

“Here they come.”

“My calculations say we have...five seconds before they’re upon us. Give me an estimate of their total strength.”

“*Huge!* Three... Two... One...”

“We won’t let them get through! *Chaaarge!*”

We blasted the wall of the front line back, raising great spurts of blood. Amidst the stench of blood on the wind and rusting iron, wailing voices pleading for help sputtered out and died.

“Archer party three! High-speed charge! Destroy them all!”

“*Ja!*”

Screams, howls, ululations of pain. Sobs choked out with a last breath, moaning keens of agony. This was war. This was what happened when people came together to kill. There was no way to put a pretty spin on the situation. Yet it was simple: we had people we wanted to protect, so we did. The enemy wanted to take them so we were here to stop them.

“Keep it up, girls! Flank the main force of the heavy cavalry on the right. Drive them back to the reserve forces at their camp.”

“Ja!”

My hands shook, and I could only imagine how shrill my voice must have sounded, but no one’s feet slowed. No one stopped and turned back. We all understood that *we were the only things standing between our loved ones and their doom*. This was exactly what Haruka-kun had done for us time and time again.

“Tight formations! Shields up! *Chaaarge!*”

“*Oui!* Shields at the ready, ma’am!”

If only Haruka-kun were here. I could already hear what he’d say... *Both German and French? Pick one!*

“Attack and fall back! Now, charge!”

“Ja!”

The gasps of the dying lamenting their last regrets only spurred us on. They pleaded for mercy, threatened us, attempted to placate us, but to no avail. We plunged into the throng and destroyed them all. Limbs flew; blood splattered. Heads rolled. No mercy.

“Fall back! Switch to a square formation!”

“Ja!”

“Archers! Ma’am, we’re being shot at!”

“Keep an eye on the skies, girls! Throw up a Wind Wall!”

“Ja!”

We held the advantage, but we were still outnumbered one to five. We could hope to whittle the church army down over time, but that would have been a waste of this trap Haruka-kun laid for them. This was a defensive battle wherein we snuffed out life after life while suffering virtually zero injuries of our own. The more soldiers we cut down here, the freer Haruka-kun would be as he moved deeper into enemy territory. It was like the war in Diorelle, where Haruka-kun was trapped by his desire to protect us. He could be strong when he had the freedom to attack however he pleased, but he was too weak to defend himself. And yet he chose to protect the entire frontier. That was why it was our turn to take up his mantle—so Haruka-kun could be free to fight. Haruka-kun needed to be free to do whatever awful Haruka-kun thing he could cook up.

Point was, we were driven to finish the fight and race to catch up with him so he would never, ever have to fight alone again. We would fight our way through this battle, dry heaving all the while if need be, so that he would never need to shoulder another burden alone.

“Three smoke signals at three o’clock, ma’am!”

“Shalliceres-san has left HQ and taken the field!”

“Good. We’ll take the enemy in the rear with a coordinated volley of arrows. From there, we’ll sweep the enemy’s left wing. Understand?”

“Ja! Archers, loose!”

The battlefield reeked of iron and blood. The scent of charred flesh assaulted my nostrils, and my eyes rang with flashes of metal on metal as the people dying all around us cried themselves hoarse. It made no sense. Why would people kill one another when their world stood on the cusp of being destroyed by monsters? The frontier understood and united against monsters, but here, so far from Omui, people turned on one another in a stupid war. War was more destructive and more senseless than any monster, a blood-spattered and

meaningless power struggle—not even the biological struggle to survive.

“Fire! Fire! Aim at their center. Fire! Now, to their left flank!”

“Ja!”

“There’s a unit of magic users on the left, captain! Behind the unit flying the blue banner!”

“Switch targets. We must destroy those mages. I want three parties of archers to provide backup for our spear users!”

“Ja!”

With sufficient freedom of movement, even a tiny force like us could pose a threat. Even we could take an enemy in the rear and cause chaos.

“Forty cavalymen approaching! We’ll take them all, captain!”

“Roger that!”

No doubt the enemy thought similarly and sent out their best, brightest, and most mobile units to destroy us. However, they now faced Shimazaki-san and her closest friends—the most zealous and battle-mad of us all. Their party surged through the cavalry, shredding them like paper and cutting down horses as easily as they did men.

“Let’s end this before Shimazaki-san’s party returns to us. Fire off three rounds!”

“Ja!”

“Ma’am! There’s an elite squad assembling in their center! It’s a shock force meant to take down Arianna-san in our front center!”

“Once we annihilate these mages, attack them with Inferno and Wind magic!”

“Ja!”

The tumultuous battle reached the final, yet no less chaotic, act we had written for it. It was total war. No holds barred. All troops rushed forward, hoping to overwhelm the other army through sheer brute force.

“Shalliceres-san’s unit has broken through the enemy’s left wing! They’ve isolated two units.”

“Sports club girls, work with Shalliceres-san to perform a wedge attack.”

“Ja! On it, ma’am.”

It was the beginning of the end—the end of their lives. A hidden spike trap, buried just below the surface of the soil for the purpose of stopping cavalry charges, now sprang into vision as it skewered the onrushing soldiers. Others fell into the moat, which burst into flame, ending the charge and leaving nothing but screams of agony behind.

Yet the cavalymen behind that first wave could not stop, driven on by the momentum of their charge. The knights behind them pushed them forward, burning and screaming, into the pit. Their headlong rush checked, they found themselves within our firing range, and we did not show them mercy. We rained arrows and spells down upon them, carpet-bombing the battlefield and making the enemy army dwindle before our eyes. This seemingly innocent plain held a secret—it had been fortified against their charge. From the start, this battle had been decided by our worrywart of a black-haired commander, the boy who took it upon himself to fight every battle with his own two hands. Through exhaustive calculations, he had dreamed up a perfect defense to annihilate the church forces and keep us all safe. That’s why we didn’t dare to lose here. We owed it to him.

“We could thin out their numbers, but we didn’t stand a chance of breaking their formation.”

“Yeah. I’m amazed Haruka-kun pulled it off.”

“It was a crafty trick. The enemy never knew what hit them.”

“In the end, Mr. Worrywart protected us all. Again.”

“Yup.”

That’s why we couldn’t lose—forget death or injury! We all smiled, but every

face was as white as a sheet, and I saw a slight tremor in the hands holding spears and swords. I knew I was no different, but I couldn't give in. I was so scared, but I forced myself to bottle up my fear. Haruka-kun was protecting me. Even now. Even before. From moment one, for all this time, for all eternity. He protected me.

It wasn't pretty—all the death, the bloodshed, the soldiers bleeding out with their entrails spilling from their stomachs. This was what Haruka-kun had obstinately tried to distance us from. This new fantasy world was cruel beyond salvation, a harsh reality riddled with meaningless death. Now I understood why Haruka-kun kept muttering to himself things like, "Why the hell is this world like this?" That's why he wanted to send us home. He didn't want us to know.

"If you can't take it anymore, that's okay. This is upsetting stuff."

"No, I'm all right. I'm scared, and this is horrible, but I'm okay."

"Yeah! I just need to remind myself that Haruka-kun is protecting us."

"Exactly. I want to cry, but I gotta hold out. Let's show the world what girls are made of!"

"Totes! We can do this. This is nothing if we want to stay here for the rest of our lives!"

"Yeah. We'll be just fine. We only need to remember he's keeping us safe."

In this heartless world, Haruka-kun took it upon himself to make us happy. He laughed at the suffering—the pain—and spoiled us. We knew the full truth of what he'd sheltered us from now. We'd seen through Haruka-kun's Eye Mastery, and it affected us no more.

Our trance was a happy one, to be sure. We would have been blessed to live the rest of our lives under Haruka-kun's deceptive spell. He kept us content and fed, taking all the burdens upon himself... Tricking us.

"Here comes their counteroffensive. Charge through their center and fall

back!”

“Ja!”

I’d spent my days being pampered, being selfish, laughing and giggling and, every once in a blue moon, crying. I thought our world was a happy one, where we could all get along, where Haruka-kun could give us everything—*everything*. What a load of bullshit! While all that was happening, Haruka-kun couldn’t even *sleep*! His body was falling apart, and his mind was hanging on by a thread.

He tricked us. He used his pleasant lies to spoil us and turn our brains off. All this time, through his Eye Mastery, he’d prevented us from worrying about him. Whenever despair threatened to overwhelm us, we turned to him for creature comforts. The manipulation was so, so subtle we didn’t even notice. We saw no sign of his underhanded kindness. We let ourselves be spoiled, we threw tantrums when we didn’t get our way, and we let him soothe us for the sake of our peace.

Haruka-kun shouldered that burden alone, and when he finally pushed himself past his limit, it destroyed him from the inside out. We let ourselves be tricked, all while he toiled and suffered. To him, we were spoiled toddlers throwing temper tantrums. But now we could resist. We saw behind the curtain and knew everything. Knew that he had protected us, our everything, our souls for such a long time. He’d done every ridiculous thing he could think of to make us smile ever since we’d arrived here. He had shielded us from this truth for *ages*.

“Charge! Whittle down the elite forces, but watch out for magic.”

“Ja!”

He’d borne the weight of our collective sorrows and agonies and let the weight destroy him. We were foolish, helpless, sheltered children, and we made Haruka-kun carry us. We cried out to the universe for help, and Haruka-kun answered with his suffering.



“Defenses up! Enemies at three o’clock!”

“Ja!”

It was our turn to take up the burden. We would dirty our hands and run to Haruka-kun with our heads held high. If we refused, we weren’t fit to stand alongside him. We may have been snively, helpless children, but by god, we were still women, and we would act like it!

“Merielle-san has broken through the enemy lines and is carving up their forces!”

“By herself?! That’s dangerous!”

“Aim for their shield line on the left wing. Charge!”

“Ja!”

We’d never be fooled again. Now it was our turn, even if we were hurt and bleeding, to protect Haruka-kun. We’d repay him a hundred times over! So bloodstained and trembling, we voluntarily became monsters—monstrous killers; the goddess Hariti come again: mothers to all the world, raining destruction on any who threaten that world. Inspired by Haruka-kun’s eternal protection, it was our time to protect him. Even if it reduced us to bloodthirsty beasts.

“Reverse! We’re going back through their center again. Converge with Merielle-san!”

“Ja!”

For such a long, long time we lived in a dreamlike happiness. We basked in the beautiful life he gave us, and we needed to repay everything he’d done for us. They said hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. Well, it was time to prove it. Time to finally, *finally* give Haruka-kun a taste of happiness in return!

“The center’s open! Charge! Give this one everything you have!”

“Ja!”

We would survive in this cruel and blood-soaked world. If Haruka-kun could carry on bringing us happiness while wounded and broken, then it was time we gave him the happiness back, even if it hurt us! We were women scorned by his deceit, and hell had no fury like ours!

“Their formation’s broken! All together now! Slay them!”

“Let’s mop up this mess and go find Haruka-kun.”

“Ja...but I’m kind of worried. Is the Central Theocracy going to be okay?”

“Yeah, are we going to find anything left of it by the time we get there?”

That’s why we had to hurry. There was a sex god on the loose. He had a habit of giving girls candy and taking them with him! He was probably picking up chicks as we spoke.

DAY 111
MORNING

The wisdom of old age bends your back into optimal upskirt-inspecting position!

OUTSIDE THE RUINS OF THE WALLED CITY OF EASTGATE

THE GIRLS TOOK A SNOOZE in their sleeping bags in the tent. The last few weeks had been traumatic for Wolf Girl, so I assumed she wouldn't feel comfortable sharing a tent with a human—a boy, no less. Besides, if Dancer Girl and I couldn't dance the four-legged tent tango, there was no point in me sleeping in the tent. That's why I pitched my sleeping bag outside. I could just barely hear the girls talking to one another. Since the sisters had been separated for ages, they had a lot to catch up on.

The smoke signals on the horizon had by now vanished. No way my classmates lost, especially as the church's main army was still sequestered in the capital city of the Theocracy. It was just my big fat ego that made me fear the worst and want to send them back home. Our original home, the place where we had people waiting for us. Probably even a high school and homework to come back to.

"Good morning, Mr. Haruka."

"Hey there. You guys can sleep in, if you want. I haven't started cooking yet."

I wriggled out of my sleeping bag and began throwing together a meal. Since Wolf Girl was still in recovery, I decided to make noodles. Noodles were easy on the stomach. I didn't have enough time to hand-make noodles, so I went with tentacle-made udon while I whipped up stock from soy sauce, bonito flakes, and kelp broth cooked in *akazake*. For toppings, I added crunchy tempura bits, dried *wakame* seaweed, eggs and slow-cooked meat. I hoped that would be enough for the girls. Finally, I added a pinch of green onion to perfect the meal.

"Dogs shouldn't eat onions, but Wolf Girl says she loves green onions. I guess

anything goes in fantasy. Soup's on."

"Thank you! Let's dig in."

Most of the denizens of this world didn't know how to eat udon the right way, but the beastfolk were slurping superstars. They gobbled the udon down with teary eyes before begging me for more. It seemed like, no matter what I put in front of them, eating moved people in this world to tears. With tongues a-wagging, tears a-streaming, and throats a-gulping, the girls embraced one another... Was this some sister-on-sister yuri action? *Uh, should I leave? (Can I watch?)*

"That meal was absolutely incredible."

"Thank you so much for the food. We are eternally in your de—*mmrhph mmrrph.*"

Dessert equaled mushroom-stuffed manjuu. Zen monks often had this kind of thing as a mid-morning refresher, so it made the perfect dessert. And an open mouth was practically begging to have a mushroom shoved down it.

Once breakfast was over, I made a set of equipment for Wolf Girl. I already had a spare set of armor made to Bunny Girl's measurements, so all I had to do was make a few tweaks. The weapons were more difficult, as each sister favored her own fighting style. I had at first made a matching set—the whole twin thing, ya know—but the sisters of a different species problem threw a wrench into those plans. Wolf Girl seemed like the type to do well with a longsword and small shield. However, when I put a sword in her hand and watched her give it a few practice swings, I realized that she was better off with katanas. So I gave her the Lil Steely MK-II, and she fell in love with it immediately.

"You can keep it. Lemme just fiddle with the length and weight first. Then you can have a go training with Dancer Girl. Wait, not with tongbei quan! Put that down—what the hell do you mean, it's a tongbei shield?! Tongbei Shield Bash is hereby banned; although I bet the Twin Telephone Poles will know it by

nightfall. Do any of you remember a shield is *defensive*?!”

“Ooh! I want to learn that trick too!”

I changed the left arm of Wolf Girl’s habit to an armored gauntlet. It may have been a bit heavy, but it doubled as a shield and gave her defense. Then I modified Lil Steely MK-II into a longer set of knives for dual wielding. As Wolf Girl duked it out with Dancer Girl, I made a couple of additional modifications. Wolf Girl put up a good fight. She knew her swordplay basics well, both offense and defense. However, her moves were so easy to read it wasn’t funny. She also struggled with anything that took flexible thinking. I kept fiddling with her swords’ centers of gravity and the thickness of the grip. Occasionally, I adjusted the width of the blade itself or lengthened the hilt to readjust the balance.

“Great! Looks like the habit is both hardy and sexy. I mean, I’d feel better if I stuck her in armor, but everyone would notice an armored wolf. Plus, armor isn’t good horndog fuel.”

“And I’m supposed to find that compelling...how?”

Neither sister liked the coif and veil because those hid their ears. I could have cut out holes for their ears, but oh well.

“I-I can’t possibly accept such precious equipment! Especially when you only fight with wooden sticks! Why do you even use sticks if you have such good swords?”

“Oh, these are just subweapons. I keep them around in case I can’t use my staff for whatever reason. I never get the opportunity to use them. Plus, someone else already took the Lil Steely MK-I—Vice Rep A, I think? So why not give the MK-II to you? Besides, I already adjusted them to fit you.”

Wolf Girl took the swords with reverence and bowed to me. Bunny Girl had done the same thing to me when I first gave her the dagger. Maybe this was a beastfolk thing.

“I’m glad you like them, but you have to grab your loot and run. You’ll never

survive the maiden bargain sales at this rate. Seriously, those things are terrifying.”

“Mr. Haruka, we will never return home until we’ve repaid our debt to you. We’ll throw away our lives for you if we must. Please let us accompany you on your quest! You saved us and—*mmmph, mmph!*”

Dancer Girl *tsk tsk*’ed their antics like she wasn’t munching on an *anpan* bun herself. Every time I brought up the idea of sending the beastfolk girls back home or at least making them stay back, they steadfastly refused me. I tried to get them to rest, but they bounded over to Dancer Girl and begged her to train them. At their levels, the beastfolk sisters could handle their own against any church soldier. As they trained, those levels kept rising. The girls might have been exceptional fighters, even among the war-crazed beastfolk, but I still wasn’t keen on taking them into the heart of church country. I kept telling them it was too dangerous, but they didn’t want to go home.

At the center of the Theocracy sat a holy land called Central. The entire area was protected by magical barriers, and the soldiers stationed there wielded magic weapons to enhance their fighting prowess. Fighting in the city without magic items was too taxing.

“I stole a buttload of magic items off of the soldiers we defeated. The workmanship is pretty good, but I don’t know if beastfolk can use them. I mean, most beastfolk are jacked but still get pushed around by no-good shmucks with magic items. Magic and beastfolk don’t seem to mix.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Haruka! We’ll do everything in our power to not slow you down.”

Yeah. The girls were still following me when we ran into archbishop dude.

“I am greatly relieved to see you all returned safely to me, my children. Ah, and is this the little sister? Well done. Through your hard work, you have changed fate itself. My dear child, I cannot apologize enough for all the wrongs my church brethren have done you. It is a product of the rot eating through our

church from the inside out. My sincerest apologies.”

He took a knee and bowed to Wolf Girl. What a perfect position from which to apologize! To seek atonement! To look up the slit of her habit! There was something to be said for the wisdom of age. I had to admit, I was impressed by the transition from apology to obtaining an optimal optical opportunity.

Once he was done getting his eyeful, His Oldness gave us a whole heap of letters and maps. He said giving them to their recipients in the anti-papal factions scattered across the Theocracy would inspire them to join the rebellion or else distance themselves from the pope. Or something like that. I figured it was a way to separate friend from foe and make it easier for us to tell who our true enemies were. However, it was still too difficult to tell where every individual stood on this issue. Considering how many people the church had brainwashed or driven to blind zealotry through their doctrines, it was probably best to assume that everyone was an enemy.

His Oldness watched us go with a heavy heart. We set off down the road, chatting about nothing. (The sexy kept my attention.) Not surprisingly, a church army overheard us and popped up to fight. I was slightly concerned by the line of soldiers in different uniforms behind a massive shield wall. They were magic users—probably a division specializing in magic items, the beastfolks’ weakness.

The first line of soldiers slammed the pointed tips of their magical shields into the ground, securing them in place, and jammed their pikes into the gaps in between to create a perfect defense. They would never let us pass. It was flawless.

I took Wolf Girl and Bunny Girl by the hand, let Dancer Girl climb onto my back, and Air Walked right over the whole thing.

“Man, you’re hea—nope, didn’t say anything! Nothing at all, Your Weightlessness!”

I could feel the glares.

The enemy stared. Dancer Girl glared. Yanking those giant shields out of the

ground and performing an about-face in that heavy armor didn't look easy. The heavy infantry was supposed to guard the magic squad, but now the magic squad was front and center—and screwed? Oops, my hands kind of slipped, so now Wolf Girl and Bunny Girl were giving me death glares? Yeah, we were *all* in hot water here.

And then everything went to hell in a handbasket? The magic users panicked and ran to cower behind the infantry, but they couldn't get past the impenetrable shield wall. Meanwhile, the shield wall trapped the infantry in place too. They may have wanted to turn and rotate their defenses, but the onrush of magic users meant they were stuck. It was a struggle, a mess, a pandemonium, a show we had killer seats to watch. *Pass the popcorn!*

As if that wasn't bad enough, the magic users had covered the ground with a thick layer of status ailments. They began lobbing poison attacks at us the moment they saw us, confident that their magic items would spare them from the damage. I took a quick look to make sure Wolf Girl and Bunny Girl were all right; fortunately, their habits were as poison-resistant as they were sexy.

So I turned it back on the church soldiers. I mixed my hydra's Poison and status ailments with the chickenatrice's Curse to make a super-concentrated, super-potent super storm of status ailment hell.

"It turns out Wolf Girl and Bunny Girl are completely resistant to status ailments. That would be helpful in dungeons. The church, though... This was a legit attempt. A status ailment storm like this would only be seen on lower dungeon floors; it could eat through equipment! I'm scared."

"This poison fog, almost entirely your fault! Not Church's! Church army, in agony!"

In the midst of the mist, the church army of old dudes howled in pain. The beastfolk sisters leaped into the miasma and fought in a display that would've put an action movie to shame. Their training with Dancer Girl was already paying off, or maybe they were just imitating her ass-kicking ability. Either way,

with skills like those, I needed to set them up with a training sesh under Miss Armor Rep. Pretty soon, they would be giving Fish Girl or Nudist Girl a run for their money. In short, I was screwed. If the girls got any stronger, the next lecture would be lethal!

With the cloud of poison so thick, visibility was effectively zero, but Bunny Girl's sword still slashed and sliced its way through the soldiers with ease. Beside her, Wolf Girl was a whirling dervish of blades. Their ability to detect their foes was like nothing I'd ever seen before. Even a fog this dense didn't slow them down. Their sisterhood made their coordination a sight to behold, and those proportions were even worthier of beholding! *Man, I wish I was holding those thighs.* Their upper legs jiggled in a frenzy of activity that left the eyes much to devour. It was a beautiful sight, but it didn't make bringing them along any less nerve-racking. My nerves were shot just watching those pale thighs work their magic.

"That's the last one of them, Mr. Haruka! We've defeated them all."

"Please take a look for yourself and confirm."

Where was this "mister" thing coming from anyway? And why were they kneeling before me? Wolf Girl's tail wagged. Bunny Girl's twitched. As they advanced on me, I felt a building sense of pressure. Their fluffy ears were just begging to be stroked, and when I gingerly tried petting them on the head, their tails went wild. Had I just tamed them? *I think this situation calls for pudding.*



“Yum! I’ve never tasted something so soft and creamy. This is a delight!”

“It’s melting in my mouth and so very sweet. I’m in heaven! We’re the luckiest girls in the world.”

I had tamed the wild beasts with food. No wonder they didn’t want to go back home. As much as I loved the “Pet me! Pet me!” attitude, I wasn’t sure how well it fit their brands. Wolf Girl was one thing. I could see a wolf being petted. But a bunny? And how come Dancer Girl and the demon scythes were waiting in line? Oh well! Petting for everyone.

DAY 111

MIDDAY

I'd swap a tiny tanuki for the Monkey King, but she might munch the cast like a salad bar!

A CITY IN THE THEOCRACY

THE CHURCH WAS A ROTTEN, lazy institution. This was my biggest problem: I dressed like one of their peeps and *still* got called out. Again! Yet when I said I had a letter to drop off from His Oldness, the gate guards let me right in. It almost made me think the letter was more effective than my disguise, but that's just nonsense. I went from church to church passing out letters before stopping by an army storehouse to nab what loot I could find.

"I have no letters for the local church, so no one minds if I steal loot, right?"

Apart from the triple glares, the girls were on board with it. The closer we got to Central, the better the loot and magic items I found. Compared to dungeon equipment, it was only worth chump change, but it was the thought that counted. Why not take it?

"It must take so much land and work to grow enough food to feed all these people. The church needs to stop praying and support itself!"

I had a much smoother experience going from town to town this time. Likely, the letters helped, but no doubt my brilliant disguise was the bigger factor. Who was interested in a musty old man's letter?

According to a group of nuns who received one of the letters, His Oldness's warm heart and gentle spirit made many people sympathetic to his cause. But he didn't want power for himself, nor did he have any soldiers of his own. He believed wholeheartedly that his place was among his people, serving them as an archbishop of god.

He wasn't a threat, basically. I think he said something to that effect when he

gave me the letters, but I wasn't listening. I had better things to do than listen to old men natter on, you know?

From there, I went on to another city, where they stopped me at the gates. Out came the letter, and in I went. *Why does this keep happening?!* Once I dropped the letter off, I moseyed on past an army building and just happened to sneak inside. I was wiping the place clean when someone caught me in the act.

As a pair of sneaking specialists, a real duo of supreme slinkers, Dancer Girl and I were in stealth mode. Darn! The combo of Wolf Girl and Bunny Girl's beastfolk racial skills and unique talents should have prevented anyone from detecting their presence. We still got caught! The sisters tried to act natural...or tried to seduce the enemy? Hard to tell in those habits. Either way, their acting skills had to be seen to be believed.

"W-w-wow! It sure is h-h-hot today, huh?"

"Y-you're telling me. *Wh-wh-whew!* It's a s-scorcher."

"It's g-getting hot in here. T-take those habits off! If you're getting that hot, take your nun-girl clothes off!"

Huh? How come they were glaring at *me*?! That was me acting perfectly natural! So natural it belonged in the jungle! So topical it was tropical! You know?

Suddenly, the space in the room shrunk. I felt like I was being crushed where I stood. Then status ailments and deadly poison rained down on me and began gnawing at my flesh. See, a bunch of dudes in black cloaks ignored our flawless acting and dumped poison on top of us before binding us in place with a spell. Between the way they hid their presence from me and targeted our weak points, I realized they were a top assassin squad.

"*A-ack, argh!* Wh-what is this? I can't m-move, and the poison is k-k-killing me! And yet, I'm kind of into it? And stuff?"

“Enough, this nonsense. Let me, handle this!”

It was eight dudes versus one Dancer Girl. Four of them bore down on us—one behind, one in front, and you know the rest—with swords raised, as the other four remained in hiding. Blah blah blah, it was every fictional assassination attempt ever. I appreciated their dedication to tradition, so I gave them a round of applause.

“But you forgot the attack from above and below! We have a bunny. Bunnies jump! The trope doesn’t work if we can get the high ground!”

The assassins knocked me down and tied me up with the rest of my fallen friends. It was so cliché it caught me by surprise! People still did that these days?

“Perhaps they thought I was too stunned by my own acting to move... That, or the status ailments. I *do* have serious acting chops, though. I was the star of the kindergarten play; everyone said I could make Hollywood cry. Heck, I’ve only improved since.”

Instead of rave reviews, I got girl glares. For good reasons, I bet!

“Back in the old days, soldiers used to form up in straight lines, which let them be eliminated in one shot. That’s being done away with in modern warfare, but this Middle Ages universe is stuck on square formations. They’re all a bunch of squares! Speaking of, why the square faces?”

“Masks! Magic items, to disguise presence!”

Well, if this was all standard tech, then it wouldn’t do a thing to the girls. It was too old for that. These black-cloaked bastards didn’t have any monster fighting know-how either. Evidently, the masks were just to show how *ooh, quirky* the assassins were. They didn’t do a thing.

“Two-dimensional thinking doesn’t fly in a world of magic. Demons fly! Even I can Airwalk, and I’m still human! In a world where old dudes can go flying... What the heck did you just do? A tongbei jump?! It’s bad enough that I can walk

on air. If we're gonna practice synchronized Airwalking, give me a heads-up first!"

I'd just burst in on the room using Airwalk, and now I was having trouble reading the room. The assassins' equipment was nasty stuff. They had tons of items that caused all sorts of status ailments: Binding, Pressure, Paralysis, Blind, Confusion, Fainting, and Instant Death—a perfect repertoire of poisons to hunt down a strong opponent. This vicious, vile villainy drained the target's MP as they frantically tried to keep their status free of ailments. The equipment also had a few defense-boosting skills as freebies on top of all the assassin-y stuff. The builds were status ailments over substance.

Now I understood why the Beast Nation and the Kingdom didn't have enough status-ailment-resistant equipment! The church didn't want anyone to counter their assassins or raiders. The frontier fell into squalor for *this*? People died in vain for this silly, sleazy church supremacy?

"Now we have to deal with assassins too, huh...? Listen, I think you girls should go home. You too, Dancer Girl. I stand a better chance against status ailments than you, thanks to General Health and my maxed-out Luck stat. I'm seriously too lucky for my own good."

Status ailments had a one hundred percent chance of affecting anyone at my level, but my OP equipment and baffling skills made that number drop. Between my Luck stat and my late-night efforts netting me Limit Break, I couldn't possibly be safer. I was basically cheating. I went from being a sitting duck to virtually impossible to kill—the most fragile but also the hardest to break. Yet if I was the luckiest man alive, how come I could never escape all the lectures? It must have been a problem of sex appeal.

"We won't leave you now, especially when it's dangerous! You saved our lives, Mr. Haruka. We owe you ever—*mmhphr mrrppmh!*"

"*Shh!* We're sneaking! Quit making a ruckus. Dancer Girl, why are you standing there with your mouth open?! What're you doing with your tongue?"

That's R-rated! It's getting pixelated out!"

I shoved rice balls down the girls' gullets. They were crying again, probably because rice was soul food for beastfolk. *God, these girls cry at the drop of a hat...*

Fact of the matter was, we got spotted even with our perfect disguises. If I was going to bring the girls any farther, I needed a backup plan for emergencies. Anything that could capture Dancer Girl when she was a level 100 dungeon emperor was a force to be reckoned with. When I fought Dancer Girl and Miss Armor Rep, neither of them wanted to kill me. I barely saw a fraction of their strength; if anything, they'd deliberately made themselves weaker hoping I'd kill them. That's how I drove off their darkness. If they had faced me with the intent to kill, I would've been dead in a moment. Not even that. In a mo—In a m—Their desire to die was the only thing that saved me from certain death.

"Hmm...how *did* they find out I'm not a priest? Wack..."

"You're wack, Mr. Haruka."

I could barely fight, and it almost killed me to do it. I needed equipment to give me a fighting chance at fighting, but even then, my self-control was clunky and uncoordinated. It was a start, though. The most baby of baby steps. So long as there was a glimmer of possibility, I could brute force my way through in any situation with a lead round of luck.

"If my arms are falling off anyway, I should get myself a glove to rocket punch stuff. Tongbeiquan lets me launch things, but I think it's also launching my sex appeal into the stratosphere."

I snuck into cities, handed out letters, and trammeled assassins who didn't appreciate my magnificent sneaking skills. For some reason, every town had assassins. What was that about? Whatever—there were other things that needed my attention. Namely Bunny Girl's lively limbs and Wolf Girl's agile assets.

“Sexual...harassment... Notes taken. Give to Class Rep, later.”

“Hey! I’m simply keeping an eye on them for their own safety, plus taking their measurements by eye— which is completely normal for teenage boys to do hence why I’m not guilty but I may be ‘guilty’ ’cause I’m golden?”

My class was known for its beautiful girls, but now they existed in a class of their own! What was this, girl inflation? Hyper-girl-inflation?! Verily, the *dramatis personae* in this epic were damsels most fetching (save the gentlefolk of the elderly persuasion.)

“Why are there so many hot girls and freaking concubines everywhere and I *still* don’t have a girlfriend? Keep it together, Haruka. Just keep your chin up... and then the tears won’t fall. Go surface tension! Save me, Holding magic!”

“Why is Mr. Haruka crying?”

“Don’t ask. You better off, not knowing.”

We even got attacked right on the street. The security tightened the closer we came to Central, and attacks increased in frequency. The biggest mystery: why they attacked with no hesitation even though we were dressed like a priest and a trio of nuns. The assassins were weak even when they were trying a sneak attack.

Too weak. Their equipment sucked, and the assassins were no better. All their fancy-schmancy spells and sword tricks were useless against *tongbei*quan. The enemies flew in; we sent them flying back again. Wolf Girl even mastered the *tongbei* shield.

“For fantasy worlds, a dude named after food could save the world. I don’t have a monkey’s tail, but I could offer up a tiny *tanuki* instead... Wait! She would just bite the rice (or dragon?) balls!”

“Who the heck are you talking about?”

“Good job. But next time, don’t make the assassins fly so far. Picking up their dropped loot is a pain when you send them halfway into next week. Stop

competing to see who can launch someone farther! It's not a contest! Sure, you hit the enemy on the other side of the wall...after you launched the wall! I don't know if that counts!"

Nod nod.

As we kicked butt, I asked around and found out that these assassins were a special division of the church knights trained to hunt heretics. They patrolled the land in small groups, but whenever we sent one cell flying, it attracted the attention of another. We sent those even farther, which brought in yet further assassins. Before long, we were flinging an endless stream of knights. Call 'em an air force.

"Oh great. Here comes more."

"Your cassock stands out too much, Mr. Haruka! I don't know how, but they can tell from far away that it's fake!"

Nod nod.

I put mithril in the surprisingly handy Replicant Sword to turn it into the "Replicant Greatsword: All stats +50%. MP Absorption (hyper). HP Absorption (large). Equipment Fracture (hyper). Penetration. Sundering. Shadow Swordsmanship. Weapon Copying (only applies to currently equipped weapons). Divide. Comboing. +Attack." In addition to the performance boost, it also gained Shadow Swordsmanship, Divide, and Comboing. Shadow Swordsmanship created shadow slashes from a shadow blade, so it paired well with my "Shadow Cloak: Speed, Dexterity +30%. Shadow Crows. Shadow Incarnation. Shadow Manipulation. Shadow Manifestation. Shadow Magic. Shadow Skulk. Presence Isolation." It was love at first sight! I could hear the audience's wolf whistles and cries of "Get a room, you two!"

Either this sword was a top-class magic sword or a lesser divine sword. I tried dual-wielding it with the Universe Staff, but the cringe factor killed me. The mithril just made it worse. It also threatened to make me self-destruct. With so little magic in the area, I couldn't rely on Revival; I could only indulge in some

light self-destruction. My skills and their side effects were just too strong.

“With cassock, sword makes giant, evil shadows! Is too noticeable! Much too noticeable!”

“Yes, but if I theoretically used Divide to make infinite shadow copies of the Universe Staff and gave them to my Infinite Tentacles... It just might work! I could host the mother of all shadow puppet shows!”

Sure, it’d instakill me, but it was possible. If I Combo’ed the sword with my staff, I could make them into a single weapon. That would be handy, and I could always pull out the sword and dual-wield whenever I wanted. But the sword was already too powerful even without the staff, and it snapped by body like a twig at the lightest swing. I hated to seal it away, but using it would be *super* cringe.

“Okay but what if I try Comboing and Divide to make a three-section staff...? Whoops, almost died under a hail of self-inflicted stick wounds. What dumbass thought up a three-section staff? I tried intercepting an enemy attack and bonked myself with my own branch!”

Things didn’t always go as planned when I tried to make myself stronger, especially when it involved the nerds and their no-good ideas. This staff was ridiculously powerful, but it was also *rid-did-did-diculously* painful. And cringe! Ow.

I could see the *potential*, though. The church knights were instakilled; they couldn’t keep up with its constant shifting and transforming—neither could I, but you couldn’t have everything in life. I wasn’t sure if this would be good in real battle, but oh well!



“That’s, dangerous! Stop getting stronger!!!”

“Times like this call for self-restraint. That is, I’ll delegate! I’ll let my skills analyze every book, movie, manga, and anime I’ve ever consumed and categorize their battle techniques into a system of theories, methods, and laws until I have a single universal theory of Fictional Battling. I bet Wisdom’s up for the task. Problem is, Wisdom takes the nerds’ stupid-ass suggestions seriously and incorporates them into its theories, which is how we end up with these knock-off Chinese martial arts all the time. Like the tongbei quan? Oh, and the tongbei quan? And let’s not forget the tongbei quan? Or its distant cousin, the tongbei quan? You know?”

It had been needling the back of my brain for a while... I could have sworn that real Shinto-Muso Cane Style was a lot different. Oh, well. The thing in my hands was a real three-section staff, surely. I couldn’t have gotten that wrong!
Thanks, Wisdom!

DAY 111
AFTERNOON

Are you making a dress or taking up vampire hunting as a hobby?

SISTER GIRL'S CITY IN THE THEOCRACY

OUTSIDE OF A FEW cuts and bruises, we were fine. That's how one-sided the battle was. We were able to fight through the tears coursing down our cheeks and the bile rising in our throats. And in doing so, we finally understood all the pain and sorrow Haruka-kun felt. We defended Arianna-san and her city and discovered what a truly painful thing it was to protect people. We'd been so sheltered! Incidentally, we also learned that everyone born in this world was a badass.

"Even Arianna-san and the other nuns! They leaped right into the fray yelling 'Hi-yah!'"

"Uh-huh! Meanwhile, the monks hacked and slashed their way through the fray, slaying soldiers left and right. And they kept licking those knives!"

Haruka-kun's brainwashing had taken root in their minds and blossomed into a magnificent murderous princess. Arianna-san struck terror into the hearts of friend and foe alike; she was a true warrior. Those who mocked her as a little girl or a mere figurehead of the movement soon learned why people called her the arch-butcher. She was terrifying!

"Haruka-kun, what did you do to her?!"

"Sure, we defended her, but... I think she would have been just fine without us."

"Too bad no one could defend her reputation..."

We sat through a post-battle debriefing, and no one had the guts to challenge anything Arianna-san said. However, it devolved into a mass of people arguing

over business deals—which they called “humble proposals”—and attempting to wheedle (“negotiate”) financial opportunities over a battlefield with still-cooling dead.

Once that was over, we proceeded to hear the reports from an old friend. It was good to see her again. It had been too long.

“Presently, towns across the Theocracy are complaining of missing arms and rations. We hear rumors that the armies of the Church have been confiscating them, leading to an uptick in public unrest. We also note an urban legend of a man dressed like a priest, whose general disposition is un-priestly, roaming the countryside and beating up anyone who questions him. Please see the locations of the incidents on this map.”

Stalker Girl was here in the Theocracy too. She was a non-combatant, so it was really dangerous!

“What are you doing here?! You’ll get yourself killed!”

“Haruka gave all of us magic items. One of my clan members reports that she was chased by soldiers, but she used her item to make a clean getaway.”

“That worked?!”

“Oh yes. You see, they’re emergency item bags. When she opened hers, missiles and poison mushroom gas spilled out. The soldiers chasing her died.”

“Why the hell did he give you guys that?!”

“I wouldn’t know. Haruka himself says each bag is expensive.”

Haruka-kun didn’t want to use protective items on himself—talk about a waste of money—but he had no problem doling out ridiculous amounts of top-class protective gear to the Shino clan and the orphans. Anyone chasing them would have to be above level 50 or just die.

“Wait a minute... I think I know what’s going on. The church is confused. Too much has been lost in translation.”

“*Ohhh!* You mean *he’s* the rogue army they’re looking for?”

“Yeah! That would make sense.”

“Anyone would look at this and think it was the work of a squadron, not a single boy.”

“If they wanted to find him, they should’ve been keeping an ear out for rumors about prowling creeps.”

According to the talk spreading the country, someone was marching up the river destroying key strongholds one by one. Two fortresses had already bitten the dust with all of their soldiers slaughtered. The church was on the hunt for the “army” responsible, but they had no luck finding it. They therefore decided to broaden the search, but as they did, their rations kept going missing. I could just hear the culprit now: *Oh cool, unattended food on the back of a wagon? Don’t mind if I do! Yoink!*

“Surely they have checkpoints? Isn’t the countryside swarming with soldiers looking for him?”

“Sure, but how is information supposed to get back to the church HQ when Haruka-kun wipes out every patrol he runs into?”

“So much for sneaking.”

Based on the church’s deployment of troops, I figured they were attempting to root out a guerilla force. Their first priority was to detect this roving army, and once it was found, all soldiers stationed nearby would swoop in. However, they only ever found two people out for a stroll, questioning Haruka-kun, and dying instantly. Dead soldiers, naturally, were not the best at explaining what killed them. Consequently, the church was bleeding men and falling deeper and deeper into chaos.

“So...that means Haruka-kun’s roughly here.”

“Why is he doubling back so much...?”

“Looks like he’s hitting up towns we didn’t mark on his map.”

This world didn’t have a magic telecoms system. Even Haruka-kun’s magic

was too weak at great distances to be much help, so he planned on developing a system of magic wires for communications. In the meantime, we all had to make do with smoke signals and flashing lanterns. The frontier, as advanced as it was, didn't have any better tools.

"What's the church *doing*? He's not that hard to find."

"I mean, if you're looking for a whole army, a couple of kids would slip right by. Even kids who can blow up a city with a snap of their fingers."

An army? What army? A bloodthirsty priest with a sexy nun? Super easy to spot. The one thing that didn't add up was the number of sexy nuns.

"We hear that the assassination corps have split up to deal with rampant, widespread theft. However, these units go missing and are never heard from again."

"Smart. If you can't find Haruka-kun, just stand near a storehouse and wait for him to rob it blind."

"Yeah. And then you think, 'Oh, I can take two kids. No sweat.' Next thing you know, you're dead."

See, Haruka-kun and Nefertiri-san weren't a scouting duo. They were a walking trap—vagabond villains. The more the church dedicated to eradicating the roaming rogues, the greater the destruction. The church was fighting for its life trying to stomp out a guerilla army hiding in the plains and rocky crags. No doubt they even stopped two innocent, deadly kids wandering the road.

"I bet the church thinks we're a guerrilla army moving from city to city."

"Oh! So that's why they're looking for our main army."

"Yeah, but they got it ass-backward."

"Right? *They're* our main army."

That's why the church disregarded these stilly stories about an evil priest and his sexy nun. Or nuns? Unclear from the rumors how many there were. No doubt they thought the two of them were an oddity. They were! Deadly

oddities. No one would ever expect a guerilla army to move about in the open like that. Our guerilla army was about as subtle as a gorilla.

“So can we proceed as planned? Liberate the cities and march on the capital?”

“I don’t wanna make any calls on our own. Arianna-san is still in her council of war.”

“Looks to me like Haruka-kun’s already wiped out the main body of the papal army. Can’t we just walk in and wrap things up?”

“Sounds simple enough. Makes you wonder what the point of that council is.”

In the Theocracy, the government left judicature and taxes up to the churches in each town. This gave these church leaders the authority to engage in the kinds of power struggles they were currently bickering over.

“People just want titles and money.”

“And to argue over who will be the next pope.”

“Ughhh.”

Already, people were bickering over cities and nurturing greedy dreams of domination before the war was even over.

“I guess if they claim a title now, they’ll be set for life when this is over.”

“And like, that’s fine, but I’m concerned about these people riding Arianna-san’s coattails. While she dukes it out with the pope for the top spot, these A-holes are using this opportunity to pad their pockets.”

“Yeah. We have to keep our eyes on the prize: the postwar recovery. There’s no point to this war if the country ends up as corrupt as it started.”

At least there was one thing we could all agree on: politics sucked!

Those schemers dreamed of their postwar riches, but they never considered the country in its position as a player on the global stage. They just perpetuated the same faction politics and internal squabbles over domestic power. They

didn't want reform.

"You know, Arianna-san doesn't have any real allies."

"Yeah! War councils are supposed to be about more than personal interests."

"Doesn't anyone get that their country is in jeopardy?"

"Arianna-san is looking for true allies. Even a few will do, so long as they have the church and Theocracy's best interests at heart."

As few and as removed from government service as they were, the Kingdom once had aristocrats who swore loyalty to the king and worked for the good of the common citizen. But there were few of them, and they were horribly overworked—no breaks, all overtime. The treatment made so-called "black companies" back in Japan look good. I heard that the commoners pitied the aristocrats. If the Theocracy hadn't had that kind of selfless aristocrat, the state would fall apart. Poof. No more Theocracy.

"According to recent reports, Archbishop Stecater has pledged his support for Archbishop Arianna, thus turning one neutral bloc after another to the side of this resistance. We should expect a letter from him any day now."

Ah, it looked like Haruka-kun had accomplished the first of his errands. I had been nervous about sending Haruka-kun to deliver a message, but my fears were unfounded. The message arrived safe and sound. Many parents felt anxious when they sent their kids off on their first errand, but Haruka-kun worried me for entirely different reasons. My concern was for the poor recipient!

"Great thinking! Passing along a letter required Haruka-kun to do as little talking as possible."

"Yeah, making Haruka-kun talk would be a disaster. He'd come home with no response and a baffled recipient."

"Wait a sec...there were *two* nuns with him?"

"Say what?"

“Oh, the two nuns? Yes, that matches the reports I’ve received.”

“Oh my god. Nefertiri-san didn’t stop him.”

I *knew* he was picking up girls! How did he do it when he had one girl with him? Damn, he had game. Angelica-san and Nefertiri-san would give him hell for it, but they always let him off easy. They also nodded and agreed with everything he said. As watch dogs, they were maybe too loyal.

“I bet he fed this new girl something and patted her on the head.”

“Yep. We know all his tricks by now.”

“Next thing you know, he’ll be picking up orphans.”

“Well, this one’s not an orphan. She’s a nun...right?”

“Yeah. Not a kid.”

“I shudder to think how Nefertiri-san will react—well, no, actually... I think she might, uh, like company.”

“She was the wrong person to send with him! She’s out to grow his harem!”

Angelica-san and Nefertiri-san had some...traditional values. Namely that Haruka-kun was a brilliant, eminent figure deserving of wives and concubines to birth an army of his children—an old-fashioned concept. Furthermore, he ran them so ragged every night. They were desperately in search of more companions. Hence why they kept asking us for backup.

“Whoever it is, she must be strong if Haruka-kun is letting her tag along.”

“Yeah. He won’t bring anyone with him unless they can fight.”

“Wait. If she’s coming with him...that means he’s, like, making her equipment. Right? With all the wriggling that entails?”

“Oh no! We have a liability issue on our hands.”

He probably picked up some poor girl moments before she was assaulted, or freed her from slavery, or something like that. But then...surely he would have sent her to us to keep her safe, right? Why did he bring her with him instead?

Very puzzling.

“I’ve just received breaking news from the Shino clan spies. This nun has a rabbit tail!”

“Guilty, guilty, *guilty!* Off with his head! Bring out the morning stars!”

It was time to give this boy a lecture. Even a morning star mauling was too good for him.

“More breaking news! He’s up to three nuns now, and we confirm nun number three has a wolf tail!”

Let’s see, let me grab my packing list... Giant scissors? Check. Saw? Check. Anything I’m missing? Oh yes! Hot pokers. Tee-frickin’-hee, Haruka-kun. Ready or not, here we come!

DAY 111

EVENING

Do they count as Swiss rolls if there's no Switzerland?

ON THE ROAD IN THE THEOCRACY

WE COULD HAVE ASKED to stay the night at a church in town, but Presence Sensing and strangers didn't mix. Plus, in the event of a church surprise attack on us, those strangers could have been hurt. I'm not naming names (cough, Dancer Girl), but a certain member of my party had developed a habit of tongbeiquan'ing entire buildings.

"It may only be effective against weak opponents, but it's not a bad trick. Good for crowd control. It might be worth looking into further."

We left town and set up the tent a fair distance from the road. Then I got to making dinner like the eager beaver I was. Wolf Girl could stomach normal food again, and was at risk of over-stuffing herself. As I cooked, she burned calories with our good friend the one more set.

"Take that! And that!"

"Ack. Hi-yah!"

The beastfolk sisters faced Dancer Girl, two-versus-one. Even though they had numbers on their side, they couldn't get past her guard whatsoever. The twins' synchronized attacks, impressive as they were, did nada. Their pride as beastfolk wouldn't let them suffer defeat in silence, and their instinct—the beastfolk blood running through their veins—spurred them on to challenge Dancer Girl to match after match.

"That makes sense for a wolf, but would bunny instincts really compel her to fight?"

Bunny Girl lacked the *aww* factor. The *me-yowwww* factor, though? That she

had in spades. She was a flurry of activity, motion in the ocean, a vibration nation. Her daggers dodged and danced, and her assets followed suit. She shook her bunny buns.

Dancer Girl fought with two plain wooden practice swords that had no skills except for Reflection. She waltzed through battle with fantastic finesse. Her spinning attacks cut down everything in her path. Her blades tangoed; her body swiveled. She taught the twins a martial arts move set that combined the best of both worlds: the natural agility and strength of the beastfolk with the techniques and knowledge of mankind. It was an astounding new fighting style—all light, flowing motion tracing sinuous lines through the air as she slashed and stabbed.

“Grr!”

“You haven’t seen anything yet!”

The twins were hellbent on landing at least one blow, so they challenged Dancer Girl with ferocity, only for each attack to be thrown back in their faces by gorgeous swordplay. No doubt they would see this as proof of their strength, vow to accompany Dancer Girl for the rest of her travels, and spend the journey challenging her with all the hot-blooded fire of youth—oh. Never mind! Dancer Girl mopped the floor with them and made them depressed. Dancer Girl’s strength was unfathomably deep. After all, dungeon emperors were mighty foes. A single emperor could threaten the full armies of a dungeon king. The girls were outnumbered, one against two.

Around wheezing, Bunny Girl spat out, “She’s too strong. I can’t imagine what her full capabilities are. It’s as unbelievable as it is beautiful.”

Likewise panting for dear life, Wolf Girl said, “We don’t stand a chance. We can’t even make her sweat. The way she uses her sword is the stuff of legends.”

“No sitting down! Even if battle, done. After training comes exercise!”

Good ol’ radio calisthenics. I never knew they could be so sexy. The girls’ leggings bit into the flesh of those mighty thighs. Their sleeveless halter neck

tops led radio calisthenics down a charming, captivating, and carnal path. *Yeah, this is the part where good kids close the book and go do something else. Everyone still reading better be fifteen or older! And I will need to collect video evidence of this scene to review later...to, uh, ensure there are no ethical violations here.*

“Yum!”

“My goodness! I’ve never tasted anything so sweet, salty, and airy!”

Just to be on the safest of sides, I made one more dish to help Wolf Girl’s recovery: monster forest mushroom creamy omelet rice with fried chicken, featuring mushroom salad and corn soup. Wolf Girl seemed to like it, if the crying and hugging her sister was anything to judge by. I would have liked to join in, but a careless brush against skintight yoga pants could prove lethal for me. Since I had been a good boy and kept my parts to myself last night, a stiff breeze would have set me off. That was the one downside to Sex God’s unlimited vim and vigor. But I needed all the energy I could get, even if my teenage boyness suffered for it.

“If you really want to come with me, you’ll need to wear armor on top of your sexy nun disguises. I’ll make you both a set, underwear included.”

“Oh, we couldn’t possibly accept. Not after everything you’ve done for us! This is too mu—actually, that armor is amazing. Revealing, but amazing. Thank you so much!”

“Truly, we’re already so well-protected, I’m shocked you’d give us anything more. It’s quite breathable and excellent for fighting in. I just wish it were a little more modest!”

Magic weakened over distance, so long-distance magic took more MP while being less effective. The reverse held true for armor, which meant that skintight armor was more effective *and* more MP efficient. Since beastfolk didn’t have much MP or magic resistance to begin with, that made vacuum sealing them into their armor even more crucial. If it didn’t cling, I didn’t want it. If those

undies didn't dig into their curves, then get it outta here. We needed masterpieces—wonders stuffed with the hopes and dreams of teenage boys everywhere—so standard sexy female armor would do the job.

“You need, equipment. But fitting requires, resolve! Is stirring stuff! Makes you say ‘oh my god!’ Are you, ready?”

“Yes, ma’am!” the beastfolk sisters chorused.

The girls were always taken with my tentacles, happy with my hydra, and chuffed by my chickenatrice. Yet for all the gasps of pleasure, I always got subjected to lectures afterward. It wasn't like I had any control over the hydra and chickenatrice! They helped without being asked. It wasn't my fault that they periodically wandered and made certain unhelpful movements. Just because I could feel every sensation didn't mean I had anything to do with it! They moved on their own! And you know how it was with snakes—they love crevices! It's in their nature. It wasn't my fault my helpers made the fitting scenes require pixel bars. I didn't ask for all these assistants!

“Please and thank you!”

On went the blindfold.

“Yup. Called it. Your fingers are spreading! I knew this would happen—didn't expect you to fake it for a single round, even—but what's the point of prying my eyes wide open and covering my mouth?!”

I gently peeled the twins out of the habits that were plastered onto every convex and concave surface of their bodies. All the X-rated details were broadcast in my mind's eye. Their naked limbs were bared with nary a thread to clothe their beastly bodies... I almost turned into an animal myself. *Wait, no. Measuring.* I wound an innumerable quantity of Magic Threads about their naked forms, scrutinizing every scrute I could find and recording every rive of riveting data.

“Hhh, aafff. Nnnh—waah!”

I took measurements on their soft, springy flesh by pushing, pulling, groping, rocking, swaying, petting... *What if I tried licking?*

“Hey, watch it, hydra! No biting! I know they look delicious, but those peaches are not for eating!”

Hiss?

What I wouldn't do to get my mouth on them...

“Nope, we're fine! Nothing to see here. Just measuring. Anything else is...off limits? I guess? No screwing like rabbits here! Or any other animal!”

“Hyaaaah...ahh, ah, ah!”

“Ffff...nnrgh, hyaa!”

“Turns out that passing level 100 gives you more meat in the seat? More junk in the trunk? More whack in the rack? I'll give you a little room for growth while being skintight while crimping, wrapping, revealing, cloaking, then make 3-D revisions and...oops. My tentacles slipped.”

“Aaaaaah!”

Magic Threads crawled across skin; feathers tickled and teased, tracing the curves up and down their sleek bods, spinning and weaving together into a fabric of—wait a minute. Feathers?

“No! Bad chickenatrice! We don't curse people! Especially not when the curse is Sensitivity Boost during a measuring!”

Cock-a-doodle-doo!

“Ahh! Ah, ah, ah, ah, ghh, nnnnwaaah...”

Flop.

“Aaahhh! Annh, annh, auuh, aaafff...nnnngh!”

Flump.

Whoops, clumsy me. They were too tense! I needed them to relax so I could

measure their flexibility. Besides, armor was easiest to make when I could run a comparative analysis on their bodies at rest.

“Very kind of you to provide the chains for hanging them up, Dancer Girl. But you, uh, don’t need to spread their legs. I don’t need a Vitruvian man reenactment! If you keep pulling so hard, you’ll tear my eyelids. The police will get me if I get a peep! Stop!”

“Ah, ah, aaah...”

I was done whipping up the first drafts of the custom-made tight leggings, knee socks, and sleeveless halter neck tops. Not to mention boleros with built-in gloves to be worn under the armor. These were only first drafts, of course. I could fix the fit once the girls had regained consciousness. Now I could move on to the armor itself... Ah! Cleanup time. I would need to wipe the girls dry, measure, wipe the girls dry, fit, wipe them dry again, and tweak as needed. Here’s hoping I had enough towels...

“Hyaaah, ahhh, ahh, ahhhh!”

“Aahhh! Aahhhhn.”

They arched their supple limbs, trembling with each moan. Backs bucked. Waists wriggled. Boobs bounced like rubber playground balls. Pale skin spasmed. The girls—well, they passed out. Again. Onto the leg armor! The chains pulled their long, beautiful legs apart for me. They whimpered, they wailed. They panted, their tails got in on the twitching action. I could feel my sex appeal breathing its last after these daily clothes-making sessions.

“That’s a wrap. I’ll do the final adjustments after training tomorrow. Now that we’re all done, let me make us a bathtub. It’ll be an open-air bath—not a hot spring, just a regular hot water bath... Okay, they couldn’t hear me. Magic Hands could carry them into the water. *Dancer Girl, can you make sure they don’t drown?* I would watch them in the bath myself, but that would drive the final nail in my sex appeal’s coffin.”

Coming up with custom equipment for the twins was difficult. For starters,

they had different physical capabilities than humans. Even though they were twins, they were different species. I had to start from scratch for each one.

“This is even harder than Elf Girl’s. It’s a toss-up on which was hotter, though.”

Elf Girl wasn’t all that different from a human, physically speaking. Her magic and skills made her much stronger, but it was still within the range of acceptable error. By comparison, the beastfolk girls differed abnormally in physique and sheer muscle mass. Their thighs? Luscious. Their abs? *Va-voom!* They had lightning-fast reflexes and incredible jumping ability, making them much more mobile than the average girl.

“There’s great up-and-down jiggleage, especially as the beastfolk girls can jump higher. Hmm, and their senses are more acute. Wait, why does this say their toe strength is so high? What are these numbers?! Does this come from them standing on tiptoe?”

In light of this new information, I revised their boots to make the most of their toe strength. I also needed to build in extra mobility function. Shoot, maybe I needed to revise their fighting styles.

“Using the way Dancer Girl moves and fights as a model for the twins *miight* be tricky. Not like humans would work any better, though.”

“Thank you so much for everything. You really didn’t need to create us a bath, too. We owe you a debt of gratitude, on our name as beastfo—*mmprh mrrph!*”

We were supposed to be in hiding! How come our tent was the nosiest place around for kilometers? Man, people in this world didn’t understand the first thing about stealth. Being a spy was all about stifled sighs and hushed hee-hees. *Living in this world is agony... God, I want some action so bad!*

“Getting out of a nice, warm bath makes me want shaved ice. But first, we need to shut those yapping mouths, so let me make some Swiss rolls. Wait, don’t open your mouths yet! I’m not done!”

Munch munch.

Those big Swiss rolls in their mouths looked kind of like fat sushi rolls. They seemed to like them, if the tears of happiness were to be believed. Dancer Girl beckoned us all into the tent, but I refused! I could not! Three pretty girls in a tent meant a sleepless hell for me! If Dancer Girl and I started going at it in front of the twins, the police would've been after my ass! That coquettish "come hither" was a trap! I'd sleep all on my lonely lonesome outside in my sleeping bag.

Boy, the stars sure were pretty. I had to keep my eyes trained on the sky, because the last thing I needed was seeing Dancer Girl dressing the twins in babydoll lingerie and beckoning! *Ohhhh* six meaty thighs... *No! No!!! I'm going to sleep, not to bed!*

DAY 112
EARLY MORNING

I took the hint and still took the hit?!

ON THE ROAD IN THE THEOCRACY

MORNING ARRIVED. That's right, no night or late-night chapter. Just morning. I rolled out of my sleeping bag, stretched, and was immediately besieged by teenage boy problems. Abstinence and three beautiful girls didn't mix, especially not when they had such smooth skin and luscious curves *pressed into me*. It was teenage boy abuse central! Pure torture.

"Okay, what the hell is going on?!"

The twins sandwiched me. I had four soft, springy mounds of flesh squishing into me and making my teenage boyness salute with an *aaaatenSHUN, soldier!* The girls cuddled me with their voluptuous thighs, inciting an explosion of excitement in me. Oh, this wake-up call awoke something in me. I was one wrong move away from a massive misfire!

"Mayday, mayday! This is a teenage emergency of critical proportions! We are at full mast, I repeat, full mast! If she blows, she's a goner! Hands *off*, Dancer Girl! Please! You're killing me here! I'm serious! I'm locked and loaded, and I don't wanna cause friendly fire!"

I knew Villager A's tent changed sizes, but I never expected his sleeping bag to fit three people. You had to wonder what he was getting up to with a sleeping bag that slept a crowd.

I sneaked out of these feminine fetters and crawled out of the sleeping bag so stealthily that they were none the wiser. Their embrace was heavenly—too heavenly. Never before had "heavenly" been pronounced like "dangerous," but there's a first time for everything.

“Would you quit hugging me and rubbing your cheek against my crotch?! I could misfire right across your face, and that’d be... That’d be...very bad! A horrific emergency!”

Squish squish. Nuzzle nuzzle. Boing boing.

Oh, to be the filling in a beautiful beastgirl sandwich. Speaking of, sandwiches sounded divine.

“Whew, that was a close one. My sex appeal was in danger for a second there. Blowing your load on a sleeping girl’s face is about as bad as it gets!”

“A lovely morning means, lovely morning service!”

We should have stayed at an inn and booked two separate rooms. The twins had lots to catch up on, and Dancer Girl and I had even more. Our love affair was a twenty-four-seven, around-the-clock special. Well, never mind about that. To breakfast!

Shocking absolutely no one, the twins sobbed through their sandwiches. It was old hat at this point—I kind of wished they would chill out already, to be honest—but the hugging thing was new. They hugged me and pressed those sexy bods right up against me. Clingy!

“My teenage boy heart wants nothing more than to be a participant in a squeezezy sister sandwich, but this is a no-touchy zone unless you want fire in the hole, and right now my teenage boyness is sound asleep. A twin sandwich is just the thing to wake it right back up!”

Before it got too much later, the girls trained in their new fits while I did the last of the fitting. After that, they bravely challenged Dancer Girl to a duel against their new weapons and armor. Moments later, the twins were in tears. Yeah, they sure seemed to cry a lot.

“Dancer Girl stopped giving herself such a big handicap since the twins have better armor. Yikes. A tongbei forehead flick!”

“We got blown sky high with the flick of a *finger*?!”

That's tongbei for you. Dancer Girl used the force from the spinning motion of her parrying blade to increase the sword's velocity. She slashed in a frenzy, her sword dashing here, there, everywhere. She rained a blizzard of sparks around her.

"Aaaah!"

"Yup. If you got trounced that badly and lived, your armor's good enough. As for your weapons... Actually, I have no idea. You never hit her. But hey, the setup works!"

Everything looked good, and nothing made any weird noises when the twins moved. I assumed there was no burden on the moving parts of the outfit. The only problem left was the feel, and all I needed was a teensy-weensy bit of additional tweaking to make it perfect. I didn't have enough data for that, so I had the twins give the armor a test run while I collected data. My only choice at this point was to watch them fight, fussing and fiddling as they went.

"Nice job out there. Any requests for your equipment? If anything's too stiff or just feels weird, let me know. The more detail you give, the better."

"Will do!"

I passed them wet towels to wash their hands and took down their requests.

"Honestly, fighting in that armor was a breeze."

"Hmmm... How's the center of gravity on your swords? Are your shields big enough?"

"Totally! As we said, it's like the armor's not even there."

"Uh-huh. How 'bout the bend in the knee? Too stiff? What about the part near your shoulder blades? I think I need another measuring sesh to redesign the knees."

"No! They're perfect, I swear."

Why were they crying again?

Anyway, we sneaked into a quiet town, me once again dressed in my eye-catching priest cassock.

“What’s with all the alarm bells, police whistles, and soldiers converging on us with spears?! I’m a priest any way you slice me! And I even said, ‘Nothing to see here, just an ordinary priest’ as I walked in! Just an uberordinary priest making his uberordinary way into town, an uberordinary scene in a mega-ultra-super-uberordinary slice of life! Why the hell are there sirens blaring all over town? All right, that’s it. It’s time for a fight. Wh-why are you crying?! Quit blowing that trumpet in my face!”

“Y-you there! J-j-just who do you think you are?”

“Wh-wh-what cause have you to disturb our peaceful town?”

“*Siiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiigh*. Look, my dudes. Take this letter. It’s from His Oldness for whoever commands the church armies? And the local bishop or whatever? Seriously, what’s with the fuss? I’m just an ordinary priest? Have you never seen a priest before? I thought this place was the Theocracy? C’mon, take a good look? I’m a priest!”

Buncha lazy sots... How bad did your eyes have to be to have never seen a priest in all your years working as a gatekeeper in the Theocracy? The gatekeeping industry was going down the toilet! I almost tongbei eye-poked those worthless eyes out.

“A letter from the archbishop, you said? Beg pardons, Fath...er...?”

“I’d say ‘I’m wearing a cassock, what else could I possibly be, go on, tell me!’ but I can’t hear myself think over that damn trumpet! Of all the loud-ass noises conspiring to give me a heart attack, that trumpet takes the cake! And the bells are hardly better! Could you at least ring them in unison?! When you’re banging out sixteen different beats, you make such a racket it’s a wonder you don’t cause half the town to suffer nervous breakdowns every time a priest shows up!”

For a quiet town, it was god-awful noisy! From there, the guards courteously

showed me to the commanding officer of the local church army, whom I advised to *read* the letter, not *eat* it.

“In short, sir, Princess Ariel is leading an army to liberate every city in the land.”

“Yes, indeed. And I see here she is heading this way... We are helpless lambs, stranger. The princess does us a great kindness, for she is a gentle soul who abhors violence. She is wasted on us.”

Abhorring violence? *Sister Girl*? The same girl who hacked and slashed her way through monster hordes, leaving mounds of corpses in her wake? The one who laughed it off and said, “Ah, monsters! They’re garbage.”? The warmonger who grabbed soldiers by their heads and swung ’em about? *You sure you have the right girl*? Maybe I got this letter switched up with another one...

My job was to zip my lip and gather info. So why did Miss Blindfold Rep cover my mouth? At any rate, the townsfolk shared rumors about the state of Central—the troops, the factions, old legends versus the cold reality. Turned out the Cathedral at the heart of the church held a secret, but the convocation of elders who had served the church for generations had sealed all knowledge of the Cathedral and its secret. The church and the Cathedral were two separate entities. Was the pope in bed with the convocation of elders? In the end, we knew nothing about the Cathedral. No secrets, no hidden weapons, no relics. Just rumors.

“If nothing else, the next town is guarded so heavily, it will probably have good loot. Funny the way it works. Heavy guard means lots of valuables lying around for the taking. It must be one a law of the universe.”

The next no-good gatekeepers ate up too much time. As convention dictated, they shouted at and unsheathed their nasty swords on my priestly self, so I poked ’em with electric-charged magic threads. Whether they were shocked (literally!) or just shocked (by the ol’ razzle-dazzle), it shut them up long enough for me to sneak in. Behind me, I heard a commotion at the gate. The guards

were all out cold—*someone* was going to get yelled at for sleeping on the job.

“Uh-oh, someone’s coming. Were we found out? Is the jig up? The goose cooked?”

“No, Lord Haruka. I am no foe of yours. I saw you passing by in another city and gave chase, but alas, you were too fast for me...”

Huh. I guessed someone from Stalker Girl’s clan made it this far into the Theocracy. Her people weren’t much for fighting, but they could spy and gather intel like nobody’s business. Once they were caught, though, they were done for. Anyway, Stalker Lady told me the deets about the royal palace sitch, an overview of the politics in each town, the deployment of dangerous church units, and traps set up to catch us intruders. Too bad she wasn’t a couple years younger; she had a nice body.

“I am impressed that you managed to infiltrate such a heavily guarded city, my lord.”

“Nah, I walked right in. I’m wearing a disguise, so no one sounded the alarm. They all thought I was a wandering priest, which makes sense because that’s what I look like. Hey, why are you looking away? Could you stop wistfully wiping away your tears?!”

Crickets.

“Why can’t you look at me? Listen. If you want to hide a tree, put it in a forest. If you want to sneak into the Theocracy, you dress like a priest or a hot nun. It’s elementary! Seriously, where on earth are you looking?!”

It was always a pain to talk to people who lacked any common sense. While I struggled through the conversation, I slapped some shoulder funnels onto my cassock. Things were about to get dangerous, so I needed to armor up.

“The pope is recalling all his spies and paladins back to the capital. We hear word that the Cathedral has been transformed into an impregnable magic fortress. We stand no chance of defeating him unless we can somehow lure him

from his lair.”

She ignored me! Anyway, the pope’s personal inquisitors were on their way here, according to Stalker Lady. The pope had noticed the uproar in the cities across the country and was now predicting my next move. Question was, where would the showdown be? The Knights of the Scripture, the so-called strongest knights in all the Theocracy, were holed up in the Cathedral and not moving for no one or nothin’. I had my own business in the Cathedral, so I had to go in and they wouldn’t leave, so we’d meet up there? Whatever. Off to the next town!

We lectured (walloped) every soldier we spotted plodding his or her way through their rounds as we made our super sneaky way down the road. The capital was a short distance away as the crow flies, but crows didn’t have letters to deliver. I did.

“We should consider how Sister Girl’s troops might get hurt when they follow us. Should we make this town’s soldiers defect from the pope’s faction, thus decreasing the number of foes to fight? Or should we fling them as far as physically possible with a tongbei plan?”

Eventually we wound up somewhere called something-or-other city. It was marked on my map, but I didn’t have a letter from His Oldness for it. The church soldiers and papal faction dudes running the place treated us with the height of courtesy; it was so very kind of them to gather all their weapons, armor, food, and valuables in one place. (I stole it all.) In return, I left them some slow-acting poison mushrooms. I mean, it was such a haul, it would have been a shame to stick around. I ran off with my loot. *It’s a living!*

Even with the letters, I didn’t know who would defect, versus attack us, versus simply stay neutral and back the likely winner. From a pragmatic point of view, even if Sister Girl’s family were the legitimate rulers of the country, their chances of winning this war were disturbingly low. The church soldiers had gained experience and levels from their wrongdoing and petty fighting, and they were swimming in magical equipment. Not to mention, the pope had more people on his side by a long margin. He had the upper hand here.

We had Princess Girl, and we could turn the tide in our favor by asking the Kingdom to send reinforcements. Heck, we could even use our influence with the Beast Nation to guarantee a victory. But Sister Girl wanted to solve the Theocracy's problems with the Theocracy's people. I agreed it wouldn't mean much unless they could figure it out for themselves, but that meant countless Theocracy citizens would die pointlessly.

"Is it just me, or is the church army too weak? Their soldiers suck; their assassins are awful. Their tools are tame. Their equipment? *Eugh!* And the only relic we've encountered was that cage thing, right?"

Nod nod.

Still, I'd never heard of an indestructible cage before. When I first caught sight of the thing, divine inspiration hit, and I thought, "If I can't smash it dead, then let it eat dimension break" That's divine inspirer M-san for you, coming in with the wild ideas. But outside of the cage, the rest of the soldiers' kit was worthless. I wouldn't have been caught dead in equipment that lame.

"I want to defeat the head honcho, but he refuses to leave the Cathedral. Eh. I've got the Inquisition to fight. I can't wait to beat them up. Stalker Lady says they're coming for my ass, and I'd rather they didn't...but I can't fault their pursuit of ass, even if it's mine! Especially if they have hot Inquisitor ladies specializing in honey-trapping! These are Inquisitors, after all! That could mean bondage suits! I can see the flags already!"

Thus, I tried to lure them to a deserted storehouse. It contained a heap of loot, as storehouses do, and as I pocketed it all, Presence Sensing kept going haywire, but no one was around. Maybe this was that thing Miss Armor Rep and Dancer Girl talked about—maybe someone was hiding their presence.

Just then, the storehouse doors slammed shut. People fanned out on all sides of us, but I still couldn't sense them. Dancer Girl reacted too. She didn't look anxious, but she put her guard up and refused to step away from the twins. They also seemed to have anticipated this. Their ears twitched, attentive to the

potential danger around us.

Surprise! Our storehouse was ringed on all sides by dozens of Inquisitors with the Presence Concealment skill. I still had no problems sensing them with Area Analyze and Jupiter Eye. Alas, so much for the bondage suit babe flags. These were all old dudes!

The presences shifted, as did the tension in the atmosphere, but the old dudes failed to transform into hot chicks. Thought Acceleration tinted the world an azure blue of slow motion, and I swung my staff through the thick, heavy air. I entangled my magic with my new Replicant Greatsword, boosting its effects. Everything slowed to a snail's pace. I refined magic and qi throughout my body, looping it through me with qi activation. I forced myself to move unnaturally fast through the heavy world of slow motion.

“Watch out!”

A huge net dropped from above as a mob of creepy Inquisitors with spikey costumes and evil-looking weapons rushed me. They brandished oversized, grotesque scissors, scythes, and iron claws. Of course, they also had plenty of the usual spears, axes, swords, and whatnot—all imbued with Skills. Damn! The Inquisitors threw weighted lassos at us to catch us by the ankles. Lassos below, a net above—they really wanted to trap us. I say wanted, because I used my infinite Magic Threads to snip the net and lassos to pieces. Iron, circular weapons flew through the air like living things and cut my threads to ribbons.

“Yo, are those chakrams? Magic self-directed chakram drones?”

Meanwhile, Dancer Girl's shield was a blur of motion. She was the picture of grace as, shield a-twirl, she heroically guarded the twins against the chakrams and projectiles. She was the beauty of violence incarnate. *If she's got that handled, I guess I'll take offense.*

I chuckled in a super manly way. “The time has come for an ancient tongbeiquan technique to return once more. Behold...the tongbei flamethrower!”

“Wh-what the?!”

I mean, it was just using Wind magic to spray oil everywhere and then lighting the room on fire. I think the tongbei part freaked them out. The Inquisitors tried to shield themselves behind their cloaks and armor, but that did little to put the fire out. Because it was a real fire? Instead of dousing the fire, the Inquisitors ran around like headless chickens. It *looked* like magic, but it was just ordinary fire. Did they know you could put out a fire with water?

“You can stop, drop, and roll all you want, but you’re just rolling into the oil... You’re only making things worse.”

“Aaaaaghghhhh!!!”

People in this world had no imagination. To them, everything was magic.

“Fire and oil are crueler weapons than magic any day.”

“Graaaaghghhh!”

Man, these people had been getting lazy in ye olde fantasy worlde for what, a couple thousand years? Did they really think primitive wizard dudes stood a chance against modern teenagers?

I graced them with yet another manly chuckle. “The history of tongbeiquan is frightening, is it not? It’s a flammable one! See?”

I intercepted all the projectiles and chakrams before they landed, but I still felt glares needling into me.

“Go, tongbei shoulder funnels! See, your problem is how trite this is! Where’s the twist? You always do the same-old, same-old assassination tactics. This is why you’re stuck in the medieval period. This is so basic, modern-day elementary schoolers could run circles around you. Kindergarteners would be too much for you. Education standards are super high these days.”

My funnels shot down all the attacks flying at me. After being wrecked in the battle against the Skull Lord, I repaired them with spare mithril and upgraded them into a 36-funnel barrage. Truth be told, I was running out of metal to

upgrade these bad boys, so I wanted those chakrams!

Just then, an armored man wielding an enormous war hammer emerged from the conflagration. He hefted the hammer above his head and swung it down, hard. Another figure leaped out from behind him, brandishing a deadly scythe. Worse, a man with a sword on my right wheeled his weapon at me in an ostentatious arc. I jumped, only to find a pair of scissors nipping at my ankles. The classic simultaneous attack!

How cliché could they get? They even had someone running up behind me with a big ol' axe. *Scene's a little overcrowded, isn't it?*

"You guys need to get with the times! What are we, the Middle Ages? Oh. Yes? Anyway, I know this is fantasy attacks 101, but these days even high school girls can send sickles and chains flying. Also, it's a pain to dodge!"

Ugh, really? They weren't going to try anything new? *Here, line up. No shoving.*

"Tongbei tentacles! And hydra, chickenatrice, and demon scythes for good measure! It's tongbei curtains for you!"

Hiss!

Cock-a-doodle-doo!

Once the Inquisitors were in line, I lined 'em up and bowled 'em over. I poked the hammer dude with one tongbei staff while using the other to send the sword guy falling on his tongbei ass. After that, I simply let scythe dude topple scissor dude.

The tongbei tentacles took care of the axe dude behind me. Meanwhile, the chickenatrice's tongbei blow darts flew everywhere. My shoulder funnels made my teenage boy heart pound, but I couldn't deny—the chicken cannon was something straight out of a middle school cringe lord's sketchbook. It even crowed as it shot off rounds!

On the other end of the room, Dancer Girl was a tongbei Shield Bash machine.

The twins worked so fast that Inquisitors didn't have a spare moment for any inquisitiveness. Not even a few friendly questions! Now the twins were glaring at me?

“What? You're tongbei'ing stuff too! All I did was take the hint! For once!”

Still glares. I *knew* the chicken cannon was a bad idea...or was it?

DAY 112

MIDDAY

An old dude pursing his spitty lips at teenage girls is the spitting image of a creep!

ON THE ROAD IN THE THEOCRACY

I DECIMATED THE INQUISITORS with my tongbei flamethrower. It wasted oil, but it beat going toe-to-toe against an execution squad trained to take out weirdos. My tentacles stripped them of their worldly goods: a host of hidden weapons and magic items.

“A helmet that sprays poison mist? That could blind enemies! Wait, don’t put it on!”

It was, without a doubt, a cursed helmet that would ruin the discerning taste of any connoisseur of the helmet arts.

“These are ‘Division Chakrams. Divide. Severing. Magic Severing. Equipment Fracture. Self-Propulsion.’ Is that what cut the Magic Threads?”

“This, a magic item. Blocks presence. Is how they, sneaked up on us.”

The Inquisitors specialized in assassination, execution, arrests, and torture. Their reputation struck fear into the hearts of people everywhere. The Inquisition—heretic hunters. The party we just defeated was probably a scouting unit or something.

“Mr. Haruka, look at their equipment and tools! These are incredible!”

“Yes, each item offers status ailment resistance!”

Sure, but the effects were either (small) or (medium)—not great. But the beastfolk had a dire need for status-ailment-resistant equipment. No wonder the twins coveted this lame junk. The church held a monopoly on status-ailment-resistant equipment and healing mushrooms, and their command of

status ailments and poison was a killer advantage in cowing enemies.

Or, it was. Now every soldier in the Kingdom and Beast Nation had status-ailment-resistant gear as part of their standard kit. This was before Wolf Girl was kidnapped, of course. I was getting kind of annoyed at the king. Why was his castle in a place where it couldn't supply the country with much-needed armor and troops? Even worse, why didn't it have any hot babes?

"If you want any of this stuff, help yourself. You can always cash it in later for clothes or snacks, too."

I could only imagine what a difficult emotional position the twins were in. Wolf Girl was kidnapped by people in armor just like this—duh. Even Bunny Girl suffered at the hands of similarly equipped folks when she was all alone in enemy territory.

"Yes! Please buy them. Oh, decisions, decisions... Candy or clothes? Oh no, what am I saying? Mr. Haruka, we couldn't possibly accept! It's all yours. We are in your deb—*mmmrpgh!*"

Nonsense. They totally could accept.

"I don't know how well donuts work as mouth plugs—they have holes in the middle. Well, not all donuts do. Like, there's donut twists. Some people say any fried, sugary bread is a donut."

I would have asked what possessed the twins to talk in such loud voices while we were undercover, but I couldn't hear them. They had big donut twists shoved down their throats, and they were hugging and crying again. The twins may have leveled up as swordswomen, but they still had a lot of personal growth ahead of them. Bestial growth? Whatever it's called.

"Ooh, but we can't."

"Right, our village..."

"Don't worry about it. You can buy status-ailment-resistant gear everywhere these days. I even made your habits resistant to ailments. They offer as much

protection as they do inspiration for my erection!”

“Uh, can we get back on topic? You know, status ailment resistance...?”

Life for the beastfolk must have been tough. Their people were frequently enslaved and even when they managed to escape with their lives, they still lost their homes, food, and possessions. So as not to lose *all* their top fighting tribes—the country’s military force—they hid behind the castle walls at the heart of the kingdom. In the time it took to sound the alarm and allow the well-equipped, trained troops to retreat, the weaker beastfolk tribes lost everything.

But with the right gear, even those weaker tribes could put up a fight. Take Bunny Girl, for instance. She was stronger than those old beastfolk dudes I beat up a couple of days ago. All her training with Dancer Girl and her new kit made her a powerhouse. She didn’t start out a chump, neither. I was impressed when I first met her.

“Why do people say the rabbit tribe is weak? Bunny Girl could give the king dude a run for his money. And I’d know, ’cause me and my classmates did the same thing. Dancer Girl here kept wrapping him in her chains, swinging him around, and slamming him into things. She’d go extra hard on ’em, too!”

“She did *what* to the king?! Ms. Nefertiri, don’t you dare look away and whistle innocently! It’s too late for that! We already heard your ‘Oopsy, clumsy me!’”

The twins respected the king, even if his soldiers hadn’t saved their village. Apparently, he hadn’t always been that way. Circumstances forced him into hiding when he deemed it necessary for the continued survival of the beastfolk as a species. The people understood that being left to their doom was a last, desperate measure. And Dancer Girl tied him up and swung him everywhere? How could she?! *At the end there, he was kind of into it...*

“Let, record show: Master plucked beast king’s beard. King cried! Master bullied him!”

“You did *WHAT* to the king?! Mr. Haruka, don’t make your *hydra* look away

and whistle for you! And why is the cockatrice going, ‘Oopsy, clumsy me!’? You could at least express your own shame!”

Dancer Girl ratted me out. I wanted to punish her long, hard, and deep for throwing me under the bus, but it was still the middle of the day. My heart and teenage-boy soul teamed up in their desire to give Miss Naughty a widdle spanking, but alas, the sun was too high in the sky for any butt business. Worse, our lodgings were a tent. If I let my grotesque tentacles, hydra, and cockatrice do their worst, I risked accidentally involving the twins. If my female classmates got wind of that, I’d be in for the mother of all lectures.

“Were our strongest tribes to fall, we would lose our entire military. So we chose to conserve our strength and only send in our forces when they were perfectly prepared. It was a group decision made in a conference with all the tribes.”

“Believe me, it shamed us mightily to hide our brightest and best behind stout walls. Abandoning his people wounded His Majesty’s pride. We don’t blame him! We still respect him deeply.”

Ah. The rabbit tribe were meatheads at heart. Bunny Girl would get along with the idiots.

“So? Just build forts along the river and attack the slavers when they make landfall. Or if the slavers come over land, set up traps and fortresses to slow them down. You can’t fight kidnappers head-on. Who the hell challenges kidnappers to a fair fight?”

This wasn’t like a *real* war between countries. There was no national pride at stake or whatever. The slavers were committing crimes, plain and simple.

I guess the meatnerds set an example—not a good example, granted—of how to be crafty...in so much as “crafty” and “meathead” belonged in the same sentence. Point was, their instincts made them wait for the right moment to unleash carefully crafted violence. They were ruthless when set loose in the woods. They made traps left and right to give themselves the greatest

advantage they could. They always worked with brilliant efficiency, not just in fights. The nerds wouldn't know what a fair fight was, but they were geniuses in the art of the sneak attack. In modern-day society, you'd call them cowards. The dregs of society. Serial killer types.

On the flip side, the beastfolk would've fit in better back in Japan. They had the kind of good sportsmanship *cough cough* (dumbassery) *cough cough* that would've been perfect for competitive sports. They were the kind of folks who put their blood, sweat, and tears into training and self-improvement. Humans called them beasts, monsters, all kinds of insults. Like we had room to talk. People were ten times more vicious and underhanded than any beast or monster could ever hope to be.

"Hey, Dancer Girl, want these 'Mirage Chains. Invisibility. Phantom Chains. Vision Leading. +Attack.'? Cool. I knew they'd be right up your alley. Your job makes you a shield user, but I don't think you need one... It's kind of sad watching enemies try their hardest to hit you when they can't even land a hit on the shield. Your defense is too rock solid for a shield."

Dancer Girl was spearheading a breakthrough—a revolution—in shield use. Those Inquisitors didn't know what to make of her; I felt bad watching her run circles around them. Her shield flitted about like flower petals on the wind. She slipped in and out of their guard, dodging here and there like a phantom. I had a couple of questions, the foremost being: *Are you sure you're playing a defensive role?*

Now that she had fallen in love with tongbei quan, it was one tongbei Shield Bash after another. Fights became bloodbaths of whirling, bashing shields. She did her job well—certainly, no attacks landed on the girls she was charged with protecting. She was a one-woman blasting machine, dancing around the battlefield, never in the same place twice. This was a subversion of the typical idea of defense. Why the hell did she bother to carry a shield in the first place?

"If you want to send people flying, why don't you get a giant war hammer? I bet Vice Rep B would love a tongbei hammer. She could even pull off tongbei

boob—ahem, ahem, ahem! Nope! I didn't say a thing!"

Now there was a scary thought. So much swinging it created shock waves. Tongbei sonic sweater pillows!

"Sorry, sorry! Wait, why are you taking notes? Who're those notes for, Dancer Girl?! Stop! You're scaring me!"

Anyhow, even though the twins were beastfolk, neither wanted the iron claws. There were a lot of cool weapons here, but a little inner voice told me that some of them were probably best kept away from the bargain sale. Particularly the giant scissors!

Once we finished sorting through the gear, we made tracks and left town. We were being watched. I could feel it. Maybe it was the main force of the Inquisition, or maybe it was a squad dedicated to spying on the sexy nuns. Perhaps not—as squad leader myself, I personally handed out proof of membership to every new recruit of this fine club. That included His Oldness.

They pounced at us from the shallow holes in the earth where they'd hidden. Or...they tried. Someone had hardened the ground. The Inquisition was stuck.

"You old guys came pre-buried! That's convenient, is what that is. Old dudes burying themselves before I get to them? I've never met any with such good sense. It wouldn't do to let them undo it!"

Here came the glares.

Even though the earth was tough as solid rock, one of the Inquisitors managed to drill up through the ground through sheer strength and pop out. He swiped at me, and I leaned out of the way. I countered, and he effortlessly pulled away. I stepped forward and aimed for his stomach; he batted my attack away like it was nothing. In the middle of all that stabbing and lunging, he looked right at me and made a kissy face! The smug creep!

And so many suggestive needles flying from that kiss! I wanted to shove my sword right into his ugly face. I quick-drew a tongbei boulder from my item bag

and thrust it straight at him! That plugged his unsightly mug real fast. The suggestive needles were blown back into his throat with such violence that his stupid face turned a suggestive eggplant color and stopped moving.

Meanwhile, the demon scythes lopped off the heads of the rest of the old men as they desperately tried to conceal their presence. Wolf Girl and Bunny Girl leaped into the mayhem. They finished off the last few foes while Dancer Girl sat back and watched like a coach, giving her charges nods of approval as they worked. She provided mid-and long-range sniper backup with her chain, just in case.

“Huh? Was this an ambush? How did they know it was us under our flawless disguises?”

“I think, it was when, we killed assassins. I sensed magic, when they died.”

Apparently, assassins worked on a kind of buy-one-get-one basis—beat up one assassin, get a squad of Inquisitors free. That was a bargain for the twins, who were training to level up. But this would prove to be a pain later—if we didn’t nip this issue in the bud now, it could be dangerous for my classmates when they came this way later.

“Creepy old dudes making kissy faces and blowing spit-covered needles at teen girls? That’s danger city.”

Nod nod.

“All he did was try to kill us, but he’s getting a *character* assassination. Poor assassin!”

We traveled on to the next town, sneaked in, handed over the letter, got attacked by a bunch of assassins, and cleaned out the storehouses of loot. Then we left and had another encounter with the Inquisition. All that fuss, and I still had yet to meet a gatekeeper who knew better than to pick a fight with a priest! This scouting mission was turning out to be a bigger source of stress than I anticipated, most of which could be attributed to the pesky gatekeepers. If only I didn’t have to set them all on fire!

Trying to conserve my MP turned out to be an effective way to practice magic control. Making a conscious effort to use as little magic as possible drastically reduced the toll magic took on my body. Since I was deliberately paying attention to it, I could also control the enhancements Entanglement gave me with less load on my body.

This suggested that I typically used more magic than I ought to. All this excess magic was converting to self-destructive power. I never noticed because it happened in my subconscious. Now that I paid attention, I could see the stress load on my magic flow. I tried to soothe it. I also strengthened myself with qi activation, which made an immediate improvement in my self-destructive tendencies. However, I found it difficult to control both my qi and my magic subconsciously.

Oh well. Off to the next town!

“Mail’s here! I have a letter for you from His Oldness the archbishop. It’s not a love letter. I think. Actually, with that horny old goat, it might be. Why am I playing cupid when I’ve never had a girlfriend? Maybe if I start slidin’ into DMs... er, mass-mailing love letters, I can finally get myself a girlfriend. Hmm. Inventing woodblock printing by itself probably wouldn’t do the trick, though.”

“E-excuse me, sir. I took the liberty of reading the letter while you were speaking. Is it true? Is Archbishop Arianna leading the rebellion? At her age...? She doesn’t belong on a battlefield. Oh, the indignity! To think she returned home from her perilous journey only to find a usurper sitting on her family’s throne! Fath—ahem, sir messenger? If you carry on your journey, you will arrive at that city. There—do you see it? The steeple on the horizon? The whole city, gates included, is heavily guarded by Phantasmal magic. I must beg you, sir. Take great, *great* care.”

The dude told me it was basically a magical version of a lie detector. Elf Girl’s Emotion Sensing did something similar, so it made sense that a magic item could do the same thing. This had to be kept out of my female classmates’ hands at all costs. *Best destroy it and scatter the pieces!* If Elf Girl showed up

and found out I was lying when I said I was *toooootally* not using Entanglement, the frequency and intensity of lectures would ratchet upward. I needed to destroy that magical lie detector! Stat!

Finally, I had one last errand to fulfill, and it lay within Central. We were almost at the gates of the capital. The girls were probably on the march by now, liberating cities as they made their way towards us. Why, oh why, did I have the sneaking suspicion that they'd be pissed when they caught up to me?

DAY 112

EVENING

We'll all return to the dirt from whence we came. I'm just helping the old dudes along!

ON THE ROAD IN THE THEOCRACY

IN THEORY, the priest outfit provided the most efficient means of infiltrating the Theocracy's capital city. Alas, things didn't go so hot in practice thanks to a handful of incompetent gatekeepers. Still, it was a perfectly sound tactic. According to our reports, the pope's faction had their talons sunk well into Central. The city was under strict guard, and the pope's forces were equipped with the finest weapons and armor. Since even the gates had magical lie detectors, undercover infiltration was a no-go. It was time for some old-fashioned sneaking over the walls.

"Why do we need to keep wearing these mortifying outfits?!"

Yup—Dancer Girl and the twins were still in their habits. Why not?

"People will notice if we walk around in full armor. We have to dress like people of the cloth and sneaky-sneak."

As inefficient as it may have been to spy in my (perfect) priest disguise, I wanted to play it safe. I had the twins with me, after all. We hid our presences, scaled the walls, and slipped into the city. Huh! That seemed a lot faster than going through the gate... *Nah, I'm just imagining things.*

"We should have been doing this from day one!"

"Look at how much time we wasted with all that song and dance about being ordinary priests and nuns."

"Excuse me? It's not my fault the gatekeepers didn't know their jobs!"

The girls glared holes into me as I delivered a letter to the local church and

garrison office. Then we beat up some assassins staking out the city storehouses. However, since the letters might have turned the city's residents to our side, I couldn't rob them blind. Alas, poor wallet; I knew him well. *All righty, off to the next town. The main attraction, if you will.*

We left the city. Already, the capital was in sight; I didn't need to use Clairvoyance. It was huge. Even from here, I could see a clear disparity of wealth between the rich living in the center of the city and the poor dwelling in the outskirts. Every road to the city crawled with soldiers and checkpoints. They must have been on high alert.

"Good thing I'm just an average, everyday priest, then! I'm a font of mercy!! If I run into an old guy, I can bid him an *adieu*. If I run into a hot girl, I can give her a *Dayuuuum gurl*. Just normal, everyday things!"

"Stop! You, there! Soldiers, detain that ma—"

Smash bonk stomp boom!

"Didn't you hear me? I said, I'm perfectly average! You guys are really starting to chap my style! I think it's time I tested out the new weapon I borrowed from (read: yanked out of the hands of) the last Inquisitor we came across. Eat my tongbei crowbar!"

Slam smash splatter!

Huh. Seemed like an ordinary crowbar to me—good for bludgeoning, not so great at tongbei'ing. I guessed I could use it to yank out nails.

"Oh yeah! I have a nail-studded bat. Are they a set? Am I supposed to pull the nails out of the bat with the crowbar? Then what's the point of sticking all the nails in?!"

These soldiers didn't want to kill us. In fact, they were making googly eyes at Dancer Girl. However, since they did no more than look, I decided to let them off easy with a lecture. I made them sit in time-out and repeat, "You're one hundred percent a priest. Nothing to see here!" approximately a million times

before I let them go. Wait a second—one of the dudes had such a strong presence I could feel him from here. I would have been intrigued if not for the old dude part. I didn't discriminate when it came to old dudes—be they strong or weak, mighty or lowly, I buried them all. We're all fated to return to the earth someday, and I just helped them along. Sped up the process a bit.

You know, for an old dude, this guy was really booking it. Coming right at us, too.

DAY 112

EVENING



THE POPE'S CHAMBERS WITHIN THE CATHEDRAL

THE VULGAR LUMP of lard's fleshy jowls twisted as he spat out his ravings. The face on this depraved creature looked ape-like, his chin was long lost in the folds of flesh composing his neck. Spittle flew from his mouth as his hysterics reached their zenith.

His bloodshot eyes roved about the table as he shrieked in his thin, girlish voice. None dared speak, as all were afraid to be the next target of his rebuke. The madman was indifferent to reason. Only that which pleased his pride was welcome at his council table; such councils produced nothing of merit.

"Why does my Inquisition not apprehend these heretics? Why do you not bring these sinners before me?! I've heard all your excuses and want no more. Do you hear me? No more! These wretches evade us because you have no interest in finding them! Open your eyes and *look*. This is child's play! Is this beyond even your incompetence?! Find the heretics and bring them to me. I will make a point to torture them myself to show the world the glory of God. No more excuses. Simply have it done, you oafs!"

I ignored his tantrum and scowled down at the baffling patterns on the map. This puzzle could have been solved by connecting the dots and tracking the timeline—at least, theoretically. We had yet to find the main body of the guerrilla army or catch any of their soldiers in our dragnet. Even so, we lost patrol after patrol. Town after town reported missing provisions and arms.

An enemy existed, but they were ghosts. Our traps were sprung, but our spies could glean no intelligence. Their behaviors were so puzzling we could not tell if they wanted to evade notice or draw it. Furthermore, a wave of defection

surged through our faction in tandem with the enemy's movements. The answer to this riddle had to be somewhere within this increasingly tangled web. This map held the key to a figure who thumbed their nose from the shadows. It was like a game of hide-and-seek. They lurked, taunting us to find them.

Before long, the pointless council ended. We each hurried away on whatever pretense we could contrive to carry us far from this dreadful place.

"It's the princess, Lord Commander. It must be."

"So 'tis. If only Her Highness could live the rest of her days in peace far from here. Alas, she has taken up the gauntlet for us."

War was too cruel for such a true soul. My heart likewise grieved for Leticia, she who was forced to capture the princess to save the lives of orphaned children. Princess Ariel loved Leticia as a sister. What a cruelty to pit the two against one another!

"We mustn't underestimate our foe. Knights! Defend this capital with your lives. We shan't be picked off one by one like our comrades. If there is one place we must protect, it is the capital."

"B-but what if the tales are true? What if the princess is leading the rebels? Many people will di—"

"Silence. Speak no more folly."

A few, the maddest among us, swore true loyalty to the pope, but the greater part of our order bowed in fear of his authority. I had no doubt some entered the pope's inner circle because they approved of Church-sanctioned oppression and wanted to use the Church's corruption to further their own evil ends. Would that I could slay them all! I doubted that I could eradicate the infestation of wizened cockroaches infesting the Cathedral's walls. The Church knights had become nary more than puppets of the Papacy, leaving us Knights of the Scriptures the sole force strong enough to resist the Papacy. If we failed, he would not suffer us to live. If we were to succeed in striking him down, we would be forced to put every man in the Cathedral to the sword lest history

repeat itself. I could not show my face to my dear, departed Leticia otherwise. Nor to Princess Ariel, who had cared for Leticia as if she were her flesh and blood.

“Might we lure some of the pope’s creatures deeper into the Cathedral and face them there?”

“Nay. Those under the Cathedral’s Divine Protection hold the advantage within its walls. We could not hope to slay them all.”

Yet if the castle were to fall, the king would be taken hostage. I could not bear to let my gentle princess fight alone.

“What news of the castle? Tell me how it fares.”

“Still safe, Lord Commander. The siege holds tight around them, and we cannot send aid. However, the castle feasts on grilled meat every night while the Church soldiers glare daggers at them from afar. Some have already defected to the castle’s side, so tempted are they by the alluring aroma.”

Only the clergy had enough food to fill their bellies as of late—they gorged from dawn to dusk. Mere foot soldiers could not afford meat. While our people preached of the virtues of poverty, the reality was far simpler—the nation was well and truly destitute. The Church robbed the entire kingdom of its wealth, but not to redistribute it. Ha! Never that. No, they spent in the name of pleasure, quite literally eating into the budget set aside to pay the nation’s soldiers and workers.

“Curious. Observe this report from a disturbance at the second checkpoint. ‘Disturbance’ is perhaps a light word; it seems it nearly devolved into a one-sided brawl. Once again, we hear word of a priest lecturing troops and beating soldiers as strikes his fancy.”

“The second checkpoint, you say? Hmm... He walked right up to the main gate, bold as brass... Do you suppose this could be the priest of persistent rumors? The one who travels with beautiful nuns? The, ahem, ‘sexy mamas of the cloth?’”

This “priest who was *not* a priest” kept appearing whenever there was chaos to be found. So too did tales of the “sexy, schmexy, hot nuns.” Supposedly, or such was the word among the troops, looking for the guerillas only resulted in meeting this priest and his companions, who doled out strange lectures along with grievous injury. These bizarre rumors had left our soldiers in a state of considerable worry. Even top command was abuzz with panic as the reports flooded in. We traced his movements as they drew steadily westward. His destination was clear: the capital of the country—Aryuca.

“Forgive me, I’m afraid I can’t wrap my head around this. Why do you claim the priest is...not a priest? Shouldn’t a quick check with a magic item give you a definitive answer?”

“See the reports for yourself, Lord Commander. Every soldier who has met him and lived to tell the tale repeats the same thing.”

He was strong in a way that defied logic. He and his gorgeous companions roamed the land on foot, destroying checkpoints in their wake. I was intrigued. Had the situation not been so dire, I would have invited the priest here to sate my curiosity.

“Reports say there are three nuns, each prettier than the last.”

“Is that so?” I said. “I fear for the checkpoint guards, out there on their own. I wish to assess this rumor with my own eyes.”

One look was better than a thousand rumors to satisfy doubt. The piss-and-vinegar priest with his passel of strong, beautiful female companions was interesting enough to pique my curiosity, but we had more power-abusing, women-violating, plot-hatching jackanapes in the Cathedral than we knew what to do with. I’d never heard of one brazen enough to fight soldiers affiliated with the Church and flaunt his lascivious affairs in broad daylight.

“Lord Commander, we are in a state of crisis! This is no time to go chasing skirts!”

“Hush, sir. Look here. The rumors of this priest closely match the guerrilla

army's movements. I find it likely this man is one of several we seek. He is a man of interest...who simply happens to be accompanied by three considerably interesting women."

I would wretch if I breathed another mouthful of this foul, stagnant air. The Knights of the Scriptures could not leave their posts. They could carry on without me, should I fall. And...I could not blame Princess Ariel for this tragedy. Leticia, likewise, was only doing her duty. It was I who killed her, for I could not stop her nor give her aid. I had no grounds to feel resentment towards the princess.

Thus, I wanted to meet this westward-traveling priest and ask one thing of him: did Leticia die a warrior's death? I could not moralize on the taking of lives, but, as much it pained me to contemplate, I had no children of my own. Leticia was as close to blood as existed. If the priest told me she suffered, I would slay every last one of the thrice-damned curs who delivered her to death, even if they acted on the princess's orders. I would slay them all. I could, and had, turned a blind eye to many injustices, but this alone I would not suffer. I did not want to make the resistance my enemy, but I was possessed of a need to speak to them. *I harbor them no ill will, but I may take all their lives. A man does what he must.*

"I shall go alone, for I have personal matters to attend to. Do not follow me. You have command in my absence."

"Lord Commander, the priest and nuns are yours to dispose of, but the resistance is ours to fight. You are not the only one who loved Leticia. She...she was like a daughter to us all. If her short life has been snuffed out, my only hope is that she died nobly."

I set off to beg the truth off the lips of my enemy. Perhaps this strong, hot-tempered priest had more in common with me than it seemed. Perhaps no talk was needed. Perhaps I had found my match.

No sooner had I left the gates than I discovered our guards attending to a

lecture. The stories were true: the moment I laid eyes on the priest, I knew he was false.

The Theocracy was home to many priests: good, bad, and rotten to the core. I had lived my long years neck-deep in priests. Thus, I knew with a glance this boy had never bent a knee to God. He would never seek God's salvation. Yea, here stood a boy who never afforded an iota of respect to the great divine.

DAY 112

EVENING

*If the whole thing works out the same in the end, why not do the hole thing?
Burying old dudes, I mean.*

A THEOCRACY CHECKPOINT

THE STORY AS TOLD BY AN OLD DUDE

HA! WONDERS NEVER CEASED! I laughed fit to burst. If this wasn't a joke, what was it? The boy was a level 25 child, a mere stripling who barely came up to my chin. Yet he terrified me to my marrow!

What the devil had gotten into me? I was the celebrated knight commander of the Knights of the Scriptures. Though I might not have gone to the frontier myself, I had fought many a monster and war. It had been long—perhaps too long—since I had felt such fear. In fact, I could not recall the last time I'd faced this emotion.

Day after day dragged on with no test of my strength. Yet I would not fight with beastfolk, not even if ordered or entreated. They were warriors of renown, yes, and I would have crossed swords with them if I had my way—I would rather put the cursed creatures to the sword than poison or enslave them. Short of going to the frontier or taking up arms against the frontier's defenders, that left me with little else to channel my strength into. I grew complacent and forgot the meaning of fear. I was a fool!

This shouldn't have been possible. Truly, what an absurdity! How could I be frightened of a sniveling child? I was laughably terrified of a level 25 boy carrying a wooden stick! Damn this infernal world and its impossible nonsense!

Words were unneeded between us. I would make my greeting to him with my blade and my full strength. Damn! The brat parried me without even dodging. Curses! For all my efforts to drive him back, I could not gain a single step of

ground. We clashed and parried, and I could not win so much as a handwidth of dirt. I had devoted my entire life to the blade!

“Devil take you! Damn your impossible strength!”

His skills were just as impossible. Lord above, where had this child trained? Hell? Somewhere defeat meant death? He was so powerful that power itself was a trifle to him. It held no interest for him. Protecting his loved ones, winning—those must have been absolutes in his world, the bedrock of his being. Death whistled past his face as my sword slipped within a hair’s breadth of his neck, but he had no reaction. This was routine. He didn’t seem to see the glittering steel whistling past his eyes.

He looked at me with neither curiosity nor rancor. Just apathy. Pure apathy. He gazed through me, as if I was mere scenery. He expressed no fear—only boredom. His face seemed to say, “Yeah, if I get struck by your sword, I’ll die. Your point? It hasn’t gotten me yet, so I don’t give a shit.”

This boy betrayed no compunction about his right or ability to kill. He simply could. Here was no plucky youth, no lad with courage of steel. This was a brat.

He selfishly decided that he could not be killed, arrogantly chose the outcome of the fight, and forced his way to victory. His self-assurance led him to complete apathy towards his opponent. Strong or weak, he cared not; it was all the same. *Curses!* What a world we lived in, with such people in it! If only I had cut away the fetters tying her to this thrice-damned Church and sent Leticia away. There were a million things I didn’t know, things I couldn’t teach her. And curse this strong boy, this lily-livered milksop!

The knave refused to relent. His childish arrogance let him push on long after I would have given up, were I him. He was a monster, but none I knew. He did not fight his own selfish desires; simply let his desires push him ever onward, his ego guarding the ground behind him. Thus, he knew no limit. Had there been one, he would only have broken through. His prowess defied measurement. Curses, curses, *curses!* As much as I wanted to win, victory

eluded me. He toyed with me, and as much as it pained me to admit, I was enjoying myself. I had wanted to fight like this for so very long. Devil take it all! I could never match this boy's skill if I spent my whole life trying. I could not even hit him!



MAN, THIS GEEZER WAS VIOLENT! I could tell he didn't want to kill me, but he was having a blast waving that sword in my face. Even if he had no intent to harm, he still fought with gusto and was delighted when his hits failed to land. What a weirdo! Toys in the attic. He cried tears of frustration through the laughter of glee. There's being two-faced, and then there's whatever the hell this was.

"Dude, if you don't stop laughing, I'm going to hit you. Can it! Quit it with the faces! Someone call pest control; there's bats in this here belfry."

He was strong, fast, and skilled. Problem was, he was too honest. Without any attempts to mislead me, dodging all his attacks was easy-peasy. The dude must have had a lot of free time on his hands to study the blade, because his form was perfect. Just, thanks to Future Sight, I could see him coming a mile away. His sword landed within a point zero-one-millimeter range of where I expected it, so he couldn't hit me worth a lick. I *knew* his style of swordplay inside and out. It was the shtick the Skull Lord pulled, so no point in sweating it. I knew ahead of time what he'd do, and I could see it happening in real time thanks to my eye skills. I couldn't deny he knew his way around a sword, but without a blowgun, this really wasn't too tricky.

That blowgun, though... Man. That was a tough nut to crack. Fighting this old dude convinced me. Combine a blowgun with this style of swordplay, and that made an unevadable attack fest. Without the blowgun, swordfighters could only defeat weaker opponents. This dude played so by the book that he eventually started trying to hammer away at me, and that was a lot of wasted effort. Or maybe that was just part of his violent personality.

His sword always arrived exactly when and where I thought it would, so all I needed to do was give the middle of the blade a lil tap to knock it out of the way. That's all it took to deflect it, honest. This guy was too simple and had zero

sense of tactics. His swordplay style must have been developed by fighting monsters, then evolved to fight humans. Problem was, it seemed pretty useless against people. Like me. I didn't remember the Skull Lord's version of the art having these people-slaying modifications. The old guy just tried to batter me down with his fervent fighting, never once throwing in a trick or a feint. He must not have had anyone to practice against. He wasn't cut out for cutting up other folks.

I figured I'd be nice and show him a few tricks. He kept coming after me, waving his sword left and right, but never connecting with the business end of the blade. I could only impersonate the Skull Lord's fighting style—I didn't, like, know the philosophy—but Wisdom pulled up a perfect memory of the fight, analyzed it, and let me unleash a copy of the bone master's skills. Thanks to Blockhead's flawless control, I think it came out well. I would now pass down the final dregs of the Skull Lord's legacy—sans blowgun, that was.

BACK TO THE OLD DUDE

MY HEART WAS CHILLED. I froze, awed. He entranced me even through my horror. The lad's wooden stick writhed in his hand and transformed into something resembling a sword. Then he took up the weapon and swung it.

He handled the blade easily, as if it were first and second nature in tandem. The move chilled my heart. That was the unmistakable style of the legendary form of the Knights of the Scriptures! The one our order passed down to none but fellow members! And more, a technique unknown to me!

I had strived to learn every technique by heart and muscle memory, and yet I knew not what this boy practiced. He chained techniques together—some I knew and some quite unfamiliar—in a brilliant, yet oh-so-simple display of swordsmanship. The pinnacle of our art, the secret techniques we thought had been lost to the ages now danced in front of me. I laughed. I had meant to challenge the lad, but what challenge was I? *He* was teaching *me*! My own skills

were lacking. His mastery of the blade was far stronger and more beautiful.

Even the way our swords clanged together bewitched me. I tried to commit everything to memory, not wanting to miss even a fleeting moment as my sword chased his. How small we were! How narrow our thinking! I meant myself, my kingdom—the world. I could not begin to match this boy, let alone hope to take on the mighty universe. I'd put on such airs! I play-acted a man with all the experience of age—an elder, a wise man—only for this jet-haired brat to humble me. I was as a babe taking its first, toddling steps! He sneered, daring me to leave the cradle of the world I knew. His sword captivated me and showed me how big the world beyond me was.

I took a thousand hits and swung ten thousand more. I threw myself into study of the sword with abandon until finally, at long last, my body refused to go on. I'd grown dull and feeble with age. Curse this thrice-damned body that refused to move at such a crucial moment! I was having the time of my long life, and it was about to be over! *Move, damn you, move!*

LET'S PASS IT BACK TO THE HIGH SCHOOL BOY SPY WHO INSISTS HE'S A PRIEST, LIKE, FOR REALSIES

THIS DUDE FINALLY GROUND to a halt. Oh shit, was he dying of old age? Unfortunately for me, he started talking, so I guessed there was still some life left in the corpse. The now-stationary old dude asked me if I'd seen a gorilla army lying around, and I told him a big fat nope. I guessed the Theocracy had a gorilla infestation? Yikes. According to this old dude, they were running up and down the country attracting attention and beating up people left and right. We must not have noticed them because we were so busy sneaking. This world sure was dangerous, huh?

He went on at exhaustive length to ask if I knew the princess and if I'd seen someone fight and *yadda-yadda blah blah*. I spaced out.

“Boy, have you encountered a female knight named Leticia? Always has a frown on her face; unmistakable. Her armor bears the same coat of arms as mine. I...I would like to hear how she passed her final moments. I had hoped to ask this of you, but I feared you might not answer until I’d taken your sword. I know she could not have lived, but I can only hope she died like a true knight. As...as wretched as it is to talk about, she was a woman. I fear she may have met a horrific end at the hands of some mongre—why did you look away, boy? You know something! Tell me. Who was it? Who was the cur who defiled her honor?! Tell me. Please, boy, I beg of you! Why...is that nun pointing straight at you?”

“Excuse me?! That’s a false accusation! Was this a trap?! Okay, so to make a long story short, I may have sorta stripped her and got all handsy on her with some tentacles and left her screaming and crying, but it’s only because I was so thorough in getting to know her every nook and cranny with my tentacles! It may have been sort of embarrassing, but that’s it! I didn’t defile anybody so I’m innocent? Besides, she was into it!”

A female knight with an ever-present frown could only be Sister Girl’s homie, the Orphanage Worker Knight Girl. All I had done to her was very kindly bust my ass making her clothes, undies, and armor.

“Y-you made her cry?! You made her *scream*? You s-s-stripped her?! You *humiliated her*?! I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you dead, boy! I’ll kill you even if you kill me first! Die, die, die! Get back here! Let me kill you, you vermin!”

“Whoa there, granpappy! Calm it down there! There’s been a huge misunderstanding! Yes, I stripped her! If she wasn’t naked and embarrassed, how else was I supposed to take her measurements?”

I thought the violent old dude was on his last legs, but he still had some life left. He picked that sword right back up and kept on swinging. *Geez, if he’s not careful, he could put an eye out with that thing.* He was ten times the fighter he’d been before. And spitting mad!

“What the hell did you do to her?! *What did you do to my Leticia?! Get back here and let me strike you like a man! Thrice-cursed hellspawn! Why?! Why?!*”

“Why what? Why’d I kidnap her? She started it! I was just kidnapping her back. I’m the real victim! Once I nabbed her, everyone ganged up on me. I’m a victim of lecturing! After I was gracious enough to strip her, tentacle her up, and make her new clothes out of the goodness of my own heart, no less!”

“You did *what?! You kidnapped her, ganged up on her, stripped her, and stole her honor?! I’ll bleepity-bleeping kill you, you son of a bleepity-bleep! Stop dodging! You confessed to your sins, so have the decency to take your execution!*”

His sword strokes grew more accurate by the minute. His mind and body had dulled with age, but anger stripped that all away and sharpened him like a naked blade against a whetstone. He still had a long way to go to reach the Skull Lord’s level, and I also had better control over my body than during the skellie fight. I’d even gotten good at getting through mundane tasks with only a couple injuries.

I was so fascinated by the similarity between his swordplay and the Skull Lord’s that I wound up drawn back into sparring. Now that I thought twice about it, I realized that he was a violent old dude I really didn’t know. The conversation made no sense to me, and since neither of us was getting through to the other, there was no point in talking. If I’d just beaten him up and buried him, I wouldn’t have had to talk to him. Plus, no more old-dude stink! *Molotov cocktail time!*

“O mighty flame, incinerator of the ancient, I summon thee! Certain death, tongbei napalm, I choose—hey, let go of me! I can’t burn the old dude with you hanging on.”

“Talking, pointless! Give him, Leticia’s letter! He, most likely, man she wrote it for.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m gettin’ to that, I’m *gettin’* to that. I’m going to burn him and

thrash him and give him the letter and *then* bury him, so let go of me! As long as I burn the old guy and not the letter, I've done what I was supposed to, yeah? If I burn him and beat him up first, I won't have to worry about him eating the letter without reading it. He's probably too angry to read anyway. He'll gobble it up!"

"I shall not! And I am still perfectly capable of reading a few sentences, damn you! Did you say Leticia has a letter for me? Why the bloody cuss did you not say that from the start...? Oh! Oh, I recall. My sincerest apologies. I did not realize that you came to deliver this letter to me. A thousand thanks. Words are not enough to convey my apologies."

The old dude got down on his hands and knees and faceplanted into the ground. Actually, he was older than the usual crop of old dudes. More like an ancient dude. The years hadn't robbed him of his levels, though.

"Uh, yeah? She told me to go find this group of old dudes called the Knights of the Scriptures and find the oldest and dudest of the old dudes and give him this letter, and...I guess you seem right? Wait, it's a whole order of old dudes! Does that mean any old dude will do? Is this a den of dudes? A geezer hive? Whatever, here's the letter. Special delivery for Mr. Old Dude."

The old man didn't even wait to get off the ground before tearing open the letter. Tears spilled down his cheeks as he began to read. Since he could read, this suggested that fantasy world old dudes sometimes evolved into intelligent life. If my hypothesis was true (and it seemed unlikely), at the end of the day, a sentient old dude was still old. Who gave a hoot about them?

"She...she lives? She committed treason against the princess, and... It even says here she disrespected the princess of another kingdom by taking hostage and threatening a wicked, black-haired jester... But she lives?! She lives?!!!"

"Yeah. Duh! She squealed and moaned and crap when I tentacled her up. She wouldn't have made a peep if she was dead, right? Anyway, Princess Girl and Sister Girl were living it up right alongside her. They were definitely alive...or at

least lively. Until they passed out. I mean, they kind of passed out. They definitely enjoyed themselves!”

If they hadn’t wriggled and squirmed so much, my tentacles wouldn’t have had to wind themselves so tightly around legs ’n boobs ’n butts. Then they got tangled in my Magic Threads, and my hydra joined in the fun for a lickety-split lickety-lick. The chickenatrice also buzzed in to tickle everyone. It was a scream. Literally.

“You did *what?! To Leticia and Princess Ariel?! Do you want to die, boy? Get over here and take your medicine!*”

“Hey, Dancer Girl? Would you mind, uh, not leaving me to my fate? I’m a weak, fragile human, not like these strong beastfolk. My life is about to be snuffed out like a candle in the wind, picked like a lone flower—a spikey nettle, to be exact—in the field. I have so much to live for! This is teenage boy slander! I’m still human, remember!”

My sincerity of heart won the day—that is, Dancer Girl stepped in to chew out the old dude for me.

“She alive, yes. Still maiden. Still virgin. Unpenetrated! Don’t listen, to my master. More you listen, less sense he makes. Without interpreter, no chance to understand him.”

Yeah. Yeah! *You tell him, Dancer Girl.* No doubt she was filling the old dude’s ears with tales of my staunch character and immaculate innocence. In a heartbeat, he cowered like he was being lectured. You know what never made sense to me? For a world without any telecoms, false accusations and slander about me spread like crazy.

OH GOD, NOT THIS OLD DUDE AGAIN

LETICIA WAS SAFE! Prior to this meeting, I thought that this was all I needed to

know—that I could go away happy having learned that much—but when the boy went on to describe kidnapping her, ganging up on her, stripping her, attacking her with tentacles, and making her cry, I wanted to rip him to shreds. Yet he would not die. I surprised myself with the speed at which I swung my sword. I couldn't so much as graze him. I told myself, *Just a little more. Just a little more!* But the gap between us was a yawning, infinite chasm. He saw through my every move, the wretch. He only moved the slightest of distances to evade my blows.

Just then, a beautiful woman stepped in between us. The boy had been about to launch some sort of spell at me to burn me. It baffled the mind. How could someone so strong with the sword also be a mage?

When I took another look at the woman, I realized how impossibly gorgeous she was. The longer I looked, the deeper I fell in love with her. My ancestors were said to have gone off to battle in the company of war goddesses and saints, never to return. Now I understood what compelled them to do such a thing. Following this vision of strength and loveliness seemed like the most natural thing in the world. I almost didn't notice her incredible power. It was not like this selfish bastard boy's absurd strength. Hers was an absolute, devastating force. Yet another reason to follow her. I could imagine no greater bliss.

"She alive, yes. Still maiden. Still virgin. Unpenetrated! Don't listen, to my master. More you listen, less sense he makes. Without interpreter, no chance to understand him."

She was unharmed? I couldn't make sense of this, but, if the beautiful girl was to be believed, asking further questions would simply muddle my senses. I lacked details, but further confusion would only make this riddle unsolvable. Ha! As if this made any sense to begin with! Could we have that interpreter she mentioned? Truly, I needed assistance.

THE HIGH SCHOOL BOY SPY WHO INSISTS HE'S A PRIEST, LIKE, FOR REALSIES TAKES UP THE THREAD OF THE STORY AND SURE, EVERYONE GETS MAD WHENEVER HE TALKS, BUT SOMEONE'S GOTTA NARRATE THIS STORY SO DEAL WITH IT?

NOW THAT THE OLD DUDE was done yammering, it was time to get this stealth mission on the road. *Off to the capital.* First things first, I wanted to get in some serious recon (that was, thieving) on any valuables lying around, but I also had some recon (a delivery) to perform at the palace. I also needed to do some recon (sightseeing) in town and even more recon (shopping until I dropped) at the market. From there, I'd rove around town performing recon (beating up anyone in sight) and recon (mass demolition) and then call this spy mission a wrap. Also, the pope was supposed to be around here somewhere. Some recon (jumping his punk ass) would be smart. There's no rest for the wicked when you're doing recon (that was, recon), but at least I got breaks and days off. *Yup, time to shop.* Also, what was I going to do about this violent old dude?

Bury him.

Inhume him.

Return him to the earth.

Execute Operation: Turn Him into a Mole Person.

A tricky problem! These were all brilliant ideas; how could I choose? Well, I could always start by digging a hole and burying him while I decided.

DAY 112

NIGHT

If the old dude doesn't make a hot chick sweat, then what's even the point?!

THE VIOLENT OLD DUDE'S HOUSE IN ARYUCA, THE CAPITAL OF THE THEOCRACY

THE OLD MAN invited me back to his house. At least I think it was his house. *Wait, so what was the point of wearing a disguise to sneak in?!* The guards let me walk right through the city gates and into the home of someone with connections to the Cathedral. *Tsk tsk!* Then, the old man and his wife read the letter together and burst out crying once again.

"A thousand thanks, stranger, for saving Leticia. I am called Gasharx, and as old and unworthy as I am, I have the honor of being the Knights of the Scriptures' lord commander. My apologies for the failure of my order. Their failures are mine. Finally, I thank you for sparing Leticia's life. We are in your debt."

Turned out this old dude was a bad guy! I mean, not that the whole attacking me thing hadn't tipped me off...

"Um, excuse me? Mr. Gasharx, sir? Are we allowed to come in? We're beastfolk, you see..."

"We heard beastfolk aren't allowed in the Holy City..."

"In our oldest teachings, it is written that all are kin—man, beastfolk, and every other demi-human race. I concur, our current teachings are false. Be welcome, the both of you."

The old lady made us all cups of tea. I called her an old lady, but she was a lot younger than the old dude and would have been a real looker in her heyday! Unforgivable! I *knew* I should have burned that old man and buried him on the

battlefield. How big was this age gap?! The old dude looked like a run of the mill middle-aged man, but that was only because his high level slowed his aging. Inside, he was old as dirt. Angry dirt. A hot-headed, irredeemable geezer. He acted like he had one foot in the grave, but stick him on the battlefield, and he'd reveal his true colors. He was a hunka hunka burning dude!

"Thank you, my dears," said the old lady, "for saving Leticia. I'm afraid we were never blessed with children, so little Leticia was like our own daughter. Oh dear, I thought I'd never see her again. Thank you. Thank you, thank you!"

The old and unworthy-of-his-post old dude (it was probably all that violence; I wouldn't trust him to lead anyone) had known RBF Knight Lady since she joined the Knights of the Scriptures as a kiddo. It broke his heart when she'd been tasked with capturing Sister Girl. If she succeeded, he knew she'd kill herself afterward. If she failed, she'd be executed. That's why, he explained, his only hope was that she could die on the battlefield like a knight. Cue the waterworks. If I were her, I would've just run—oh, but the orphans were being held hostage. So *that's* what she was talking about.

Now it all made sense. Nothing seemed to fit together because the church wasn't a single entity. There was a convocation of elders that had presided over the Cathedral for ages and a whole conglomerate of disparate religious factions that hung out in the Holy City and Cathedral. The larger portion of this latter group were ragtag political cliques following various theological doctrines. This whole wadded-up mess was called "the church," but it was actually a scattered bunch of subgroups. Right now, the only glue holding them together was the orders that came down from the pope. That's why all the soldiers on the fringe of the country had such lame armor and crappy magical equipment.

The people who had held Dancer Girl captive must have been from the Cathedral. They were my true enemy.

Since the Cathedral cabal were the ones who called the doctrinal shots, that meant all the real villains were in the Cathedral. Everyone else in this country was simply a follower of the religion. The top dogs were the ones calling the

frontier a filthy, unholy land and bragging about sealing away an enemy of God in the Ultimate Dungeon.

They were fiends. Ghouls. They sought the spoils of the dungeons for themselves, so they extolled the virtues of adventurers and brave heroes. Then, when the adventurers delved too deep, the Cathedral cabal branded them traitors and had them killed.

“The convocation of elders has a stranglehold on the treasures and relics of our church. For too long—generations—have they sheltered in the Cathedral. I’m afraid even I, in my role as lord commander, do not know precisely who they are and what they are up to. I have virtually no contact with them, as they play an entirely different role than the pope. However, I do know that their power stems from their magic items. In modernity even the Knights of the Scriptures are but a shadow of our former selves. However, I fear the Cathedral’s soldiers are being armed with forbidden weapons from the convocation.”

See? I knew the Cathedral was nothing but trouble. It was a nest of snakes and the seat of power for the church. However, the Cathedral itself was a relic that granted its Divine Protection to a select few inside of it. For those without Divine Protection, the Cathedral sapped their strength and limited their abilities. This was capital-T trouble all right, and if we didn’t put an end to it soon, it would be Big Trouble.

As we talked, the conversation confirmed that I’d dodged a bullet earlier—in fact, dodged a whole missile silo. I gave the twins a good, long stare. They had curves in all the right places and toned muscles everywhere else. They were so lovely and animated it was a treat to watch them. Plus, they were basically as tall as me. Bunny Girl was sweet yet sultry; Wolf Girl darling yet dauntless. Like adults. They must have had a couple years on me, right? Nope. They were *fourteen!* Each! Because they were twins! Junior high was calling, and it wanted its students back! With that shape I thought they were at *least* my age! It was a trap! Beast girls must mature faster than their human counterparts!

If you still don't get it, let me lay it out for you: I got nuzzled by a pair of sleeping preteen girls! I nearly went off on them! *Just kill me now!* Sinning with slumbering secondary schoolers was like an instadeath spell on both sex appeal and societal acceptance. Worse, if my classmates found out, it would be *physical* instadeath! They would slaughter me! The thrilling tale of my poor sex appeal was so overflowing with twists and turns I was a second away from Ophelia'ing in them. What if, god forbid, they'd been even younger? What if it'd been a twisted turn-on? *Capital punishment for Haruka!*

"Based on those proportions, I'm guesstimating you're a year younger than Merimeri and a year older than Poster Girl and Stalker Girl."

"We're told beastfolk mature faster than humans."

"Oh yes. We're considered adults by age twelve."

We weren't on Earth, so ages weren't an exact science...right? Well, in that case... Oh my god, it was a literal case of the junior high cringe cooties. And I didn't mean me. Furry twins with animal powers and sword fighting skills? How much more baby's-first-OC-ish can you get?

After that shocking revelation, the old dude and old lady served us dinner. It was simple, humble food, but it was plentiful and delicious. The old lady wanted to hear me talk about RBF Knight Lady, so I did. For some reason, she glared at me. She's the one who asked, so I gave her the deets! Anyway, the old couple were nice enough to draw us a bath, and we all waited our turns to go. Without Slimey, I felt lonesome. That was, until Dancer Girl joined me. The two of us spent an eternity in that bath. If the twins had walked in? *Under the jail.*

When I finally left the bath, my attention was caught by a whistle of wind—a sword swishing through the air. It was the violent old dude, practicing to master the form and the swing of the Skull Lord's fighting style. He was already dead on his feet, but with every stroke, his form grew...worse.

"Hey, old fart. Give your sword. I won't keep it; it's too old and worn out. And the balance sucks! Figures. Look, just because you're butt-ugly doesn't mean

you need a butt-ugly sword. I'd really like to burn you, but that would be a little rude, I guess. So why don't I fix this sword up for you? Yeah, like this? Or hold on, give me a sec. How's this? Give it a swing; walk it around the store."

"Wh-wh-what have you done to my sword?!"

The old man swung it, and this time, his form was perfect. His big old, brutal basher of a blade had a center of gravity too close to the sword's edge. Same with the grip; it was too wide. I made a few little tweaks, and that was all he needed to reach perfection.

"Trying to control your sword with strength is what ruined your form. A butt-ugly face makes for a butt-ugly sword which makes for butt-ugly form. That's just math! By the way, even though I could fix your sword, your face is gone. Sorry."

"What kind of beast are yo—no, I'd best not ask. You have my gratitude. You have no idea how long I've yearned for a blade of this sort."

Using the smithing skills I'd cultivated in producing the Lil Steely series, I made a replica of the legendary Dojigiri, the Slayer of Shuten-doji. That's some oni dude from Japanese folklore. Anyway, I called my version the "Dojigiri, the Slayer of Old Men Because I Feel Bad for Shuten-doji When I Can Shoot 'n Dodgey Old Men Instead?" Armed with this mighty weapon, I challenged the old dude to a match.

I modeled my sword after the one Minamoto Yorimitsu used to slay Shuten-doji, but mine was meant for old dudes. It was just a replica—and since this world had its own Seven-Branded Sword, I wouldn't have been surprised if the real Dojigiri showed up somewhere. An enormous number of my female classmates started to use swords after passing level 100, but good swords were hard to find. I tried making some, but I was never happy with the results. The real Dojigiri could supposedly slice through the corpses of six criminals in a single stroke and bury itself in the platform they lay upon. I tried the Old Dude Slayer on slow-moving Stone Golems, but I couldn't slice through six at once. I

needed more practice.

Miss Armor Rep wanted to take a shot at it later, too. *She* cut several dozen Stone Golems right in half, but that didn't count! She could cut stone with a tree branch! It had nothing to do with the sword. If you had a dynamite body, you could blow up anything. Anyway, it was time to put the Old Dude Slayer through its paces on its intended audience.

"Damn you! How is your fighting style so different from the one you used earlier?"

I opted for dodging instead of parrying. I stayed about half a step away from the end of his sword and used kenjutsu timing with toujutsu speed. The old dude was a fast learner; he made it through alive. He wasn't very good target practice...

"Your mouth is as filthy as your face! Since you're stupid, I'll be nice and tell you what the deal is. Last time, I fought with a European-inspired sword. But this is a Japanese katana, see? That's why I'm using toujutsu. This is basic knowledge! Question is, what's the deal with Cane Mastery? So long as I call it Shinto-Muso style, I can use my staff for anything from a blowgun to a morning star. Maybe I should try tongbei Shinto-Muso Cane Style!"

The old man's defense was solid, and every movement of his blade conveyed meaning and purpose. He was still no Skull Lord, but he was on his way there. Sans blowgun, of course.

"What devilry is this? How can you use the arts of the Knights of the Scriptures with a staff? That's not Cane Mastery, you dishonest cur! Pick one and stick with it! *Yaaargh!*"

"Pick one? *What?* All the bad fighters in the Theocracy have rotted your combat brain. Listen, old man. I have all these tricks, and even they aren't enough to save me in a training sesh slash beat-down fest against Miss Armor Rep! I can bring out the whole deal with hydra, chickenatrice, and shoulder funnels, and I still don't stand a chance against her! Listen, man. The frontier is

one cruel place.”

“Truly?!”

I once heard “Jab like a spear. Swipe like a knife. Slash like a sword. Swing like a morning star. Blow like a blowgun. Float like a butterfly, half-ass it and miss then cast a spell and hit the enemy like a staff,” and I’d never looked back since. It was a quite useful set of reminders. If it was incorrect, blame the nerds!

“How many weapons does your staff need, boy?! How greedy can you get? Now I feel absurd using a normal blade!”

With that slight balance correction, the old dude’s form transformed into efficient, flowing motions. He had beautiful swordsmanship but a gross and gnarly old man face, so I didn’t want to get up close and personal. No thank you—not that kind of swordplay.

“I’m only level 25, so I can’t use any of the skills on my cool swords. That’s why I just use a staff. Everything falls under Cane Mastery. I didn’t do anything wrong!”

“I don’t understand how you fight better with a sword than any knight in my order! You’re too young to have learned so much, to have mastered so many arts... You impertinent little upstart!”

“Ah, ye of no brain...You are like a little baby. Have you ever fought a dungeon emperor? They’re tough. Like, if you think *I’m* good, you’ll be in for a shock. It’s not even funny. You want to spar with one? For real, for real? I have a dungeon emperor with me, and if you want to get your common sense recalibrated, having her beat the stuffing out of you is the fastest way to do it. Let me give her a holler. Good luck...for all the good that will do you.”

“N-now, just hold on! What sort of frightening nonsense world do you live in? How horrifying *is* the frontier?!”

The dungeon emperor—Dancer Girl dressed in a fetching yukata patterned with hydrangeas—showed up with her old friend the war fan. She had just

gotten out of the bath and didn't want to be all sweaty again, so she fanned herself as she knocked the old dude around. Long time no see, "Dancer's Mirage Fan: Speed, Dexterity, Resistance +30%. Physical Reflection (ultra). Magic Reflection (ultra). Illusion. Phantom. Slashing. Projectile Fan. +Attack, +Defense." She didn't break a sweat, which was a shame, because it meant her yukata didn't get wet and see-through. I had hoped for the stunning sight of transparent threads clinging to fine flesh, but alas, this old dude was no good for anything.

"That's a dungeon emperor for you. Scary, right?"

"Is this truly normal on the frontier?! *Yaaargh!*"

No! Worse. On the frontier, dungeon emperors came as a two-for-one deal, and oh-so deliciously sticky.

I didn't want to see a violent, burly old dude with Xs for eyes, but I figured I'd stick around for a good thirty seconds to get a glimpse of thigh action through the slits of the yukata. Alas, my hopes were dashed. This old dude really was useless! I stuffed a mushroom down his throat and returned him to his wife like used goods. He had already swung his sword past his limits; any more, and he would rip his muscles and ugly face to shreds.

I went to my room to do my side jobs. I shared a two-person bedroom with Dancer Girl, but she was away in the twins' room having a girls' meeting. Bursting in on them was a one-way ticket to getting the police called on me (a high school boy, breaking into a preteen girls' room?) so I waited for Dancer Girl to come back. My teenage boyiness would have to wait. Today's work involved solving the issue of controlling all thirty-six funnel shields at once.

"I thought my head would explode! There's too many of these damn things! Who got carried away and added so many? Doesn't he know there's a limit?"

Seriously, controlling this many was a headache and a half. I guessed I just got too greedy after the Skull Lord broke my last set. Just when I was about to lose control, I finally discovered the solution: flying. I combined my shoulder funnels

with the “Division Chakrams: Divide. Severing. Magic Severing. Equipment Fracture. Self-Propulsion.” I wanted the Self-Propulsion skill for my funnels.

By making thirty-six chakrams through Divide and inserting them into the funnels, my goal was to improve the funnels’ automatic control with Self-Propulsion, along with boosting their overwhelming defensive (read: annihilative) capabilities. With the chakrams’ other skills, the Aegis Shoulder Shields’ funnels would become dramatically more powerful. As for the control, that would now be entirely up to the funnels! Thanks, Self-Propulsion!

“Yeesh, I’m almost out of mithril. But this city is full of old dudes. There has to be a ‘Mithril Old Dude, Lv. Ancient’ around here somewhere. Ew, wait—I don’t want to inject eau de old men into my equipment!”

Old dudes were more useless than monsters. Where were they spawning from?

Anyway, I combined the shoulder funnels with the dismantled and duplicate chakrams before adding the self-controlling function I had just analyzed. The final result: “Aegis Shoulder Shields: Vitality, Power, Wisdom +50%. Automatic Defenses. Physical Defense (ultra). Magical Defense (ultra). Total Reflection. Absorption. Shield Slash. Shield Bash. Magic Blast. +Attack. +Defense.”

“If the Shield Slash gives it slash damage and magic slash damage, then I might be better off making triangular, bladed chakrams. Is that even a chakram at that point? Chakrams are descended from a triangular scale weapon that eventually, for aerodynamics’ sake, became the circular chakrams we know and love, so it should work with Self-Propulsion. Let’s give it a shot.”

I copied the magic and alchemical circles. I made perfect copies of all the mechanical components too. All that was left was to make the ultimate design—well, to play trial and error until I reached the ultimate design.

“Just gotta mix, knead... Add a dash of mithril... Gah. More spellstone dust! Nope, scratch that. Take two: more mithril. No, that’s not right either. What am I doing wrong?”

I wasn't smart about it. I mean, I got the item I wanted, but I wasted tons of mithril and high-grade spellstone dust in the process. Finally, I had "Godly Aegis Bladed Shoulder Shields: Vitality, Power, Wisdom +60%. Self-Propulsion. Automatic Defenses. Physical Defense (ultra). Magical Defense (ultra). Total Reflection. Absorption (ultra). Divide. Sword Form. Slash. Equipment Fracture. Long-range Magic. +Attack. +Defense." Fewer funnels, but with so many skills, there was only one conclusion to be made: I went way overboard!

The more automation I added, the easier they became to use and the more MP they guzzled. Oopsies. Okay, so maybe the whole turning into a sword thing was a bit much. But I wasn't about to go back on that. Every high school boy needed an epic sword! Maybe I was just reliving my junior high cringe phase.

"It uses too much MP, but I can live with it. To conserve MP, I can always control them myself...but that's ridiculously hard. Oh me, oh my. What's a guy to do about his life-saving defensive equipment?"

Really, the issue was what would happen to me when I was asked to fulfill my function as a teenage boy. I had barely any MP left! Dancer Girl was smiling and licking her lips, but I could produce nary a tentacle or Magic Hand... *Ruh-roh*.

Thus began a soft, moist infringement of my non-protesting teenage boy's personal space. She toyed with me, played with me, and promised a night of never-ending wonder. The way she sucked on my teenage boy's neck was even more impressive than the way she sucked MP out of me with MP Absorption. Hers was an abyssal ravine of suction that drank down the burning passion that came burbling up out of me in a torrent of magma until I was empty, zero, nihilism itself. That is, she sucked me bone dry. Even Sex God's Alpha Male and Super Horny couldn't keep up. But I would have my revenge! Someday. Not anytime soon, apparently.

DAY 113
MORNING

Why pay for a spot when I'm already standing in one?

ARYUCA, THE CAPITAL OF THE THEOCRACY

HELLO UNFAMILIAR CEILING, my old friend—yet another to add to my growing collection. For a Shut-in and Loner, I sure did a lot of waking up staring at other people's ceilings. Was that allowed? Speaking of waking up, the girl waking up next to me shot a fierce wave of glares at me. I did a good job on her last night—maybe even too good of a job, hence the stinging glares. I ruffled her hair and sauntered out of the room to go wash my face.

"Oh good. You had fun." the twins monotoned.

After being sealed away for a few days, the den of hungry beasts (teenage boyness) living inside of me could not be contained. They (among other things) burst free in a maelstrom of madness (a frenzy of foolin' around), a life-or-death battle, a heroic (refreshing) night. Yeah, we enjoyed ourselves!

"Morning! What's with the glares? I like twin glares; that's new! But why are you glaring at me? I made sure to soundproof the room and block our presence."

Come to think of it, this was the first time I'd ever taken (on) Dancer Girl alone. No wonder she gave me the granddaddy of all glares. This glare packed serious heat.

"We're beastfolk, Mr. Haruka! We have better senses than humans—hearing, smell, *and* Presence Sensing!"

All my soundproofing was for naught. Funny how a couple of fourteen year olds could skate past the rated-R rule. I heard people could marry as young as twelve in this world, so maybe the twins were just early bloomers. It wasn't

uncommon to be an old grammy or gramps at thirty in this neck of the woods.

“I wonder if women are considered past their prime after thirty in this world... That’s the case back hom—oh look, my audio cut out.”

(Or maybe I was too scared to keep talking.)

Last night I was so drained of MP I couldn’t move, which was my excuse for having Dancer Girl ride my teenage boyness like a cowboy at a rodeo, and all the energy and synergy and shaking and quaking of the experience contributed to a lot of up-and-down movement which shut down my teenage boyness, turned me upside down and inside out. I hit the moment of release when Lovemaking and Qi Wizardry restored and amplified my MP. When Dancer Girl was all worn out and let down her guard, she got swallowed up in the billowing waves of teenage boy lust, which made her scream and wail and moan in absolute ecstasy. There she lay in the early morning sunlight, her amber-hued limbs splayed out in an exhausted sprawl, and since she was so sexy and sleepy and in need of reward for a job well done, I shoved my mushroom in her mouth. By then my MP and horniness were back in all their glory, so I went all out and did my very best on this bright and beautiful morning on which she woke up and assailed me with a glare. It was a beautiful glare, but ow?

Sex God had many perks—more vitality, infinite Regeneration—but it had a trade-off: a weakness to abstinence. The situation had grown so dire my teenage boyness had almost accidentally opened fire on my own allies, and those allies were barely in their teens! My place in society and my sex appeal were in grave danger. All the stress built up, and I just couldn’t take it any longer. The moment it was just me and Dancer Girl alone... Well, you know the rest.

“Ah, awake, are you? Forgive me, but I must report for duty at the Cathedral. I do not have the right to stop you, nor do I have any desire. But...let me say this: please refrain from doing anything unwise. The capital is a place of beauty and riches, but at its heart, it is a nest of vipers. Everywhere you look, you will find the serpents writhing and coiling together. They label any outsider an enemy

and sink their venomous fangs in you. Oh yes, the serpents are very, very good at finding their next meal.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t do anything wild. I’m just here to spy. I’ve been trying to scope out how strong the enemy is, but by the time I’m done with them, there are no enemies left standing. I don’t have any data to take home yet! The Cathedral must be swarming with enemies, so it’s perfect for me. If you want, I can always ‘spy’ a few old dudes or knights for you.”

“Please, I beg you. Stay away! By ‘spy,’ I’m not sure if you mean ‘annihilate,’ and perhaps it’s best if I not ask. No, after the lesson of last night, I must repeat myself—stay away. The younger members of my order would not last a moment in a fight against you. They need training. I must pass on to them the true arts of our order. Such shall be my new role in these last years of my life. This ‘Skull Lord’ of whom you speak must have been one of my forefathers. I know the very one, in fact. He was cast out from the Knights of the Scriptures and is spoken of in words most ill, for he defied the Church to journey to the frontier alongside the Goddess of War in a quest to slay monsters. The Church later ordered her death, for she purportedly was evil’s pawn. I must thank you for freeing him from his eternal suffering and granting him the sweet release of the final slumber. Alas, a shameful descendant am I, when I am too feeble to venture to his tomb to lay flowers upon his grave...but I am proud of my forefather for following the Goddess of War into the jaws of death. Thank you, boy. Now stay away!”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m staying.”

“I mean it! Don’t you dare!”

The old dude showed us part of the way to the Cathedral, and after he said goodbye, we began our spy mission in earnest. And by that, I meant we went sightseeing. Recon (and by that, I meant shopping) was crucial. Especially if it involved scoping out the adult stores! This was a vital task, a dazzling experience, but I felt murderous intent radiating from the girls behind me. The old dude was right; the capital of the Theocracy really was a dangerous place.

Maybe I'm just as dangerous? Little old me?

The streets of whatever this place was called were thronged with people. But even if there was no lack of foot traffic, the bazaar offered little in the way of goods. In particular, there was almost no food to be had. With so little for sale and so many prospective buyers, the market was a jostling, bloodthirsty anthill of humanity.

“No wonder things feel tense. Too bad this is the twins’ first shopping expedition in casual clothes. What’s the good of a new sundress and straw hat if you can’t shop till you drop?”

Here in the Holy City, people wore priest robes when performing rituals or whatnot. I wasn’t about to go praying to no stinkin’ old man, so I opted for us to wear our own clothes. In the twins’ case, I set them up with a pair of pure, clean-n-tidy dresses with buttons up and down the front. Problem was, their bodies took it upon themselves to bulge out of those dresses nicely. The buttons held on for dear life. Those were all that stood between me and a visit from the police.

We minded our own business walking around the bazaar, gathering a little recon as we went, but a bunch of priests and church knights fell into line behind Dancer Girl and the twins. They wanted to abduct the girls, so I rounded them all up and reconnected the living daylights out of them. Then we popped into a few shops for more spying-slash-snacks before rounding out the day by browsing a few stalls for tasty intel and snacks. *Hmm... Not a lot on sale.* Food was especially scarce.

No shopping extravaganza was complete without a tasty treat. Our mission was in jeopardy. Operation: Bazaar was in critical danger! I had no choice but to take matters into my own hands and go stealth mode.

“Get it cheap! The price is cheap; the quality’s worse! Get your rip-off okonomiyaki right here! It’s tasty! And a horrible deal!”

As the sunlight filtered through the trees, it almost felt like *she* was here

again... M-san... It was like she was telling me: *If they cannot buy bread, sell them cake!* Not like I actually knew M-san; this was just my attempt to write good. Poets got a lot of tail!

“Um, what are you doing...?”

“Where did you get a stall from?”

“Ooh, that looks good...”

“Can we each have one?”

“Ew! You’re drooling! Oh gosh, me too!”

“Does my nose deceive me, or is that dashi soup stock and dried bonito flakes?”

“Yummm!”

The twins sobbed over how good it tasted and hugged one another, which quickly attracted a crowd. One look at the girls was all it took for the crowd to converge on my stand. I had a full house of customers in no time. The twins were fantastic shills—beautiful, sincerely happy girls with such expressive faces made for compelling advertising!

I had a huge line in moments. It twisted and turned until I couldn’t see the end. I mixed and fried at top speed, glopping on mayo and sauce before adding a pinch of bonito flakes in this express-lane mass production of isekai okonomiyaki. But mine was more of an Oh’KOnomiyaki. The customers wolfed them down as fast as I made them. The twins were such good spokespeople they drummed up a crowd too big for me to feed. Worse, the crowd kept growing. In the middle of these food shortages, tasty smells were just too tempting, and watching other people devour the food like starving wolves made the hungry populace’s patience wear thin. Pretty soon, the crowd was pushing and shoving for a spot in line.

How well people stood in lines said a lot about their culture’s manners. I was impressed at how patient most of the Theocracy citizens were, even in such a

major food shortage. When the occasional grumbling church person elbowed their way to the head of the line, Dancer Girl slapped them silly. Whenever anyone from the church came to ask me if I had paid the fee to run a business here, my hydra and cockatrice bit and pecked them until they collapsed.

“I’m kind of busy here, okay? Stay out of my way. And I’m not *running* anything. Why do you think they call it a food *stand*?”

Hissss!

Cock-a-doodle-doo!

It turned out that ripping people off was not a sound business plan. The church took too much food from their people’s mouths to feed their soldiers, which meant food shortages, which meant, duh, no food, which meant people bought from me when I sold for cheap, which meant I made fat stacks of cash. Good thing I had plenty of food—I’d pocketed the entire nation’s food reserves! Economic cycles dictated that demand (ripping off) went hand-in-beautiful-hand with supply (yoinking loot). Buy it low (free), sell it high. That right there formed the basis of a brilliant economic strategy. And, to keep down my expenses, I simply beat up everyone who came asking how I did it so cheap. High profits, low business costs! I was the fattest of cats! The richest of rip-off kings! The head of a now very long line! *Keep ’em coming, masses!*

In a short time, I wound up with a mountain of silver and copper coins interspersed here and there with ones of gold or iron. I sold out with a few thousand Oh’KOnomiyakis, all dished up in under an hour. I still had some food left, but there was now a full tummy epidemic in the bazaar. If they kept this up, the people would develop Tiny Tanuki’s bad food habits! Now, with my hard-earned cash, I decided to do some shopping. One man’s trash was another man’s treasure, especially if I could fix it up and rip off some other poor sucker with it later. I also haggled the price down and traded some items for wheat. Then I made a mental note to give every priest I met a good staff-whackin’. See, this “bitter tea” the priests drank as a part of their ascetic practices turned out to be coffee. They sold coffee beans here! Time to buy every bean and

monopolize the trade!

It was pure bliss walking around and enjoying my first sip of coffee in months.

“Bleh! I’ve never tasted a better bitter brew. Bravo! Bravo!”

Seriously, this was a quality cup. The twins pulled a face and said they weren’t interested; Dancer Girl tried a sip and yuck’ed it. *Black coffee is amazing, guys. Sugar and milk are the devil. I’m a worshipper kneeling at the altar of the black god of caffeine.*

“Okay, so if we follow the map, it should be...right here. That’s a pretty fancy building. Must be owned by the church.”

When we showed up at RBF Knight Lady’s orphanage, a herd of skinny orphans came rushing out and crowding around us, no doubt attracted by the smell of the Oh’KOnomiyakis. They stared at me with enormous, hungry eyes. When the old lady who ran the orphanage finally caught up to them, I gave her RBF Knight Lady’s letter. The old lady broke down into sobs and wails. RBF Knight Lady letters seemed to have that effect on people. What did she say when she was trying to be nice? “Congrats, asshole?”

Better get on with it. I divvied up the Oh’KOnomiyaki ft. healthy mushrooms and shoved it into the mouths of the flocking children. And shoved, and shoved, and shoved, and shoved... Jeez, how many kids were there?

I even had to bust out my Magic Hands to help. Like Kannon with her thousand arms, so did I shove food into teeming maws. The horde of smiling, munching children never abated. I wondered why they weren’t running balls of energy like their frontier counterparts. Maybe malnutrition was to blame. They lined up politely and sat there with their mouths open like baby chicks. The older ones, even though they were starving, hung back around the endless sea of younguns, presumably waiting for the littlest kiddos to get their fill.

“Hey, Bunny Girl and Wolf Girl, you see those kids? Can you give them some food? Eat up. We’ve got lots of food sent by our lady of the frowny face. Eat all you want, because she’s footing the bill. All right! Who wants theirs with fried

udon? Get munching, munchers!”

“This food comes from Leticia?”

“Really? Can we really eat as much as we want?”

“It’s... I’ve never tasted anything so good!!”

“You’re so nice!”

The orphans weren’t bouncing off the walls yet, so they must still have been malnourished. That meant I had some serious feeding to do. Technically speaking, an orphan who couldn’t wall-jump was just a regular orphan, but it would have been a crying shame if I couldn’t get those kids a decent double jump.

“Thank you so very much for all you’ve done, for the children and Leticia both. I don’t know how I can ever possibly repay you. Oh, thank you, thank you.”

The old lady orphanage director broke down sobbing while she clung to the flock of mouths-open-waiting chick orphans. Meanwhile, the older kids were a mess, torn between sobbing and stuffing bento down their throats as fast as possible. I don’t know what it was with people in this world, but no one knew how to eat properly... Maybe crying while eating was some kind of cultural thing? I felt like that made eating harder.

Once the older kids ate themselves into a food coma, I taught the orphans how to make Oh’KOnomiyaki and gave them a food cart (rip-off model, adjustable height for orphans) and an item bag stuffed with food. Oh, and another item bag filled with defensive gear, just to be on the safe side. With this, the orphans could run their own food stall and follow in my contreprenuring footsteps! *For someone who spends so much time swindling people, how come I never have any money?* If I didn’t make another underhanded venture, I would be in the red!

“It’s a lot of work to go all the way to the storehouses and wipe them clean! Grindset mindset.”

Supposedly, the palace—my next destination—was an ally, so I wasn't allowed to steal any of its stuff. Shame. It seemed like a hidden treasure trove.

Oh...snap! I was too careless! Next thing I knew, the crying and orphan-clutching grannies were multiplying! A crowd was upon me, and most of them were of the old lady persuasion! My classifieds always had listings open for sexy caretakers, but old lady nannies were not in vogue among the healthy teenage boy crowd. Good thing I had a bunch of luxury candy on me. It was time to throw that in their eyes like chaff and beat a hasty retreat. *No matter where you go, chaff is the number one way to fend off an orphan attack!*

DAY 113

MIDDAY

The girls' chests are puffed with pride, but not all chests are created equal... I didn't say anything!

THE PLAINS OF THE THEOCRACY, THE RIGHTFUL ORTHODOX, LEGIT AF ARMY OF THE CHURCH HQ

OUR FORCES MARCHED over the vast plains, liberating cities and distributing food as we went. We captured and jailed church soldiers charged with crimes against the common people. The church forces were too scattered, their reinforcements too nonexistent, to put up much of a fight. Thus, we loosed the shackles from one city after another.

"Excellent work, girls."

"For real. This is almost too easy."

"That's 'cause all the heavy 'scouting' work was done before we got here."

Every town brought a fresh story of uprisings in the streets and resistance against the pope. These words lent us wings. Haruka's horse ran hither and thither as we rushed to attend to all the calls for aid coming our way. We began in the east, but we did not end there. A good 60 percent of the country, in the northern and southern regions too, now stood free. Indeed, our invasion was going almost too well. A crop of victory flags popped up on our map as we liberated town after town.

"By 'scouting' you mean destroying every enemy in sight, right? Uh...does that count?"

"Shh. Don't think about it too hard."

Our progress was so rapid because there were no enemies left. Or food. Or weapons. Or armor. It'd all been 'scouted' up—which was to say, beaten to a

pulp and then looted. I could almost hear the looter now: “Oh, whoops! Wouldja look at that? It jumped right into my hand!” For him, looting was as inevitable as the sun rising in the morning.

“Be good, and the looter will give you happiness. Be bad, and the looter will rob the clothes off your back. Everyone knows that if they live in Diorelle or Omui. Even kiddos.”

We routed the few remaining soldiers as we marched on Central to meet an archbishop. Arianna-san described him as a man who hated hostility, despised destruction, and execrated evil. He was a helpful person of good character. But to me? He just looked like an old man decked out in a full suit of armor raring to jump into the fray.

“I am so glad to see you safe, my chil—no, no. Where are my manners? Your Highness. You should know that my core philosophies remain unchanged. I still have no love for this butchery of brothers. I believe, as ever, we must help the weak and needy. We must come together to protect one another. But then, Your Highness, I met this boy of whom you spoke, and I understood. I saw in his eyes that he disavows violence and bloodshed with the same fervor as I. But—and this is crucial—that is why he kills. If only we lived in a world where killing one another was not a necessity! His eyes possess the kindness of a calamity that destroys all other calamities. That is why he fights for us, the useless masses. Your Highness, this frail old man may be no more than a figurehead, but I would like nothing more than to join the fight in whatever manner should prove useful. This boy is not responsible for our Church, and it is not right that he should fight alone. Not with such sad eyes. All our teachings, all our repudiations against violence and bloodshed—Your Highness, they are lies. These teachings are warfare on the soul, violence waged without weapons. They are burdens too heavy for a single boy to bear. He may travel with three lovely companions, but in his eyes, this boy wages his own solitary war. How could any man or woman look in the eyes of one such as he and ever again believe the cowards who bleat of peace behind stout walls? Your Highness, the

people of our sect and those allied to our cause have made ready for war. We wait only for you.”

“Your words do me honor, Archbishop Stecater. I would accept your aid, and gladly. And...these three companions of whom you speak... Are they...?”

We had a nasty chuckle among ourselves at the news.

“Called it.”

“Oh, yes. The moment I see him, he and I will have a nice, long talk. Nice and long!”

Our ranks swelled rapidly, but most of the new recruits were not made of the stern stuff we hoped for. Their levels were low; their armor, pot metal. These soldiers marched to war with little more than bravery. Rationing food and arms proved to be a major headache.

“After everything we handed out, why do we still have so many clubs?”

“Blame Haruka-kun. Jeez, how many goblins did he kill before he ran into us?”

“I’m not surprised. He always says, ‘You can wipe out every kobold and goblin in the forest, and they’ll be back again tomorrow?’”

“So he wiped out the monster forest’s goblin population several times over.”

“And that was only the start of the monster extinction. Now the dungeon emperors are in on it too.”

No matter how many clubs or mushrooms we handed out, there seemed to be no end to either. That item bag of Haruka-kun’s must have had just as many spellstones. He used the bag as one giant MP battery to store ridiculous amounts of magic. There was so much saved up that he could decimate dungeon emperors or the whole monster forest all by himself.

“Even with slower MP regeneration, Haruka-kun’s MP stats are astronomically high.”

“Let’s pray he never uses all his MP at once. Can you imagine? His head would

go ka-boom!”

“No kidding. He has more MP than a person could ever use. He’s one step away from becoming a human chain reaction.”

“What if he ever ran out? He’d be boned. Like, totally screwed.”

“Maybe... But is that better than his head-splitting levels of MP the rest of the time?”

With everyone coming to see and talk to Arianna-san, she didn’t have a moment to herself. Leticia-san was just as busy running after her. Meanwhile, Shalliceres-san and Merielle-san had their hands full directing troops. Erailia-san’s Emotion Sensing was in high demand, and the nuns had their work cut out for them coordinating logistics and standing guard. The priests... Did I even have to say it? They were busy running their tongues up and down their knives. We couldn’t give them anything else to do. So many knives to lick, so little time.

“Talk about busy bees, all of us.”

“That’s because it’s time for this huge mass to unite under Arianna-san’s banner.”

I had the sneaking suspicion that these poor, cowardly soldiers were being brainwashed... Even in our last battle, I kept hearing soldiers scream, “*Hi-yah!*” or trying to lick longswords—and their expressions said they didn’t quite know what they were doing. The priests were turning more violent by the day. Honestly, it was kind of freaky watching them mass licking their blades. *I worry for the Theocracy...* Was anyone even thinking about doctrines or god anymore?

“Class Rep! Our strategy has gone off without a hitch. We’ve done it! Our liberation blitzkrieg has taken the whole country in a single swoop. With all the forts along the waterways fallen, I don’t expect us to run into any more large enemy groups.”

“Thank goodness for scouting!”

“Yeah. I never doubted Haruka-kun for a minute.”

It was impossible for Haruka-kun to pursue the last few enemies who had scattered, and he would be too easily damaged if he tried to protect every city. It was basically suicide for him to constantly go back from city to city, defending each place he liberated but, well...Haruka-kun might try. Still, we had the numbers he lacked, so we could fight back against the church for him. We could also divide into smaller groups and protect all the cities so he didn't have to. That's why we didn't bother to stop him on his mad "scouting" rampage. We let him scout (*cough cough*, attack, *cough cough*) however the heck he wanted, scout (*cough*, go, *cough*) wherever the whim took him, and scout (assail) anything that took his fancy. He was stronger that way—although "stronger" might not be the right descriptor. "Downright nasty," maybe. "Villainous." No, too generous. "Atrocity-committing." That was the ticket. He was justified, but it was still apt. Anyway, he tore through the enemy like a disaster and left them bleeding in his wake. All we had to do was march after him. If we didn't move fast enough, he'd give away all his sweets before we got any! *This is serious, people!*

And so, tears and all, we tried. We tried *hard*. Because if we were just *maybe* a little biased, *possibly* indulging in a tad of favoritism, *potentially* possessing a smidgen of partiality...then perhaps we were helping out Haruka-kun a teensy-weensy bit. Not even a whole bit! Just a fraction. But for once, we weren't being protected. We weren't getting in his way. We were just—in our own very, very small way—repaying the favor, one little bit at a time.

"Have the deployments changed since our first plan? We haven't received any additional information since, have we?"

"No, ma'am. All that's left is to liberate Central."

"Perfect. Let's flank them. Form two columns, and we'll march down on them."

This was such an infinitesimally tiny thing that none of us discussed it. Embarrassment prevented us. Somewhere deep inside where no one else could see, we felt proud of ourselves. Somewhere, where no one was watching (and

only then) we threw up teeny-tiny victory poses. *Microscopic*, I swore! We still had barely taken baby steps to catch up to Haruka-kun, but we did it. For real this time, we were on track to match Haruka stride for stride—eventually.

“We need to keep Haruka-kun’s force with the shock force in the center. If disaster strikes, we don’t want them cut off from either of our wings.”

“But every town between here and Central has been liberated or razed to the ground. Like...now’s our chance. If we don’t join the vanguard, we won’t get any action.”

“Nuh-uh. Arianna-san has to lead the way and liberate the country. For like symbolism and stuff. Although it sure takes forever...”

Our pride wasn’t something we could share with Haruka-kun once we caught up to him and dragged him back into the fold. I knew the others were hiding their pride, too. We gritted our teeth to prevent that microscopic triumph from showing. Once no one was around, we’d all clench our fists *very* loosely and make the *tiniest* of victory poses. Well. By “we,” I meant everyone but Haruka-kun. But someday—someday he’d be proud of us too.

“District Six is confirmed liberated, ma’am! We’ve added it to our line of defenses.”

“*Whoo-hoo!* That’s great news.”

Haruka-kun was the kind of person who took responsibility for everything. If a single person slipped through the cracks—if there was just one person he couldn’t save, one thing that proved impossible to him—he’d go somewhere alone and cry. That’s the version of him we wanted to be proud of us. We wanted to show him how happy he’d made everyone. So, right now, we allowed ourselves to be happy, because he’d want us to be.

“Great. We’ll set off the minute we’re ready. Get your equipment on, girls, and meet up back here!”

“*Ja!*”

I let myself have the smallest of swaggers in my step as I put on my armor. I was still cognizant that Haruka-kun was protecting me even now thanks to my weapons and armor. Deep down, I gave myself a mini pat on the back as I prepared for a bloody battle. Blood would stain our hands; people would curse our names. But we would not shrink. We would vomit our suppers up, cry our eyes out, and still stand tall to become like Haruka-kun.

But...three hot nuns? Really? He only had Nefertiri-san with him. Where did these other two come from? If those mystery girls were hot enough to be called pretty when they were with Nefertiri-san, we were talking serious looks.

I needed to give Haruka-kun a piece of my mind. I was very, very interested in learning why he was picking up girls when he should have been scouting. I was sure he was full of excuses. I just wanted a chat. That's all. Just a word. Just a lecture to make him say his prayers. I *knew* he was out there giving them dessert and head pats! As for my poor classmates? We'd run out of goodies ages ago. We were starving for sweet things, and yet we managed to work so hard despite the dearth of dessert!

"Do you think we'll meet up with Haruka-kun in the Holy City? Because I've got a morning star with his name out it."

"He's probably breaking in as we speak. Just as we're breaking out the morning stars."

"I can't wait to see him again! And bean him again!."

"Yeah, like who are your new friends? Who are those young ladies you're traveling with? Oh, and where did you take those girls from, Haruka-kun?"

Oh, I was sure he'd have plenty to say. Problem was, he'd baffle and trick us all with his bizarre explanations. Next thing we knew, we found ourselves agreeing with him, still confused as when we'd started. At any rate, I figured Haruka-kun picked up the girls after bailing them out of some trouble or another—I mean, they were beastfolk in the Theocracy, of all places. He probably found them crying and helped them out, even though I knew he would

claim it was all a complete coincidence and he'd had nothing to do with it. Honestly, I didn't even need to hear him out. Haruka-kun had a track record.

He'd saved us too.

"All right, on to liberate town number eighty-four. Take out any last soldier stragglers you find, but be careful. They might have magic items on them. Remember, no going alone!"

"Ja! Full steam ahead, ma'am!"

If Haruka-kun were here, he'd yell about mixing languages again. Which was why everyone did it. We liked seeing him react. Getting a rise out of Haruka-kun was fun.

DAY 113

MIDDAY

How to solve a deep problem? A deeper habit.

ARYUCA, THE CAPITAL OF THE THEOCRACY

BEFORE I RAN MY ERRAND at the palace, I took another look at the twins' equipment. I also needed to fiddle with my own. I mean, how was I supposed to fit shoulder funnels on a cassock?

"You see priests and nuns with Japanese polearms, big-ass swords, or machine guns in anime all the time. Shoulder shields, though...?"

"Mr. Haruka, I don't know what half of those words mean."

My priestly disguise implied that I was a man of god—a man in service to god. As far as I was concerned, that old god dude was out of service, for all the good he did. So why sweat the details?

"What if I gave one of the church statues of that god dude a tennis racket? We'd have a ball! Or a brawl? I don't think the church would like that. They would *cause* a racket."

"I'm lost. Are you sure you're talking about God?"

The church had magic items, and I needed to prep for them. Hence the absolutely crucial nun habits with enormous slits and garter belt stockings, the stuff of teenage boy hopes and dreams. And we couldn't forget the fishnet tights.

"Or the deadly weapon of sexy high heels. We could go for high-heel boots, even. The ones that go all the way up girls' legs!"

"He's not listening..."

Magic nullification was my biggest concern. If the church managed to disable

the skills imbued in our equipment, those hot, hot habits were nothing more than thin cloth. Super thin. We're talking spread thin and tight, tight, tighty-tight against their curves. It was out of this world sexy.

"My head says to put them in full suits of armor, but my teenage boyiness says to keep them in habits. I *knew* nullification nullifying would be a thing..."

Not all skills were created equal. Sufficiently strong skills could overpower weaker skills, effectively nullifying them. Granted, you also needed high levels to use these skills, and the MP costs grew astronomically. *You know, while I'm at it, I should make those slits longer.*

"Much farther, and they'll be able to see all the way to our belly buttons!"

"These slits have long since passed the point of practicality."

"Don't worry. You have full sets of armor to wear in battle, so no one will see."

"Then what's the point of lengthening the slits?!"

Uh, mobility for those bods? Lusty legs and thirsty thighs? It went against my professional pride to put the twins in armor that didn't make the most of those limber leporine limbs and breathtaking beastfolk badonkadonks.

Which presented me with a dilemma, an oxymoron of a situation. We needed disguises both sturdy and flexible for covert operations, but heavy armor would get us caught in two seconds flat.

"As if we wouldn't get caught right now?! We draw more attention than honey draws flies!"

"No one even notices the giant sword I have on my back. They're too busy staring at my ridiculous outfit!"

Exactly. That's the power of misdirection.

"You know how the checkpoints always have No Weapons Allowed signs? No matter how professional the gatekeeper, one peep at those weapons of wobbling, and they'll never see your real weapon!"

“It’s mortifying!”

More importantly, the slit distracted the soldiers from noticing those furry tails. *In nuce*, high slits were highly sexy. High equaled good!

“Forget slits, Master. Worry about, own self. That cassock, much deadlier weapon!”

“You think? Well, it is a bit snug on the waist... But apart from that and the A-line silhouette, it’s perfectly normal for a priest.”

“Then why does it look so terrifying when you wear it?”

Little details could make or break a disguise. According to my rigorous background research in certain fictional materials, priests had sex left and right. It only made sense to bring a group of sexy nuns with me. It was a perfect disguise. Perfect, I tell you.

“Okay, but do fishnets *really* boost our defense?”

“Heh heh, it sure does wonders for the offense. Those legs could knock me out.”

“Oh my god, *stop!*”

I mean, this is just how high school boys roll.

“What’s the problem? We got this far without getting caught, right?”

“Yes, but if we’re just going to pound everyone to a pulp anyway, why do we have to dress in these mortifying outfits?!”

Methinks the maidens doth protest too much! Because those furry tails quivered in delight every time I made them a new outfit. Besides, based on past experiences, I knew there was no problem that couldn’t be solved with a head pat and a snack or two. *They won’t mind if I make those slits a little deeper. Right?*

DAY 113

MIDDAY

Finally, a use for the Trip Ring! But it's off screen?! And I don't even get any lines!

THE ROYAL PALACE OF THE THEOCRACY

THE CASTLE SAT CAPTIVE in a sea of soldiers, the sun glinting off their silvery armor and shields. These besiegers made numerous attempts on the castle, but our defenders threw them back again and again. Now, the Church army settled in for a long siege amid demands for surrender from the royals. The daily calls for capitulation wore down the resolve of the palace's inhabitants until the grilled meat they ate lifted their spirits once more. In fact, the scents of the rich meat sizzling away sapped the Church soldiers' morale. We waged war with the weapon known as "barbeque served with some tare-sauce-looking-kind-of-thing? I guess?" A wondrous, delicious weapon indeed.

"Lord Commander, we have company. I urge you to make ready."

"Another attack? These fools never learn. Very well. Have the soldiers take the field."

A woman who identified herself as a member of the Shino clan of Diorelle brought us foodstuffs and information. Without her, the castle soldiers and inhabitants would long since have succumbed to starvation. She was our savior. She described herself as a messenger of the black-haired jester of Diorelle theatrical and Aryucan heretical fame.

"No, Lord Commander. It is the boy. The one we have waited long for."

The woman of the Shino clan turned her gaze toward the command tent in the besieging army. I looked as well, only to be greeted by the bizarre sight of people flying through the air. Suits of armor sparkled in the sun as they went left, helmets went right, and stripped bodies went another direction altogether.

The army devolved into pandemonium in an ever outward-spreading ripple. I could hardly believe my eyes. It was like a single drop of water had fallen into an ocean and raised surging waves that spread to the four corners of the map.

“Sh-should we not ride to his assistance? As he is behind enemy lines, as it were...”

This man of whom I spoke was the black-haired commander whose notoriety stemmed from a theatrical performance in Diorelle. I had assumed he would devise some clever scheme to sneak through the enemy encampment but, contrary to my expectations, he merely walked through them. He beheaded pikes and sliced through armor like they were weeds in his way. No trickery, no subterfuge—he advanced through the army at a leisurely stroll. The church knights in all their fighting glory were paltry obstacles to him. He batted them away, cut them down, and trod upon their corpses. This man was a peerless charlatan. He wove lies and traps to befuddle his foes. However, he went by another name, too: the Dungeon Destroyer. Had I not been aware of this moniker myself, the scene before me would no doubt have flabbergasted me. Just looking at the battle and how he took the Church knights unprepared, as if they came from no army, made me feel a pang of sympathy for the enemy commander. There was no commanding that chaos. One could not possibly organize against it.

“No, I think not. In fact, I think it best we stay far away.”

Perhaps this move was a brilliant example of deception in its own right. Who would ever think of passing through enemy command, the thickest knot of soldiers in the army? Military theory dictated that large numbers of troops equated a certain level of vigilance. Launching a surprise attack would make the enemy forces tighten their considerable defenses in a short time. However, when smaller groups attempted to halt a stranger for questioning, said stranger could slaughter them. While other soldiers scrambled for their weapons and rushed away from the command tent, he could walk through them to the now-undefended command center. From there, with the chain of command broken,

the teeming mass of soldiers stood no chance of regrouping. They jostled together in hopes of fleeing, effectively trapping themselves until the stranger sent the swarm flying—a chain reaction of men tumbling and crushing the soldiers behind them.

“Madam, this is... This is cruelty!”

“This is warfare, Lord Captain. One must be prepared for any storm.”

The majority of the soldiers knew not where their opponent stood and were shoved along by their jostling neighbors until they joined the ground cover of corpses. Many of them never met the stranger at all and were trapped and crashed by their own army. Unable to move, unable to see the threat, unable to take orders, the army transformed into a massive traffic jam of confused, terrified humanity. Chaos turned to catastrophe.

The boy muttered to one of his companions, “Tongbei judo throws and tongbei roundhouse kicks?! How is that even possible?”

The heavy infantry—weighed down by their stout suits of armor, massive shields, and spears—lacked the maneuverability to turn. With limited visibility and no orders from their leadership, they were nothing but obstacles for their own army. Heavy, slow-moving scarecrows. Poor souls. They didn’t have the faintest idea where the enemy was or even what was going on as they were flattened and crushed. Once one stumbled and fell, they stood no chance of regaining their footing. The sea of feet rushed over them and trampled them to death. They did not even lay eyes on their foe. They only perished under the pulverizing weight of their own countrymen and their own armor.

“Mr. Haruka, this armor is wondrous! I owe you my lif—mmrph, mrrph!”

Unchecked, the black-haired commander reached the gates of the castle and laid his hand upon the wood. The outer gate was known as the Trap Gate and inlaid in it were magical traps meant to kill intruders. The boy slipped past without triggering it, opened the true gate, and strolled inside. The infamous gate had claimed the life of many an enemy, but this boy—this stranger who

had never been registered with it—sauntered in. All in the castle sent up a cry of alarm, matched only by the shouts of surprise among the soldiers outside.

“I-it shouldn’t be possible to get through that gate!”

“The Ultimate Dungeon didn’t stop him. How could the Trap Gate stand a chance?”

Swords whistled through the air, the naked steel gleaming in the sunlight. Meanwhile, a boy clad entirely in black and several fiercely beautiful girls slipped into the inner gates of the castle. They advanced with deliberate calm as if they walked along a domestic roadway instead of a trap-littered gateway. They moved with confidence, as if the traps were not there. All, including the king and queen, were entranced; their royal majesties leaned forward to catch a better view of the scene. All watchers rose—a soundless standing ovation for his performance.

With nothing left to slash or stab, the flying swords transformed into wing-like scaled shields extending out from the shoulders of the boy’s black cloak. We watched in a mesmerized silence as he approached the inner gate. A gate that, if the laws of nature held true, would not open. It was wrought in beautiful decorative ivy, a magical trap that would ensnare and throttle any intruder who attempted to force their way into the castle. We rushed to cry out and stop him, but we had long since screamed ourselves hoarse while lamenting the misery of our plight. We could do nothing but wail silently as he touched the gate and bade it open. The ivy did not so much as twitch in defense. The deadly doors opened like they were welcoming a long-awaited guest, granting him access into the castle. The silence in the castle ruptured, and the boy in black called in...

“Mail’s here! I’m the errand boy for the lady of the house (er, castle?), and I have to say, she has a thing or two to learn about managing her teenage boy employees. She’s running me ragged with all this scouting! Why all the secrecy? I’m only delivering a few letters! Whatever. Here’s your mail. Just to be safe, let me remind you that letters are for reading, not eating. If you’re going to eat it,

make sure you read it first. I won't do redeliveries, since this is a letter that may or may not be from S. Girl. (Now, does that stand for Sister Girl or Schrodinger's Girl? Who knows!) But there's no cat inside either way. Oh yeah, and Wolf Girl and Bunny Girl aren't part of this special delivery. I would draft them and trade for Tiny Tanuki, but watch out 'cause she bites. Speaking of biting, I wonder if I could trade the mean girls for the beastf—*mmpf!*”

“Wh-what is he babbling about? Oh no, we don't have his interpreter on hand. Whatever are we to do?”

One of the beautiful girls slapped her hand over the boy's mouth, effectively silencing him. Perhaps this was a custom of whatever far-off land she hailed from. I took the letter from Princess Ariel, confirmed that it was indeed her handwriting, and then led the boy and his companions to the audience chamber of the king. As we walked, he spoke to the woman from the Shino Clan. They shared details about the state of the war and the boy's scouting expedition.

“We bid you enter. The king and queen are waiting. I'm afraid in such turbulent times, we cannot stand on ceremony; they wish to speak with you at once. Pray forgive us for this lack of courtesy, but His Majesty would speak with you frankly.”

Our royal family had never been much of one for ceremony to begin with, and doubly so for the king. He rose from his throne, ignoring his guard, and walked down the hall to meet the boy halfway into the chamber.

“Well met, black-haired commander. I must thank you. Not as king of my country, but as father of my dearest Ariel. Our fine representative of the Shino Clan has told us only the broad strokes of the current situation. Would you permit me read my daughter's letter so I may learn more?”

As His Majesty spoke, impatience drove his hand to pick up the letter and begin to read. Even for a king, this was an affront to any messenger, but none of us could find fault in him when tears filled his eyes. His fingertips trembled as he turned the pages. He was glued to his daughter's every word. In this

moment, he was like any other father concerned for his child, and none—not even the minister of ceremonies—could chastise him for it.

Meanwhile, the black-cloaked boy stood there with the girl's hand covering his mouth. As the savior of our princess and the one who sent the woman from the Shino Clan with her provisions, we all—even the king—owed him our respect. Were he to issue us orders, none of us could dare disobey. Our lives were in his hands. Yet he said nothing. The significance of this was not lost on the king who once again bowed low.

“I must beg forgiveness for my ignorance of foreign customs, but I know not the meaning of pressing a hand to a person's mouth. Here, we use such a gesture to silence a person... In light of the great debt we owe you—truly, how could we ever hope to make it up to you? It would only be right to offer you a seat at our decision-making table. That you refuse to speak over anyone is the height of solicitude. We are enormously grateful. The outside world may whisper behind our backs and say the royal family is but a figurehead, but even a figurehead king is duty-bound to fight for his country. And if my daughter should risk her life to bring us back into God's light and oppose the pope, then I dare not stop her. I am little more than a humble instrument of God, but even so, as king and general of the knights of the Church, I shall lead my people in the coming battle. I shall show my subjects the will of our royal family. Please, would you relay my message to my daughter Ariel? I would be most grateful.”

Tales of this black-haired commander, this master of deception, sang of his silver tongue and honeyed lips. However, he spoke not a word to us. He nodded assent. His boundless consideration for our needs humbled us, and we took to our knees. Before we could rise, he walked away from us on unhurried steps. His retreating figure delivered his implicit message: it was now up to the king.

It must have been my imagination, but I swore I saw him fighting to draw breath before passing out and being dragged from the audience chamber by his lovely companion. No doubt it was another foreign custom or an attempt at humor. Its meaning was lost to me. Nevertheless, his mere appearance had

transformed the mood in the palace. Hemmed in by soldiers as we were, we had felt trapped and somber. But now, as our brave defenders watched the commander bowl away the armored church soldiers, we laughed until our stomachs ached. The resolve to take up arms once more filled us.

Our collective attention was fixated on the feast the boy had brought us to cheer up the troops. Outside, the screams and crashing sounds continued unabated; the woman from the Shino clan watched with a resigned shrug and an “Oh my goodness.” But I saw the smile on her face and the many emotions contained within. This black-haired boy—be he called commander, clown, or con artist—was the human embodiment of a miracle. He was such an odd fellow. But I couldn’t help but think, if this lifted our spirits so, then perhaps it was not so terrible to be fooled.

As delicious as the food looked, none of us knew the proper way to eat it. We hesitated to tuck into the feast. I would have appreciated if the commander had at least told us how to eat the food... What was this “*shabu shabu*” dish? It looked scrumptious, whatever it was, but... What was this peculiar device in which it was served? What, pray tell, was a “hotpot”?

DAY 113
AFTERNOON

He said stay put...but did you really think I would? Pfft! Ha!

THE CATHEDRAL OF THE THEOCRACY

OH, THE IGNOMINY! Cruelty of cruelties! My first encounter with that pretty lady in Stalker Girl's Clan in what, days? Yet when I hoped to talk the night away re: my scouting mission, Dancer Girl covered my mouth!

"I couldn't even say my pleases or thank yous! I couldn't wow the room with my flood of flowing, fluent, flawless, flamboyant, flirtatious flimflam! A flood so strong it could drown a kappa monster! Diplomatic courtesy so great, even Class Rep has had good things to say about it! At least the lady from Stalker Girl's clan knows about shabu shabu. Things in the palace won't get too shabu shabby with her around."

Welp, back to the old dude's house. I asked his wife to write a letter and made my preparations to catch lunch with the old dude, as per his invitation. I told the old lady I'd make dinner tonight in thanks for her hospitality and set off.

Now here it was: the Cathedral. The wellspring of this tangled web of issues, the keystone of all corruption in the dark annals of this world's history. With the letter from the old dude's wife in hand, I claimed that I was here to drop off his lunch and thus gained admittance to the huge domed building. Now any mischief I got up to could be blamed on the old man, so I had nothing to worry about.

"My goodness..."

"It's huge!"

The Cathedral was a dignified house of worship; the inner chambers were filled with an austere radiance. Light from the sun streamed in through skylights and played off the marble-white columns and walls. It was modest, yet

majestic. A building of such purity, it was a preview of the celestial heavens—or, that was how it was designed. This building was puffery designed to brainwash or mislead the subconscious. Just a trick. Consequently, the more the people worshipped here, the more easily their unconscious mind fell under the church's sway. When priests preached at the pulpit in the center of this vast, soaring, light-filled chamber, the preaching itself became a form of psychological manipulation. The Cathedral's very goal was, *by design*, to control the subconscious of all who ventured here.

"Stick close and watch out. Don't go far from Dancer Girl, no matter what. Your stats and skills will only get you so far, so don't pick any fights. That's crucial. Essential. Leave all the fight-picking to me, got it? Oh, and if you could not cover my mouth this time, that'd be great. Not only can I not flex my flashy fluency, but I also need to breathe to live."

"Fear not, Mr. Haruka. We won't get in your way. We're here to help, promise!"

"No starting fights! Got it."

Mysteriously, I didn't get a chance to speak after hand-delivering the letter to the palace. It was a shame, because the Ultimate Dungeon treasure "Trap Ring: Automatically deactivates traps." finally had its chance to shine, and I didn't! At least I gave my new shoulder funnels a test drive. With the wires being my Magic Threads, I rained Confusion and Paralysis on the battlefield. The Self-Propulsion feature ate up huge amounts of MP, so I reserved that for emergencies only. It was still quite handy, though. Wisdom recorded the automatic fight patterns and was currently whipping up revisions for them.

Anyway, my last job today was scouting out the Cathedral. Kind of like a field trip, if you think about it. I would take a tour of the property and let Jupiter Eye work out the best places to sneak in. Today, the girls had to wear loose A-line dresses with hoods that we pilfered at the front door. "Clothes of worship" or whatever. Even in these baggy clothes, their curves were amazing. If anything, it proved a pretty girl can look good in a burlap sack! After this, I was going to

scout all right. I would put my peepers in serious note-taking mode!

Incidentally, I was wearing one of those outfits too, but I doubted there was any demand to see teenage boys dressed in baggy robes.

“This is as far as layfolk are allowed to go. If you would please wait here, sir and ladies.”

With so many other worshippers, we blended in perfectly. Unfortunately, the clothes also backfired. We had difficulty sneaking in further while dressed like this. If only we had a good place to change clothes... Oh look! A changing room.

“Ah-ha! A confessional.”

I wasn't keen on changing while confessing my sins to a priest, nor would I let a priest watch the girls change. *That's my job!*

“Besides, I have nothing to confess. I'm just an eternally, infernally innocent teenage boy with a glut of false accusations. I can't think of a single I've ever done wrong.”

So much for changing. The only thing left to do was have a look-see around the chapel. You know, to say “hi” to the old god dude, or whatever.

“Are you there, god? It's me, Haruka. You have a lot to answer for, geezer. What were you thinking, sending a poor, innocent teenage boy who could never hurt a fly to such a backward world? But you're an old guy, so maybe it's for the best you stay lost. Don't look at me; don't talk to me. Can I return you for a goddess? I wonder what the upgrade costs.”

It was impossible to see the underlying structures supporting this lofty Cathedral from the outside, and now that I was inside, I found it was no easier. I would have loved to take a peep at the underlying structures supporting those pairs of lofty domes—ahem. I mean, these teens were too young for my tastes. No need to call the police!

“Hmm... Is it just me, or is there something up with the walls?”

Area Analyze was flummoxed by this place. It didn't know what to make of

the rooms I wasn't allowed to enter. Holding magic didn't work at long distances, so that was a bust. I couldn't find any cracks in the plaster or the thick stone walls underneath, meaning I couldn't send my Magic Threads through the walls. At this rate, I couldn't Map anything but the chapel area. I sent my Magic Threads scurrying into every odd-looking nook and cranny I could find. If there were any doors that had been painted over to look like ordinary walls, my Magic Threads were thinner than a strand of hair and could slide right on in. But they could only travel a certain distance, and I was getting bored poring over every patch of wall and floor!

"I have a basic idea of the shape of the room and what's in it. But there's some sorta...transmission feedback? Man, this is boring! What a waste of Magic Thread! Compared to the lovely flesh I got to feel up last night, a stone wall is no fun to fondle."

Even if I did manage to run a Magic Thread into some inner sanctum of the Cathedral, chances were it'd just bump into another wall, a floor, a priest, or an ancient nun. The Cathedral had a dire lack of divinely pretty, young nuns. I was also down for divinely pretty, young, *naked* nuns, but there was no luck on that front either. Nun whatsoever.

"Hey there, person who says she's a sister even if she's more of a grandma! I'm looking for an old dude to deliver a letter, drop off his lunch, or maybe burn him—the usual. Would you know where he might be? You know, a violent old dude who swears like a sailor? The one with a way hotte—I mean, younger wife? Yeah, I might as well burn down the whole Cathedral."

"*Aherm*, do you happen to mean the commander of the Knights of the Scriptures, Sir Gasharx? He may have a bit of an uncouth tongue, but he's as upstanding as they come. Would you like me to fetch him?"

She could fetch him all she wanted, but I didn't want him. I didn't like how violent he was! This whole lunch thing was just an excuse for me to sneak around and do recon, so there was no point. Old dudes never had a point!

“Uh, Gay Sharks, was it? Yeah, that’s the one. He wants me to come see him and his knights specifically, see. He was real insistent on the ‘me coming to him’ part, not the other way around. Old dudes, I’m telling you!”

“Oh! In that case, let me escort you directly to him. It’s so nice to see that he and his wife are still a close couple. Sending him lunch, why, what a *darling* idea.”

Unfortunately, the elderly nun didn’t take me to the center of the Cathedral. Instead, we hugged the outer edges of the compound. I didn’t see a single staircase. The Cathedral seemed to be arranged in a complex pattern of disjointed sectors. I tried to Map it and noticed that a patch of wall had odd dimensions. There must have been a secret passage. I extended a Magic Thread as far as it could go through the wall.

“And here you are. This is the office of the Knights of the Scriptures, but I believe the commander is currently out drilling the troops. The screams of his victims are a bit of a tip-off.”

“Hey, thanks. Can I pay you back with part of his lunch? Just know that the cookies are delicious but fattening, so don’t lecture me if you gain weight. Disclaimer: I didn’t do anything wrong? Also, bye-bye!”

“Oh! Why, thank you. I’ll be sure to share it with the others.”

I heard screams and familiar cursing. The old dude was swearing his head off as he drilled his troops, an old-fashioned and decidedly unscientific form of training. Not like the enlightened, scientific, humane methods of Sergeant Hartman. He was going ballistic.

“You wretched, useless mob! How do you expect to get anywhere if you give up? Devil take you all; do you lose all drive just because victory is outside your grasp?! You maggoty bunch of dogs!”

“How’s it hangin’, old fart? I brought along someone no one can beat (it’s Dancer Girl). You can give up if you want. She’ll kick your butt either way. Yup, it’s a cruel world. You ready for Dancer Girl to serve up some world-shattering

whoop-ass?”

“Y-you?! Stay away! Stay away, I insist! I apologize for my impertinence! Please, forgive me, madam! I simply wanted to teach this pathetic lot the way of the world—but come now, is being destroyed by this woman necessary?”

The soldiers snuck peeks at Dancer Girl and the twins. It almost looked like they wanted to train with the girls... *Now that's brave!*

“Go for it. Don't hold back, Dancer Girl. They're just old dudes. Besides, this old dude is just playing shy. All this 'stay away' business is an invitation, so... Have a little sparring sesh. Oh, and here's your lunch.”

“I was not! Don't put words in my mouth. You are the enemy of God, are you not? What the Devil are you thinking, walking into the Cathedral?!”

Soldiers flew through the air and smacked into the walls. The tongbei roundhouse kick was certainly innovative, but weren't these two concepts diametric opposites? Oh well. Diametric or not, they made a good combo. Dancer Girl taught the twins tongbei reverse sweeping kicks... *Can I be her next pupil?*

“Are you even listening? Also, does this count as training?!”

The handmade lunch was just a disguise. In truth, it was a teenage boy's magic handmade frontier mushroom lunch. I called it the “Eat Up, Bubbachuck Special, Ya know?” I doled it out, shoved it down old men throats, let the mushrooms work their HP recovering magic, and then let the girls beat them up all over again. All this sneaking around must have been wearing me down, because I didn't have the strength to hold back.

“I fooled around too much with the Godly Aegis Bladed Shoulder Shields and Incarnate at the palace. Now I'm so angry, three soldiers at a time doesn't feel like enough for me! Good thing there are plenty of knights to go around.”

“The blasted boy won't heed me!”

If the violent old dude had joined in, we might have needed both tongbeiquan

and qi activation to win—our magic was weakened here. Fortunately, these soldiers were high level enough that they could withstand the girls' full tongbeiquans. The girls seemed to be enjoying themselves, too. A little voice, the Sergeant Hartman inside me, whispered that I should do some drilling.

"I want a sir at the start and end of every sentence, you hear me, 'you f*****g maggots?!' Whatever that means! I don't know; I don't speak English! Or asterisk! What does ***** mean? You know?"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

There we go. That's more like it. Back on Earth, Sergeant Hartman was probably smiling in pride. No matter how we bashed and bonked and beat up the old dudes, we couldn't wipe those half-smiles from their faces. They were the kind of proud, patriotic soldiers (pronounced: jingoistic warmongers) who fought on despite the incredible odds. Getting beaten up by Dancer Girl wasn't too scary—she broke your ability to feel fear. *Yeah, be a coward all you want. Just don't give in to your fear.*

"You're beating my soldiers so hard you're destroying their personalities! What do you think training is? Yes, they're gaining levels, but... Why do they look so happy to be cut to ribbons?!"

"You were smiling yourself when you went on your violent old dude rampage yesterday. The church is the place to be if you want to get cut to shreds by Dancer Girl. Say...are you sure it's not a little sus? Old men wanting to get beaten up by a teenage girl? All right, anyone who doesn't want to get whacked is getting buried. Man, I want to bury some old dudes."

Now I knew the layout of this area, the front right first-floor sector of the Cathedral. The sector for the Knights of the Scriptures. The outer left sector was their barracks and parade ground. The rear sectors and back sectors were still mysteries to me, and I had no idea what was located on any other floor. I looked outside, but all I saw were rooftops and birds. Too many unknowns.

"Hiii-yah!"

“What the blazes are you do—will you listen to me?!”

I decided to sneak in during the dead of night. Wow, what a spy! That meant full-body tights for Dancer Girl. Or maybe a leotard! A scouting mission was serious, (t)horny work... A zippered leather body suit was another attractive option. Ooh, but a surprise attack by mini-skirt-clad ninjas... Yes, very (t)horny—with or without the “t”!

DAY 113

EVENING

Legend tells of a hero laid low by a dreadful foe—juvie!

**THE CATHEDRAL OF THE THEOCRACY, THE KNIGHTS OF THE SCRIPTURES'
PARADE GROUND**

THE OLD DUDE'S ARMS—the raw power of bulging biceps—were as hard as steel. He pulled them back and, with his enormous sword, unleashed a bellow in tandem with the swing of his weapon. Despite the mighty force channeled through the move, his sword did not waver. He held the hilt in a strong grip and wielded the sword with a deft, precise ease. It slashed through the air in an arc that left an afterimage like the lash of a whip.

This was orthodox swordplay, but a form of swordplay where every movement was planned. All wasteful motion had long since been whittled away to make man and blade unite as a single killing machine. Just one move seamlessly transitioned into the next, each movement optimized to bring the swordsman the ultimate advantage in battle. Here was a form of swordplay with a foundation in pure reason—the art of the Skull Lord. Without the blowgun, that was. Too bad, because the blowgun was what made it super lethal!

“*Hrrgh!* Accursed boy! I can't keep up with whatever the bloody hell you think you're doing! And now you dare pull a blowgun on me? Have you no pride as a swordsman? Coward! Underhanded cheat!”

“Huh? This is the Skull Lord's favorite blowgun. It has a rich history. Your great-great-great-great-grandpappy left it for you. And stuff?”

“What?! That cannot be!”

Ew. Even cringing in fear didn't improve an old dude. They just weren't cute. There was something fundamentally creepy about a swole-ass, old-ass man

with a blow dart in his forehead curled up in a fetal position and hugging his knees.

In the end, everyone got dragged into training with the old dude. Even me. I had to be one of his sparring partners. He demanded I show him more of the Skull Lord's sword skills. Since he begged, I pulled out the blowgun on him. That's how we got here. Turned out blowguns didn't run in the family.

"I asked for a sword fight, boy! Put that nonsense away! And I told you to stay away! At least fight me like a man if you cannot obey, boy! As much as it pains me, you're the only one who can teach the Knights of the Scriptures these techniques. Get on with it!"

His sword sliced through the air, ruffling my hair. Oh, he *meant* that one! Problem was, the old dude wanted me to use a sword, and all I had was a stick. Kind of a sword-ish stick, though. *Close enough?* So long as I didn't manifest a divine sword, that was. Divine blades would cleave right through the old fogey's sword and armor. And probably the old dude, come to think of it. I'd enjoy that, but I didn't think he'd let me stay overnight at his place if I cut him to bits on the battlefield.

I was buffeted by a storm of swords, and if I wasn't careful, I'd be a feast for crows. Bit by bit, the old man was improving. His technique needed a lot of polish, but he was well on his way to perfecting one of the arts of the Skull Lord (sans blowgun). The old man took his licks, made his best attempts, and occasionally came close to hitting me. *I wonder if this is how Miss Armor Rep feels when she trains me.* Except I never stood a chance at perfecting Miss Armor Rep's sword techniques! Anyone who could swordfight like her would be a god of swordplay! Besides, I was fighting with Cane Mastery anyway.

"Yeee-aarrgh! Can't you let me get a hit?! Would you at least pretend to reel? Oh, you infuriate me, you dog! Why do your lies only save face for yourself? Acknowledge I have improved!"

The violent old dude revealed his true colors: blue. Yeah, his face was totally

blue from all the swearing and puffing. The doddering old man was going killer mode. This guy had a nasty mouth, a nasty face, and a nasty mind for the ultimate nasty grand slam!

“Wait, you thought were getting better? Ha! Want to fight Dancer Girl again? Want to feel the ferocity once more? Don’t mess with Dancer Girl. She’s bad enough! Face two, and RIP.”

“No! No, I didn’t mean it! I apologize! I simply thought that I had the form down, but I know nothing! That dungeon emperor would destroy my spirit! Why is your life full of so many frightening people? Is this really the norm on the frontier?”

“I wouldn’t say there’s *so many* frightening people... But if we’re talking swordplay, I know one dungeon emperor who’s the best swordfighter around. Want to try her? I doubt you’ll understand much from watching. Even I have no idea how she does it!”

It would be hard to find a more instructive—or frightening—experience than fighting Miss Armor Rep. Future Sight could see dozens of possible futures, but she slashed through every one. Miss Armor Rep sliced through every escape route and every future you could live behind them. The infinite, spreading kaleidoscope of a thousand things her opponents had yet to do, poof, snuffed out. It was the kind of scary that made you abandon hope.

“If even *you* don’t understand it, then it’s far beyond me! What the hell do they do out there on that frontier?!”

“Yeah, life can be tough out there. But as much as we had on our plates, we came to the Theocracy because none of you knew how to behave. I didn’t beat every old dude in the country because I had nothing better to do, you feel me? And you’ve got an overpopulation of them, so it was a lot. They’re an invasive species! I’ve got more old dudes than I know what to do with, and they keep spawning. Why would I want more? I have too many at home.”

“I...I apologize, boy. Truth be told, the Knights of the Scriptures were first

founded to train the knights who traveled to the frontier on monster-slaying pilgrimages. We've fallen far indeed if we take such sound beatings."

See? I *knew* the Skull Lord's sword techniques were meant for fighting monsters! This was a craft honed with the intent of bonking beasts...and then somewhere along the way, someone threw in a blowgun.

"Hmm. You're not too bad with a sword. You could probably keep up with the older orphans on monster-slaying field trips. Don't worry. If anything goes wrong, the frontier housewives will come bail you out. Just make sure not to mistake a housewife for an orc. Here's the trick to telling them apart: housewives are much scarier. Beyond that, good luck."

"I thought the monsters were the most fearsome part of the frontier, but even the people are terrifying! I must retrain all our knights! Although they have grown much stronger through your training...but why are they laughing to themselves and licking their swords?"

"Oh, if they're at the 'Mwa ha ha!' stage, then their training is almost over. The last priestly old dudes who came to the frontier ended up like that and became monster-massacring machines. And (*whisper whisper*, it's permanent)."

"They'll never go back to normal?!"

"I mean, they can't quit, even though it's shit; so that's it? At least they can't be killed. Nothing's better than killing without being killed. Once you're dead, that's it! If you just get beaten black and blue—I mean, it sucks, but you made it. And hey! It gives you more time to lick your knife and cackle evilly to yourself. In the end, it's the quantity of your years, not the quality. You're lucky to be alive! You're all old dudes."

"Is this what they teach the survivors out there on the cruel, cruel frontier? We are spoiled fools, the lot of us. We've forgotten how it feels to resist death daily. It is a kind of madness, but our sanity is ignorance. But—why the cuss are my soldiers adding spikes to their armor? You can't seriously mean this is what ordinary people do on the frontier. Boy! Quit looking away, boy!"

After that, I went off with a *knock-knock-knock* and a *rat-tat-tat* on walls, floors, and ceilings around the Cathedral—reconnaissance. Something didn't feel right, and Jupiter Eye was picking up faint traces of...something. Whatever it was, it blocked X-Ray Vision and Area Analyze. Was it a wall? A magic item? I went from wall to wall, putting my hands against them and channeling magic. I used Holding magic to analyze them.

Tap-tap-tap. Okay, that was stone. But how come I felt a teeny-tiny trace amount of magic when I touched it? It was like every stone in the Cathedral added up to make an enormous magical circuit. The *Cathedral itself* was a magic item according to Wisdom. That explained the lack of complicated mechanisms and why I felt so little magic in each individual stone.

Knock-knock-BOOM. Okay, that last one was a tongbei sword slap. That's an attack where you started with a slash but pulled away at the last second to hit the target with the flat of the tongbeiquan blade. I didn't know if this was an unforeseen result or a plain old side effect, but while I was tongbeiquan'ing, the expression on knights' faces changed as their sanity collapsed. Their focus increased. Their senses heightening like animals, they threw themselves into battle with a sharp intuition. Unfortunately, their opponents were *real* animals—well, beastfolk—who beat the knights to a pulp. The twins were turning into excellent trainers.

"I, too, had best devote myself to my study of the blade lest I lose to these beastfolk. It's been too long since I've witnessed such fine fighting and wondrous weaponry. But...must the girls be so hard on us? I have no words. Even so, I could likely best one of these beastfolk girls one-on-one. Is not the Cathedral too dangerous for them, then?"

"Right, but we're not here to fight. Honestly, I was hoping you and your knights could be an additional set of guards for us. Just...behave when Sister Girl and RBF Knight Lady show up. It's all well and good to yell '*Hi-yah!*' or be an ugly, violent old dude. But I'm worried the lack of sanity, smarts, and sentience will make the knights attack the rebellion on sight. You guys are the real

danger! Why is it so hard for people to understand how important it is that *everyone* survive?”

I bet the old dude had some stupid plan like trying to get into the inner sanctum and kill the pope himself. In his final moments, he would be giving out one final lesson to his men.

What a dolt.

“As pitiful as I am, I have things I care about as well. Things bigger than life itself, things that would bankrupt my soul to lose. My men would say the same or at least...they would have before they lost their minds to sword-licking nonsense.”

I wanted to get the worst battles out of the way before Class Rep and the other girls got here. Oh, and pick up loot, too. That’s why I wanted the intel necessary for pope-pummeling. There were too many people around the pope during the day, and if we launched an attack on him from outside the Cathedral, clergy would come running. My best bet was to attack in the dead of night, with no one around to get caught up in the mess save for a couple of church knights. If all went wrong and we had to bring the Cathedral down around our own ears, very few people would get hurt. So stealth was crucial.

“Something’s not right with the layout of the building here. It makes no sense from an architectural standpoint. Why would you use this space as a passageway? If you want pointless passages, make them lead to a storage room. Why does it loop all the way around and pop out here?”

“Mr. Haruka, that’s the last of the knights! Ms. Nefertiri says she’s hungry and wants to go home, and Sir Gasharx says he’s had enough for the day. Hm?” *Sniff sniff*. “Why does the air smell different right in this spot?”

Huh, the indraft had a scent? *That* was weird. Now that Bunny Girl mentioned it, something seemed off. I touched the wall, but there was nothing fun to grope here. This wall was flat as a board!

“Not like I enjoy feeling up curved walls either. I’m not a wallsexual.”

“Is this the spot? Hmm, it does have a scent. I think it’s...incense? Let me call my sister over. Members of the wolf tribe have amazing senses of smell.”

“Whereas the rabbit tribe is known for good hearing, huh? Can you hear anything on the other side of this wall?”

Bunny Girl plastered herself against the plaster and leaned her ear to the wall. Her boobs squished flat against the wall too, all soft and... *No, no, no thinking that! I am keeping my eyes to myself. Little peeks only! Anyone that juvenile will get me sent to juvie hall!* Her body may have looked plenty adult, but I didn’t want to go down in legend as the brave hero who’d vanished after someone tipped the police off about him. Younger teens were too teeny for me!

“I’m here!” *Sniff sniff.* “I can smell it too. It’s the same incense that was in the chapel. Maybe the two places are connected.”

“But it’s too quiet on the other side of the wall. If it was the chapel, I would hear footsteps, but there’s only a distant echo sound. Maybe it’s a stairwell?”

I sent a Magic Thread in through a teeny-tiny crack in the spot Wolf Girl indicated.

The crack turned out to be a hidden door, but it wouldn’t open from this side. I had to extend my Thread as far as it would go to learn more. The twins chowed down on pudding as a reward for their efforts, hugging each other and crying as they did. *Come on, don’t cry. You’ll make Dancer Girl think I’m up to no good. Here, take more pudding. Here’s some pudding for Dancer Girl too. And head pats. I’m not doing anything creepy!* When I patted anywhere else, the girls got mad at me, so I had to stick to head pats. This was serious discrimination here.

Anyway, now that we had our intel, it was time to head out. The Magic Thread couldn’t go far, so I didn’t learn much. But Wisdom would analyze what little it picked up. In the meantime, we could head back to the old dude’s house. We walked back along a corridor that hugged the outer wall of the chapel, and the twins checked the sounds and smells coming through the wall.

Our search hadn't even mapped the first of the Cathedral's three floors, but at least we had a few clues about its design philosophy and architectural quirks.

What the hell *was* this building?

DAY 113

NIGHT

Turkish coffee gets in your teeth, but it's a real eye-opener!

THE VIOLENT OLD DUDE'S HOUSE IN ARYUCA, THE CAPITAL OF THE THEOCRACY

SINCE THE VIOLENT OLD DUDE and his wife gave us room and board for two nights running, I paid them back tonight by making pork cutlet. In addition to *katsudon* cutlet rice bowls and *kushikatsu* cutlet skewers, I made mushroom salad, *babaocai*, and a spicy stir fry of cucumber and chicken at the old dude's request. He sure had an old dude's taste. He gobbled up all the chicken and loved every moment of it. The rest of that chaotic menu—including stewed taro root plus a pork and potato stew with two species of tubers—went down to universal acclaim.

"Eat up. I tried to feed the old dude a mushroom bento for lunch, but he got pissy because he wanted cutlet instead. 'Cause he likes to cut his enemies. Get it? *The Art of War* and the cutlet cookbooks have synergy—be it enemies or chicken, try frying in hot oil! Is anyone even listening to me?"

"Oh, this tastes so good!" Cue the sobbing.

"Damn the frontier! What the blazing hell is this amazing food?!"

As ever, the twins cried and hugged each other, and once the old dude's wife heard their backstory, she joined the weeping pile. Meanwhile, the old dude wanted seconds, but Dancer Girl was doing her best to eat me out of (the old dude's) house and home. The old dude looked like he was almost ready to start crying too. *Come on, dude. I already made thirty servings, and there's only six of us!*

"Thank you so much! That was incredible."

“I cannot express enough how very touched and grateful I am for all of your kindness. I owe you my life after everything you’ve done for m—*mmhph*, *mmmph!*”

For dessert, I debuted a sponge cake cooked in a frying pan. I had yet to perfect this new recipe, but the others loved it. Dancer Girl even waited for more with her mouth wide open. The cake came out similar to a pancake, but I didn’t have the exact ratio of ingredients right. Thus, I decided to wing it.

“If I remember correctly, the recipe calls for fifty eggs, a kilo of sugar, a kilo of flour, half a liter of milk, and half a kilo of butter. Then you whip the egg whites and sugar with Vibration magic until they form a nice meringue. Mix the yolks, melted butter, and the milk, then whip that too. Add flour, and then mix, mix, and mix some more. Serves three girls, I think?”

The key was cooking it over a very low flame to avoid burning it. This was just a test run, so the edges were a little crisp. No one seemed to mind. I guess being tasty and sweet was all they cared about. For the modern teen girl’s highly refined palate, it was all about quantity over quality.

After that, I took my turn in the bath and went back to my room to put my thoughts in order. From my brief feel-up of the central chambers of the Cathedral’s first floors, I knew there was a dungeon. A defensive dungeon, not a maze. It would allow the clergy to launch counterattacks and buy time for any noncombatants to evacuate upstairs without needing an army to defend them. And, since the clergy could attack from the high ground, any invader would have to fight every step of the way, dodging a plethora of traps. The Cathedral was a fortress designed to whittle away invaders through attrition.

You couldn’t throw a huge army at the Cathedral. There would be too many losses. As we fought our way up to the pope and he fled higher and higher, we would lose too many of our soldiers. Our forces would be exhausted and all the church had to do was wait. We would be the only ones taking damage. At the top, it’d only get hairier. The Cathedral was an inverted dungeon, worse toward the top than the bottom. The wide, snaking corridors were a defense against

monsters, not just people. Sure, dungeons came in different sizes, but this place was too big to only handle human threats.

“This ‘Cathedral’ is fake. It’s a facility designed to collect and trap all the magic in the Theocracy.”

It sucked up all the magic from its dungeon to stop it from growing too large and triggering a dungeon deluge. With such a powerful seal and the magical might of an entire country, whatever this Cathedral was sealing had to be worse than a typical deep dungeon. Most likely, it held a dungeon emperor.

“So even if I find a way to blow up the Cathedral, I’d probably trigger a dungeon deluge. I guess we could try to take on both the Cathedral above and the dungeon below at the same time. It would be tricky. If I mess up and cause a deluge, I won’t be able to ‘Oops, clumsy me’ my way out of this one. Hmm.”

I wished I knew more. It’d be best to eliminate the threat before the girls got here. For that, though, I needed more hands. I mean, even if I had them, I didn’t have a card in my hand to play. My hands were tied. I wanted time to formulate a good plan to scope out the Cathedral, but the only pieces on my side of the board were Dancer Girl, the twins, and me. Once the palace was liberated, I would need the twins and the old dude knight commander to free the capital and guard it. So long as I didn’t know what was in the Cathedral, there was an unknown monster lurking at the heart of this city.

Worse, the seal was growing in strength over time. I needed to destroy it, or the Cathedral would steal all the magic in the Theocracy.

Because the magical makeup of the land had been mismanaged, harvests were less bountiful in the Theocracy than anywhere else. This must have started a long time ago, leading the Theocracy to invade the wealthy Beast Nation to recoup their losses. This one, stupid reason caused the changes in church doctrine that advocated for stealing crops in the name of punishing the enemies of god. To hide the Theocracy’s decline, the church dirtied its hands with the slave trade. Maybe it was their authority. Maybe it was their ill-gotten

wealth from the magic item monopoly. Either way, they manipulated the masses with a false promise of an afterlife, all for the sake of hiding the truth. They rewrote history and took advantage of belief.

“And if the situation’s only getting worse, then that means the dungeon must be growing.”

Then there was the problem of a dungeon deluge. I shuddered to think how much damage a dungeon king and a hundred floors of monsters could cause. In an actual dungeon, fighting one type of monster per floor wasn’t so bad. But in a deluge, that advantage vanished. An army would struggle to counter a mixed bag of monsters, and the monsters would break through human lines. If there was a dungeon emperor on top of that...the world would go down in flames. There would be a chain reaction of dungeon deluges, and once the dungeon kings and their armies entered the fray, the destruction would be literally unstoppable.

That’s how the church’s dungeon-deluge-causing device worked. It disseminated Dancer Girl’s magic, which resonated with dungeon kings to set off man-made deluges.

“But if the dungeon under the Cathedral was the same one Dancer Girl was held captive in, it would have died after she left it.”

From what I knew, people with Dancer Girl’s skin color came from an area in the south known as the Confederation of Nations. Here in the east, everyone looked Caucasian. Clearly, some history was being covered up.

The info I sought was in the bowels of the Cathedral. There was probably also some sick loot down there. Maybe even an adult sto—nope, I wasn’t saying anything! I could feel a deadly wave of malice seeping through the wall of the next room over. Something told me someone was waving a morning star in my general direction. *Yikes!*

“Problem is, the Cathedral is a ‘relic’—basically a magic item—that amasses all the magic in the Theocracy. It grants a Divine Protection that the Church

pretends is a miracle of god. Clearly, it's lost its way."

As part of this Divine Protection, the Cathedral could grant stuff like Healing and Revival. According to legend, a priest once healed the wounds of an injured child brought to the church. In another legend, a deathly ill priest made a full, miraculous recovery. In yet another, it was said those who prayed in the Cathedral never grew ill. This was all explainable by ordinary healing skills.

I had a lot of things I wanted to do tonight, and sneaking into the Cathedral was the most important one. Good thing I had so many disguises at the ready. I asked the old dude if there was a women's dormitory in the place. (What? Never hurts to ask.) He said no. Women were once forbidden from the Cathedral altogether; even now they weren't permitted access to anywhere but the common areas and chapel on the first floor. To go anywhere else required a magic item that served as a permit, and the church couldn't modify it. It was also a relic or something. Point was, sneaking into the place in the middle of the night meant I'd be up against old dudes only!! I had never heard of a teenage boy spy tale without any sexy lady antagonists!

"Welp, Dancer Girl, you'll just have to solo the fan service for me! Now, do I have a costume for *you*. I've got a ninja outfit featuring a see-through chain kimono top and miniskirt, or a magic leotard, or a full-body leather bondage suit. That last one's a classic! The stuff teenage-boy dreams are made of! Hooray for the Cathedral!"

I took a catnap (unfortunately, without any sexy times), got up in the middle of the night, and discovered that my teenage boyness got up too. I tamed him with the help of a pal, and then set off into the night for our Cathedral spy mission. Even though it was so late, the place was swarming with guards. So, going back to our roots, we donned the priest and nun outfits to avoid attracting attention. No one would bat an eye if they saw priests and nuns in the Cathedral in the wee hours of the morning. *The sexy nun? Yeah, she's with me. We have important business to attend to!* It was flawless.

Dancer Girl had a great view of the stars as I carried her in my arms. She

insisted it was better than a piggyback ride or being thrown over my shoulder in a fireman's lift. Princess carries were, she informed me, all the rage these days. *I dunno, it sounds tough to be a princess...* I remembered back when Princess Girl got the pseudo-dungeon heave-ho. Anyway, I Air Walked up into the heavens, Dancer Girl in my arms.

I expected the Cathedral's walls to have some sort of magic-proof and auto-repairing alarm system. The plump pigeons hanging around on top suggested maybe not. Speaking of chubby birds, the one in my arms sure weighed a to—nope, I didn't say a word!

"Ow, ow, ow! Stop pinching my cheeks, or I might drop you! Don't pull either!"

"Is punishment for, insult me!"

I jogged high up into the air. With the stars to my back, I looked down upon the Cathedral.

"Dang! People look like specks of dirt from this high up. I mean, I can't see the actual grains of grit. Just the dirtbags down there. Hey, for a glasses guy, I actually have great eyesight! Too bad there's almost nobody down there."

"Look! Exact middle, gate side! A hole!"

The chapel's skylight allowed in a stream of austere, dignified light. We also knew that the bishops had a sermon during noon services. That was our window of opportunity for stealing the light. Noon meant the sun was high overhead—lunch time. And if you were hungry, why would you care about listening to an old dude's sermon?

"In the spirit of poverty, people in the Theocracy only eat two meals a day: breakfast and dinner. Only laborers and soldiers have lunch at noon. If the girls lived here, they would have staged a revolution."

Nod nod!

This lack of food caused the short stature and slender build the people of the

Theocracy were known for. Even Sister Girl's nuns were short, with few assets to speak of. Still, we had two asset-less teenage girls in our group who binge ate like nobody's business, so meals didn't necessarily give you melons. Nutrition was mysterious stuff. Anyway, if there was a hole to be entered, as a teenage boy, I instinctually wanted in there. Yes, the tender age for exploring all kinds of holes. I was something of an expert in this myself, being a teenaged boy.

This hole was a cylindrical tube with mirrors lining the sides that went *aaaaall* the way down into the chapel. I looked in; there was no alarm system here, either. The air felt thick with magic. Maybe this was the place where all the collected magic went. This would be a good opportunity to fill my batteries as I explored. I attached a Magic Thread to the edge of the hole and began rappelling myself down.

"Yeesh, it's slippery. No thieves are getting in this way, that's for sure. Falling from this height would be lethal. I don't know how we would get out without flying. Huh! There's no rainwater or leaves and crud. I expected this would be too risky for routine cleaning, but maybe that's just a part of, like, hardcore monk training. It's like bungee jumping without the rope. Damn, monks are badass!"

No sooner had I said that, however, than I spotted a cleaning door at the bottom. Jumping down the roof was evidently not a requirement; the monks, manifestly, were more mediocre than my musings made them out to be.

"Hey, it's unlocked. Tsk! Don't they know a UTO (unidentified teenage object) can come swooping down at any minute? Heya, just popping in to say hi! I guess people around here aren't concerned about flying monsters or giant spider creatures. Maybe the Cathedral has a mechanism to ward off monsters. I hope it protects the city too!"

"At end, of hallway. I sense someone. A guard."

This little passageway led to a guard post. The layout of the Cathedral was surprisingly complex!

“Er...Father...? Might I ask what you’re doing here so late at night? Oh, heavens! Nuns aren’t allowed in this part of the Cathedral!”

The guard stopped us. Oh! I could smell the lovely scent of coffee behind him—the distinctly tantalizing aroma of a dark roast in powdered form to bring out the best of the bitterness. Turkish-style! I knew my coffees!

AFTERWORD

THANK YOU for buying this book! I have no idea how the hell we got this far, but here it is: the afterword of Volume 11.

Thank you to my editor Y-san for helping me get this book out the door. We are taught that man is a creature capable of growth, and yet my editing creature, Y-san (more of an *aww, man* than a dude) never changes. You guessed it; just like in every other book, no matter how much I whittled down the page count, he bullied me. “Oh, and by the way, you’re two pages over the page count.” He seemed like he was about to blow a gasket, so I blew my deadline and got bullied for that too. (True story, by the way.)

I once again want to thank Enomaru Saku-sensei for the lovely illustrations. They’re always incredible, and the only time the Editor Who Shall Not Be Named is cordial with me is when they arrive. We go “Dude! These are so cool!!!” together. The rest of the time, we’re trading barbs.

I was on the receiving end of a few blown gaskets because I was told the afterword should be no longer than a header plus two line breaks and no more than thirty-three lines of text. I sent back an email like, “What the hell am I supposed to put in that tiny space?!” Nobody can conduct themselves online these days. Does anyone else struggle with hate mail?

Oh! This volume is releasing concurrently with the next volume of Bibi-sensei’s manga. Thank you so much for all the great work, Bibi-sensei. Also, thank you to Hebi-sama, the editor at Comic Gardo.

With Volume 11, we are now in the Theocracy arc. It has one of those “Suspenseful spy missions! Hot babes! Gripping battles!” plots. As I’m proofreading it, I looked back on this section with the benefit of hindsight. I feel a little nostalgic...and, you know, everything an author is supposed to say in one of these things.

No spoilers or anything, but wasn’t this kind of a grim arc? Our less-than-

serious protagonist was sorely needed here. Some of the scenes were meant to be brutal, but Haruka sent the depressing mood flying. My mental image of the story was boxed in, no escape—and then sent flying. Does that make sense? I don't know what I'm saying. I think I went a little crazy writing this book. This feels like the setup for the kind of joke Haruka would tell! Ha!

I'm only here because so many of you buy my books. Thank you. I must also thank my many web readers. I publish this story online, too. In fact, I am currently in my banished protagonist arc on the Naro novel-hosting platform.

The Editor Who Shall Not Be Named and I snip at each other over the lack of space in the afterword on every book, and I end up running out of space for my acknowledgments in *eeeeevery* book. And yet, bafflingly enough, they won't cut me off from writing one!

And with that (turning this in a day late), here's my afterword, acknowledgments, a blown gasket of my own, and another deadline I've just blown past. Ha ha!

—Shoji Goji



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AFTERWORD

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