

Hey! You've  
Kidnapped  
the Wrong Royal!

Takumi Otaki  
Fshima



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Hey! You've Kidnapped the Wrong Royal!

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"I am sure  
Lady Alice can  
handle herself  
just fine."

"Dragon scales  
sell for a pretty  
penny, you know."

"Do we just  
leave her up  
there or what?"







Demon Lord

“Rest assured,  
so long as I walk  
this earth, no human  
will lay so much as  
a finger on you.”

“Eh?”

Jean

# Prologue: Did You Just Kidnap the Wrong Royal?

**WONDERLAND** was struck by a terrible rumor: the Demon Lord of the North was after the princess.

The king, in response, assigned his son Jean and the butler Seb as her last-minute royal guard. He also assigned his finest men to guard the palace.

The Demon Lord of the North and his demonic legion marched into Wonderland just a few days later.

“Where is she? There’s no use hiding!”

The palace guards fell one by one, unable to so much as land a scratch on his demonic legion. Before long, the Demon Lord found his way into the princess’s hiding place.

“Rejoice, for not only do you get the honor of becoming my wife, but you also get to bear my children as well!” he declared.

The princess hid behind Seb.

“O-Over my d-dead body!” Jean jumped out in front of him, holding out his sword, legs shaking uncontrollably, tears gushing from his eyes.







“*This* is Wonderland’s finest? *This* girly boy right here? Ha! Could’ve fooled me.”

“I won’t let you lay a ffinger on my little sister you, you monster!”

“Little sister, you say?” The Demon Lord sunk deep into thought.

*The palace guard put up an uncharacteristically pitiful display, and one half of her royal guard consists of this fair-faced, effeminate male who can’t even hold back his tears. Something doesn’t feel right...*

He looked at the princess. She met his gaze head-on, her stare combative.

The Demon Lord now knew *exactly* what was off.

“I see... She’s a double. Ha! Thought I’d just take the bait that easily? Give me your name, O knight in shining armor.”

“Jean. What’s it to you—” The Demon Lord swept Jean right off his feet in a feat of unparalleled agility. “L-let go! Let go of me!”

“Those doe eyes, that straight-edged nose, those plump lips, the glimmering golden blond hair... You’re not fooling anyone, Princess Jean.”

“M-Me? P-Princess? I’m afraid you’ve got the wrong per—”

“Despite all odds, she refuses to drop the failed act. How admirable, my wife-to-be.”

“Listen! *I’m* the prince and that’s my little sister Alice hiding behind our butler.”

“You mean to tell me *that’s* the princess? He’s got a pretty face, and the dress fits him nicely, I’ll grant you that! But the death glare and aggressive body language lead me to believe otherwise. But I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to make sure.” The Demon Lord tucked Jean’s shoulder-length hair behind his ear, softly blowing into it.

“*Ahh*, not my ear, *uuugh...*” A shiver ran down Jean’s spine, his cheeks turning bright pink.

“Need I say more? Enough talk! Our wedding ceremony awaits!”

“H-Help! Please!”

Alice was about to charge in, only for Seb to stop her dead in her tracks.

And just like that, the Demon Lord took his triumphant leave.

“It appears we got off scot-free, aside from Prince Jean’s unfortunate kidnapping,” Seb muttered.

“Why? Why *him*? Is it because he’s **cuter** than me?” Alice shuddered in defeat.

“Relax...”

“Sure, he’s got a pretty cute face, but I’m a girl and he’s a boy. I win by default, right?”

“Calm down...”

“Why were his cheeks flushed? What were those moaning sounds? Was he trying to *entice* the Demon Lord? Is he secretly a *pervert*?”

“Simmer down...”

“He’s cuter than me... Cuter. Than. *Me*...”

“Deep breaths...”

“No, no, **no**! I’m cuter! Cuter than some **guy**, at least! He did it on purpose; he *must* have! How else could he pick so wrong? I’ll kill him; kill him good; *real* good! First, I’ll give him a taste of my fist, then my foot, then I’ll chop him up into tiny little pieces! Then finally, I’ll take those pieces and tenderize them till there’s nothing left!

“Breathe in...”

“‘Breathe in,’ he says. Would you shut up already?! A guy beat me at my own game, Seb! A GUY! My purest of pure hearts, torn to pieces!”

“Breathe out...”

“I said SHUT UP!”

Alice yelled, sending shockwaves throughout the palace.



**HAVING** taken the time to collect her marbles, **Alice** could now properly

assess the situation at hand.

“Awfully levelheaded, aren’t we?” Alice said to Seb.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Jean just got kidnapped, remember?”

“I was told to protect the princess, not her brother or anyone else.”

“I can respect that. Now make us tea.”

The two sipped on their tea without a care for the trashed room, nor the fact that everyone else was busy collectively losing their heads.

“Didn’t put up much of a fight, now did they? The king’s ‘finest’ men.”

“How could they? The Demon Lord thrives in war while they wouldn’t know the first thing about it.”

“And what about you, Seb? Would you happen to know a thing or two about war?”

“Well, besides mastering every armed martial art there is to master, I spearheaded the Monster Extermination League back in, shall we say, less peaceful times.”

“Never heard of it. Are you by any chance a lot older than you look?”

“Let’s just agree I’m forever twenty-three.”

Seb was an enigmatic fellow. Everything about the man was shrouded in mystery, aside from his name and line of work. However, the crisp suit, the spotless white gloves, and the well-kept black hair all betrayed his fastidious side. He also happened to be tall and quite handsome, all of which made him quite popular with the ladies.

“Regardless, I need you to tell me one thing—can you take on the Demon Lord?”

“Provided it’s a one-on-one fight.”

“Well then, what say we teach this Demon Lord a lesson, you and me?”

“I’ll pass, thanks.”



“What was that?”

“With pleasure, my lady.”



“**SO**, you *do* wish to rescue Prince Jean?”

“I couldn’t care *less* about what befalls Jean’s virginity. I want to introduce the Demon Lord’s face to my fist, nothing more. Besides, he’ll get tossed out the second they realize the ‘he’ part.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. Demons have access to sex change magic, or so I’ve heard. And given Prince Jean’s looks, it’s likely only a matter of time until he’s bearing the Demon Lord’s children.”

“Now that *would* be a fun sight...but I can’t have a princess cuter than *me* exist on the same planet, now can I? I suppose we may as well rescue him while we’re at it.”

“With great haste, preferably.”

“Let’s get a move on then, shall we?”

“I’m good, thanks.”

“Come again?”

“Your orders, my lady.”

Seb—having received his orders—exited the room, leaving Alice all to herself.

Alice slipped into a comfy mini dress, then she went over to the mirror and bunched up her wavy, golden blond, waist-length hair into wavy twintails. Her unique brand of cute easily rivaled that of Jean’s.

She then rustled through her closet—a hodgepodge of deadly weapons like daggers and guns—and stashed anything worthwhile.

Alice was in the middle of stuffing her shoulder bag with the bare essentials when Seb brought in Lilith—one of her servants.

“Yes, my lady?”

“I hear you dream of a simpler life; an endless loop of nothing but eating and

sleeping.”

“I, *erm...*”

“I’ll be gone for a bit, and I need you to put on a dress, eat whatever you’re brought, and sleep like your life depends on it. Whatever you do, do not set a single foot outside this door. If anyone tries to come in, turn on the waterworks, tell them you want to be left alone, anything. Just make them go away.”

“A world where I get to do nothing but eat and sleep?! Count me in!”

Lilith dived into bed without further inquiry, unable to quell her primal urges.

“And that’s about everything. Father’s hyper-fixated on Jean at the moment; that’ll buy us more than enough time. Off we go then. I’m expecting great things from you, Seb.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Sorry, I didn’t quite catch that.”

“Your wish is my command.”

Through clever use of a secret passageway, the two slipped out of the palace.



**ALICE** handed Seb her golden tiara and a hastily scribbled note.

“Sell it, then buy everything on this shopping list.”

“Are you sure you want to go through with this?”

“Yes, just make sure to...you know...”

“Go through the black market to avoid tracing and inform the king that it was stolen?”

“Couldn’t have said it better myself. See you at Hatta’s place.”

“I’ll be there in an hour,” Seb said as he disappeared into the shadows.



**ALICE** rushed to an item shop on the very edge of the town.

There lived the brother and sister Hatta and Haigha. The three went way

back.

Alice swung the door wide open the second she got there.

“Welcome, Prin—Princess?!” The shop boy quickly got down on one knee.

“Make me tea. I’m parched.”

“R-Right away.”

Alice plopped down on a chair in the corner of the room and took a sip of the tea.

“Tastes cheap.”

“S-So, Princess, what brings you to our humble shop? Something to do with the recent attack?”

“Right, I almost forgot. Where’s Hatta and Haigha?”

“Hatta’s at the City of Mirrors and Haigha’s at the Mysterious Forest.”

“Huh, guess we won’t be seeing them around any time soon. Also, a cookie, if you could.”

“C-Certainly.”

*I hope she leaves sometime soon,* the shop boy thought. But in fact, she did not.



**SEB** pulled up outside the shop in a coach within the hour.

“Food, water, cookware, blankets; I took care of just about everything, my lady.” He bowed.

“Fine work, as always.”

“I don’t see Hatta or Haigha with you.”

“They’re out. Let’s get going before someone finds us.”

Alice hopped in the coach, and before long, they left town.

“Should I head straight for the Demon Lord’s castle?”

“You said you could take on the Demon Lord provided it’s one-on-one. We

need them for this to work. Hatta's currently at the City of Mirrors and Haigha's at the Mysterious Forest. Let's pick them up along the way."

"City of Mirrors it is then."

And so, Alice set off on a quest. A quest to knock some sense into the Demon Lord...and maybe rescue Jean if she had the time.



# Chapter 1: The Winged Beasts Strike

A few hours later...

“It’s nice to get some fresh air every once in a while, don’t you think?”

“It really *is* a nice change of pace.”

Alice and Seb made their way to the City of Mirrors, slowly but surely. They were in no particular rush—rescuing Jean was just a “side mission” after all.

Alice had it pretty easy. Monsters? Seb handled them no problem. Food needs? Seb had those covered as well.

“We’ve arrived, my lady.”

“Good, now we rest, then we look for a crowd. Where Hatta goes, the crowd follows.”

They parked the coach at a local inn and began wandering all over town. Soon after, they came across a large gathering in the town square.

“If demons can successfully invade a castle, just imagine what they can do to us! Here before you lay a whole assortment of items that’ll fend those pesky fiends off for dirt cheap! Get one while you still can!”

A curly-haired little misfit riled up the crowd while holding out his top hat. He was, in fact, older than Alice, despite how much younger his vest paired with shorts made him look.





The items—capitalizing on the fear in people’s hearts—sold like hotcakes. They completely sold out in a matter of seconds.

“Buncha suckers.” He scooped up some gold coins from his signature top hat, staring at them with glee. “I’d thank the Demon Lord myself, if I could.”

“About that...”

“A-Alice... Seb? What’re you two doing here?” he asked, whipping his head back.

“We’re looking for a certain someone named Hatta. You might be familiar with the name.”

“You mean *me*? Sorry, I’ve got places to be. Bye!” He tried to make a run for it, only to be cut off by Alice.

“Hear us out first.”

“Alright, alright. Quit glaring at me.”

Seb filled Hatta in on the situation now that he’d given up on running.

“Well, he *does* give even the hottest chicks a good run for their money, looks-wise,” Hatta said afterward, grinning and scratching his cheek.

“And *that’s* where you come i—”

“Nuh-uh. I want nothing to do with this!” he declared.

“You didn’t let me finish.”

“Nothing good ever comes out of your ideas, Alice.”

“Well, now you’re just being rude.”

“Oh really? Did you forget the time I almost got burnt to a crisp when we were harvesting dragon scales because you thought I’d make for a good shield? Or the time you used me as bait in that cave? I almost saw the light, Alice. The light! Or the time you—” He continued to rattle off all his grievances with Alice for what felt like an eternity.



“**I**M going to need both of your help, Hatta.”



“That’s still an easy ‘No’ from me. I wanna expand the business; I don’t have time to be playing your silly games,” Hatta continued to decline.

“I have a little something that might just interest you then.” Alice took off her necklace and handed it to Hatta, smirking. “It’s worth five hundred gold coins. That’s more than ten years of your life.”

The jewel-encrusted necklace shined brilliantly.

“...What’s the job?”

“I need you to help me take down the Demon Lord of the North.”

“...Wait, what about Jean? Aren’t you going to rescue him?”

“Jean could get turned into a girl and give birth to the Demon Lord’s child for all I care. What matters is the fact that he chose Jean over me. *That* I simply can’t forgive.”

*Poor Jean.* Pity for the prince washed over Hatta.

“Ideally, I’d like to introduce his face to my fist, treat him to a lead salad, chop him up into pieces and tenderize them into nothing. But that’d be a little too gruesome, so I’ve decided to settle for the classic punch-trample-condescending-stare combo!” Alice huffed.

“Are you crazy? This is the Demon Lord we’re talking about here, not some generic slime monster.”

“That’s where our boy Seb comes in. He can take on the Demon Lord, apparently. Provided it’s one-on-one.”

“Huh.” Hatta tilted his head in surprise, to which Seb responded with a courteous bow.

The screams of horrified townsfolk filled the town square not a moment later.

“We’ve got a monster on our hands!” someone screamed as a monster attacked people in the square.

“Seb, you can beat the Demon Lord as long as we clear out all the trash, right?”

“In all likelihood.”

Mere trivialities, such as the incessant screaming, did not faze the two in the slightest.

“Guys? There’s a monster trashing the place, you know,” Hatta pointed out.

“Who cares?”

“What do you mean who—actually yeah, you’re right. That mushroom thing looks mighty weak anyways.”

“Mushroom?”

Alice and Seb finally bothered to look at the chaos.

“Oh, that. It didn’t taste too good...”

“I’d say it tasted awful, even,” Seb agreed.

“You put *that* thing in your mouth?!”

“It didn’t taste anything like a mushroom. Strange, isn’t it?”

“It’s a mushroom monster, not a mushroom! Also, not only does that sound disgusting, you could’ve gotten poisoned, too!”

“No worries, Seb prepared it and force-fed it to some other monster first just in case.”

Seb bowed.

“Is that really where you should bow?!”

“If you really want one, just say so already, jeez. There’s some left over in the coach; you can have them.”

“Were you listening to a *single* word I just said?!”

*These two are going to drive me up a wall. I can’t do this.* Hatta glanced at the necklace. *But this is over ten years of work resting in the palm of my hand.*

“If Seb goes down, I’m bailing.”

“Fine by me.”

And so, Hatta joined the party, unable to resist the allure of wealth.



**AFTER** spending a night at the inn, the three replenished their food supplies and headed out north to recruit Hatta's little sister.

"A coach, huh? Living the high life, I see. Well, maybe not Seb. I can't imagine he's having the time of his life."

"Hey, Hatta, Haigha's at the Mysterious Forest, right?"

"Yeah, she is."

"She got her hands on a Boundary Stone, didn't she?"

Hatta flinched, sweat dripping down his brow.

"Don't even *try* hiding it from me. I know that this rare item, capable of deploying a barrier so powerful, even the Demon Lord himself couldn't pass through, can only be activated with Holy Water—an ingredient only found in the Mysterious Forest."

"You don't plan on taking it from us, do you? We worked hard for that stone. Bundled with the Holy Water, that's thirty gold coins we're talking here."

"Quit your whining. I'm offering more than ten times that. Anyway, how big is it? From what I understand, the bigger the stone, the larger the radius."

"Twenty-meter radius big." Hatta took the Boundary Stone out of his item bag and showed it to Alice.

"With this, we can set up the ideal one-on-one environment."

"Oh, I see! You plan to trap the Demon Lord inside since no one can enter or exit the field so long as it's active. Sounds like a no-brainer, now that I think about it. Beating the Demon Lord might be easier than I thought."

"We'll need healing magic to activate it. That's where Haigha comes in. How fast can we get there?"

"A week, give or take."

"Won't do. Any other ideas?"

"Haven't had a chance to use it myself, but we could try an alternate path through some monster lair I'm not too intimately familiar with. Wouldn't take a day."

“Monsters, hm? Seb, stop here. Let’s have an early lunch.”

Seb pulled over in a beautiful grass field and got straight to cooking.

“That right there’s the sound of a skipped breakfast.” Hatta was doing some light stretches when his stomach suddenly started growling.

“Want some?” Alice held out a plate. On it rested a most delectable sandwich.

“How oddly kind of you. Don’t mind if I—*bleurgh!* What’d you put in this?”

“Mushroom monster.”

“You WHAT?! Don’t feed me weird stuff, Alice!” Hatta’s cry echoed across the grass field.



**SEB’S** exquisite cooking graced the freshly set-up folding table. They dug in and then transitioned straight into tea time.

“Any info on this supposed monster lair, Seb? I know you were listening in on our conversation.”

“I believe a Dodo nests there, not that I’ve seen it myself.”

The teacup stopped just before her lips upon the mere mention of one of the most dreaded monsters around.

“By ‘Dodo,’ you mean the one that’s the Demon Lord’s direct servant, known for being ripped, insufferable, and considerably powerful? We’re supposed to throw down with that thing?” Hatta interjected.

“Not necessarily. We could fight, or we could try beating it in a race.”

“A race?”

“A Dodo can supposedly run a hundred meters in a whopping five seconds. Whether this is true or not remains to be seen, but it likes to flaunt the fact and, as such, will challenge anyone it meets to a friendly race, apparently,” Seb explained.

Alice suddenly grinned. “Sounds amusing. I didn’t know such a monster lived in my country. Looks like all that time spent running away from the slightest hint of danger wasn’t for nothing! It’s time to put those speedy feet to the



test...Hatta!"

"Why *me*?! You're just as fast."

"I'm in a dress, Hatta. Or maybe you'd like me to take it off? You perv..."

"You're the perv here! Actually, what about you, Seb? You look fast."

"I don't want that insufferable creature anywhere near me."

"Sorry?"

"I said I must prepare for my bout with the Demon Lord."

For a moment, Hatta felt like calling Seb's bluff, but his survival instincts begged to differ.

"Use your head. You've got your trusty items to fall back on, Hatta."

"G-Good point. I won't lose any battle if I use those."

"You've got this in the bag."

"It's just an overblown rumor anyway. A hundred meters in five seconds? Preposterous. You can do it, Hatta."

The two sang Hatta's praises, loathing the very idea of facing off against the insufferable beast themselves.

"Yeah, you're right! Me and my rare super-speed shoes are gonna show that birdbrain who's boss. Let's get going."

And so, they set out with a single goal in mind—recruit Haigha. Nothing was going to stop them, especially not some insufferable beast.

However, the onslaught of monsters only intensified the further they got.

"Is it just me, or is their number growing?" Faint traces of fatigue began showing in Hatta's face as he bombarded the small-fry monsters with mini explosives, thinning them out in an instant.

"We must be close," Seb said, mopping up the stragglers with remarkable ease.

"I get why no one goes through here. We need to move, fast."

It appeared that even the weakest of enemies could pose a formidable

challenge in large numbers. They just kept coming and coming without an end in sight, walling off the coach. The alternate path turned out to be even more arduous than expected.

Alice, meanwhile, was catching some Z's, to absolutely no one's surprise.

"Tch. Guess I'm forced to use it. What a waste..." Hatta pulled out a purple ward and stuck it to the coach. "It's no Boundary Stone, but it'll keep the weaker monsters at bay for at least thirty minutes. Let's blow this joint."

Seb took the reins, propelling the coach forward. The ward lasted just long enough for them to reach a most beautiful grass field.

"We got away, no thanks to a certain somebody." Hatta looked at Alice and heaved a heavy sigh. "How can you still be sleeping? I'm sorry, but you're just asking for it."

He took out a pen and drew a mustache on her face. "Oh, right. Seb, can you really take on the Demon Lord in a one-on-one scenario? I mean, he has 'Demon' and 'Lord' in his name..."

"I got a chance to observe him at the castle. His magical aura was certainly nothing to sneeze at. But his type tends to underperform in close-quarter combat. So it shouldn't be much of an issue."

"Gotcha. Must be rough being Alice's personal chew toy."

"It's nothing if not an honor."

"Now speak from the heart."

"I want to go home and rest."

*Poor Seb.* Pity, this time for Seb, washed over Hatta a second time.

"If it goes south, I'm taking Jean as a human shield and getting the hell outta there, haha," Hatta joked.

"Likewise."

"...Seb?"

"Yes, Master Hatta?"

"...Forget it."

*The only person he wouldn't use as a human shield is Alice,* Hatta thought as he averted his gaze.

"Where's that ominous presence coming from?"

"G-Gah! Y-You're up, Alice?"

"It woke me up. Can't you feel it? It's hot."

They disembarked the coach and surveyed the surrounding area to no avail.

Right when Alice figured it was just her imagination, a flock of winged beasts struck from above. They managed to dodge in the nick of time.

"What are those things?!"

"The Dodo's minions, most likely. Ready, Master Hatta?"

"Ready. Let's show 'em what we're made of."

Seb felled the winged beasts one by one, all while dodging their attacks. Hatta downed them one after another thanks to his trusty boomerang-dagger combo.

"I see you haven't lost your edge," Alice commented.

"You think? My whole shtick is being able to effectively utilize any weapon and any item there is. How else would I run an item shop? Though I will admit magic items aren't my forte—and why are you just sitting around drinking tea?!"

"Seb seemed busy, so I made it myself."

"That's not what I meant! Why can't you just— Whoa?!"

The ground shook under a tremendous weight. Something had fallen from the sky right into the middle of the flock, kicking up a cloud of dust in its wake.

"Who dares stir trouble in my territory?"

The flock parted, revealing an insufferable, winged beast wearing a tank top.

"What unusual guests. The name's Dodo, I serve the Demon Lord of the North. I also happen to run this joint. Now your turn," he said as he approached.

"Alice, Seb, and that back there's Hatta," Alice replied, seemingly unfazed by

the Dodo's overbearing presence.

"Aliseb, Hatta... Sick names. What about you, girly?"

*Aliseb? Was that supposed to be a failed attempt at humor, or is he really all brawn and no brain?*

"You won't tell me? Fine, be like that. What brings you here?"

"We seek your permission to cross into the Mysterious Forest."

"No can do. One, I don't even want to *know* what the Demon Lord's going to do to me if I just let you through all willy-nilly. Two, I don't take requests from humans. Pack your bags and leave. Or...if you're feeling lucky, beat me in a friendly contest, and I'll let you through."

"Friendly contest?"

"See that tree over there?" He pointed into the distance. "Whoever gets there first wins. Or would you rather let our fists do the talking?" The Dodo put on a gun show no one asked for, his smug little face looking even more punchable than usual.

"One moment."

"Sure thing."

They huddled around Alice and began hatching a plan.

"I don't want anything to do with brawn for brains over there. Hatta, sick 'em."

"I'll get his sweat all over me. Besides, if Seb can take the Demon Lord, he can take this guy easy."

"I'm not touching that thing. Being near it is already pushing it."

No one wanted a fight, not because it was unwinnable but because the Dodo was just that annoying.

"Hundred-meter dash it is then. Seb, what are our chances?"

"Low. Judging by his magic aura and confident demeanor, I think it's pretty fair to say the rumors were true."



“What about Hatta’s shoes?”

They redirected their gazes to Hatta’s super-speed shoes, which looked like an ordinary pair of shoes with wings slapped on the sides.

“How do they work?”

“Put simply, they make you twice as fast at the flick of a switch. You’ll tire out quick, but that doesn’t really matter for short distances.”

“And your top time?”

“A whopping twelve seconds.”

“Even *with* the shoes, we have no shot at winning,” Seb concluded.

Assuming the rumors were true, one’s top-time had to be under ten seconds to even stand a chance at winning.

“Find a way to win, Seb. I don’t care how, just find one.” Alice came out with a seemingly impossible demand.

“Ask and you shall receive.” Seb bowed, entirely unconcerned, and went over to the Dodo to begin negotiations.

“Done yet? I can race all three of you at once. If at least one of you beats me, I’ll let you pass.”

“I appreciate the kind gesture, sir. May I also signal the start of the race, if it pleases you?”

“Go ahead.”

“One moment, please.” Seb set Hatta at the starting line, positioned Alice behind him, and gave her a hand mirror. “We’re ready.”

“Start it whenever.”

And so, Seb’s insidious plan was set in motion.

“Switch them on.”

“Done.”

“And you, Princess Alice, please look at yourself in the mirror.”

“Why? Is there something on my—” Alice noticed the drawn-on mustache. A

black aura consumed her as she crushed the mirror into pieces, shaking uncontrollably.

“*Hmm?*” Hatta turned around.

***“Die... Die... Die... Die... Die... Die.”***

“N-Now hold on a se—”

“Start!”

The Dodo sprinted off, with Hatta following shortly after.

“GET AWAY FROM MEEEEEE!”

Just like that, he overtook the Dodo with Alice in hot pursuit.

***“Kill... Kill... Kill... Kill... Kill... Kill...”***

“HEEEEEELP!” Despite his record-smashing speed paired with the super-speed shoes, Hatta could not, for the life of him, shake her off. Alice and her high heels had ascended into godhood!

The two blew right past the tree, disappearing into the horizon.

“A-Are you guys human? Mustache girl just flew past with the visage of a bona fide demon,” the Dodo mumbled in awe.

“I ask that myself sometimes.” Seb gave him a soft look.

*You’re the least human of the bunch.* The Dodo quivered in fear.



**ALICE** returned thirty minutes later, dragging Hatta’s borderline lifeless body behind her.

“Forgive me... Forgive me...” he kept repeating. He was, of course, unconscious.

Alice tossed Hatta into the luggage trunk. She then wiped off the mustache and fixed herself up.

“Permission to pass?”

“Granted. Also, there’s something I should tell you. One of the Demon Lord’s direct servants, Cheshire, assumes the appearance of a cute young boy. If you

happen to meet him, turn around and run. Run till the cows come home! Cheshire can manipulate dimensions at will, and once he pulls you in, he never lets go.”

“Sounds fun. But I’m afraid I must bid you adieu now.”

And so, they were back on the road. The Dodo’s minions went quiet, allowing them to progress peacefully. For now, at least.

Alice indulged in some black tea in celebration of their most recent victory and everything going according to plan—minus Hatta’s life-threatening injuries, of course.



### MEANWHILE...

“Put me down, please. I won’t run away again, I promise,” Jean pleaded from the Demon Lord’s arms.

“My cute little princess is blushing again. How precious.”

“I’m *not* a princess!”

“Rest assured, so long as I walk this earth, no human will lay so much as a finger on you.”

“Eh?” Jean’s heart skipped a beat, followed by immediate self-hatred.

Eventually, the Demon Lord lowered him down. On a coach, surrounded by minions, sitting next to the Demon Lord himself. Escape was not an option.

Unable to do anything, Jean looked up at the Demon Lord.

*Is the wind too strong? His beautiful, straight gray hair is a mess. What a waste.*

“Hold still.”

“Why are you touching my hair? Stop it.”

“I’m fixing it for you. Relax.”

Jean’s face got awfully close to his, causing the Demon Lord’s heart rate to spike.

*Why is my heart trying to escape from my chest?! I'm a Demon Lord. I won't fall for some human. I only kidnapped her to secure offspring. That's all there is to it.*

"Much better. Take better care of yourself; it matters."

"Am I less of an embarrassment to you now?"

"Eh?" The surprised look on Jean's adorable, innocent face cut deeper than any sword.

The Demon Lord averted his gaze, desperately trying to collect himself, unaware that what he was feeling was none other than love.

## Chapter 2: A New Companion and the Dimension Beast

**ALICE** and the gang journeyed into the Mysterious Forest on a quest to recruit Haigha.

“We’re close, really close,” Hatta said, having healed his injuries with an item.

“Wonderful! Now let’s just hope we don’t miss each other because we took a different route,” Alice responded.

“Her stamina is beyond abysmal, remember? There’s a good chance we’ll beat her to the punch.”

“Good point.”

They managed to arrive at the forest entrance without a hitch.

“Footprints.” Seb noticed the second they disembarked the coach.

“Haigha’s footprints, judging by the size. Not that they’d belong to anyone else, since she’s pretty much the only one who ever comes here.”

“There’s only one set of them, and they lead into the forest. She must still be around here somewhere.”

“Let’s get cracking then.”

They followed her footprints when suddenly—they heard laughter. Alice looked around the area and came across...came across...

“Found her, Alice?”

“Don’t look. For your own good!”

Oblivious of what would come next, they followed her gaze, only to freeze up the second they saw...*that*.

“What’s that, Mr. Squirrel? Life’s going well? That’s nice. Me? Well, it could be going better, but it’s fine. The birdies and their beautiful singing help me forget. You can hear them right now if you listen closely. Oh, and there’s also Mr. Raccoon. He was so worried he came running to me, cute thing. I can return



the favor too, you know, with my love magic!”

A lovely little bobbed-hair girl sporting a plain dress and robe sat there talking to animals.





*Is it a forest spirit? Or maybe a monster trying to pass off as human?* Appearance-wise, she bore a strong resemblance to Haigha, but they weren't entirely convinced.

"Mr. Squirrel, wait for—ooph!" She ran right into the trio.

"Hey... Haigha."

"Hatta?! Alice and Seb too?!"

"It's okay, Haigha. I've already erased all my memories of you talking with squirrels, was it?" Alice reassured.

"I didn't hear nothing about no 'birdies' or their 'beautiful singing,' no siree," Hatta threw in.

"While I would've simply *loved* to see what this 'love magic' is all about, I'll just pretend I didn't hear that bit," Seb added for good measure.

"I...I..." Haigha took flight, red as a beet. However, her abysmal stamina allowed Alice to catch up almost immediately.

"Easy there."

"Let go! Let go of me!"

"What's gotten into you?"

*Have some empathy, will ya, Alice?*

A chill ran down Hatta's spine from secondhand embarrassment.

"Please put me down...I'll be good," Haigha pleaded, tears rolling down her cheeks.

"I'll just assume you've already collected the Holy Water. We'll talk more at the coach."

They returned to the coach, making sure to box Haigha in so she couldn't escape along the way.

She just wouldn't stop crying, which made Alice—yes, *the* Alice—feel a little uncomfortable, so she ordered Seb to make tea.

"Your tea is delicious, Seb."

The tea made Haigha feel much better.

“I made sure it was to your liking.”

“It means a lot. Anyway, what’re you all doing here?”

“Did you know that the Demon Lord tried kidnapping me?”

Alice wanted to investigate the amusing previous matter further but chose not to, for fear of the waterworks going off a second time.

“I’ve heard rumors. But it seems they were just that—rumors. You’re right here, after all.”

“Not exactly. He did succeed...in mistakenly kidnapping Jean.”

“He *what?! We have to go save Jean.*”

“Who cares about Jean?! The fact that he didn’t kidnap *me* is the real issue.”

*Poor Jean.* Pity for the prince washed over Haigha.

“What’s the plan?”

“We tear the Demon Lord a new one. Seb here can beat him in a one-on-one.”

“Doesn’t the Demon Lord have bodyguards?”

“I’ve already thought of everything. First, we sneak into his castle and plant bombs in various locations. Then we make them go off all at once. His minions will go investigate, allowing us to break through with ease. Once Seb gets in close, you set off the Boundary Stone, trapping the Demon Lord inside.”

“I see— Why me?!” Haigha’s voice cracked from the sudden realization.

“You’re the only one that can do it.”

“What about Hatta?!”

“The Boundary Stone can only be activated by healing magic. Seb only knows offensive magic; Alice and I can’t use magic at all. That only leaves you.”

“Yes, but...if I set it off, I’ll get trapped inside with them.”

“Crawl into a corner and curl up in a ball. If anything bad happens, Seb’s got you. Don’t you, Seb?”

Seb quietly sipped on his tea.

“I’m not so sure about that, Hatta.”

“You’ll be fine. Here, have this.”

“A ward? It won’t do anything against the Demon—” Haigha noticed the inscription which read: *Good Fortune*. “How is this going to help me?!”

“Hatta accepted the offer. There’s no turning back now, Haigha,” Alice said with a cold smile.

Out of everyone, it was undoubtedly Haigha that got the short end of the stick. Seb was just doing his job, and Hatta was in it for the money, while she had no reason whatsoever to go along with any of it besides not making matters worse for herself.

“If it helps, the Demon Lord didn’t seem like the type to hit a defenseless girl,” Alice said in the least reassuring manner possible. “Now, onto more pressing matters. Seb, how long is it going to take us to get to the Demon Lord’s castle?”

“It will take us a few days if we head up north through Underland, assuming nothing gets in our way. But I highly doubt it’ll be that simple.”

“I see. Hatta.”

“Yeah?”

“Pull out your flying contraption.”

“What flying contraption?! If I had one, we wouldn’t be sitting here.”

“Unbelievable. Haigha.”

“Yes?”

“Make this coach invisible.”

“No can do.”

“Keep this up, and we’re going to need to have a serious discussion regarding your pay.”

*Is she seriously considering docking our pay? Or is she just bluffing to keep us on our toes?* Hatta and Haigha went silent, pretending not to hear that last part.

“Oh yeah, I should mention that Holy Water can’t be used immediately,” Haigha warned.

“Completely slipped my mind.” Hatta shrugged.

“Elaborate, Hatta.”

“Haigha has to imbue it with magic and wait about a month. Only then does it count as Holy Water. Otherwise, it’s just regular old water.”

“Can’t wait that long. Any alternatives?”

“Well.” Hatta grimaced. “The White Rabbit lives in a hut east of here. He’s got a pocket watch that can manipulate the flow of time. He...can get on my nerves sometimes, so I’d rather look for other alternatives.”

“Roasted rabbit for dinner it is then.”

“Are you trying to get under my skin?!”

“Rabbit stew’s fine too, jeez.”

“That’s not the issue!”

“There, there, Hatta. Alice is just fooling around. She doesn’t actually want to serve him for dinner. The White Rabbit is a good friend of mine; I’m sure he’ll hear us out. Let’s try and see what happens, okay?”

With the conflict settled, they set off in search of the White Rabbit, a pan and a pot mysteriously appearing right next to Seb.



“I sure hope he’ll hear us out at least. Hmm? Are those...monsters?!”

The relentless attacks resumed almost as soon as they left the Dodo’s territory, and the fact that they were a moving target didn’t help. This wasn’t that much of an issue, however, as Hatta and Seb repelled them with ease.

“Agility buff, Sis.”

“There you go.”

“An attack damage buff, if you’d be so kind, Lady Haigha.”

“No problemo.”



Haigha's various buffs were a great asset to the party, allowing them to clear the attacking monsters with even greater ease.

"This mouth ulcer's killing me, Haigha," Alice complained.

"I'll fix you up in a jiff."

"I got bit by some bug, and it itches real bad, Haigha," Alice griped.

"Not anymore."

And then there was Alice, who used Haigha's powers for other purposes.

"I'm taking a nap. Wake me when we get there."

"Sure, but how do you expect to fall asleep under these—" Hatta turned to Alice, who was already passed out. "—circumstances."

"Some things never change, huh, Hatta?"

"Alice lives by her own set of rules. Also, do not, under any circumstance, draw anything on her face. You'll regret it for the rest of your life."

"Did you—" Haigha noticed Hatta's thousand-yard stare. "Nothing, nothing."

"Master Hatta, I see a hut up ahead," Seb informed the siblings.

"That's the one. Wonder if he's there."

They stopped by the hut to check if he was inside.

"Empty."

"Look over there, Master Hatta."

There he was, out in the distance, digging a hole in the ground. He planted a seed in the hole and hit a button on the pocket watch hanging from his neck. The seed matured into a magnificent fruit tree in the blink of an eye.

"Grr! I still can't reach it? One last jump."

Alas, the tree branches hung just a little too high.

"Ya ain't climbing trees anytime soon there, pal. Find something else to harvest."

"Long time no see, Hatta."

“Hey, White Rabbit.” Haigha popped out from behind Hatta.

“Ha-Ha-Haigha?!” The White Rabbit started fidgeting, his face turning bright red. “This must be my lucky day. You can go now, Hatta.”

“Go where? I came to ask for a favor.”

“What favor?”

“Set this Holy Water’s internal timer about thirty days forward. That’s how long it’ll take for Haigha’s magic to fully permeate.”

“That’ll be five thousand gold coins.”

“Uh-huh.” Hatta furrowed his brow. “I’ll get the fruit down for ya. Now, make it snappy.”

“I’m a busy man; pay up or scram. I’m off to see the Red Queen once I fetch myself a bite to eat.”

“The Land of Cards’ queen?”

“Long story short, I’m busy assisting her, so I don’t have time to play your silly games. Although...if Haigha were to give me a big old hug, I might reconsider. Oh, and throw in a kiss on the cheek too for good measure.” The White Rabbit ogled Haigha, a shimmer in his eyes.

“*Erm*, how should I put this, *no*.”

“Wh-Why not?!”

“You’re just...an acquaintance.” That single remark had demoted him from friend to acquaintance in a flash.

“Dammit, dammit, dammit! Whatever, I’m late for a very important date anyway—” Alice nabbed him by the ears. “Release me at once!”

“Found dinner.”

“Dinner?! Wh-Who are you?!”

“Why, only the face of Wonderland, the blindingly beautiful princess Alice herself, of course. Do you not recognize me? Oh well, I’ll allow it. You don’t get to see talking rabbits every day, after all. Are you some sort of monster? Seb, prepare the fire.”

“Right away.”

“Haigha, help!”

Normally, Seb’s phenomenal prep speed would’ve been awe-inspiring. But to the White Rabbit, it only further inspired dread.

“Alice, that’s the White Rabbit we talked about earlier. He can help us.”

“He does have a pocket watch, now that you mention it.” She tried ripping it from his neck, yet it refused to come off.

“Ow ow ow, watch it! Only I can use this ultra-rare item—it’s merged with my body!”

“So, you’re cursed?”

“No?!”

“Who cares? All you need to know is that this can go one of two ways. You either do as you’re told and get mercifully boiled into stew, or you don’t do as you’re told, and we’ll be serving slow-roasted rabbit for dinner.”

“I get eaten regardless?!”

By this point, even Hatta, who got a little heated, and Haigha, who had recently demoted him to an acquaintance, started to feel bad for the White Rabbit.

“Enough’s enough. I think he’s learned his lesson.”

“Let him do his thing, Alice. That’s why we came here.”

“...Fine, but you better make it quick.”

“Okay, okay. Now put me down already. Also, could I maybe get a bite to eat? Anything, even the fruit from the tree, will do just fine.”

“Sure. Here, try this.” Alice held out a plate. On it rested a delectable sandwich.

“Don’t mind if I...*bleurgh!* What’d you put in this?!”

“Mushroom monster.”

“You WHAT?! Don’t feed me weird stuff!” The White Rabbit, genuinely

concerned for his own well-being, caved into her demands.

Holy Water in hand, he pushed a button on his pocket watch. The Holy water took on a faint blue-ish shade, giving it a mystical vibe.

“Happy? I really need to get going to the Land of Cards now, or else the Red Queen’ll have my head.”

“Hold it. The Land of Cards borders Wonderland, and we enjoy friendly relations. It’s ruled by two queens—the Red Queen and the White Queen. It’s a peaceful land known for its tasty sweets... What happened?”

“The Red Queen’s favorite afternoon tea snack is a tart. She munches on them every day. Recently, someone’s been stealing all her tarts. They just seemingly vanish into thin air, with no perpetrator in sight. That’s where I come in. I was asked to find the criminal using my trusty pocket watch.”

“Tarts so good they’re worth stealing? Once we beat up the Demon Lord, let’s stop by the Land of Cards, Seb. I wish to try one too.”

“As you wish.”

*Beat up the demon lord?* The White Rabbit shook his head. *No, I don’t want anything more to do with these people,* he thought as he scrambled away, blissfully unaware of their future encounter in the Land of Cards.



**WITH** the White Rabbit gone, they resumed their journey to the Demon Lord’s castle.

“It’s getting late. I suggest stopping by a nearby town.”

They stopped by a town at the foot of a hill, per Seb’s suggestion. They parked their coach at a local inn and began wandering all around.

“I could eat a horse.”

“I’ve got just the thing for you, Hatta.”

“No thanks. I don’t want your mystery food.”

“What’s the ‘mystery’ about this? It’s just an onion.”

Alice held out what seemed like a normal onion.

“Three things. First, why? Second, where did you get that? Third, who eats a whole onion by it...self?” Upon closer inspection, the onion appeared to be moving. “I knew it!”

“Mouthwatering, isn’t it?”

“Put it back where it belongs!”

“Well, aren’t you a picky one? I’m sure Haigha’ll appreciate it more.”

*What do I do now?* The onion looked up at Haigha with puppy-dog eyes.

“Run, little buddy, run!” Haigha, spotting an opportune moment, set it free.



“**IT’S** been too long!” Hatta charged headfirst into the bar, the rest following shortly after.

Having regularly sneaked out of the castle to go on adventures with Hatta and Haigha, Alice was accustomed to bars. She went up to the bartender and put in her order like it was second nature.

“How’d you manage to slip out that easy anyways?” Hatta asked. “The entire place must’ve been in mass hysteria... You used that to your advantage, didn’t you?”

“I prepared a decoy too. But even then, I’ve got maybe seven to ten days at most before the jig is up. It used to be so much simpler back in the day, before they tightened security.”

*Whose fault do you think that is?* Hatta thought, the words stopping short on his tongue in fear of her wrath.

“Those were the days all right. Like that time you pushed me off a cliff, or that time you pushed me into a running river, or that time you pushed me headfirst into a wall, or that time you...you...” Hatta suddenly started feeling sick to his stomach.

“I know your plans for the Demon Lord, but what about Jean? You *do* plan on rescuing him, right?” Haigha asked to be sure.

“I’m a little conflicted. On the one hand, if he gets turned into a girl and

marries the Demon Lord, I get the throne *and* a foothold in the demonic legion. On the other, it'd be an admission of defeat, and I can't have that, now can I?"

*I wish I hadn't asked.* Haigha dug in, falling silent.

"I'll sleep on it. For now, let's just focus on the task at hand—treating the Demon Lord to a knuckle sandwich, courtesy of yours truly. I'm counting on you, Seb."

"I want out."

"Once more, if you could."

"You can count on me, my lady."

*Will they ever stop?* Hatta and Haigha thought.



**AFTER** spending a restful night at the inn, they set off for the Demon Lord's castle. They were constantly on edge, ready to spring into action at the drop of a hat. Yet there was little of it to be seen.

"Not a lot of action, huh, Hatta?"

"I don't like it. It's quiet...a little too quiet."

"I caught this little guy, though." Alice held out the onion monster from the day before.

"Again, really?"

"It was hiding in the coach. You can have it, Haigha."

"I think..." Haigha took a good look at it. "I think it's scared, Hatta."

"Scared? It's just shaking."

"That's its magic waves oscillating. Alice, were there any others?"

"Only him."

Seb suddenly stopped. "It appears we've been going in circles, my lady."

"No..." Haigha burst out of the coach, onion monster in hand. "No..."

"Something wrong?"

“This isn’t right. I can’t hear the birds or the bugs, anything. It’s not just quiet; there’s no sound. This little guy only came with us because he couldn’t find his way back home.”

“So, we’re the only ones here?” Alice examined the inconspicuous grass field, and, just as Hatta said, it was completely devoid of sound.

“Look over there.” Seb pointed at a pretty young boy, clad in shorts and a cat hoodie, dancing.

“Isn’t that Cheshire, Seb? The boy Dodo mentioned?” Alice asked.

“In all likelihood.”

“You’re gonna have to clue me in here,” Hatta interrupted.

“Right, you were passed out. He basically said something to the effect of ‘Don’t go near that dimension manipulating freak; once he pulls you in, he never lets go.’” The boy kept on dancing, ominously. “Looks awfully young. It’s your time to shine, Haigha.”

“W-Why me?!” Haigha blurted out, choking on her own spit.

“Kids should play with kids.”

“We’re the same age!”

“I’m clearly the grown-up here.” Alice puffed out her meager chest.

“I—” Haigha took in her washboard-flat chest, at a total loss for words. “I don’t know anything about dimension manipulation.” She sighed.

“Do you, Seb?”

“Not a thing. Catching Cheshire and asking him ourselves seems like the best course of action. Would you happen to have the right tool for the job, Hatta?”

“I’ve got a net and some rope and— Speak of the devil.”

“I’m Cheshire, and who might you be?” The boy examined their faces and put on an innocent smile.

“Alice. We’d like to pass through here.”

“Knew it. I’ve heard many great things about you, Alice. Like how you beat the



Dodo at his own game and how you—” Cheshire faded into thin air, appearing right in front of her. “Boo!” Alice didn’t so much as flinch. “Hahaha, I like you. Wanna play?”

“We don’t have time to be playing games.”

“Oh, come onnn! Don’t be like that. Remember, you’re in my dimension now. If you wanna escape, you’ll have to ca—” Alice reached out to grab him, only for him to vanish. “Whoa! That almost scared me. You have some amazing reflexes.”

“*Tsk.*” Alice clicked her tongue, annoyed by his lighthearted demeanor.

“There’s no time limit. You either catch me, or you don’t. Your call.”

“If we don’t, we’ll be stuck in here forever. We’ll handle this,” Hatta said.

Haigha and Hatta frantically chased him around using everything they had. Despite this, they were unable to so much as graze, let alone catch Cheshire. He’d disappear right as they were about to catch him and teleport to a different location every time.

“What’s the matter? Calling it quits already?”

“Seb,” Alice called him over, having rationally analyzed their situation. “We’re going to tire out at this rate. Think of something! Anything!”

“Anything?”

“Anything.”

“Your wish,” Seb bowed, “is my command.” He started setting up a folding table and some chairs seemingly out of nowhere. Suddenly, it was tea time. “Care to join us, Cheshire? There’s cookies.”

“Don’t mind if I do!” Cheshire pulled up a chair and began wolfing down cookies.

“Got ya now!” Hatta got the drop on Cheshire, or so he thought.

“Don’t bother,” he said, disappearing and reappearing. “So long as you think before you act, you’ll never lay a finger on me.”

Alice and Seb enjoyed their tea, paying no mind to Cheshire’s boasting. Hatta

and Haigha just looked on in awe at what was happening.

“May I ask you a question?” Once everyone’s minds were at ease, Seb initiated his master plan.

“Shoot.”

“What’s your type of girl?”

“The cute, reserved type. I really like those.”

“Go on.”

While Cheshire was busy yammering on and on, Seb called Hatta and Haigha over and whispered something to them.

“Gotcha.” Hatta pulled up a chair in front of Seb and started drinking tea.

“Understood.” Haigha sat down right next to Cheshire and also started drinking tea.

Was Seb trying to lull Cheshire into a false sense of security? No one knew.

“How about the girl sitting right next to you? Is she your type?”

Haigha gazed at him with a big old smile on her face.

“She’s cute. *Definitely* my type.”

Haigha’s cheeks took on a slight tinge of pink. She appeared to be quite fond of the compliment.

Seb then gestured to Hatta.

“I almost forgot. You know how the Demon Lord kidnapped the princess?”

“Didn’t get to see it for myself, but I’m his direct servant, so of course, I do. All those rumors about how cute this princess was had him completely hooked.”

Alice’s cup froze, the corners of her lips rising, the tension in her face relaxing.

“Yeah, about that. He mistakenly kidnapped her brother instead.”

“Her brother? There’s no way he couldn’t tell them apart.”

“I mean, she’s right here if you need proof.”

“You mean her?” Cheshire asked, gazing at Haigha’s beautiful smile. “Well, I’ll

be damned.”

“No, no. Her.” Hatta pointed at Alice, her cup shaking.

“She’s cute too. But the death stare is a little off-putting, not to mention the... killing aura? Oh sorry...are you a dude?”

The cup shattered in her hand. Alice approached Cheshire, a black aura enveloping her. Hatta and Haigha ducked out immediately.

“Even if you’re a dude, don’t think you can catch me that ea—” Alice picked up a knife and jabbed it into him without any windup time. “Whoa?!” Cheshire managed to teleport behind her in the nick of time. Alice slowly rotated her neck back a hundred and eighty degrees. “Eek?! Y-You’re the princess?!”

“Indeed, I am... Now, let me stab you!”

“You meant ‘catch,’ right? Right?!” Cheshire vanished, utterly horrified.

“Got you now!” Alice caught him by the throat the second he reappeared.

“W-What kind of beast are you?!”

“Silence, dinner. I’m trying to think of all the different ways I can cook you.”

*I need to get outta here, fast.* Cheshire shook off her grip, vanishing far, far away.

“Fancy meeting you here.”

“AAAHHH!”

Every time he reappeared, Alice was there, standing right in front of him in typical horror fashion.

“I give, I give! Help, please!”

“I thought I just heard something. Must be my imagination.” Seb paid no mind.

Hatta and Haigha stared at Seb all teary-eyed, their voices whisked away by sheer horror, urging him to do something. The two felt a sharp pang of guilt for blindly going along with his idea, seeing what Alice had become.

“Fine, if you insist.” Seb went up and embraced Alice. “Cheshire said you’re

cute, my lady. He spoke highly of your defiant stare, your dignified aura. It was the Demon Lord that spoke horrible, horrible things about you. You're the most beautiful there is."

"You could've told me earlier." Alice regained her cool, the black aura fading.

"Mind sending us back home?" Her pretty smile rivaled that of Jean's, but all Cheshire felt was a mixture of dread, horror, and fear.

"Yes, miss!" Cheshire lifted his dimension, returning them back to their world. The other three just stood there, unable to move.

"Quit loafing around, you two! Let's get a move on. Oh, and Cheshire, mind telling us the fastest path to the Demon Lord's castle?"

"The Demon Lord's castle? Okay, okay. Stop glaring. You'll want to pass through the Ridge of Illusions. The name just speaks for itself, really. For that, you'll need the *Poem of Jabberwocky*—a spellbook presently in the hands of the Red Queen. This should shave two days off your journey."

"Thanks. Seb, to the Land of Cards."

"Understood." Seb changed course northwest to the Land of Cards.

*Can't you take on the Demon Lord yourself?* The words stopped at Hatta's and Haigha's mouth, never to be uttered.



**MEANWHILE,** Alice's kidnapped older brother had reached the Demon Lord's castle after taking the shortest path there.

"Wow! I thought your place would be more angsty. Well, the outside is a little like that, but the inside is amazing!" Jean's eyes lit up at the sight of the surprisingly gorgeous interior.

"I'm glad to see it tickled your fancy, my princess."

"How many times must I tell you? I'm not the princess!"

The Demon Lord picked up a glistening bird statuette and handed it to Jean, their fingertips lightly brushing together.

"It's modeled after a monster of legendary status, famous for making the lives

of a certain group of heroes a living nightmare. It's worth every bit of its weight in gold."

"So cool!"

"You can have it, if you'd like."

"Really?! You shouldn't have." Jean burst into a smile, melting the Demon Lord's heart.

"Thank you so much. I promise to take good care of it."

"I promise to take good care of *you* too."

"*Eh?*" Jean hung his head in embarrassment, his cheeks turning red.

Between the Demon Lord's sickly sweet remarks and Jean acting less and less like a guy, it was clear that the two's relationship deepened, slowly but surely.

"Let me give you a quick tour of the place."

Jean followed the Demon Lord through a hall decorated with all sorts of famous paintings.

"Even I know all these. Are those originals?"

"Only the splendor of the real thing can truly capture my essence."

"Can we stay just a little longer, please?"

"Do as you please."

Jean stood absently by the wall, utterly entranced by the breathtaking art, when suddenly, an old light came crashing down on him.

"*Eek!*"

"Watch out!"

The Demon Lord flew in and knocked it aside as it was about to crush Jean. He put his arm out to regain balance, pinning Jean against the wall in a miraculous turn of events.

"Are you hurt?" he asked with genuine concern in his voice.

"I, erm, I'm fine...I'm fine." Jean couldn't bear to look him in the face, his heart racing.

*Why does this keep happening?! You're a guy, Jean. Remember that.* Jean agonized over the Demon Lord's masculine charm.

## Chapter 3: To the Land of Cards

“**THE** monsters around here are a complete joke. Didn’t even break a sweat!” Hatta said, single-handedly fending off some monsters.

“Do you have someone you like, Alice?”

Haigha and Alice, meanwhile, were having some typical girl talk.

“Not at the moment, though I doubt I’ll ever find anyone even remotely close to my level. What about you?”

“I love everyone equally.”

“Come to think of it, you did mention something about making lots of love with animals.”

“I did not! I *said* I’d make them happier with my love magic!”

“Huh, my mistake.”

On second thought, maybe it wasn’t exactly *that* typical.

“What about the White Rabbit? Do you love him?”

“He’s...just an acquaintance.”

*So much for everyone.* Alice felt a sliver of pity for the rabbit.

Once the monster attacks ceased, they got to enjoy a brief moment of rest and relaxation.

“A certain someone is blocking our path, my lady...” Seb suddenly stopped their coach.

“A certain someone? Oh, you mean the Red Knight. The one that really knows how to get under your skin.”

Alice got out of the coach and approached the Red Knight, otherwise known simply as Red. Hatta and Haigha followed closely behind out of curiosity.

“Why, if it isn’t Princess Alice. Beautiful as always.”



“I’m glad to see you’re doing well too, Red.”

“Seb’s not coming down to greet me, I see. How cold, old chum of mine! Oh! My apologies. Was he perhaps bedazzled by my unspeakable beauty? *Hahaha!* Can’t say I blame him; I would be too, after all this time.”

“He just can’t stand that part of your personality, supposedly.”

Red had, to put it lightly, an intense personality.

“And who might those two in the back be?”

“My fellow companions Hatta and Haigha. They run an item shop in the city.”

“I’m Hatta. It’s a pleasure.”

“And I’m Haigha. Pleased to meet you.”

“I’m the Red Knight, but feel free to call me Red. I serve the Red Queen. But enough about her; let’s talk more about me! Don’t even try hiding it; I can tell you two are just *itching* to hear all about my gorgeous looks. It all started one full moon night when I, the son of God, was born.” Red entered storytime mode, tossing his hair back.

*No wonder Seb can’t stand this guy,* Alice thought.

“Red has no friends,” she said out loud.

*Never would’ve guessed,* Hatta thought.

“And so, this cute little angel... *Hmm?* Did someone just say they wanted to be friends? Or was it just me?”

“Just you. I said you have no friends,” Alice said drily.

“Why, I never! Of course, I have friends. Everyone does! Alice, allow me to introduce you to my good friend, Dan.” Red held out a roly-poly. Hatta and Haigha’s fight-or-flight instinct kicked in, prompting them to step back.

“You and Haigha might have something in common.”

“Do *not* go there!” The comparison peeved Haigha so much, she stepped forward again.

“Haigha, was it? I think we can be friends, if your little onion monster is

anything to go off of.” Red locked on to Haigha immediately, entering her into his potential friend list. With the onion monster chilling by her side, Haigha’s excuses were doomed to fall flat.

“What are you doing here anyway, Red?” Alice asked.

“I’m here on the Red Queen’s orders. She’s collecting rare sweet ingredients, one of which, the mind-blowingly sweet purple yams, can be found at the flower field up ahead. And where might *you* be heading, princess?”

“To see the Red Queen. There’s something I need to borrow.”

“You want to see the Red Queen? I’m afraid you’ve come at a bad time. The town’s in total lockdown due to the ongoing search for the tart thief. To get through, you’ll need to pass a whole series of checks which, at worst, can take anywhere from one to two days.”

The tart thief incident appeared to have ballooned into something much more serious than the party had initially expected.

“We’re in a hurry. Can you get us through somehow?” Alice asked.

“I can write you an invitation letter, for a small favor, that is. I need you to take care of this pesky little monster terrorizing the flower field. It’s right up ahead; it won’t even take you that long.”

“Why don’t you handle it, Red?” Alice asked. “Not that we mind. It’s just your combat abilities are the only aspect of you the Red Queen ever speaks highly of.”

“Why do you have to put it like that? Regardless, why don’t you just go ahead and see it for yourselves? You’ll see what I mean.” Red got in the coach, and they set off for the flower field, which they got to in no time at all. “There it is. Look.”

They hopped out of the coach and got up closer to the unidentified source of movement in the center. It appeared to be a slime monster.

“Wh-What is that?!” Hatta turned pale. “Alice, we can’t get any closer.” He forcefully halted the group.

“Why’s that?”

“Once you get close, it reads your memories, and then it turns into the thing you fear most. Everyone’s had at least one or two traumatic experiences in their life, yeah? It’ll use them against you, that insidious bastard.”

“Traumatic experiences? I’m sold.”

“Huh?! What’re you—”

Alice circled around Hatta and gave him a good shove, sending him flying in front of the slime monster.

“N-No. No. Noooo!!!”

The slime shapeshifted into Alice from the Dodo race, the one enveloped by an ominous black aura. This was, apparently, Hatta’s number one traumatic experience.

“Who’s that pretty young lady, Red?” asked Alice.

“Why, that’s you, Princess Alice.”

“Who’s that young lady with the refined air around her, Seb?” asked Alice.

“Why, it’s you, of course. Although the *real* Lady Alice shines all the more brightly.”

Seb and Red were suddenly in perfect sync thanks to Alice, not that it really mattered.

“Hatta?!”

Haigha rushed over to her unconscious brother, leading the slime monster to shapeshift into Alice from the Cheshire hunt. Nothing really changed besides the inexplicable knife in her hand and the ominous smile.

“Who’s that beautiful young lady, Red?” asked Alice.

“A blind man could see that it’s you, Princess Alice.”

“Who’s that sweet, elegant young lady, Seb?” asked Alice.

“Why, it’s you, of course. Although she’ll never truly match the original.”

The three were entirely unfazed.

This time, a concerned onion monster approached Haigha’s unconscious

body, leading the slime monster to shapeshift into Alice hungrily drooling from her mouth. The onion monster began shivering in fear.

No matter who dared approach, the slime monster would only take on various forms of Alice.

*Is Alice synonymous with trauma?* The words never left Red's mouth.

The slime monster, returning to its original form, started lightly tapping Hatta and Haigha's unconscious bodies.

"What's it doing, Red?"

"First, it makes you pass out, then it starts attacking. The attacks themselves are so weak, they don't deal any actual physical damage, but the lingering psychological damage more than makes up for it. In my case, it was the Red Queen when she gets absolutely livid."

"My condolences. Anyway, play time's over; let's go take care of it. Red, you stay put."

Alice and Seb approached the slime monster. Yet it, for some inexplicable reason, didn't shapeshift into anything. Seb first froze it with ice magic. Then Alice just picked it up and tossed it beyond the horizon. The seemingly unbeatable monster had been handled with ease.

"Do they...not *have* any traumatic experiences?"

The disturbing realization hit. It was rather surreal how Red, a known whack job, seemed relatively normal compared to Alice and Seb.

"Wakey wakey, sleepyheads."

"Huh? What—what happened to the slime monster?"

"Don't worry; we took care of it. Now get up; there's still work ahead of us."

They collected a bunch of tasty-looking purple yams.

"I say, we deserve a little reward after all that hard work. Seb, you know what to do."

They moved away from the flower field and watched Seb roast up some yams. The smell was so good, Hatta and Haigha managed to recover from the

psychological damage they'd suffered earlier.

"Bon appétit!" Seb said.

They dug in, a smile spreading across everyone's faces the moment the piping-hot-roasted yams reached their tongues, except for Seb.

"As deadpan as always, I see," smirked Red. "Could you maybe, I don't know, *try* smiling a little like the rest of us?"

"Be careful what you wish for," Seb said, smiling fearlessly.

"Not quite what I had in mind."

"Don't forget to write up that invitation letter you promised."

"Completely slipped my mind. Pen and paper, if you could." Red began working on the invitation letter with Alice observing him from the side.

Seb put out the fire. Hatta laid down, massaging his stomach. And Haigha, bored out of her mind, was playing with the onion monster.

"Alice, can I go play in the field?"

"Go ahead. We'll pick you up after we're done resting."

"Thanks!" Haigha ran off into the flower field.



"**IT'S** so beautiful! And is that... a bunny!" Haigha's excitement blew through the roof. "Alice won't be here for a while. I'm safe!" Haigha bunny-hopped after it, making bunny ears with her hands. "Bouncy bounce! Wait up, Mr. Rabbit, let's play together! Oh, I didn't see you there, Mr. Fox. You want to play too? What's that? You'd like to introduce me to a friend? I can't wait to meet—" Haigha looked up, only to see Red standing right in front of her, "...th-th-them."

"Something wrong?"

"What're you doing here, R-Red?!"

"I'm here to bring you back. Alice changed her mind and said, 'We'll be leaving immediately, so go fetch Haigha.'"

"D-Did you...see?"

“See what? Oh, you mean how you were frolicking around with the bunnies?”

*He saw everything!*

“Y-You didn’t see anything, okay?”

“But you were so cute. I like talking with insects; I know how you feel.”

*Don’t even go there*, Haigha thought as she continued to plead with him.

“Please forget everything you just saw. Please forget everything you just saw. Please forget everything you just saw. Please, please, please!”

“Hmm...well, you know what, fine. I can do that...*if* you become friends with me.”

Haigha was suddenly faced with the toughest choice of her life, bar none.

*He seems to get on well with Alice*, she thought. *But, judging by their difference in rank, he probably wouldn’t go as far as to call her a friend. If I accept, I’ll likely be his very first friend and, honestly, I don’t want him parading that fact around. But I guess we won’t be seeing each other often anyways, so I might as well go along with it.*

“...Deal.”

“My very first friend! Oh, what a day to be alive!”

*I knew it.*

“Just think of all the things we can do together. We’ll moon gaze and write poems together! We’ll chase after the sunset together. We’ll scream into the big blue sea together!”

*That’s not what friends do at all...but still, no thanks! Go do that stuff by yourself!*

“I must get going now. The next ingredient isn’t going to find itself after all. Send Alice my best regards. Oh, and once I’m done with my assignment, let’s go do some friend things together, friend!” Red left, all smiles.

*He’s not a bad guy. I just really don’t want to see him ever again.* Haigha saw him off, praying in silence that her wish would come true



**ALICE** and the gang set course for the Land of Cards. Alice was dozing off, as always, while Haigha played with the onion monster she now lovingly called “Onion Boy.”

*Can Seb really beat the Demon Lord?* Hatta heaved a heavy sigh.

“How come you know where the Demon Lord’s castle is?” he asked.

“I just happened to pass by it some time ago,” Seb replied with the casualness of someone who spotted a nice inn on their way back home.

*How do you just happen to pass by the Demon Lord’s castle?* Haigha thought but chose not to ask.

“Haigha, do you know anything about the *Poem of Jabberwocky*, the one Cheshire brought up?” Hatta asked. “The name rings a bell, but I’m blanking on it.”

“The *Poem of Jabberwocky* is a blanket term for a series of ancient spellbooks written by a wizard of the same name.”

“Now it’s coming back to me. Those spellbooks contain a slew of forbidden spells that, by my understanding, can be learned but can only be cast under a certain condition...that I also can’t remember.”

“The spellbooks themselves act as a source of magical energy and, without them physically in your possession, their spells are rendered unusable,” Haigha explained. “The one we’re after dispels illusions, at least according to Cheshire. I’m getting a little excited just thinking about laying my hands on one!”

“You can have mine, if you’d like,” Seb, who never spoke unless spoken to, interjected.

“Wait, you have one?”

“Yes, please!”

Hatta, not being a magic user, wasn’t all that interested. But Haigha’s eyes lit up on the spot.

Seb pulled a black book out of his pocket and handed it to them.

“What kind of magic’s in here? Since it’s yours, I’m guessing offensive magic



or maybe summoning magic.”

“Magic that allows the user to distinguish between a raw and boiled egg without touching them.”

*Very funny*, the siblings thought as they opened the book only to find out that it did, in fact, contain egg-distinguishing magic. The fact that it exuded powerful magical energy mystified them even further.

*Why would I ever want to use this?* Hatta thought as she closed the book, handing it back to Seb.

“What kind of a person was this Jabberwocky anyway?”

“I’d love to know myself....” Haigha’s inner thoughts leaked out for a brief moment.

“We’ve arrived. Wake up Princess Alice, if you could.”

“We’re there already? Oh! Yeah, we are.”

Just as the conversation had reached its natural end, they arrived at the Land of Cards.

“Hatta, will there be card soldiers?”

“Yeah, there will.”

“I hope they’re cute...” Haigha drifted off, fantasizing about the card soldiers.

They woke up Alice and headed to town.

“Halt! We are not allowed to let you through without a written invitation.” A group of soldiers stopped them.

“You can rest assured we mean no harm. Here’s our invitation, courtesy of the Red Knight.” Seb handed them the letter.

“The Red Knight?” They looked at the invitation. “We’re terribly sorry for the inconvenience, Princess Alice and her entourage. You may enter.” They bowed, smiling.

Thanks to a surprise run-in with Red, they were able to get into town without a hitch.

They parked their coach at a local inn and headed for the castle.

“It smells of sugary goodness.”

“Alice, how about we grab a bite to eat?” The sweet, pervading aroma had gotten the best of Haigha.

“Sounds like a plan!”

They went into a nearby tavern and ordered tarts, as per the chef’s recommendation. The freshly baked tarts came in after a short wait.

“They’re good...but not ‘worth stealing’ good,” Alice muttered.

“What did you expect? They’re not the Queen’s tarts.” The tavern owner came up to them.

“There’s a difference?”

“The Queen’s tarts are on a whole ‘nother level! They’re made by top-class chefs using only the finest of ingredients. No wonder somebody stole them! Though it hurts not having access to the castle.”

“What do you mean?”

“They’ve locked down the town as well as the castle ‘til they find the perpetrator. They only allow potential suspects or helpers in. It’s a darn shame, too; selling sweets to card soldiers was really good for business. Now, we’re kinda in a tough spot.”

“What about the White Queen? She never would’ve allowed this! And she’s the only person who can oppose the Red Queen.”

“The White Queen left quite a while back. Apparently, she got so sick and tired of the Red Queen doing all the actual governing that she just up and left. She pops back in every once in a while and then leaves just as quickly.”

With no one to rein in the Red Queen, the tart thief hunt had grown into something much larger than it needed to be. If they couldn’t find a way in, the *Poem of Jabberwocky* was as good as lost.

“What’s the plan? Want me to sneak in?” Hatta offered.

“Don’t bother,” Alice said. “It’d be a complete waste of time. We don’t have

even the slightest clue where it could be stashed. Let's just try going there first. Maybe they'll let us through if we're lucky. And, if not, we're forcing our way in."

"Let's get going, then."

"Wait, Hatta," Haigha pleaded.

"Don't tell me you're *still* eating."

"I'm not. But he is."

The onion monster munched ever so happily on a tiny piece of tart.

"Why won't you just set him free already?"

"I tried; he just keeps coming back."

"You just don't get it, Hatta! She's clearly trying to fatten the little guy up before feasting on his flesh." Alice sized-up the onion monster, causing it to shiver in fear.

"I'd never do such a thing!"



A whole slew of beefed-up guards was manning the gate. It didn't seem like the gang were getting through any time soon.

"Do not let anyone through. Do I make myself clear?"

"Sir! Yes, sir!"

"That's what I like to hear. Don't let me down, boys!"

"Sir! Yes, sir!"

They were almost as insufferable as the Dodo.

"What's up with you, Haigha?" Hatta asked.

"You lied! Those aren't card soldiers."

"Yes, they are. See?" Hatta pointed at the cards casually sticking out of their chest pockets. "Cute and gentlemanly! Am I right, or am I right?"

*How can you say that with a straight face? They're neither of those things!*

*They're...they're jacked!* Haigha fell to her knees, crying on the inside.

“Long time, no see, General Ace of Spades.” Alice approached the guards, ignoring Haigha’s mental breakdown.

“Who do you think you—” He recognized Alice. “Well, if it isn’t Princess Alice! What brings you here?”

“I’ve come to see the Red Queen. Mind letting us through?”

“We were explicitly instructed not to let anyone through. Not even you, Princess Alice.” He bowed. “I hope you understand.”

*Well, this just got a little awkward,* Alice thought.

Alice was brainstorming solutions when a nearby scream cut off her thought process.

“Monsters on the loose!”

They turned around and saw an onion and a mushroom monster wreaking havoc.

“Don’t let them near the castle!” The card soldiers fearlessly rushed in, their general leading the charge.

“Alice...”

“What is it, Hatta?”

“Now’s our chance.”

“You’re right. Time to kill two birds with one stone. Seb, fire up the pan.”

“I already have,” Seb said, holding out a hot pan.

“That’s not what I meant by that at all!”

“But there’s a mushroom and an onion just waiting to be devoured,” Alice argued hungrily.

“How many times do I have to tell you? They’re *monsters*, not veggies, Alice! Whatever; let’s just get inside while they’re distracted.”

“Completely slipped my mind. But before we go, Haigha...”

“Yes?”

“Don’t you want to watch them beat the ever-living hell out of those monsters? You said you *liked* card soldiers...”

“No, thank you!”

“I could also introduce you to Dodo, this super-jacked monster, if *that’s* the kind of thing you’re into.”

“No, I’m not!”

“Let us hurry, my lady. Time is not on our side.” Seb took the initiative before the conversation spiraled out of control, the frying pan still resting in his left hand.



**ALTHOUGH** they eventually managed to make it inside, the guards patrolling the place didn’t allow them to move around as freely as they would’ve liked.

“Alice, look here.” Hatta beckoned her over. “We can disguise ourselves as card soldiers.”

Alice peeked inside and saw a row of armor. Upon reflection, she remembered the card soldiers outside weren’t wearing any. They probably weren’t expecting monsters to come knocking on their doorstep.

“That’s a line I’m not crossing,” Alice said.

“Just thinking about wearing the same suit of armor as them makes me feel sick,” Haigha declared.

“I’ll have to politely decline,” Seb said.

They all shot down Hatta’s suggestion in unison.

*Have it your way, then.* Hatta reached for a set of armor. It was so moist with sweat, he immediately changed his mind.

“We still have to find a way through. Any ideas, Seb?” Alice asked.

“My lady, can you feel the ominous presence?”

“Now that you mention it, I think it’s coming from somewhere around,” Alice grabbed Cheshire out of the air, “here.”

“How’d you find me?! I used a dimensional veil to completely mask my presence.”

“I had a feeling.”

“What feeling?”

“It doesn’t matter right now. What does matter is what you’re doing here. Were you trying to get the drop on us?”

“I wasn’t and never will. You have my word. I heard they caught the tart thief, so I thought I’d stop by to take a look.”

“They did?”

“I had my minions investigate. This is fresh stuff.”

It genuinely felt like Cheshire was telling the truth. *He just came here to see the show*, thought Alice.

“The trial starts shortly. See ya around.”

“Take us with you.”

“Wanna come with? Sure thing.” Cheshire waved his hand, enveloping them in strange black smoke.

“My dimensional veil should make you virtually undetectable. The trial’s taking place in the throne room. Let’s get moving.”

With Cheshire’s unexpected help, they successfully made their way into the throne room. The trial appeared to have already started as the Red Queen pressured the suspect into confessing.

“I know it was you. Confess to your crimes.”

“I wasn’t even *in* the Land of Cards when they were being stolen! Call Princess Alice; *she’ll* prove my innocence!”

Said suspect was the White Rabbit.







“Even after all that rewinding, you failed to pinpoint the perpetrator. Why? Because it’s you.”

“You have no proof!”

The absurd debate raged on.

*Not only is what she’s saying completely absurd, but she also doesn’t have any proof, as the White Rabbit correctly pointed out. But if so, then who is the tart thief?* Hatta thought.

“Haigha, do you see what I see?”

“Yeah, I think I do.”

Hatta and Haigha appeared to have noticed something. Their gazes were fixed on a guard munching on a tart right behind the Red Queen.

“Fess up!” cried the Red Queen.

“Call Princess Alice first!”

“Do you think you can pull the wool over my eyes? I know a tart thief when I smell one; I eat at least one every day.”

“I’m not pulling anything!”

*How has nobody noticed? Do they want to make him out to be a criminal?*

“Lift the veil,” commanded Alice.

“As you wish,” purred Cheshire.

They appeared before the Red Queen.

“Alice? How did you—”

“Alice?! Have you come to rescue me?” The White Rabbit skipped around with joy.

“I came to see the trial firsthand. Quick question: what if the tart thief was actually one of your guards?”

“I’d lock them up in the dungeon for the rest of their natural life.”

*She really hasn’t noticed.*

“Well, you’re in luck. I know who did it.”

“You do?!”

“Yes! You really did come to rescue me!” The White Rabbit got so excited, he dove face-first into Alice’s chest. “Thank you, thank you, thank—” Alice grabbed him by the ears, a black aura enveloping her. “Y-Your chest is a little bigger than Hai—” She smashed him into the ground, instantly rendering him unconscious.

“Go die in a ditch,” Alice snarled, trampling all over the White Rabbit with her high heels. “He did it.” She handed him over to the Red Queen, holding him by the neck.

“Throw him in the dungeon!”

“You reap what you sow,” Hatta and Haigha whispered to each other as the guards dragged the White Rabbit away.

“Can we just leave him like this?”

“He’s got his pocket watch. I’m sure he’ll escape in no time.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“You’ve been a great help, Alice! If there’s anything I can do to return the favor, feel free to ask away.”

“Mind if I borrow the *Poem of Jabberwocky*?”

“The *Poem of Jabberwocky*? Oh...that. It should be in the storage room. Jack, escort our guests.”

“Understood.”

They followed Jack—the guard that ate the tart.

“You’re the real tart thief, aren’t you?”

“I’ve been caught red-handed. Just kidding! Truth is, there never was a tart thief. The Red Queen just generously shared one of her tarts with me.”

“Elaborate.”

“No one ever stole any tarts; that’s just something the Red Queen made up to teach the White Rabbit a lesson for all his chicanery.”

“I thought it was a little silly to have a trial over some stolen tarts, even if they were one of a kind. Now it all adds up.”

Cheshire’s presence had suddenly faded. *He likely turned around and left due to the case officially being closed*, Alice thought.

“And here we are.” Jack led them inside a room full of books. “Let me just find it real quick, and...there it is: the *Poem of Jabberwocky*. There are plenty of fakes circulating, but this one’s undoubtedly the real thing. You can just *feel* the magical energy.”

The magical energy was so powerful they could indeed feel it bleed through the box. There was no doubt in anyone’s mind that it was, in fact, the real thing.

Alice opened up the spellbook.

“Gibberish, as expected. It’s your time to shine, Haigha.”

“It sure is.”

*Please don’t be egg-distinguishing magic, please don’t be egg-distinguishing magic*, prayed Haigha as she opened the spellbook.

“It dispels illusions, just like Cheshy said. There’s also magic that protects from illusions.”

“Jackpot. Ridge of Illusions, consider yourself crossed,” Hatta said.

“You’re going to be crossing the Ridge of Illusions?” Jack asked. “Well, in that case, I’ve got some pretty exciting news for you. Somewhere along the ridge, there’s this item shop called Deedledumdee. There you’ll find rare items not sold anywhere else, or so the rumor goes.”

“You had me at ‘item shop!’” Hatta exclaimed. “Alice, we have to stop by there.”

“If, and *only* if, we happen to find it,” replied Alice. “Thank you, Jack. We’ll be on our way now.”

Parting with the Land of Cards, Alice and the gang set off for the Ridge of Illusions, where a mysterious item shop awaited.



## **MEANWHILE...**

“Wow! Just think of all the historically significant books hidden inside these shelves.” Jean marveled at the library, whose shelves were simply bursting and stretched all around the room.

“All the knowledge you’ll ever need is within these four walls. Not me, though; I’ve already read through most of them,” the Demon Lord said a little smugly.

“You’re surprisingly well-rea—” A speck of dust flew into Jean’s eye. “Ouch!”

“What happened?”

“I got something in my eye.”

“Show me.” He lifted Jean’s chin, their eyes meeting. The Demon Lord felt like his heart was about to explode.

*Do I go in for the kiss? No, that’d come off too strong. Maybe I should hand her a handkerchief like a proper gentleman would?* On the one hand, he wanted nothing more than to cherish and treasure Jean. On the other hand, his carnal urges were screaming at him to go all the way.

“Here, use this,” he said, handing over a handkerchief.

“Thanks.”

In the end, the Demon Lord pushed his carnal urges down and was rewarded with Jean’s beautiful smile as a result. He promised himself to always treat Jean with the utmost respect going forward.

“Is something wrong?”

“It’s nothing. Now, what say we treat ourselves to some tea?”

The Demon Lord had one of his minions make tea as they moved into a different room.

“It’s nice.”

“Made with only the finest tea leaves. Cookie?”

“Why are you so nice to me, Demon Lord?”

“For you, I’d take on God Himself.”

Jean clutched his chest, desperately trying to stop himself from diving into the Demon Lord’s arms.

*You’re a guy, remember? What’s with you?* Jean felt so embarrassed, he kept his face down, sneaking glances at the Demon Lord.

“Something wrong?” The Demon Lord’s precious smile pierced through Jean’s heart, knocking him out instantly. “Jean? Jean?!”

## Chapter 4: The Two Checkpoints

**THE** closer to the Demon Lord's castle they got, the higher the monster encounter rate rose, delaying their progress.

Seb whipped out his sword, slashing them into pieces.

Hatta busted out a whip, making quick work of nearby enemies.

Haigha cast healing magic.

Alice observed.

Seb unleashed fire magic upon the enemy.

Hatta rained down arrows on the enemy backline.

Haigha cast protection magic.

Alice observed some more. And some more. And a little bit mo—

“Do something, will ya?!” Hatta cried.

“Do you *mind*? I'm trying to pick out dinner,” Alice sniped.

“Where'd this weird infatuation with eating monsters even come from? Didn't you get to eat the finest meals money can buy back at the castle?”

“I'm sick of that stuff! Being served virtually the same exact meals day in and day out gets awfully repetitive. I want something fresh! Something exciting! Don't you ever dream of being the first to stumble across the best gosh-darn meal you've ever tasted in your entire life? Eating monsters is absurd; completely unheard of! All that unknown taste and nobody's willing to brave it, right at our fingertips.”

Alice gave the onion monster a hungry stare, causing it to shiver. Haigha quickly hid it from her.

“Planning to fatten him up just a little more, I see.”

*Asleep or not, she's not the least bit useful.* Hatta could feel his soul leaving his body as he heaved his heaviest sigh yet.

With Seb at the helm, they were able to make good progress regardless.

Next thing they knew, they had reached the Ridge of Illusions.

"The fog's set in so thick, you can barely see what's in front of you."

"I can't seem to sense any monsters around. What do you think, Haigha?"

"The fog's being produced by some sort of monster, I think. Let me try using the spellbook first."

Following the book's instructions, Haigha activated the ancient magic, and tiny beads of light gently embraced them.

"Alice, look!"

"The fog lifted?"

The thick veil of fog had completely dissipated.

"'Lifted' is not quite the word I'd use to describe a fog that was never really there to begin with. Whether or not it's an illusion being produced by some sort of monster, as Haigha pointed out, remains to be seen. But we should keep our guard up regardless," Seb remarked.

They proceeded with great caution, carefully surveying their surroundings as they went. There were no monsters in sight, but the sheer number of precipices had Hatta and Haigha on edge.

"Had we gone in blind, we would've been careening down the edge of a cliff by now," Hatta observed. "Ain't that a scary thought? On the flip side, it's a fairly relaxing ride, if you come in prepared. No monsters, nothing."

"The Deedledeedum is right up ahead, Hatta," Haigha said.

"You mean the item shop Jack mentioned earlier? Alice, we gotta drop by!"

"Sure, why not. We needed a break anyway."

They pushed the antiquated door open, revealing two pudgy men engaged in a game of chess.

“Hmm? Oh, hello! And welcome to the Deedledeedum. I’m Deedledee,” said one of the men.

“And I’m Deedledum,” said the other one. “Not that our names really mean much. Have a look at our wares. Take all the time you need.”

The shelves were jam-packed with rare items.

“All of these items are rare. Heck, even the weapons are pretty rare!” Hatta’s eyes lit up. “But they’re way pricier than market value. Mind bringing the price down a notch, Deedledee?”

“No can do.”

“Oh, come on!”

“Before the fog settled, our foot traffic was amazing, and we priced our goods appropriately, but, as you can see, things have changed. We don’t get even a fraction of our previous traffic anymore, so marking up our goods way higher than they’re worth is the only way we can keep our business afloat. Besides, we need to save up some money so we can finally move out of this godforsaken place.”

“Oh, I see.” As a fellow item shop owner, Hatta understood the struggle all too well and chose not to push any further.

“If you have some good food on you and wouldn’t mind sharing, we’ll give you a slight discount,” Deedledum interjected.

“Didn’t we *talk* about this?”

“Just this once, please, Deedledee.”

“All right, fine. But just this once.”

“Here, have this.” Alice, set off by the words “good food,” held out a plate.

“A sandwich? Don’t mind if I—**bleurgh!** What’d you put in this?”

“Mushroom monster.” Deedledum rushed out of the store, clasp his hand over his mouth. “Seems like the seasoning didn’t land quite right again.”

“I suppose we could go for a simple salt and pepper combo next time. Also, slowly simmering it to really let the flavor soak in might be better than cooking



it with the hottest fire,” Seb suggested.

It appeared they’d tried many different ways of preparing monster meat.

“So, how about that discount, Deedledum?”

“WHAT DISCOUNT?!”

Deedledum’s scream echoed across the entire ridge.

Hatta and Deedledee enjoyed some lighthearted banter while the rest of the group headed outside to grab dinner.

Seb’s exquisite cooking graced the freshly set-up folding table. His already amazing cooking skills appeared to be improving by the day.

“I almost puked myself to death.” Deedledum came back, pale as a ghost. “What’re you having? It looks good.”

“Want some?”

“There better not be any monster in there.” He hesitantly took a small bite. “It’s delicious. Mind if I join?” Deedledum took a seat and dug right in.

“Some monster’s behind the fake fog, correct? We could hunt it down for you, in exchange for some of your wares.”

“Incorrect. See that flower over on the cliff right there?” Deedledum pointed to a beautiful bright-red flower, gently swaying in the wind. “*That’s* what’s causing the fake fog.”

“A flower?”

“It’s a special kind of flower, known as Dream Drop. It yields all sorts of powders. We’ve lived here well before it ever got there, so we know this place like the back of our hands, meaning we can have the powder all to ourselves. Deedledee says he wants to move shop, but personally, I’m rather fond of our current quiet, peaceful lifestyle,” he said, taking a small jar out of his breast pocket.

“What you see inside is a powder that’ll put virtually any monster, even the stronger ones, to sleep. Just sprinkle it in the wind, and boom! Lights out, just like that. Take it, as thanks for the lovely meal; just don’t tell Deedledee. Also,

it's only good for one use, so be careful."

Alice took the jar.

"Got my hands on a few rare goodies," Hatta exclaimed, marching out of the store. "We'll be back soon, Deedledee, Deedledum."

"There's a town by the sea up ahead. Get some rest there."

"Will do."

The two kind men saw the party off as they disappeared beyond the horizon. They arrived at the seaside town just before dark.

They passed out the second they got to their rooms. The journey proved to be so physically exhausting, even Seb, who never let his guard down, was sleeping like a baby.

The night passed, and they were all still asleep, except for Alice, who, having gotten plenty of quality shuteye in the coach, woke up to the morning sun shining through the window.

"Get up," she said to Haigha, sleeping right next to her with the onion monster.

"I don't wanna..."

"You don't want to go for a nice morning stroll across the beach with me?"

"Did you say 'beach?' I changed my mind."

They got dressed and headed for the beach.

"Think we should've taken the boys with us?" Alice asked, walking along the coastline, the sea breeze gently brushing against their bodies.

"I went to their room, and it looked like they were still out cold. Thought I'd let them get the sleep they deserve. Also, don't you want to take off your heels, Alice? I imagine they're not very comfortable to walk around in..."

"Where there's a will, there's a way. Look, I didn't even get any sand on them."

*How?!* If it wasn't weird enough that Alice could stroll around the beach in high heels without batting an eye, the fact that they somehow remained

spotless certainly was.

Haigha tried asking how any of this was possible, but all she got in response was some gibberish about how any real princess could do as much, so she chose to change the subject.

“Alice, what do you think’s beyond the horizon?”

“I don’t know about no horizon. But what I do know is that there are plenty of fish in this here sea just waiting to be caught.”

“Hungry again?”

“Aren’t you?” Alice gave the onion monster—resting on Haigha’s shoulder—a hungry stare. “We haven’t had a bite to eat since last night.”

Sensing a threat to its life, the onion monster began shivering.

“No! Leave Onion Boy alone!”

“Still fattening him up, I see.”

“H-How about we go grab breakfast somewhere, okay?”

“Fine by me.”

As they turned their backs, the sea erupted in a giant column of water.

“We finally meet, Alice.”

They turned around and saw...a talking walrus.

“Why doesn’t he bark? Walruses bark, right?”

“Seals bark; walruses growl.”

“Now it all adds up.”

*What adds up?* Haigha thought. *What is there to add up?*

“That’s nice. Off we go, then?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

“H-Hold on a second!” They reluctantly stopped. “I’m Walrus, the Demon Lord of the North’s servant.”

“We noticed.”

“I mean, you look just like one.”

“I-I do?”

“Where does being a regular servant place him rank-wise? Somewhere below the middle?”

“Alice, that’s not a very nice thing to say.”

“Why I oughta—” They continued to talk amongst themselves, ignoring him completely. “That’s it, you asked for it!”

Walrus growled, bursting with anger. Multiple fish monsters jumped onto the coast and...flopped around fiercely.

“G-Guys? Guys?!”

“They can’t move on land. ’Tis a shame.”

“They breathe through their gills? Even though they’re monsters?”

*Should we just turn around and leave?* the girls thought. But the performance on display was so pathetic, they couldn’t move.

“Look at what you did to my boys! You’ll pay for this!” The Walrus got even angrier.

“He’s not an actual walrus, right? Just a monster that looks like one?”

“I think so.”

“So...it’s okay if we dispose of him?”

“Well, he *is* the one picking a fight with us, or at least trying to.”

“You two *girlies* dispose of *me*?” Walrus burst out laughing. “Without your guy pals to protect you, my sharp tusks will pierce right through y—”

Alice picked up a small stone and tossed it at Walrus, beaching him.

“N-Nice throw, but now it’s my turn,” Walrus growled again, flopping around pathetically, just like his fellow fish monster brethren.

“What now, huh?”

This time, a swarm of crab monsters appeared.

“My dream of becoming the Demon Lord’s direct servant, finally in claw’s reach. Sic ’em, boys!”

The crab monsters launched themselves towards Alice and Haigha, only to get blown away by a massive explosion.

“Homemade explosives, crafted by yours truly,” smirked Alice. “Pretty neat, huh?”

Walrus growled in excruciating pain as he got struck by a big old bolt of lightning.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, my lady.”

Seb and Hatta positioned themselves in front of Alice and Haigha.

“Perfect timing. Hatta, clear the trash; Haigha, agility buff; Seb...you know what to do.”

“Gotcha.”

“On it.”

“As you wish.”

And so, the epic battle kicked off.

Hatta bombarded the enemies with his mini-explosives.

Haigha cast agility buff.

Seb started a fire and put a pot full of water over it, bringing it to a boil.

Alice handed Seb a plate.

Hatta thrashed around with his whip, knocking the enemies back into the ocean.

Haigha cast yet another agility buff.

Seb filleted the fish monsters, setting them on a plate while the crab monsters simmered.

Alice prepared a selection of spices.

Hatta mopped up the remaining trash with his boomerang.

Haigha cast healing magic.

Seb took out the crab monsters and set them beside the fish monsters.

Alice marveled at the finished product.

“Wh-What are you doing back there?!”

“Pipe down. There’s plenty to go around for everyone. Here.” Alice tossed a piece of Seb’s latest masterpiece inside Walrus’s mouth.

“Bleurgh!” Walrus frantically rolled around, trying to get the god-awful taste out of his mouth. “Wh-What did you do to—” He passed out mid-sentence.

“Did you add poison?”

“I believe my cooking was *just* that putrid, my lady.”

“It’s not your cooking; it’s the ingredients you’re working with.”

The battle was over, and they stood victorious, even though Hatta and Haigha were technically the only ones who did any real fighting.

“What *were* those things anyways?”

“Beats me. They just came out of the blue and started attacking us.”

“That answers everything. Well, whatever, let’s just go grab breakfast.”

“You’re in luck, old buddy, old pal, because I’ve got just the—”

“Anything that has a monster in it is an instant no from me.”

Seb and Haigha also weren’t in the mood for seafood, so Alice just dumped the remains beside Walrus.

“Off we go then.”

They found a nice place to eat at and ordered breakfast.

“How much longer ’til we get to the Demon Lord’s castle, Seb?”

“Around two days, give or take. If everything goes according to plan, that is.”

“If?” Alice stopped eating. “You’re telling me we’re still not in the clear?”

“There are a total of two checkpoints in the Land of Mythical Creatures meant to prevent monster invasions that we’ll have to cross. One is run by the Lion

Knight Order, and the other is run by the Unicorn Knight Order, the former of which might prove particularly troublesome. I'd recommended taking a detour," Seb suggested.

"No detours. If they don't let us through, we're *forcing* our way through. Anything else I should know about?"

"There's also a certain cave we'll have to pass through if we want to reach the Demon Lord's castle. Back in my day, it used to be just like any other cave but with an added dash of monster. Nowadays, it's teeming with all sorts of powerful monsters, and the exit is guarded by the most powerful of the bunch, known as Humpty. Or so I heard."

Hatta and Haigha went pale at the mere mention of the name.

"Something wrong, you two?"

"A fellow item shop owner once told me to stay the hell away from Humpty at all costs," Hatta said.

"I've also heard some scary things about him. Apparently, he can wipe a party out without even lifting a finger," Haigha added, shuddering.

"A super-strong monster sounds like fun. Anything else I should know, Seb?" Alice asked.

"The Demon Lord's castle is right outside the cave, so no."

Hatta and Haigha knew full well that Alice didn't back down for anybody and accepted their fate wearily. And so, they were off to the Land of Mythical Creatures.



**ALTHOUGH** the monster encounters got progressively tougher, the four managed to successfully reach the Land of Mythical Creatures.

"I suggest we take a short break."

They treated themselves to a nice cup of tea out on a beautiful grass field.

"Tell us a bit more about these two checkpoints, Seb. All I can remember is that they're run by some kind of knight orders?" Alice asked.

“That’d be the Lion Knight Order and the Unicorn Knight Order, with the former being the first one we’ll have to cross. I’ve crossed them myself once, actually.”

“Do you think they’ll let a bunch of travelers like us through?”

“Oh, they’ll let anyone through. But only if you prove yourself worthy.”

They tilted their heads in confusion.

“Put simply, we’ll have to open the gate ourselves. But, of course, there’s a catch. Due to its sheer size, the gate won’t budge an inch without applying a tremendous amount of force.”

“So...you’re saying we can’t get it open? Even with our combined strength, Seb?” Hatta asked.

“Even with our combined strength—unless you happen to have an item that conveniently buffs strength.”

“Sadly, I don’t. But I’m sure Haigha’s buffs’ll carry us...” Hatta glanced at his sister. “...through?”

“Can you see it, Hatta?” she said, staring off into the sky. “Onion Boy’s so frightened, he started shivering.”

“Seb...is that who I think it is?” Hatta followed her gaze until he stumbled upon a flock of winged beasts.

“It most certainly is. Get him down here, if you could.”

“No problemo.” Hatta fired his flare gun.

“Aliseb, long time no see.” Dodo came down to ground level.

“Do you *know* him, Alice?” Haigha asked, hiding behind the table.

“Oh right, you haven’t met before. Haigha, I’d like you to meet the perv who can clear a hundred meters in a whopping five seconds, otherwise known as Dodo.”

“Who you calling ‘perv?’ Besides, there’s nothing ‘whopping’ about my five-second record. You smashed it like it was nothing.”

“I did? Well, anyway, moving on. Dodo, I’d like you to meet our local bulging



muscle enthusiast Haigha.”

“Local *what* enthusiast?!”

“You’re into muscles too? Hoo boy, have we got a *looot* to talk about. How about we start with biceps?”

“How about we don’t?! S-Stay away from me, you freak!”

Both Haigha and the onion monster seemed genuinely afraid.

“Suit yourself then.” He turned to Seb. “So, what do you want with me?”

“Off somewhere, I see?”

“Thought I’d pay my dragon buddy a visit. Just need to fly past that checkpoint.”

“Must be awfully convenient being able to just fly past any checkpoints, isn’t it?”

“Get to the point.”

“I’ve got a favor to ask.”

Seb asked Dodo to lend a hand, leaving out certain unnecessary details like the fact that they were out for the Demon Lord’s blood.

“Sure, I’m down. It’s been a while since I’ve gotten to put these bad boys to good use. Go ahead guys, I’ll catch up with you once I’m done helping out my main man Aliseb.”

Dodo hopped in the coach.

“Hatta, are you sure it’s a good idea to be bringing a monster to the checkpoint?” Haigha asked.

“I’m sure we’ll be just fine. He’s no different from your average overly-jacked middle-aged man, aside from, you know, the wings.”

“I didn’t think we’d ever stoop low enough to ask a monster for help.”

But, sure enough, they did. And so, the five set out for the Lion checkpoint.



“**AND** these right here,” Dodo tapped on his shoulders, “these are my

deltoids.”

“Please stopppppp. I can’t take it anymore!”

Dodo did nothing but teach Haigha about all the various muscle groups the whole ride. Hatta was fake-sleeping to escape the Dodo’s wrath. Meanwhile, Alice was, of course, catching some sweet, sweet shuteye.

After traversing the mountain roads for a while, they finally reached the coveted checkpoint.

“Freedom at last.” Haigha burst out of the cart, on the verge of a mental breakdown.

“And who might *you* be, girly?”

“N-No. No more muscles!” An order of burly knights surrounded Haigha. “Goodbye, cruel world...” she murmured and passed out.

Alice took her spot as they carried Haigha back to the coach.

“Which one of you is the commander?”

“You’re looking at him.” A man with a lion’s mane-shaped hairdo stepped forth.

“We wish to cross.”

“You do know that this path leads to the Demon Lord’s castle, right? What business could some pretty little princess like you have here—” He noticed Seb out of the corner of his eye. “Why, I’ll be...if it isn’t Seb.”

“Hello to you too, Lionel. Haven’t seen you around since our days in the Monster Hunting League.”

“Oh, I see. *That* kind of business. Did you get the king’s permission?”

“We’re in a bit of a hurry, shall we say,” Seb said, deflecting the question.

“You may pass. But don’t expect any help from me or my men.”

“That’ll do just fine. Thank you.”

The knights cleared the way, revealing a massive gate.

“Alice, this thing’s at least ten-meters tall,” Hatta said, staring at the gate.

“How do you expect us to get it open?”

“Didn’t you say you crossed it once yourself, Seb?”

“I had obtained the king’s permission beforehand, so I had the Lion Knight Order backing me, and even then, we just barely managed to get it open. Twenty burly men had to all be pushing the gate simultaneously for it to even budge an inch.”

All they could do was sit and marvel at the gate’s majesty.

“Hahaha!” Lionel suddenly burst out laughing. “Run along now, kiddies. Come back when you have the king’s permission.”

“Wait ’til you see our secret weapon. You can come out now.”

Dodo hopped out of the coach, his ominous aura prompting the knights to shift into battle stance.

“Wh-Who the hell’s this?”

“He’s my uncle,” Alice said, not even flinching.

“Why are there wings sprouting from his back?!”

“Oh, those? Those are just props. He’s really into cosplay. Isn’t that right, Uncle?”

“Hi! I’m Alice’s uncle, and I’m really into cosplay. Today, I’ve dressed up as an...angel,” Dodo asserted, also unflinchingly.

The way he just stood there, arms crossed menacingly, brought more to mind a demon than an angel. Hatta, meanwhile, was dying from laughter.





"I-Is he *really* just your uncle who's really into cosplay?"

"Did I stutter?" Alice looked him right in the eye.

"O-Okay, sorry."

It seemed to have worked, surprisingly enough.

"Aliseb, you want me to rip open this gate right here?"

"If you'd be so kind."

"This won't take long." Channeling all of his energy into a single point, Dodo managed to make it budge.

The knights started cheering, as this was the first time anyone had ever made it move all by themselves.

"Hatta," Alice whispered, not amazed in the slightest.

"Yeah?"

"You know how physical exertion makes humans prone to laughing for seemingly no reason?"

"Actually, now that you mention, yeah. Like when you're lifting a heavy object and then burst out laughing at something not even that funny."

"Think the same goes for monsters?"

"Only one way to find out." Hatta walked up to Dodo, face flushed, pushing the gate open with all his might, and pulled a silly face.

"Pfft!" The tension in his muscles dropped. "Hey, what gives?!"

"That's his way of showing support."

"I thought I'd cheer you on a little, you know? Like any good kid would."

"Oh, my bad."

*What's even going on anymore?* Lionel thought, having completely lost the plot. *I'll just ask Seb. Oh...never mind then.*

Seb was busy having tea in the back without a single care in the world.

"You can do it, Uncle! One last push!"

“You got it.” He resumed the intense gate pushing. “*Nrrrgh!*”

And finally, it opened just wide enough for a coach to squeeze through.

“How do you like our secret weapon?”

“I-I didn’t think it was even possible to open that thing alone. What kind of a monster is he?”

“He’s no monster! He’s my uncle, silly!”

“I see...”

The Lion Knight Order would go on to pass down the legend of Alice’s uncle for many generations to come.

“Come with us, Uncle. We’ll drop you off at your friend’s place.”

“Don’t mind if I do.”

And so, they set off once more.

“Hmm?” Haigha opened her eyes. “I think there’s something wrong with my pillo—”

“Rise and shine, sleepyhead.”

“Eh?” The first thing Haigha felt was Dodo’s lap against the back of her head. “Goodbye, cruel world!” She passed out again.



**THE** four dropped Dodo off and started heading north. Without any monsters to delay their travel, they managed to arrive at the Unicorn Checkpoint faster than expected.

“Is that really you, Seb?”

“Long time, no see, Uni.”

This time they were greeted by a group of well-kempt young men.

“I’m guessing you’re on a pretty serious mission to come all the way out here?”

“Something like that. I hope you’ll let us cross even without the king’s permission.”

“Well—”

“Well, what?” Alice interjected.

“We’d be more than happy to let you through Seb, but I should warn you that a certain monster—or rather, monsters—have been posing a threat to our checkpoint lately.”

“Monsters?”

“They try to sneak their way past by manipulating us with their foul illusions. They’re likely lurking somewhere nearby as we speak.”

All eyes were on Haigha.

“What am I supposed to do about it?” she sputtered.

“Does the *Poem of Jabberwocky* ring any bells?” Alice asked.

“That spellbook drains way too much energy for me to cast a protect spell on all of you,” Haigha retaliated.

“Who said anything about protecting? Just dispel whenever needed, and you’ll be fine.” Alice turned to Uni. “If we capture these illusive monsters alive, will you let us cross in peace?”

“Of course. But are you sure you can handle it, miss? If we’re being unreasonable, just let us know.”

“I think I’ll manage just fine,” Haigha smiled. “Thank you.”

She seemed genuinely pleased by the fact that someone was finally treating her like a normal human being.

Having come to an agreement, they went straight into teatime and patiently waited for the monsters to reveal themselves.

“Huh, when did these get here?”

Two large potatoes had appeared right next to Haigha, seemingly out of nowhere.

“That’s them! Move!” Uni yelled as the potato monsters shot out their sprouts, giving Haigha no time to react as they hit her.



*“Ahaha! Hahaha!”*

“Haigha?! Snap out of it!”

“Hahaha! Eat this!” Haigha attacked Hatta, dealing zero damage. “And this!” Haigha attacked Hatta, again dealing zero damage.

Her offensive abilities were, to put it mildly, less than ideal.

“Ahaha! How about this!” Haigha cast Attack Damage buff. Onion Boy’s attack damage increased. “And this!” Haigha cast Attack Damage buff again. Onion Boy’s attack damage increased again. “And some of this!” Haigha cried, casting Attack Damage buff again. Onion Boy’s attack damage, in a shocking turn of events, increased again.

Onion Boy was shivering even harder than he usually did.

“Quit wasting your energy, Haigha!” Hatta cried. “Alice, Seb, I’ll hold her down. You take care of the monsters.”

“On it. Seb, fire up the pan.”

“Way ahead of you.”

“How many times must I tell you two to quit your shenanigans?!”

While they were mucking about, the monsters had made it to the gate, duping many of Uni’s men with their illusions along the way.

“Not so fast!” The monsters dodged Uni’s quicksword. “Are you okay?”

“We’re fine! But, I *do* have to say, those are some annoying monsters you’ve got on your hands.”

“Tell me about it. They always get away at the very last second. Even my quicksword is no use against those slippery little rascals.”

“We’ll figure something out. But first,” Alice pulled the mushroom monster sandwich from her bag, “allow me to bring Haigha back to her senses.”

*“Ahaha! A—”* She tossed a piece inside Haigha’s mouth. “Bleurgh!”

“Snapped out of it?”

Although Haigha appeared to have returned to normal, her energy reserves

were running on empty.

“There goes that plan. Seb, think of something else.”

“Understood. Uni, I’d like to ask you a few questions, if you don’t mind. There’s only two of them, correct?”

“Correct.”

“Is it possible that they’re actually just messing around with you and have no real intention of sneaking past the gate?”

“Judging by the fact that they always head straight for the gate, I’m going to say no.”

“In that case, I’ll need you to procure a canvas big enough to cover the area around the gate.”

“A canvas? I suppose the one we use for our tents will do.”

Uni’s men laid out the canvas in front of the gate, just as Seb had ordered.

*Is this going to stop it somehow? Or is he trying to catch it inside the canvas?* Alice wondered.

“What you’ll want to do next is—”

“Oh, now I see. Very clever.”

Seb finished dishing out orders and then unwound to a nice cup of tea.

Soon after, Uni’s men removed the canvas. The ground beneath it looked the same as ever.

“All set.”

“Now all that’s left is to sit back and enjoy the show.”

Uni joined Seb. Shortly after, the potato monsters appeared again and, with no one to stop them, made a beeline for the gate, only to fall inside a trap hole.

“I certainly didn’t expect it to be this simple.”

“Once you know your enemy, it’s easy to plan accordingly.”

“I’ll try to keep that in mind.”

Meanwhile, Alice peeked down the trap hole. The two monsters laid at the bottom, unconscious.

<Alice got potato x2!> a thought bubble inside Alice's head seemed to say.

"Those aren't potatoes! Those are monsters, Alice. Now put them back!" Hatta ordered.

"You can have one too, jeez! Now quit shouting."

"That's not the issue!"

"So anyway," Alice shifted her gaze to Uni, "mind doing the honors?"

"Right away."

Once they got done filling in the hole, Uni and his men opened the gate.

"You're off to the Demon Lord's castle, aren't you, Seb? Why else would you pass through here?"

"Caught red-handed."

"Don't worry, I'll keep my mouth nice and shut. Also, a word of advice. On your way to the monster cave, you'll come across a spring known as the Fountain of Life. It revitalizes anyone who drinks from its waters, or so I've heard. Try it, especially you, missy."

"Who, me?" Haigha stared in confusion.

"You emanate powerful magical energy. But you abuse it so frequently, it doesn't fully restore even after resting, does it?"

"I-I guess so, now that I think about it."

"Go a little easy on yourself every now and then." Uni smiled. "You deserve it."

*Lionel doesn't compare to this man, not even close,* the four all thought.

"Best of luck in your travels." He turned around.

"One last thing," Hatta called out to him. "Think you could spare me some gunpowder? I want to craft a new type of explosive that makes a lot of sound but doesn't do any damage."

“I’m not entirely sure why you’d want to do that...but yes, I think I could, but only a little.”

“It’ll do. Thanks.”

And so, having received the gunpowder, they set off north.

The ragtag party consisting of a princess, a butler, an item shop owner, and a whimsical mage were slowly but surely nearing the Demon Lord’s castle.



### **MEANWHILE...**

“What a lovely garden,” Jean mused, mesmerized by the variety of beautiful flowers on display.

“I’m glad you like it.”

“It’s even better than the one we have! Can we stay just a little longer, please?”

“If you say so,” the Demon Lord complied, unable to say no to Jean’s adorable smile.

Jean went all around the garden, the Demon Lord following closely behind.

“My very own flower fairy.”

“Sorry?”

“I didn’t say anything.”

*Whew, that was close. I really should avoid using such girly language; it sets a bad example for my minions.*

“Jean, we’re going.”

“One last thing, real quick.” Jean gathered a bunch of flowers and sat down

“Jean?”

“Just one moment and,” he put a wreath over the Demon Lord’s head, “there, perfect.”

*What is this?* The Demon Lord jogged his memory. *Could it be a so-called engagement ring? The one typically gifted to the love of one’s life? At least*

*according to my books...*

“It really doesn’t suit you, now does it?” Jean giggled. “A gold crown, on the other hand—”

“No, I’m keeping it. The sentimental value matters more to me.”

“I, *erm*, I’m glad you like it.”

The silly misunderstandings just never ended with the Demon Lord.

“May we proceed with the tour?”

“Only if you catch me first!” Jean slipped through the Demon Lord’s fingers and gunned it, smiling playfully.

“Ha! Think you can outrun me?”

He circled around Jean, placing a hand on his shoulder from the front in a feat of unparalleled agility.

“Whoa?!” Jean quickly grabbed onto his clothes in an attempt to regain balance.

In a miraculous turn of events, they both ended up on the ground with Jean on the bottom and the Demon Lord on top, with both his arms on either side of Jean.

“Are you okay?”

“I-I’m o-okay. P-Please move.”

“Of course.”

Their faces were so close together, Jean felt like he was about to pass out.

“You’re acting strange. Did you...did you get hurt?!”

“I-I’m j-just f-f-fine,” Jean stuttered through his words, unable to produce fluent speech.

“How about we find you a nice bench to rest on?”

“Yeah.”

They sat down on a bench and gazed at the clouds gently billowing across the blue sky together.

“I think I’m getting a bit,” Jean closed his eyes, “...sleepy.” He nodded off, his head conveniently landing against the Demon Lord’s shoulder in the day’s second miraculous turn of events.

Jean’s sleeping face was so adorable, the Demon Lord couldn’t move a muscle. So he just patiently waited for Jean to get up, still as a statue.

## Chapter 5: The Fearsomely Fearsome Cave Guardian

**AFTER** successfully making it past the checkpoints, the four set course for the monster cave.

“They just keep getting stronger and stronger...” Hatta’s face was riddled with fatigue.

“You can do it, Hatta! I believe in you!”

“Go believe in me somewhere safer, like the coach!”

Haigha, having used up what little energy she had left, was now completely useless to the party.

“I have to say the fragrance really adds to the taste.”

Alice was also completely useless to the party...as usual.

“Seb, we need to find the Fountain of Life.”

“Absolutely. I can’t keep this up for much longer...”

By this point, the monsters had gotten so strong, even Seb was showing signs of fatigue. Really, it drove home how necessary Haigha’s support magic was to them.

“I can feel a strange magical energy coming from the left,” Haigha told them.

“Welp, guess it’s about as good a time as any to use the ward I got from Deedledee.” Hatta stuck the ward to the coach. “It’s not much, but it’s better than nothing.”

They zoomed past all oncoming enemies, the presence of monsters gradually fading, the air turning crispy cool.

“It’s right up ahead, inside the forest.”

“Understood.” Seb followed Haigha’s directions.

And, surely enough, the sparkling mythical spring came into view. Hatta and

Haigha froze in place, utterly captivated by its unspeakable beauty.

“I dub thee the Fountain of Alice!”

“I’m afraid it already *has* a name, my lady.”

*Those two never change*, Hatta thought.

“Taste test it.”

“As you wish.” Seb scooped up a handful. “Oh my!” He clenched his fists, a faint light washing over his body.

“Seb?”

“I feel...stronger.”

Hatta and Haigha took a mouthful.

“I don’t feel tired anymore!” Hatta exclaimed.

“I got all my energy back!” Haigha cried.

Hatta and Haigha exchanged surprised glances as Alice tried some of the magical water for herself. Nothing happened. Apparently, she wasn’t the least bit tired.

“I just got a brilliant idea. Let’s fill up a few jars with water from the fountain. That way, we’ll be able to use them in a pinch.”

“That’s actually not a bad idea. Lemme go grab them real quick,” Hatta said.

“Don’t bother.” A familiar voice rose up. “It’ll turn into regular old water the second you step foot outside this place.”

They turned around and saw the White Rabbit, cackling to himself.

“I see you’ve managed to escape the dungeon after all,” Alice said witheringly.

“And whose fault is it that I got thrown in there in the first place?”

“You have no one but yourself to blame for that one. Anyway...you were saying?”

“I had the same ‘brilliant’ idea as you. But not only did the water lose its magical properties, but it also turned lukewarm. What a double whammy of



disappointment... You're not buying any of this, are you? I can tell it from your eyes."

*As if I'd ever trust a word that comes out of your mouth,* Alice thought.

"I don't think he's lying, Alice. This place is teeming with holy energy."

"Now you I can trust, Haigha. Unlike a certain someone."

"Brazen as always, I see. And here I thought I'd share an invaluable piece of information with you, but...oh well."

"Out with it! I don't have all day."

*"Again* with the cocky attitude. Oh, who cares at this point! Basically, all you have to do is submerge yourself in the fountain's waters, and your defense stats will shoot through the—" Alice and Haigha stared at him, disgust all over their faces. "What? What'd I do?"

"If you want to watch me *bathe*," Alice seethed, "at least have the guts to say it."

"Pervert!" Haigha spat.

"No, wait, you've got the wrong idea! I only wanted to watch Haig—" Alice punched him in the stomach, knocking him out cold.

"We'll be bathing now. Hatta, stand guard."

"Aye, aye!"

"Seb, boil him into a fine rabbit stew."

"As you wish," Seb said, dragging away the White Rabbit's unconscious body.

"Huh, that's odd..." The White Rabbit was suddenly torn from his restful slumber. "Is it just me, or is it a little...*hoooot!* Hot, hot, hot!!!" He jumped out of the boiling pot.

"I see you're awake," Seb remarked.

"I sEe yOu're aWakE...' I nearly got cooked to death!" he protested. "I need to go jump in the spring to, *erm*, heal my burns! Yeah, heal my burns! Not because I want to peep on Haigha or anything like that!"

“Go ahead. No one’s stopping you.”

“Don’t even *try* to stop—” he paused for a second. “Wait, really? Thanks, Seb, you’re the best!” he said, zooming past Haigha and Alice.

“Wasn’t that the White Rabbit? You let him escape?” Alice asked.

“My sincerest apologies,” Seb proffered.

“*Meh*, who cares about that slimeball, anyway? But what about our food?”

“I’ll whip something up right away! And while I do, would you two mind fetching Hatta for me?”

The White Rabbit made a beeline for the spring, unaware of what really awaited him.

“Haigha? *Haigha!* Boy, am I glad to see you. Look at what that bad ol’ Seb did to me.”

“What the blazes are *you* doing here?!”

“H-H-Hatta?! Get away from me, you sicko! Gross!”

“Who you callin’ sicko, sicko?! Out!”

“H-Help! I’m drowning!”

“Get your dirty hands off of me!”

Sadly, the Fountain of Life could not, in fact, mend psychological scars.

“Haigha, look—they’re hugging completely in the nude! Were they *always* that close?” Alice wondered aloud.

“Not sure, but I fully approve of Hatta’s decision regardless. I think love is beautiful in all its forms. Even interspecies love...” Haigha said slyly.

“I suppose you’re right. Come on, let’s give those two lovebirds some much-needed privacy.”

Psychological scars and an unfortunate misunderstanding—the cherry on top of the crap sundae.

“Shouldn’t Hatta be with you?” Seb asked when the girls came back alone.

“Let’s start without him. He’s, shall we say, a little busy right now,” Alice said,

trying not to grin.

Hatta returned sometime later, dragging the White Rabbit's weary body behind him. There were no marks or bruises, just sadness. The sadness that can only come from being trapped in a limbo of getting beaten to a bloody pulp and then instantly regenerating.

"Did you settle on your wedding day?" Alice said, a little smugly.

"My what now?"

"I'll support you no matter what, Hatta," Haigha piped in.

"Thanks...?" Hatta responded, utterly oblivious to their meaning. "Oh! Are we leaving right after dinner or what?"

"We're staying the night here," Alice said. "It's pretty much the ideal resting spot."

"Good. I'll get to making my new bomb then."

Hatta jumped straight to work while Haigha frolicked in the fountain with Onion Boy by her side. Meanwhile, Alice and Seb treated themselves to a nice cup of tea.

"Tell me more about this Humpty fellow," Alice said. "Haigha mentioned something about him being able to wipe a party out without lifting a finger, but I have a hard time believing that."

"I can't say I'm an expert myself," replied Seb, "but apparently, he's quite easy to elude alone, assuming you can brave the monster cave all by yourself. Which is highly unlikely, seeing as no one's ever done it."

"Why would he be easier to avoid alone? Is he slow? I don't get it."

Realizing that further deliberating the matter would yield nothing, Alice and Seb went back to the coach to nap. What they didn't notice was that, at around the same time, the White Rabbit woke up again.

"I need to get as far away from these crazies as possible!" He quietly scooted off without even looking back at Haigha.

Just to show how little anyone cared about him, the White Rabbit's escape

went entirely unnoticed.

Time passed a little slower than usual inside the forest's calm, soothing embrace. Haigha made sure everyone was sound asleep and snuck out for a midnight bath.

"I could do this all day," she said, grinning to herself.

The spring water sparkled brightly under the moonlight, giving it a lovely, ethereal vibe. The next thing Haigha knew, a school of fish had gathered around her.

"That's right! I can use all the magic I want here."

Haigha clasped her hands together as though in solemn prayer, unleashing her magic's true potential. A dress made of tiny glittering beads of light covered her body, with tiny wings of pure light sprouting from her back.

"I'm the spring fairy!" she declared cheerfully. "Prepare yourselves for a heaping dose of fun!"

Had the White Rabbit been around to see just how breathtakingly beautiful she looked just then, he surely would've fainted on the spot.

"Come on, fishies, dance with me! The party never ends!" Haigha giggled.

"I'm no fishie, but can I join too? Looks fun."

"Eh?" Haigha turned around and saw sleepy-eyed Alice just standing there, imposingly. "Ali-Ali-Ali—"

"Alligator? Did you get bit?"

"Alice?! Wh-When did you get here?"

"At around the same time you donned your lil' see-through angel costume," Alice smirked.

*She saw everything!!!*

"I-I can explain..."

"No need. There's nothing wrong with wanting to follow in the footsteps of your idol, AKA my cosplay-obsessed Uncle Dodo."

“You’re completely off-base!”

*There’s only one way out of this,* Haigha thought.

“This is all a dream,” she cried, clinging to Alice. “You didn’t see anything, okay?”

Her pleas were met with nothing but silence.

“Alice?” Haigha looked up at her face, only to see her nodding off. “Is she... sleepwalking?”

Haigha changed back to her regular clothes and carried Alice back to the coach.

*Please think it was all a dream. Please think it was all a dream,* she prayed as she fell asleep.



**MEANWHILE...**the White Rabbit was still racing away from the party at max speed.

“Should be far enough by now...”

He halted and wolfed down his emergency fruit, regaining just enough cool to calmly survey his surroundings. Despite it being daybreak, it was still fairly dark out, which, coupled with the disturbing monster sounds, didn’t put him at ease.

“The *last* thing I need right now is a monster on my tail. I need to find someplace saf—” he trailed off, noticing something off in the distance. “Aha!” he cried, running right toward it.

The something was a large opening inside a precipitous mountain. The inside was too dark for him to see anything.

*It’ll do just fine,* he thought with relief.

The White Rabbit stepped inside, blissfully unaware that what he had just stumbled across was none other than the fabled monster cave.



**HAVING** risen to a beautiful chorus of bird chirps, the party sallied forth to the monster cave.

“I just had the craziest dream,” Alice declared. “So, what happened was—”

“H-Has anyone seen the White Rabbit?” Haigha interrupted nervously.

“Can’t say I have. What about you, Hatta?”

“What do *you* think? He obviously skedaddled and— Why’re you staring at me like that?”

Alice and Haigha were still under the impression that they had gone from enemies to...

“Whatever; forget it! More importantly, don’t you think it’s a little strange how their presence keeps getting stronger and stronger, yet there’re no monsters around?”

“That *is* rather strange. Seb, any ideas?”

“Call it a hunch,” offered the butler, “but I think the weaker monsters just instinctively keep clear of the cave.”

“Because they don’t want to get picked on by the ones inside?”

“In all likelihood. Just as humans bicker amongst one another, so do monsters.”

The fact that there were no monsters to repel didn’t help Hatta and Haigha feel better. After all, if Seb’s hunch turned out to be accurate, that’d mean the monsters inside the cave were extremely powerful.

It didn’t help that Onion Boy—perched atop Haigha’s shoulder—was shivering harder than usual.

“Think we’ll find any fit for human consumption?” Alice, on the other hand, wasn’t fazed in the slightest.

Despite knowing full well that she was as good as useless in a real fight, it was that simple fact that inspired some level of confidence in Hatta and Haigha.

“We’re here.” A large hole inside a steep mountain came into view with an all-consuming darkness covering its entrance. “Ready?” Seb asked.

“I don’t think this is a good idea,” declared Hatta. “It’s bloody pitch-black in there!”

“That’s only the entrance,” Seb replied. “The inside is surprisingly well-lit, what with all the glowstones. Or, at least, that was the case back in my day.”

“Glowstones? *The* glowstones? The ones they use to light up royal palaces? I can snag some here and there, right? Right?” Hatta’s excitement instantly shot through the roof.

And so, with one less frightened passenger on board, they ventured into the cave.

“It really *is* surprisingly well-lit.”

“Would you look at all those glowstones?! They’re just waiting to fall into my hands!”

“Now’s really not the *time*, Hatta,” Alice admonished. “Quick, use one of your wards before those monsters wreck our coach!”

“Good thinking. Lemme use the one I got off of Deedledee, since it works against intermediate monsters too. It cost me a pretty penny, but with all this glowstone, I’m sure to make it back and then some.” Hatta whipped out a silver ward from his item bag and stuck it to the coach, instantly causing the monsters to part, opening up the way forward. “Works like a charm.”

“How do you distinguish between different levels of monsters, anyway?” Alice asked.

“It’s pretty arbitrary. A buncha item shop owners started categorizing monsters into levels, and it caught on for one real simple reason. Say I told you weapon A does a ton of damage; that doesn’t tell you anything. It’s too vague. Now, what if I told you weapon A works against high-level enemies? That’s easier to visualize, making you more likely to buy it. There are a number of special cases that escape tidy labeling, though.”

“Like Dodo and Cheshire?”

“Yeah, boss-level monsters are too powerful to be neatly categorized.”

“What about Onion Boy?”

“Too weak.”

Onion Boy shivered, possibly out of sadness.

“I’m afraid the time for talking is over,” Seb interrupted. The path ahead was blocked by all sorts of unusual monsters. “Try not to use explosives unless it’s absolutely necessary, Hatta. The cave might collapse in on itself.”

“Close-range battle it is, then. It’s been a long time coming.” Hatta charged right in, spear in one hand, dagger in the other, felling monsters one by one.

“I’ll hold the enemy back with my magic but, before I do, Mistress Haigha, an energy buff would be greatly appreciated.”

“Done,” she replied. A blue light passed through Seb’s body as he froze most of the monsters in place.

The monsters had gotten much tougher. But, thanks to the Fountain of Life, the party was now an unstoppable force, progressing at an unimaginable speed.

But just as they thought it would be smooth sailing from here on out, Alice’s face contorted in pain.

“What happened?!” Hatta asked.

“The monsters they...they—”

“They what? Speak to me, dammit!” Hatta cried.

“They don’t look edible! Not a single one.”

“Alice, I swear to God I’ll—”

“But I *did* happen to spy a certain food source *you* might be familiar with,” she said coyly, pointing into the distance.

“A *mushroom*? Seriously? That’s what you wanted to show—” Hatta then noticed a certain rabbit, surrounded by monsters. “What the hell’s he doing here?!”

“Your very special someone’s waiting for you to swoop in and save the day!” chirped Alice. “Wouldn’t want to keep him waiting...”

“My...? What’s *that* supposed to mean?!”

“I’ll buff you like you’ve never been buffed before!” Haigha exclaimed. “Now, go get ‘em, Tiger!”

“What’s gotten *into* you two?!” In the end, Hatta reluctantly rescued the



White Rabbit, anyway. “How daft do you have to be to wander in here all willy-nilly?”

“I didn’t know I was walking straight into the monster cave! They’ve been chasing me around for so long, all I can think about is food!”

“Food, you say? I’ve got just the thing.” Alice held out a plate.

“I’m not falling for that one again! No siree.”

“It’s just a potato sandwich; what’s the worst that could happen?”

“It looks...surprisingly normal. Don’t mind if I—” he took a bite. “*Bleurgh!* You said it was just a potato sandwich!”

“It is! A potato *monster* sandwich, that is.”

“I knew it, I knew—” he sputtered as he began hallucinating. “H-Haigha? Why are you—” he cried before abruptly passing out.

They threw him in the coach and continued on.



A few intense—for everyone but Alice—battles later, the party made it to the halfway point.

“I’d really like to rest now, Seb,” Alice said.

The relentless onslaught momentarily ceasing, they took the opportunity for a quick breather, only for a bat monster to immediately swoop down.

Haigha quickly dished out a protection spell, repelling its attack at the last second.

“*One* second; would it kill you to mind your own business for *one* single second?” Alice huffed.

“It’s giving off powerful magical energy. Intermediate-level boss monster powerful, to be exact.”

“Lemme first try some good ol’ fashioned negotiating.” Hatta turned to the monster. “There doesn’t have to be any bloodshed if you just let us through in peace,” he proposed.

“What enviable naivety!” the monster tutted. “You speak of pure absurdity without even realizing it, boy. *Peace*? There can be no peace, only battle. Battle to the death!”

“Alice, please tell me I’m not the only one who thinks he’s, you know...”

“Unbearably cringy?”

Seb and Haigha nodded in agreement.

“I’d be more *careful* about hurling such petty insults if I were you,” the bat huffed. “I could wipe your entire party out with no greater effort than taking candy from a baby.”

“Alice, please tell me I’m not the only one who thinks he’s, you know...”

“Never even *tried* taking candy from a baby?”

“I actually think you’d find that stealing candy from a baby is surprisingly difficult,” retorted the monster, sweating a little. “Their grip is deceptively strong, not to mention the ensuing hissy fit.”

“So basically,” Alice mockingly remarked, “what you’re trying to say is ‘I won’t stand in your way! Please don’t hurt me!’”

“GAARGH! Enough talk! Prepare to—” the monster paused, spotting Onion Boy. “No self-respecting monster would ever be caught dead associating with these filthy humans! You’re a disgrace to us all.” He ripped the little onion right off of Haigha’s shoulder and flew high up in the air. “May God have mercy on your soul! Because *I* certainly won’t—”

“**What** do you think you’re doing?” Alice clung to his back, enveloped in a black aura.

“Wh-When did you—”

“Do you know how *long* I’ve been waiting for him to get nice and plump?”

“What are you even talking about? Get off!”

“Be careful what you wish for.” Alice grabbed him by the wings, holding them in place.

“Wh-What’re you—” He crashed head-first into the ground.

“I did as you asked! Now please, tell me, what did you plan on *doing* with my precious food source?”

*This is too much, even for me.* Hatta looked away from the tragic scene on display.

Haigha snagged Onion Boy and ran to hide, while Seb treated himself to a nice cup of tea.

In the end, they were able to get a much-deserved breather after all.

“It’s okay, Onion Boy. You’re safe here with me.”

Except for Haigha.



**ONCE** Alice had cooled off a little, they resumed their journey.

“They’re one persistent bunch, I’ll give ’em that. How close are we to the exit anyway?” Alice asked.

“It should be right up ahead, if memory serves. Haigha, some healing would be nice,” Seb remarked.

“On it.”

As the attacks grew in intensity, fatigue started coming over their faces. Except for Alice and the White Rabbit, of course, since they were too busy messing around.

“Do the potato monster next. If we set its internal timer forward, it might get even softer.”

“Setting it forward will only make it taste even more disgusting than it already does.”

“Then what if we try setting it backward instead? Maybe it’s already gone bad.”

“...You just might be on to something!”

Needless to say, their conversations didn’t quite reflect the overall mood, but that didn’t stop the party from holding their own regardless.

“Can you feel the wind, Hatta?” Haigha asked.

“The wind? Actually, yeah, you’re right. The exit must be close by. Let’s move!”

They hopped in the coach, brute-forcing their way through any and all that stood in their path.

Just as they all thought *We’re home free*, Seb suddenly stopped.

“You might want to take a look at this.”

They got out of the coach and saw an enormous egg-shaped entity blocking the path.

“What is that?” asked Alice.

“I’m afraid I don’t have the slightest clue,” Seb said.

“Haigha, feel anything?” asked Hatta.

“Not really, no. I’ll try getting a better look.”

The face of an elderly man suddenly appeared on the giant egg. This creeped Haigha out so much, she ran crying and screaming behind Alice.

“Oh! I didn’t mean to startle you, little one. I’m Humpty. And who might you fine folk be?”

“Princess Alice. We’d like to pass through here.”

“You seek the Demon Lord’s castle, I presume? In that case, I’ll have to ask each of you a question. And if any of you get it right, you may pass unharmed.”

Alice wasted no time responding.

“Seb, fire up the pan.”

“Right away, my lady.”

It seemed like Alice was in the mood for an omelet, as she grabbed a hammer and—

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Hold it!” Hatta barged in. “You’re not seriously gonna eat that thing, are you? Think of your stomach.”

“That thing *can’t* be good for you, Alice,” Haigha chimed in.

“No worries; we’ll split it evenly.”

“*No thanks!*” the siblings shouted in unison.

“Allow me to handle this, my lady.” Seb took out his *Poem of Jabberwocky*. “It appears as though Humpty is...raw.”

“Problem solved! That egg-differentiation magic really came through for us in the end.”

“That changes nothing!”

“Let’s *really* think about this, okay, Alice?”

They continued to try and persuade her as Humpty politely waited for them to finish.

“First, let’s try doing things his way, all right?”

“He said he’d ask each of us a question. If we get at least one of them right, we’re good to go.”

“You know what... I’m sold.” Alice shoved Haigha into the forefront.

“What’re you—”

“She’ll go first.”

“N-No! Noooo!” Alice wouldn’t stop pushing Haigha forward, no matter how hard she struggled. “I’m scared, Alice!” she cried. “You go!”

“I don’t want to be anywhere *near* that creepy thing.”

“Neither do I!”

“There’s no turning back now, Haigha. Put on a good show; I’ll be watching *very* closely.”

After much struggling, Haigha accepted her fate and stepped forward.

“Ready?” asked the giant egg.

“Mm-hmm.”

“But first, allow me to take a quick peek inside your mind.” Humpty’s body lit up momentarily. “I see. Let’s begin then, shall we, Haigha?”

“Eh?” A shiver ran down Haigha’s back as she realized Humpty had actually peeked inside her mind. *Oh no!* She looked on anxiously, gulping nervously.

“Which one of these best represents your opinion of Alice? A: She’s so kind and pretty, I just want to be by her side forever and ever! Or B: I’d be a much better princess than that sour-eyed witch.”

Sweat poured down Haigha’s brow in waterfalls as she felt an ominous aura building up directly behind her.

“Answer the **question**, Haigha.”

Haigha passed out the instant Alice grazed her shoulder.

“You’re up next, Hatta.”

“I’ll avenge Haigha. You’ll see!” Hatta, putting on a brave front, stepped forward.

“Very well.” Humpty lit up once more. “Which one of these is true? A: I’m only putting up with Alice because of the money. Or B: I want to hold Alice down against her will and—”

“AAAGGGHHH!” Hatta suddenly burst out screaming.

“*Ahem*, as I was saying, B: I want to hold Alice down against her—”

“I give, I give, I give! You win! Just please stop! I beg you!” he pleaded, covering up Alice’s ears as hard as he could.

“Now, now, Hatta. I think we should hear him out ’til the very end,” Seb interjected.

“Yeah, Hatta. What if you know the answer? Let’s hear him out,” the White Rabbit seconded Seb’s opinion.

“Say one more word, and everything within a ten-kilometer radius gets wiped clean off the face of this planet! You hear me?!”

His eyes weren’t joking. *What could’ve possibly driven this man to the peak of insanity?* Seb wondered.

“I’m not sure what’s going on. But put those down!” Alice tried taking the explosives away from him.

“Let me drop out, Alice, or else this place and everyone in it goes kablooey!” he threatened, his eyes bloodshot.

“Okay, okay! Now ease up a little.”

“Hmm?” Haigha woke up at about the worst possible moment. “What’s going —” The first thing she saw was her brother with murderous intent in his eyes, holding onto a truckload of explosives. “Oh...” She passed out, again.

“Watch and learn, Hatta. My love for Haigha is sure to land us an easy victory.” The White Rabbit stepped forth of his own accord.

“Very well. What—”

“Wait, aren’t you, like, going to do that glowy thingy? Or did I just miss it? Actually, you know what? Give me your best shot. I’m ready for anything.”

“As I was saying, what does the future hold for you? A: Rabbit stew or B: Slow-roasted rabbit.”

“What even *is* this question?!”

Indeed, both of the outcomes were virtually one and the same.

“I think it’s A, most likely,” Alice answered for him.

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that. B does sound rather promising,” added Seb.

“Would you shut up already!” cried the Rabbit.

“I should warn you that only one member per party is allowed to drop out,” Humpty interjected.

*It’s not over yet.* The White Rabbit chose option C: Remaining silent.

“That being said, I will make a special exception this time as I admittedly should’ve warned you earlier. By which I mean I’m removing the time limit. Take all the time you need to answer.”

*Now it’s over!* He passed out, frothing at the mouth.

“What now, Humpty? I don’t think he’s answering any time soon.”

“I’ll make an extra-special exception and allow two members to drop out.”

And so, the White Rabbit would live to see another day.

“That only leaves us with you two. Which one of you is going to step up to the plate?”

The rumors about Humpty being able to wipe out an entire party without even lifting a finger turned out to be very true. However, this did not faze Alice in the slightest.

“Show these kiddies how it’s done, Seb.”

“As you wish.”

Despite everything, Seb was still Seb.

“Allow me to take a quick peek inside your...mind?”

“Is something the matter?”

“It’s, *erm*, it’s nothing. Ahem, which one of these accurately represents your innermost desires? A: I want to become the Demon Lord and wreak havoc upon the world, or B: I want to ascend to godhood and enslave humanity.”

“Both,” the butler replied without a moment’s delay.

“...You may pass.”

“It’s been a pleasure.” Seb bowed as Humpty faded out of existence, Hatta shivering nonstop out of the corner of his eye. “Let’s get moving then, shall we? Get Haigha and Hatta inside the coach if you could, my lady.”

“Seb,” Alice said.

“Yes?”

“I never knew we had so much in common.”

“I’m happy to hear that.”

*Remind me never to get on their bad side*, Hatta thought as he promised himself to be a little pickier when it came to friends next time.

What happened to the White Rabbit, you might ask? Well, they left him behind.



**MEANWHILE...**



“You really shouldn’t have!”

“But I did!” The Demon Lord smiled. “Now go ahead. Don’t be shy; eat to your heart’s content.”

“If you say so.” Jean picked out one of the many gorgeous dishes and chewed thoroughly, really savoring the taste. “I didn’t know monsters ate normal food; this is delicious!”

“What did you think we eat?”

“Grass, leaves, berries—that kind of stuff.”

“You’re thinking of beast-type monsters. We humanoid monsters eat pretty much the same things you do!”

From this angle, they looked no different from your average love-struck couple—enjoying a nice meal in each other’s company.

“I’m stuffed.”

“A light eater, I see?”

“Compared to you, maybe.”

“Eating is the simplest yet most effective way of replenishing my boundless magical energy.”

“That’s good. I *like* people who can eat up a storm.”

The Demon Lord suddenly froze up. *Did she just say...like? Did I hear that correctly?*

“Well, you’re not *exactly* a person *per se*, but— Are you even listening?”

*She did! She definitely did! I’m sure of it. But why would she confess her feelings at a time like—*

“Wonderland to Demon Lord!”

“Huh? Oh, sorry, I blanked out for a second. Where were we again?”

“Talking about how you’re a big eater.”

“I’d be an even bigger eater if you made all my meals.”

“*Eh?*” Jean was struck by this roundabout proposal. “I mean, I wouldn’t *mind*,

but...don't you have world-class chefs already doing that for you?"

"You're missing the point."

"So, I'm guessing you're a soul food kind of—" Jean's hand slipped, spilling tea all over his clothes, "guy."

"Need a hand?"

"It's okay. Sorry about the mess."

"There's nothing to be sorry for. Let's get you a change of clothes."

"I didn't bring any."

"No worries." Multiple maid-uniform-wearing monsters appeared at the snap of a finger. "I've got just the thing."

"Wh-Where are you taking me?"

They whisked Jean away.

Ten minutes later, he returned in a pretty dress.

"So *that's* what you meant."

"It fits you beautifully, my princess."

"How many times *must* I tell you? I'm not the princess," Jean insisted, trying to hide the embarrassment he felt from both the heartwarming compliment and his own inability to function in a dress.





“What’s wrong? Is it the wrong size?”

“The size is *fine*; it’s just that—”

“Say no more. There’s a nice sofa we can rest on. Come.”

Jean sat next to the Demon Lord on an ornate sofa.

“This sofa is the best. It’s soft, and it’s—” Jean looked at the Demon Lord, only to see him with his eyes shut. “Is he...sleeping?”

Jean placed a hand on his shoulder to get a closer look. “Whoa?!”

His head fell onto Jean’s lap.

“You poor thing!”

Jean’s maternal instincts kicked in as he began to gently caress the Demon Lord’s hair.

## Chapter 6: The Nameless Forest

**AFTER** escaping the monster cave without a hitch, the four continued on their journey to the Demon Lord's castle.

"This place is giving me the heebie-jeebies, Hatta..."

"What, did you expect this to be a fun romp through the countryside or something?"

"Well, no, but still..."

Hatta and Haigha's concentration started to wane as the attacks became more and more unpredictable.

"Silly question," Alice started, "but is there anywhere we could stop and rest, Seb?"

"There is, actually. It's a little out of the way, but an old friend of mine happens to live nearby."

"In a place like *this*? Sounds promising. Take us there."

"As you wish, my lady."

Seb drove the coach down an overgrown path leading to a hut perched atop a small hill while the presence of monsters all but vanished.

"You have interesting friends, Seb."

"He's technically your friend too, my lady."

"He is?"

"Less blabbing, more mov—" Hatta tried to step off the coach, only to be stopped by a surprise arrow landing a mere inch away from his foot. "What the blazes?!"

"The White Queen isn't taking visi—" said a man who came up to the carriage and abruptly stopped in front of them. "Seb, is that you?"

“Long time no see, White.”

“I assume you’re a friend of his? My sincerest apologies.” The silver-haired man bowed. “I’m White Knight, the White Queen’s royal bodyguard, but you can call me White.”

“Just watch it next time, all right? The name’s Hatta, and that back there’s my sister Haigha. Pleased to meet you.”

“The pleasure’s all mine. And who might you be, little...lady?”

“Long time no see, White.”

“Seb, ah-ha, I just remembered I have...places to be. Toodles!” White tried to make a break for it.

“Hold it!” Alice caught him. “What’s the matter with you?”

“What’s the matter with *me*? What’s the matter with *you*?! Did you forget the time I went three whole days without a proper meal because you nicked the Queen’s treats and pinned it on me? Or the time I got thrown in the dungeon because you broke the Queen’s prized vase and blamed me? *Or* the time you—”

He kept rattling off all his grievances with Alice for what seemed an eternity, with Hatta quietly sobbing in sympathy.

“It’s okay, White. It’s okay now.”

“You’re right... I could keep going, but I think that’ll do for now.” Seb’s emotional support appeared to have done the trick. “So...need something?”

“We’re on our way to the Demon Lord’s castle, and we’d like a place to rest our weary bones for a bit,” Seb said.

“The Demon Lord’s castle? I won’t ask why, but you’re not going to get far without the White Queen’s help.”

“How come?”

“You’ll have to pass through the Nameless Forest—a forest cursed by the Demon Lord himself. The moment you step inside, your memories are gone, just like that. Then you walk back out, totally oblivious, and just walk right back in over and over again.”

“Is it some sort of illusion?” Seb asked.

“Illusions can be countered; whatever that thing is can’t. Only monsters, animals, and the White Queen can pass through unaffected. Of course, you *could* always try downing the Demon Lord. But you’d have to get to him first and—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, ask the White Queen for help; we *get* it!” Alice said, cutting him off. “Where do we find her?”

“She should be out back, posing as a sheep.”

“A *sheep*?”

“The White Queen has a spellbook allowing her to shapeshift at will. She’s been getting in touch with her inner sheep recently.”

“I see. Hatta, Haigha, come with me. Seb, have dinner ready by the time we get back.”

“As you wish.”

“I can’t *wait* to taste your delicious cooking again!” White exclaimed. “Actually, let me help out.”

Seb and White got straight to cooking while Alice, Hatta, and Haigha headed off to find the White Queen.



**THE** moment they circled around the hill, they were greeted by a grass field so beautiful and serene, it almost made them forget they were a stone’s throw away from the Demon Lord’s castle.

“She’s there in the middle. Look!”

“Maybe you’re not so useless after all, Hatta.”

They approached the sheep.

“Hey there! So,” Hatta addressed it, “we need you for something.”

The sheep ignored him completely.

“Is *that* any way to address a queen, Hatta?” scoffed Alice.



“Yeah, Hatta, show a little respect,” chimed in Haigha.

“Alright, alright, jeez.” Hatta cleared his throat. “My queen, all I ask is but a moment of your time. The situation is dire.”

The sheep kept on ignoring him.

“Close but no cigar,” snorted Alice.

“C’mon, I totally nailed it.”

“You better get your head in the game before I nail it to a wall!”

“Why can’t things just go my way for once?” Hatta got down on his hands and knees. “I beg you, Your Highness. Help us...please!”

It turned out this was just *a* sheep, not *the* sheep.

“Well, isn’t that just great? Yippee!”

“You’re jumping to conclusions, Hatta. Did you hear it go ‘maa?’ Because I certainly didn’t.”

“Goats go ‘maa,’ not sheep. Sheep go ‘baa.’”

“Thank you for clearing that up, Haigha. Let’s head back.”

“Excuse me?”

Just as the conversation was getting weird, a gigantic flock of sheep appeared.

“Quick, Hatta, get down on your hands and knees!”

“Ha, you *wish*!”

They bickered as the flock of sheep took the opportunity to completely surround them.

“Long time no see, Alice,” said one of the sheep, which turned into a breathtakingly beautiful young lady before their eyes. “What brings you here?”

“I was just about to ask you that myself, actually.”

“The Red Queen can manage by herself, so I’m enjoying the quiet life for now. Want to try being a sheep? I promise you won’t regret it.”

Her carefree attitude sharply contrasted the Red Queen’s resentfulness.

“Uh...maybe next time. We need your help getting to the Demon Lord’s castle.”

“The Demon Lord’s castle? Oh, I see. You wish to pass through the Nameless Forest. Sure, go ahead; I don’t mind.”

“How are you going to get us through, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Ta-da!” The White Queen busted out two separate *Poems of Jabberwocky*.

“Awesome!” Haigha rushed over to the White Queen, a glimmer in her eye. “May I look at them, please?”

“Of course, feel free.”

“Thank you so much, Your Majesty!”

One of the books contained spells involving shapeshifting into various animals, while the other contained a spell that could dispel anything.

“This book could very well make magic obsolete, Alice,” Haigha said, slightly awed.

“So, I’m guessing we can just borrow it and cut out the middleman?” Alice asked.

“I don’t have enough energy to cast the spell, let alone maintain it for prolonged periods of time. I don’t mean to come off as rude, but can you use it, White Queen?” Haigha asked.

“Naturally,” replied the Queen, “although I can only maintain it for upwards of thirty minutes before going limp. I’ll cast it at the entrance and the rest is up to you.”

“Your help is greatly appreciated, White Queen,” Alice said.

And so, with the White Queen now on their side, the four headed back.



**THEIR** nostrils were greeted by a delicious smell the moment they stepped inside the hut.

“Chow time!”

“You said it!”

The mouthwatering selection of foods on display caught Hatta and Haigha’s attention almost instantly.

“Well, fancy meeting *you* here, Seb.”

“Long time no see, White Queen. Come, join us.”

They dug in, the atmosphere made extra-cozy due to the White Queen’s relaxing presence.

“Why are you traveling to the Demon Lord’s castle again?” asked the White Queen.

“Jean got kidnapped,” Alice said brusquely.

“Oh, I see! So you seek to rescue him from the Demon Lord’s clutches?”

“*Alice* doing something out of the kindness of her heart?” White interjected. “*Pffft*, apparently she just wants to ‘knock some sense’ into the Demon Lord who ‘egregiously’ mistook Jean for the princess, despite her ‘unrivaled’ cuteness,” he said sarcastically.

“Never change, do you?” sniffed the Queen.

The two knew Alice so well, they were entirely unfazed, even after hearing her rather questionable motives.

“Never have, never will. But, now that I think about it, just smacking some sense into him won’t cut it. I’ll have him beg and grovel at my feet, kinda like Hatta.”

“Don’t drag me into this!”

“Hatta groveled at your feet?” Seb asked incredulously.

“Well, not *mine* and not really feet, but rather, a sheep’s hooves.”

“What did I *just* say?!”

*I knew I should’ve come with. What a shame,* Seb thought.

“I believe a short break is in order before we go,” Alice declared. “Oh, and I assume you’ll be tagging along for the ride, too?” she asked White.

“Naturally! It’s my duty to protect the White Queen.”

“Do you wish to discuss ancient magic with me, Haigha?” asked the Queen.

“Do I ever!”

Haigha and the White Queen had a friendly chat, while Seb and Hatta tended to their weapons.

“Come on; I’m bored,” Alice said to White.

“All right. Why not?”

Alice took White back to the grass field.

“Bring me a sheep.”

“...Okay?”

He did just that, slightly confused.

“Huh, didn’t even react,” Alice said as she hopped on its back.

“That’s because you weigh almost nothing.”

“It’s so soft and fluffy and nice.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Can I cuddle it?”

“Go ahead.”

Alice buried her face into the sheep’s shaggy fleece, rubbing against it with the most precious smile imaginable.

*A smile like that could’ve prevented any of this from happening,* White thought as he took it all in.







**AND** so, the party set off for the Nameless Forest alongside the White Knight and Queen.

“As you can see, I’m a little rusty,” White said as he effortlessly downed waves of monsters with his expert sword skills.

“Welp, I guess I’ll just sit this one out then,” Hatta said.

“Save your energy for the Nameless Forest; I’ll manage.”

“Yeah, I noticed. Also, who do you think’s stronger, you or Seb?”

“Seb, definitely,” White answered instantly.

“Huh, really?” Hatta didn’t sound convinced. “You seem pretty evenly matched to me.”

“That’s because he’s only using less than fifty percent of his power at any given time. If he went all out, he could give the Demon Lord a good run for his money.”

Seb’s claim of being able to take on the Demon Lord one-on-one appeared true after all. Now, however, he was comparing spellbooks with the White Queen.

“Egg-differentiation magic? That’s just...mind-boggling,” the Queen said.

“Is it?”

“Of all the *Poems of Jabberwocky* I’ve seen over the years, this one is easily the most head-scratching. When would you *ever* use it?”

“Well, I *did* use it in a fight fairly recently.”

“Interesting. It seems even the most useless spell in existence has its moments.”

While the spell didn’t actually do anything in the “fight” with Humpty, for some reason, an observer wouldn’t get that impression from looking at Seb’s reassured expression.

“See for yourself. It uses almost no energy, and I’ve got an egg ready to be

differentiated right here.”

“How kind of you, Seb. Don’t mind if I do.” The Queen cast the spell. “It’s... raw!”

“Indeed, it is.”

“Hurray, I got it on my first try!”

*What a cute girl,* Alice and Haigha thought as they observed from a distance.

“We’re here. Everybody off!” White instructed, hopping off the coach.

Before long, they’d reached the Nameless Forest, rested and ready to go.

“We meet at last, Nameless Forest.”

“Hold your horses, Alice. I’ll cast the spell first,” said the White Queen, “then you may proceed.”

“Fine. But before you do, there’s something I’ve been dying to test out.”

“Test out?”

Alice borrowed some rope from Hatta and tied it around Haigha’s waist.

“Wh-What’re you—”

“See you later!” she said, shoving Haigha into the forest.

“You think this is funny, Ali—” The light in Haigha’s eyes suddenly faded. “Who am I? *Where* am I?” Her memory had, in fact, been wiped clean within mere seconds.

“You’re Haigha.”

“Who? I’m not a Haigha, I’m a bunny!” she exclaimed, making bunny ears with her hands. “Look at me! Look at me! Bouncy, bouncy, bounce.”

She kept hopping around, making those silly noises after each and every single jump.

The cringe had already gotten too strong for Hatta, so he pulled her back to safety. Haigha, red as a beet, immediately ran inside the coach and locked herself in.

“Why would you *do* something like that to your very own sister, Hatta?” Alice



cried. “Go apologize right now!”

“This was *your* idea!”

Haigha holed up inside the coach for a full half-hour, screaming “I wanna go home!” at the top of her lungs.

“Why is it always *me*? Now, no one’s going to marry me...” she sobbed.

*Actually, I can think of quite a few people who’d be into that sort of thing,* Hatta thought, but decided to keep mum.

“She *does* have a point,” Alice remarked. “Hatta, you’re up next.”

“Fat chance.”

“How about you then, Seb?”

“As you wish.”

“*Anyone but him!*” everyone present—aside from Alice—screamed in perfect chorus.

But who could blame them? Just thinking about someone as powerful as the Demon Lord losing themselves was enough to make anyone a bit jumpy.

“If you say so,” Alice said as she casually tied the rope around White’s waist.

“Hey, wait, don’t—”

Alice shoved him inside the forest before he could finish. Hatta and the White Queen’s curiosity got the better of them, so they joined in on the fun, too.

They all thought White’d do something silly like Haigha. But instead, he curled up in a ball and started mumbling to himself.

“I didn’t steal your treats! I didn’t break your prized vase! It wasn’t me, I promise. No, not the dungeon! Anything but the dungeon! It’s so dark and lonely in here! Is anyone out there? Please...help.”

White’s mental breakdown was hard to watch, even more so than Haigha’s cringy antics.

They reeled him back to safety, but he just sat there, motionless. Two of their party members had met their untimely demise, and it wasn’t even the fault of a

monster.

“I think we’ve had enough fun for today, Alice. Let’s get going already.”

“The Demon Lord won’t smack some sense into himself, now, will he?”

Hatta and the White Queen went on the offensive, fearing for their lives.

“What’s gotten into you two?” asked Alice.

“What’re you talking about? We’re just really excited for the Nameless Forest, right, Your Highness?”

“O-Of course. Now, please stand a little closer together.” The White Queen cast an ancient spell, enveloping the four in a thin veil of pinkish light. “As I’ve mentioned earlier, I can only keep this spell up for thirty minutes. If you don’t leave the forest in time, you could get stuck in there forever, so be careful.”

“Duly noted. Seb, let us make haste.”

They said their goodbyes to the White Knight and Queen and ventured forth into the Nameless Forest.



“**THAT** thirty-minute time limit had me a little worried at first, but it turned out to be a walk in the park,” Hatta said.

The few monsters that did crop up were completely harmless, letting them proceed at an unusually fast pace.

But just as the four thought they were home-free, a deer jumped out in front of the coach.

“What now, Ali—” Hatta looked over, and Alice was, naturally, getting some shuteye.

He and Haigha decided to take matters into their own hands and hopped out of the coach.

“Would you mind getting out of our way?”

“I’m the White Queen! Turn back immediately; it’s dangerous out here.”

*You’re a deer,* Hatta thought.

“Listen to the dragon’s footsteps.”

*What footsteps?* Haigha thought.

“What’s *this* guy’s deal, anyway?”

“I think we’re supposed to be fooled by its disguise, which isn’t really working.”

“So, you’re saying it’s a monster?”

“Animals aren’t exactly known for their speaking abilities, now, are they?”

They figured they’d just ignore it, but the deer kept on rambling.

“Don’t throw your lives away; turn back while you still can! I’ll keep the dragon busy. Don’t worry about me; there’s nothing I, the White Queen, can’t handle!” it finished, winking playfully.

At this point, Hatta and Haigha felt they had to say something before things got out of hand.

“I don’t know how to say this, but—”

“Yes? Go on.”

“You...know *we* know you’re a deer...right?”

“Deer? I’m no deer, I’m the White Que—” the deer trailed off as he realized the jig was up. “H-How long have you known?!”

“Since the start.”

“Why didn’t you say so before?!” he wailed, burying his face in his hooves. “Do I look like a clown to you? You think this is funny, you sickos?!”

“We’re sorry, really.”

“Sorry” didn’t seem to cut it as the deer started rolling back and forth in shame. Haigha, on the other hand, stood there smiling, happy to share the pain with someone else.

“Say, what kind of spell did the Demon Lord put on this forest?” Hatta asked. “I’ve heard it’s not your regular illusion magic, but I’d like to know a little more.”

“Why should I tell *you*?”

“We’ll forget everything that happened.”

“You’ve got a deal! So basically, the Demon Lord used his *Poem of Jabberwocky* to surround the forest with that thin layer of fog you probably noticed on the way in. Once inhaled, the fog produces illusions from inside the body. It’s a high-level spell, which regular dispels can’t touch.”

“He can deploy magic over an area this large? That’s just...wow.”

Hatta and Haigha exchanged glances, then shifted their gaze to Seb observing from a distance.

“Is something wrong?”

“White said you could give the Demon Lord a good run for his money. Not like I don’t trust the guy, but how do you plan on taking him down?”

“His magic might be powerful, but he doesn’t stand a chance in close-quarter combat. As long as I can avoid every spell he throws my way, and I can get in close, he’s as good as dead.”

When Hatta thought about it, it seemed no matter how fatigued he got, Seb hadn’t taken a sliver of damage, not to mention that he took down anything he touched in one shot.

Over the course of their journey, however, Hatta had acquired a much greater kill count than him. It seemed Seb excelled purely in single combat.

“So, basically, you’re a one-trick pony. Also, one other thing has been on my mind for the longest time now—why in Wonderland do you serve Alice?”

“To put it simply? Because it’s fun.”

“You find all this *fun*?” Hatta scoffed.

“Well, no. Even *I* couldn’t have predicted this. I just want to go home and rest.”

The arbitrary nature of Alice’s actions seemed to have finally thrown even Seb for a loop.

“Are you *seriously* planning to take on the Demon Lord? You should really quit

while you're still ahead. You could get seriously hurt!" the deer warned, its doe-eyes filled with genuine concern for the party.

The deer was a kind monster at heart, as evidenced by the fact that it tried shooing them away without inflicting bodily harm.

"I appreciate the concern, but we can't just turn back now. Sorry, buddy." Hatta turned to Haigha. "We can't stay here for much longer. Let's get moving."

Haigha caught on to Hatta's concern almost immediately and got in the coach ASAP.

Was this due to running low on time? Not really—they just didn't want Alice to serve their new furry friend for dinner.

"Off we go, then!"

*What if Hatta, the White Rabbit, and the Deer fell into a love triangle? Wouldn't that be something?* Haigha thought, staring into the Deer's longing eyes as they faded further into the distance.

"Something wrong?"

"It's nothing, really."

"You sure? You were making this really stupid face just now. We need you in tip-top shape, Haigha. The Demon Lord's castle is right up ahead."

"I know, but I think we have other things to worry about," she said, pointing to some enormous creature.

"Is that a G-Griffin?"

A creature, part-eagle and part-lion, was sleeping peacefully right in the middle of the road.

"I sense powerful magical energy. What kind of a monster is it?" Haigha asked.

"That thing's not a monster," Hatta scoffed, "it's a legendary creature. It has sharp talons and fangs and is known for bringing a swift death to any and all who dare anger it. Seb, can we squeeze through somehow? If not, let's just go around."

“The road is *much* too narrow to squeeze through,” the butler answered. “And as much as I’d love to go around, that simply isn’t an option as we’re running dangerously low on time.”

“What’re our other options? Picking a fight with the damn thing?”

“We could also try abandoning the coach and traversing the forest on foot, although we might not make it on time, no matter how fast we run, and then there’s always the possibility of us getting lost.”

They had five minutes left. The clock was ticking.

“You better get up right...now?” Hatta’s voice trailed off as he noticed Haigha staring into the distance, pale to the bone. “What’cha looking at—” He lost his voice the second he saw Alice on the Griffin’s back.

“What in Wonderland are you doing up there, my lady?” Seb cried.

“I’m feeling it out. It’s not quite as fluffy and soft as the sheep, but it’s definitely a top-tier contender. A griffin, right? I hereby dub thee Griffy!”

“I must say that’s a rather cute name indeed.”

It went without saying at this point, but the princess and her butler really were something else.

“Do I look cool?”

“Of course you do; what could possibly be cooler than the world’s first griffin knight? Dragon knights wish they could be this cool.”

“I know what could be cooler,” Alice said, banging Griffy on the head. “Wakey wakey, sleepyhead.”

The griffin looked around in confusion as Hatta and Haigha screamed on the inside.

To make matters worse, a lizard-faced humanoid monster appeared seemingly out of nowhere. It seemed to be an intermediate-level boss monster based on its aura alone, which certainly didn’t help quell that internal screaming.

“So, you’re the ones who managed to get past Humpty. I’m the guy who owns

this place, and you ain't going nowhere 'til you get past us first. Also, since when was that griffin there?"

Three minutes left on the clock with a legendary creature, and boss-class monster blocking the path. The odds couldn't have possibly been more stacked against them.

"It doesn't seem hostile. Try giving it some food, my lady."

Seb, however, was not about to throw in the towel.

"All I've got on me is a monster sandwich," Alice replied.

"That'll do just fine."

Were they planning to poison Griffy? Or were they banking on it succumbing to illusions? Nobody knew, but that didn't stop Alice from tossing her sandwich inside its mouth anyway.

They all watched with nervous anticipation, waiting for something crazy to happen, only for Griffy to gobble it up like it was candy.

"Aww, he looks so happy."

"I think it likes you, my lady. I hear Griffins can comprehend human language and have two special abilities: Wind Gust and Roar. You might just want to try it out on those monsters right there."

"I guess we'll see if it works. Griffy, use Roar." Griffy graced the monsters with an ear-piercing roar, locking them in place. "Good boy! Now use Wind Gust."

"W-Wait! I'm the great Demon Lord's—"

Griffy flapped his wings, sending the monsters flying over the horizon as Hatta and Haigha just looked on in disbelief.

"You two get on Griffy's back. Quickly now! We've only got a minute left." Seb guided Hatta and Haigha onto the Griffin's back. He then cut off the reins, sending the horses galloping toward the exit, and got on himself. "Can you see where I'm going with this, my lady?"

"Do I look blind to you? Griffy, grab the coach and get us out of here."

Griffy seized the coach in his talons and lifted off with a majestic roar, ferrying

the four outside the Nameless Forest in the blink of an eye.

“We made it, with a whopping five seconds to spare too.”

The thin veil of light around them faded the second Seb finished speaking. It had been close—worryingly close—but they’d managed to scrape by the skin of their teeth.

“Who’s a good boy? You are! Yes, you are,” Alice praised, petting Griffy. “You too, Haigha; show him some love.”

“Who, me? S-Sure, I guess.” Griffy screeched with joy as Haigha caressed his back. “What a good boy!”

“Told you.”

Haigha had quickly taken a shine to Griffy.

“Thanks, buddy. We couldn’t have done it without you.” Hatta lowered his guard, petting Griffy. “What’re we gonna do about the runaway horses, though?”

“That I do not know. I was expecting us to converge back at the exit, but that didn’t quite go according to plan, as you’ve so astutely noticed,” Seb said.

“Who needs horses when we’ve got the next best thing?” Alice ventured.

“You might just be onto something, my lady.” Seb bonded the broken reins back together and attached them to Griffy.

“Now, *this* is what I call cool,” Alice said, beaming at the world’s very first griffin-drawn coach—a mode of transportation worthy of the gods themselves.

“Let’s get a move on then, shall we?”

And so, the four made their way to the Demon Lord’s castle, their unlikely companion scaring away all who dared approach.



### **MEANWHILE...**

“How long was I asleep...?! The Demon Lord’s blood pressure skyrocketed as he realized he had been dozing off on Jean’s lap this entire time.



*How? How does this keep happening?* The question eluded even the erudite Demon Lord himself.

“There must be something...”

*I do recall reading somewhere that love is the most elusive creature of all.*

“Seems like I’ve got a lot more studying to do.”

Little did he know someone was watching from the shadows.

“Was I asleep?” Jean mumbled, woken by the ominous presence.

“Out cold,” the Demon Lord replied, hastily lifting his head off Jean’s lap.

“Huh? Is it just me, or are we being watched?”

“So it would seem,” the Demon Lord replied, turning his attention away from Jean. “Show yourself, whoever you are,” he growled, his unusually grave tone giving Jean a light scare.

“My Liege! Why are you humoring this human filth?” a seductive humanoid monster lady shouted, jumping out of the shadows. “I’m a much better fit for you than that runt could ever dream of being.”

Jean felt the womanly pride he never thought he’d had crumble right then and there.

“She’s right, Demon Lord. I’m nothing compared to...compared to...” Jean hung his head, his voice trailing off into a barely audible mumble.

The Demon Lord couldn’t bear seeing Jean like this, so he slowly approached the monster lady.

*That’s right. Go! Run! Scram!* Jean thought sadly.

“I appreciate the enthusiasm,” the Demon Lord said sternly, “but I only have eyes for Jean.”

Hearing this, the monster fell to her knees, a stream of tears running down her cheeks.

“Come with me, Jean.”

“D-Demon Lord...”

The two were so perfect for each other, the monster lady hadn't even noticed Jean was actually a boy.

## Chapter 7: Infiltrating the Demon Lord's Castle

**THE** air was teeming with an ominous aura, the sun obscured by a sea of thick, dark clouds.

"I'm scared, Hatta." Haigha clung to her brother's clothes, drenched from head to toe in a nervous sweat. Even the monster cave wasn't as disturbing as this.

"If you can survive *her*, you can survive anything. Trust me," he whispered back.

*We've yet to meet a monster scarier than Alice. Maybe he has a point,* she thought.

Seb suddenly stopped the coach. "We're here."

They got out of the coach and were greeted by a giant castle perched atop a mountain.

"If we proceed by coach," Seb said, "there's a good chance we'll get dragged down to the bottom of the swamp. I'd recommend going on foot from here on out."

"Can't we just, y'know, fly over?" Hatta asked.

"I believe we should try to be as discreet as possible," Seb replied. "And flying right into the enemy's hands sounds like the exact opposite of that."

"What're we waiting for, then?" Hatta responded. "Our bags aren't going to pack themselves."

Hatta and Haigha made sure to pack only the vital essentials to cut down on weight. Meanwhile, Alice just stood there, looking mighty conflicted.

"Is something the matter, my lady?"

"Which one should I take with me? The mushroom, onion, or potato monster?"

“How about we just split them into thirds?” Seb suggested.

“Hmm, actually, forget it. I’ll just take this instead,” Alice said, staring into the green jar Deedledum had given her.

*He said the powder will knock out virtually any monster it interacts with, she recalled. It might only be good for one use, but what a use it is!*

“We’re good to go, Alice.”

“Same here.”

Hatta and Haigha were already outside the coach, ready and raring to go.

“Seb, how long is it going to take us?”

“About thirty minutes or so. Assuming nothing gets in our way, of course.”

“Hatta, did you pack all of your silly little items?”

“I brought four of my latest homemade bombs with me. They’re loud as all hell, so we can use them for distraction purposes.”

“Haigha, are you prepared to set off the Boundary Stone when the time is right?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Perfect, off we go then,” Alice said, dismissing Haigha’s concerns. “Griffy, watch the coach.”

The monster screeched in acknowledgment.

And so, the party—which solely existed all because Princess Alice felt like smacking the Demon Lord out of incredible pettiness one day—set out.

“Watch your step, Alice. Wouldn’t wanna get your precious shoes all dirty...” Hatta’s voice trailed off as he noticed her heels were completely spotless. “How’d you do that?”

“Where there’s a will, there’s a way.”

“Yeah, yeah. What kind of weird magic did you put on her shoes, Haigha?” Haigha shook her head, her own shoes covered in mud. “‘Where there’s a will, there’s a way,’ huh?” her brother muttered.

He thought about pointing out how no amount of willpower could overturn the laws of physics but, realizing it'd lead to absolutely nothing good, kept his mouth shut. Seb's shoes were similarly spotless, but Hatta and Haigha both pretended not to notice.

"M-M-Mon—"

"Mon what?"

"Monster!"

"Monster?!"

Hatta followed the direction Alice pointed in and saw...a carrot monster stuck in the mud.

"It's a *carrot*."

"Carrot monster, you mean."

"I *knew* I should've brought the potato with me."

"Why?"

"To make curry, of course," Alice declared, shifting her gaze to Onion Boy, perched atop Haigha's shoulder. He began shivering.

"Think rationally, Hatta. Why haven't we come across a single carrot throughout our entire journey? Because it *only* lurks around the Demon Lord's castle. And why's that, you may ask? Because it's the Demon Lord's direct vassal, of course."

"Counterargument: the Demon Lord's direct vassal wouldn't get helplessly stuck in the mud."

"You win this time, buddy. Let's go look for one that's not stuck, for now."

"Aren't we supposed to be after the Demon Lord?" Haigha asked.

"I forgot!" cried Alice.

Alice was *this* close to changing their primary objective to finding a carrot monster for curry-making purposes, an objective that, by all means, was far less arduous than the one she'd initially planned.

“Let us make haste, my lady,” Seb interjected. “Wouldn’t want to get mud all over our clothes because of some stray monster, now would we?”

“God forbid.”

And so, after some walking, they successfully reached the castle entrance. It was guarded by multiple, tough-looking guards, so they hid inside a nearby bush to plan their next step accordingly.

“Do we bust our way in or what?” Hatta asked impatiently.

“For my master plan to work as intended, we have to keep a low profile,” Alice replied. “There’s no ‘busting through,’ in Hatta-friendly terms.”

“Got any *better* ideas, genius?”

“Behold,” Alice said, whipping out the green jar, “a powder that’ll put any high-level monster to sleep, courtesy of Deedledum.”

“Any high-level monster? I’ve gotta see this.”

They moved upwind and popped the jar open, flinging its contents airborne. All the guards were out cold within mere seconds.

“Works like a charm, ay Ali—” Hatta looked over to Alice and found her quietly dozing off. “Are you kidding me?!”

“How could I resist? Just seeing them sleep so comfortably makes me want to join them.”

“What’re you, a monster?”

“*Rude!*”

*Silly Hatta! Demon Lord class monsters aren’t affected by the powder, so why would I be?* Alice thought.

“Enough talk,” she said out loud. “Let’s move on.”

The four simply entered through the conveniently wide open front gate. Did the monsters just forget to close it? Or was this a display of arrogance? No one knew.

“Oh my,” Haigha exclaimed.

They were greeted by a luxurious entrance, with every inch polished to perfection. Not a speck of dust in sight.

“I thought it’d be a little more, y’know, *edgy*?” Hatta remarked. “Like cobwebs all over the place. Strange mushrooms, that sorta stuff.”

“Are you...hungry for mushrooms?” asked Alice.

“What? No!”

“Well, why didn’t you *say* so earlier? There’s one back in the coach.”

“Alice, listen to the words coming out of my goddamn mouth for once in your life, please.”

“I’m just messing with you. Don’t take it too hard, okay?”

He didn’t. In fact, Hatta seemed oddly *into it*, for whatever reason.

“Where to now, Seb?” Alice asked.

“Structurally,” the butler answered, “it doesn’t appear any different from your average castle, so we should be able to reach the throne room by going in a straight line. Although I wouldn’t recommend it due to the high risk involved. I believe executing your plan would be the ideal move here, my lady.”

“Let’s go find somewhere to plant bombs then,” Alice said.

And so, they haphazardly wandered around the castle.



**THEY** were soon faced with red, blue, and yellow doors.

“Which way do you want to go?” Hatta asked.

“Let’s just go in order,” Seb recommended.

They entered the red door and found a seemingly normal room.

“Lookie here. Kettle, unfinished teacups...someone must’ve been having a tea party just now. Want me to plant a bomb here, Alice?” Hatta asked.

“Is that any way to say hello?” an unfamiliar voice answered.

“What the—” Hatta instinctively leaped back. “Show yourself, coward!”

“Look under the table, my dear boy.”

“A mouse? Sorry buddy, but I’m afraid I’ll have to put you down now,” Hatta said, chucking his boomerang, only for it to rebound inches away from the mouse. “Huh?”

“Now, now,” cooed the mouse, “enough with the vile barbarisms. Come, have a seat.”

“We may as well do as he says,” Alice remarked. “The exit’s gone anyway.”

Hatta and Haigha quickly darted their eyes across the room and noticed that the door was, just as Alice had said, missing.

“You have nowhere to go,” continued the mouse. “So come, please sit. How bad could it be?”

Realizing they were completely out of options, the four sat down at the table.

“This is my domain. Attacks of both physical and magical nature are rendered null here,” the mouse said as it ran up the table. “Here’s a question for all you fine folk. Do you plan on seeing the Demon Lord? If not, I’ll release you from my domain at once. If you are, we’ll have to sort things out a little differently.”

“What are you trying to say?” Alice asked.

“The door leading up to the Demon Lord’s throne room can only be opened by those His Highness has personally deemed worthy. Or those in possession of three select keys,” the mouse explained. “If you recall, there were a total of three distinct doors for you to choose from.”

“So basically,” Alice began, “if you want access to the Demon Lord’s throne room, you’ll have to collect all three keys from all three rooms, correct?”

“My, my! Aren’t you a bright one?” chirped the mouse. “That is correct.”

His calm reassured demeanor was more than enough for them to believe his words.

“You wouldn’t bother telling us all this if you intended to fight,” Hatta remarked. “So, what’s your game?”

“Funny you should ask, seeing as I have one set up for you. Win and the key is



all yours,” the mouse said. “We’ll start by introducing ourselves. I’m the Dormouse; I spend most of my days sleeping.”

“Call me Alice *or* the cutest princess to ever grace this world. Either works.”

“Name’s Hatta; I run the best darn item shop around.”

“I’m Haigha, a magic user, more or less.”

“I go by Seb. I’m Lady Alice’s butler/bodyguard.”

“Here’s how this goes: whoever falls asleep first loses. Seems simple enough, right? Well, there’s a catch. Once you drift off into dreamland, you’re never coming back,” the Dormouse explained. “Unless someone brings you back, of course.”

Hatta and Haigha could feel saliva sticking to the back of their throat as they swallowed wearily. Who could blame them, really? You’d be a little nervous, too, if losing meant never waking up.

“Let the game begin!” Alice cried, passing out instantly.

“That was fast!” the Dormouse exclaimed.

“Oh, sorry,” said Alice, waking back up. “I didn’t mean to.”

“I’ve never seen anyone pass out that quickly,” the Dormouse said. “You truly are one of a kind, Alice.”

“I get that all the time,” she said proudly.

“You never cease to amaze, my lady,” Seb enthused.

The Dormouse let out a faint sigh as he listened to Seb sing Alice’s praises. “Seb, was it? Her parents must be quite overprotective to keep you around,” he said. “This is going to be a fast game. I can feel it already.”

“Is it? I had a big breakthrough just now, thanks to Lady Alice.”

“Big breakthrough, you say?”

“This room is specifically designed to induce sleep in humans. The humidity, the temperature, the calm music in the background, and the fragrant aroma of flowers all led me to believe this. At first, I thought that’s how he’s going to get us,” Seb said, all eyes on him. “But then Lady Alice passed out, yet the game

continues. Meaning—”

“Meaning we can just take turns sleeping and win easily,” Hatta concluded.

“But then why would he make us play a game where the odds are in our favor?” Haigha asked.

“Because there’s a catch. Either he has some trick up his sleeve to make us all pass out at once, or he’s purposefully stalling for a different win condition,” Seb said, inspecting the inside of the kettle. “Empty, just as expected. By ‘different win condition,’ I meant, of course, us dying of hunger or thirst, whichever comes first. Things could’ve gone very poorly for us had I not noticed.”

“I take back what I just said,” said the Dormouse slyly. “That’s the first time anyone’s caught on this quickly. Congratulations.”

Although he might’ve looked like an ordinary mouse, his power level was easily that of a boss monster. Even if they still had Deedledum’s special powder on hand, they all knew it would have no effect whatsoever.

“Now all that’s left is to find the path to victory,” the Dormouse continued, “or else you might as well flush that brilliant insight right down the drain. Take your time; no reason to rush.”

“There’s plenty of reason to rush,” cried Alice. “Seb, think of something! Anything!”

“Give me a minute, my lady.” Seb crossed his arms, delving deep into thought.

“This might take a while. Hatta.”

“Yeah?”

“Humor me with your signature strip dance routine.”

“‘Signature’?! When have you ever seen me strip dancing?!”

Haigha looked at her brother with disgust, her eyes rejecting any possible number of excuses.

“Why do I have to humor you anyways?”

“Haigha can do it instead,” Alice replied. “I don’t mind.”

“Who, me? Oh, erm, sorry. I’m waaay too boring for that; yep!” Haigha felt

like bailing, but there was nowhere to bail.

“Love magic sounds anything but boring, if you ask me. Haigha did say something about ‘returning the favor’ with her love magic back in the Mysterious Forest, if memory serves.”

“You said you’d erase all your memories!”

“Of you talking with squirrels, Haigha. You’re conveniently leaving out a crucial bit of context! Now show me this love magic and make it snappy.”

*Why, why do you just happen to remember this one trivial exchange word for word?*

By this point, Hatta and Haigha realized that if they didn’t think of something fast, their sanity was at a very real risk of collapsing, so they joined Seb.

“Typical. How about you; do you want to play?” Alice asked the Dormouse.

“Sure, but what?”

“Anything, who cares?” Alice said, lifting him up by the tail. “Actually, didn’t you say you spend most of your days sleeping? How are you still awake?”

“I can manipulate my sleeping tendencies at will. Sometimes, I’ll sleep for three days straight; other times, I’ll stay awake that long. Depends on my mood, really.”

“That’s quite the convenient body you have. Let’s see if we can find what makes it tick!”

Alice tried poking him, playing around with his cheeks, and yet...nothing. Or so they thought when Seb had a sudden stroke of genius.

“Let me try something, my lady.” He reached for the Dormouse, only for his hand to rebound mere inches away. “I see. How about now?” He reached for the Dormouse again. This time, his hand made contact. “Care for a game, my lady?”

“A game of what, exactly?”

“Catch.”

Hatta and Haigha—realizing Seb had finally conjured up a solution—

preemptively moved to the corner of the room to avoid getting caught in the crossfire.

Seb positioned himself against a wall on the opposite side of the room and tossed the Dormouse to Alice.

The Dormouse began cackling and said, “You really didn’t think this through, did you, Seb? How is Alice going to throw me that far? I mean, just look at her!”

Hatta and Haigha started shaking in each other’s arms, painfully aware of what was coming next.

“Oh, just you wait and see!” Alice wound up and hurled him through the air with inhuman speed.

Seb gracefully moved out of the way as the Dormouse proceeded to smash against the wall. He slid all the way down to the floor beneath him, his limbs twitching erratically.

“I can see you’re still holding back, my lady,” Seb taunted as he scraped the Dormouse off the floor, tossing him back to Alice. “Give it all you’ve got!”

“Be careful what you wish for.” Alice wound up again.

“H-Have some mer—” The words died in his mouth as he was launched through the air, screaming on the inside.

Seb gracefully moved out of the way again as the Dormouse collided against the wall with an audible splatter, passing out instantly. The missing red door shifted back into place, his domain abolished.

“Seb, you have some serious explaining to do,” Alice said.

“If you recall, the Dormouse mentioned how attacking him was pointless. Indeed, Hatta’s boomerang throw demonstrated just that,” he explained. “This led me to believe that touching him was outright impossible. But you, my lady, proved otherwise. That’s when I knew I just had to try something.”

“That being?”

“At first, I tried grabbing him with the intention to squish him to death. As you saw, that attempt failed miserably. For my second attempt, I tried grabbing him with no particular intention, and it worked just fine,” Seb continued.

“Essentially, what his domain really did was protect him from physical actions performed with harmful intent. Meaning you, my lady, harbored no ill will, even when you went all out.”

“Makes perfect sense,” Alice nodded.

*This does not, in fact, make perfect sense, as it takes a truly ‘special’ person to knock someone unconscious without any harmful intent whatsoever,* Hatta thought.

“On to the next room we go!”

“But before we do, my lady, you might be interested to see what I found lying next to the Dormouse,” Seb said, holding out a red key.

“Guess we really will need all three keys to access the throne room after all. Hatta, Haigha, I know you two are deeply in love with that corner, but I’d really appreciate some movement.”

“Wh-What about the Dormouse? We can’t just leave him like this.”

“Good thinking, Hatta. Let’s stuff him inside the teapot, just to be safe.”

*That’s actually the exact opposite of what I had in mind!* Hatta thought as Alice sealed the Dormouse away.



**AND** so, having cleared the red door, they moved right on to the blue one.

“Two more keys left to go. *Ughhhh*,” Alice grumbled. “Actually, what if we just get my uncle to open the throne room door for us?”

“Your uncle’s a direct servant of the Demon Lord, brainiac,” Hatta snarked.

“We’ll just tell him Haigha is dying to talk about muscles, and that should cut it.”

“Yeah, no way!” Haigha cried.

Alice had no other option but to open the blue door with her brilliant idea falling flat on its face.

“A-Alice?! Woo-hoo! I knew you’d come to save me!” cheered the White Rabbit, hog-tied to the floor.

“Sorry, wrong door!”

“W-Wait, Ali—” His pleas fell on deaf ears as Alice ruthlessly shut the door behind her.

“On to the yellow door.”

“*Alice!*”

“What is it, Haigha?”

“Did you forget about...you know...?” Haigha glanced at her brother.

“What? Is there something on my face?” he asked.

“Fine. You owe me big time, Hatta,” Alice sniffed.

“Owe you for what?!”

The two girls were still fully convinced there was something between Hatta and the White Rabbit. Although—unlike Jean and the Demon Lord’s budding romance—there was little excitement to be found there.

“After you, hero.”

“Sure thing...” Hatta languidly opened the door.

“*I knew you’d come back for me!*”

They then noticed a large turtle next to the White Rabbit.

“I’ve been waiting for you, Alice,” the turtle said.

“How do you know my name? He told you, didn’t he?”

“I, the Mock Turtle, have lived for hundreds of winters. I know everything there is to know, including that you’re friends with the White Rabbit.”

While the “hundreds of winters” part was impressive in its own right, he clearly overplayed the “know everything” bit, Alice thought. *If he did, he would’ve known we abandoned the White Rabbit back at the monster cave. Not very buddy-like, now, is it?*

“Call me every name in the book for all I care,” the turtle continued. “I take pride in my cowardice. I’m on a constant lookout for information to hit the enemy right where it hurts—the heart. You thought you lost your precious

friend in battle and yet here he is, waiting to be rescued. Devilish, isn't it?"

*Not really, no*, thought everyone in the party. They hadn't lost him in battle; they'd just forgotten he existed.

"Who did you hear this from?"

"Cheshire; the name might ring a few bells."

Cheshire must've been watching from somewhere and told him a bunch of nonsense to spice up their future encounter, Alice realized.

"Swear allegiance to me, and then we'll—"

"Split him in half? Sounds like a plan," Alice declared.

"Exactly; we'll split him in...half?"

"Roast. Stew. Either works." Her eyes were dead serious.

"Wh-Why *me*?! I taste terrible!" the White Rabbit squealed, struggling for dear life. "Haigha, help!"

"Hang in there! Hatta's going to rescue you in no time!"

"Hatta? Oh, who cares? Just help me already!"

Hatta, fed up with the curious looks coming from both Alice and Haigha, responded with a plain and simple "Nah."

"Dammit! If it wasn't for these ropes, I would've gotten away by now!"

The Mock Turtle, meanwhile, had now completely lost the plot.

"He's confused. Now's our chance, my lady," Seb urged.

"I'll only say this once. So listen carefully, Mock Turtle," she said, "you can have our half of the White Rabbit if you hand over the key. How does that sound?"

"Your half?"

The Mock Turtle was completely dumbfounded. And why wouldn't he be? He had no intention of eating the White Rabbit whatsoever.

"Or would you like to get turned into turtle soup instead?"

Suddenly, the pressure was on the Mock Turtle. If he didn't act fast, tonight's dinner menu would consist of slow-roasted rabbit and turtle soup. He saw that Seb had already begun preparations.

"I-It seems as though I'm forced to personally destroy all of you myself!"

The Mock Turtle attacked...or at least he tried to, for his move speed was laughably slow. Alice casually circled around and plopped down on top of him.

"Wh-What's the meaning of this?!"

"Nuh-uh. Nothing like a sheep. Hard as a rock and slimy. *Very* slimy. Final verdict: ten points."

"What?!"

While Alice and the Mock Turtle were busy playing, Seb slowly approached the White Rabbit with a lit-up stick in hand.

"D-Don't come any closer! Don't come...any..." he passed out, frothing at the mouth.

"Don't you think you're taking this a little too far?!" the Mock Turtle yelped.

*Is this seriously the Demon Lord's castle?* Hatta and Haigha thought as they witnessed the carnage unfold right before their very eyes.

"Actually, I'm only feeling a little peckish. Leave the rabbit for later, Seb."

"As you wish."

And so, the White Rabbit would again live to see another day.

"Let's take the key and move on to the next room ASAP."

"Can't you see he's got a full tea set inside his cupboard, Hatta? You know what that means."

They rustled through the Mock Turtle's stuff, setting up a makeshift tea party.

"That's it, now you've made me angry!" the Turtle huffed, not taking too kindly to this gesture.

"Oh no! Whatever shall we do?" mocked Alice.

"Let's see you keep up that attitude after I unleash my true power for the first



time in decades!” he said as he started to approach the party, spinning rapidly.

“Hatta, take care of him for me.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Hatta tried whipping the Mock Turtle, only for his shell to deflect the attack altogether. “*Er*, this might take a while.”

“Don’t—mess—fools—prefer—slow—agonizing—”

He spun so fast, his speech kept cutting off after every other word, rendering him nigh-incomprehensible. He supposedly meant to say, “Don’t even think about messing with me, you fools! Unless, of course, you’d prefer a slow and agonizing death!”

“Allow me to fill in the gaps,” declared Alice. “Ahem. ‘Don’t eat me! I taste horrible, and you might seriously mess up your stomachs, fools! Also, I personally prefer slow-roasted rabbit to an agonizing degree.’ ”

Naturally, she wasn’t even remotely close.

“He’s scared of getting turned into soup, so he’s begging us to have the White Rabbit for dinner instead. Am I getting that right, my lady?” Seb presented his rather disturbing interpretation.

How come they had time to be fooling around when the Mock Turtle was hot on their trail? Well, he was still slow as molasses. Eventually, he ground to a halt, his eyes spinning uncontrollably.

“Look, Alice. He dropped something,” Haigha said, picking the blue key off the ground as the Mock Turtle wept without a sound.

“Is he giving birth?” asked Alice.

“He could just be sick after spinning for so long. Either way, let’s leave him be.”

“I suppose it’s the least we could do, seeing as not only did we get the key, we also got to rest in the process.”

And so, they acquired the second key without any real resistance. What happened to the White Rabbit, you might ask? He got left behind...again. Which wasn’t a surprise by now.



**AND** so, they moved on to the third and final door.

“Why do I have to put up with all this nonsense just to smack some sense into the Demon Lord?” Alice huffed.

*Now you know how we feel.* The words died inside Hatta’s throat.

“Complaining’s not going to get us anywhere, Alice.”

“You’re right, Haigha. In we go.”

Alice casually opened the door without any second thoughts. Inside, they came upon two flamingos, one of which flew over to greet them.

“And who might you be?”

“Alice.”

“If you want the key, you’ll have to play with us.”

“That’s it?”

“Yup, that’s it! It gets a little boring around here since we don’t get many human visitors, and even when we do, they never make it this far. The Demon Lord told us we could play around with our guests as much as we like.”

He most certainly hadn’t meant that literally. But they weren’t about to point that out.

“What’s the game?”

“We’d just like to quickly show off our shapeshifting abilities.”

“Made possible by a *Poem of Jabberwocky*?” Haigha asked.

“Not exactly. Observe.”

His fellow flamingo walked up beside Haigha and shapeshifted into her.

“You see, we’re able to shapeshift without the use of magic, and, better yet, we can copy memories too. Say hi for us.”

“I’m Haigha. Nice to meet you, Alice.” Ahgiah—the shapeshifted Haigha—said, perfectly mimicking Haigha’s tone and inflections. Ahgiah then grabbed her by the hand and started dancing in a circle. “Can you find the real one?”

They already did. For one, the real Haigha would never ask that question to begin with. Second, she had Onion Boy perched atop her shoulder, unlike Ahgiah.

“Not a clue.”

“Nuh-uh.”

“I’m afraid not.”

The three played dumb just to see what would happen.

“I guess that leaves us with no other choice but to move on to the questioning phase,” Alice said. “Got any, Hatta?”

“We’d need one heck of a banger to outsmart that memory copy ability.”

“What if we have them do their best bunny impressions? There’s no way the *fake* can top the real Haigha. Show us what you’ve got, you two.”

“A-Alice?” Haigha started fidgeting, but Hatta made sure she was going nowhere, locking her in place.

“I’ll be keeping my eye on you. *Very* suspicious,” Alice said. “What about you, other Haigha?”

“Watch me!” Ahgiah made bunny ears with her hands and started hopping around the room.

“Make it stop! Please make it stop!” Haigha’s cries fell on deaf ears.

“See? *I’m* the real Haigha.”

“I’m quite sure the real Haigha would vocalize every bounce.”

“*Erm...* bouncy, bouncy, bounce!”

“Please stop! I can’t take it anymore!” Haigha cried, tears welling up in her eyes.

“Hush, faker,” Alice ordered.

“You’re doing this on purpose, aren’t you?! You know full well I’m the real Haigha!”

“I’d need to see some love magic before making any serious accusations,”

Alice smirked.

“Love magic isn’t real! It’s just something I made up!”

“Or so she claims. What about you, other Haigha?”

Suddenly all eyes were on Ahgiah.

“Love magic is real! Behold!” Ahgiah bent over ever so slightly, clasping her hands behind her back. “A smile to make your day a little brighter!” She broke into a great big smile, winking coyly.

Haigha’s eyes rolled back into her skull as she dropped to the floor unconscious.

“Seb, this is...beautiful.”

“It really is, isn’t it? I’d even go as far as to say that Haigha should seriously consider breaking into the idol industry. Her path to stardom is virtually guaranteed, seeing as a vast majority of idol fans are very much in line with the White Rabbit when it comes to certain...preferences, shall we say? To really nail down the bunny aesthetic, it might even be a good idea for her to pose as an alien from Lepus.”

“That could work! But I think Moon Envoy rolls off the tongue much better. Actually, what if we took the other Haigha and have them pass off as twins? Twice the idol means twice the profit, after all. You could even be their manager, Hatta.”

“It’s...tempting, but I don’t think my pride as an item shop owner would allow it.”

No one showed any concern for Haigha whatsoever. Not for lack of care, by any means; psychological wounds were simply out of their control.

“We did what you asked,” Alice said. “Now hand us the key.”

“One last time, okay?” The first flamingo walked up beside Hatta, shapeshifting into him. “Can you guess which one’s which?”

Again, it was laughably obvious.

“Oof, this one’s a toughie.”

“Indeed.”

Alice and Seb weren't sure if anything would come of it. But they played dumb anyway.

“Why me? I'm as dull as they come. Right, Alice?”

“I'm sure there's something I can dig up.” Alice sank deep into thought. “Actually, forget I said anything. You really are as dull as they come.”

“I'm afraid I'm forced to side with Lady Alice on this one, Hatta. As much as it pains me to say, you are utterly unremarkable.”

“So unremarkable, in fact, I don't think anyone'd notice even if we took the wrong one.”

Their verbal onslaught had already left Hatta in tears.

“Now that I really think about it, there is maybe one question off the top of my head that only the real Hatta could answer.”

“I knew you'd come through for us, Seb. What've you got?”

“Fill in the blank: ‘I want to hold Alice down against her will and—’”

“Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!” Hatta yelled over and over. What could've possibly set this man off so quickly?

“Get your hands off my ears, Hatta. I can't hear anything,” Alice complained.

“Say one more word, and this whole place goes bye-bye!” he threatened, holding up a truckload of explosives, his eyes bloodshot. It almost felt...familiar, somehow.

“I don't know what's gotten into you, but put those down.” Alice tried taking the explosives away from him, only for Hatta to slip away untouched. Attah, meanwhile, just blankly watched the whole thing unfold. “Seb, I really think you should ask him something else before he blows his fuse.”

“Very well. Haven't seen it myself, but I hear you groveled before a shee—”

“Never mention the Humpty thing again,” Hatta pleaded, aggressively groveling before Seb's feet. “I beg you.”

Alice and Seb fell silent as Attah just watched in utter disbelief.

“Was that amusing enough for you?” asked Alice.

“It was...certainly something, I’ll say that much,” the first flamingo said as the two of them shifted back into their original forms. “Here’s the key. Oh! And have you collected the other ones?”

“Sure enough.”

“Want to crash here for a bit? Your fellow party members aren’t looking too hot, we’ve noticed.”

Haigha was still unconscious, and Hatta was still down on his hands and knees.

“Don’t mind if we do.”

“Come, take a seat. There’s plenty of tea for everyone.”

They did just that while waiting for Hatta and Haigha’s psychological wounds to heal.

“How come you’re this cordial? Aren’t you supposed to be the Demon Lord’s servants?”

“Yeah, but we’re in it to have a fun time! A lot of us monsters are, actually.”

*As is evident, Alice thought, by Cheshire’s usual antics. Even the Dodo just does his own thing most of the time.*

“Just to be crystal clear,” Alice started, “we will find the Demon Lord inside his throne room, correct?”

“He was merrily walking toward the throne room with the princess by his side last time I checked. So yes, you should.”

Seemed like Jean was safe and sound after all.

“Are there any monsters inside?”

“Not to my knowledge, no. Although there are plenty outside the room. Despite, you know, the fact no human has ever gotten that far. They’re just looking to score brownie points so they can reach that coveted direct servant rank, really. Because direct servants get to just do their own thing.”

“How do we get to the throne room?” Alice asked.

“Go back to the entrance and head straight. Although I should warn you that eventually, you’ll come across this giant room, guarded by the Demon Lord’s right-hand man himself. You’ll have to defeat him to get through.”

“That’s about all I needed to hear, thanks. We’ll be going now.”

Hatta and Haigha had joined them at the table partway into the conversation. It seemed as though the two’s psychological resilience had gone up over their time with Alice.

“The bomb planting can wait,” Alice stated. “First, let’s go pay this supposed right-hand man a visit.”

“As you wish.”

And so, with all three keys in their possession, the four went back to the entrance.



**AFTER** making it back to the entrance, they took some time to reassess the situation.

“We’ve got all three keys,” Alice said. “Now, all that’s left is to walk straight ahead till we run into the Demon Lord’s right-hand man. Once we’re done with him, a group of monsters will be waiting for us outside the throne room.”

“The explosions’ll lure them away from the entrance, problem solved,” Hatta said. “What does worry me is this right-hand man, although, judging by how all of our previous boss fights went, it’s probably not going to be as straightforward as I’d like.”

As Hatta accurately pointed out, they had not, in fact, had a single “normal” boss fight yet.

*Please let there be no silly hijinks this time,* Hatta thought, heaving a heavy sigh.

“Not to downplay the threat posed by this supposed right-hand man,” Seb chimed in, “but we’ll also need to proceed with extra caution. If we don’t quickly dispose of any monsters in our path, they’ll no doubt call in reinforcements, my lady.”

“That’s precisely why I’ve been ignoring him all this time.”

“Ignoring who, exactly?”

“Observe.” Alice walked over to a nearby wall and casually grabbed Cheshire out of the air.

“How’d you find me?! Do you have a sixth sense or something?!”

“I could feel your presence ever since we got here. I know you handed the White Rabbit over to the Mock Turtle and fed him a bunch of lies specifically so you could get a laugh over the ensuing chaos. Don’t even try to hide it. The only reason I’ve been ignoring you up until now is because I had a feeling you might come in handy later.”

How did a sheltered princess develop a sixth sense, you may ask? Nobody knew, not even her friends.

“If you choose to cooperate,” Alice continued, “I’ll let this one slide. If not, well, let’s just say you’ll regret that choice for the rest of your life.”

“Okay, okay, now quit glaring. Also, not a word of this to the Demon Lord, got it?” Cheshire waved his hand, enveloping them in a strange black smoke.

“It’s just like that time back in the Land of Cards,” Alice remarked.

“You’re good up to the halfway point. Now, if you’ll excuse me...”

“Where do you think *you’re* going?” Alice said threateningly. “We’ll need you to lift the veil.”

“I was hoping you’d forget.”

The five made their way forward. They eventually arrived at a huge door, running right past any and all monsters in their path. Cheshire looked around to see if the coast was clear, then he lifted the veil.

“You’ll need to get through him if you want to reach the throne room.”

“What do you mean *you*? You’re coming with us too.”

“W-Wait! You don’t know what you’re—!”

Alice ignored Cheshire’s protests, dragging him inside with them. Little did she know that there was a little surprise waiting for them.



“Is that what I think it is?”

That little surprise being a large, yawning dragon.

“He wakes up and activates his domain the moment a human sets foot inside.”

Hatta and Haigha frantically whipped their heads back, only to find that the door behind them had vanished.

“Is it anything like the Dormouse’s domain?” asked Alice.

“It’s nothing like that,” Cheshire said. “It is a lot like getting sucked inside one of my dimensions, though. What’s inside stays inside, but what’s outside can still come inside.”

“Good to know, although I can’t imagine it’s going to help much, seeing as we’re all stuck inside anyway. Now, how do we get rid of it?”

“You’ll have to either put the dragon to sleep or make it pass out.”

It appeared as though they’d actually have to fight for once. And what a fight they were in for, judging by how unusually hard Onion Boy was shivering.

“Guess we have no other option but to fight. Although, I must ask,” Alice started, “why so nervous, Cheshire? He’s not going to attack *you*. And, even if he does by some freak accident, you can just hop into a pocket dimension.”

“Let’s just say that living for thousands upon thousands of years did a number on his mind. He can’t distinguish between friend or foe, and he just so happens to be one of three anomalies dimension-hopping doesn’t work on, alongside you and the Demon Lord.”

“Rude. Anyway, think you can take him head on, Seb?”

“I highly doubt it.”

“What about you, Hatta?”

“I’m starting to get flashbacks to that time I almost got burnt to a crisp because of you.”

“Nostalgic, isn’t it?”

Their odds weren’t looking all that great, but, sadly, flight wasn’t an option.

Seb unleashed his ice magic, and Hatta pelted him with daggers. Yet, they weren't able to punch through his thick scales.

In retaliation, the dragon opened his mouth, breathing out a pillar of fire.

"Fire resistance now!"

"There!" Haigha came in at the clutch, allowing them to successfully weather the first hit.

And so, their fierce battle raged on.

"Where'd Alice go?"

Alice and Cheshire had suddenly vanished.

"Dragon scales sell for a pretty penny, you know," the others heard her say to Cheshire.

"I'll pass. Not gonna risk it."

They were harvesting scales off the dragon's back. Well, Alice was, anyway. The two were so light and posed so little of a threat, they didn't even seem to register on his radar.

Truly the only thing fiercer than the dragon's attacks was Alice's desire to be up to no good.

"Do we just leave her up there or what?" Hatta asked.

"I'm sure Lady Alice can handle herself just fine. I'd be more worried about our position, quite frankly," Seb responded dryly.

The dragon had unleashed his fiery breath upon them when suddenly, a certain someone wandered inside the room.

"Finally got away from that blasted Mock Turtle. Time to rest my weary bones." It was none other than the White Rabbit himself. "H-Haigha?! Yippee!" he cheered with glee. "The thread of fate has brought us together yet again. What's that? Look up? Well, if it isn't Alice riding on a...d-d-dragon?!" He was out of there in a flash...or so he thought. "What the hell's going on here, Hatta?!"

"We ain't going nowhere 'til that dragon bites the dust!"

“Isn’t that great— Eep! Why me?”

The dragon now locked his sights on the White Rabbit, thinking he was food. Despite this unforeseen turn of events, Alice was still fully engaged in harvesting scales.

“Let’s take this opportunity to hatch a proper game plan, shall we?” Seb suggested to the siblings.

The three moved to the corner of the room and began mulling over their options.

“Any bright ideas, Master Hatta?”

“You know how you get sleepy on a full stomach? So, what if we burn the White Rabbit alive then chuck him inside the dragon’s mouth?” Hatta put out there for good measure.

Haigha gave him a disapproving look. At this point, you had to wonder if the truth behind their supposed ‘relationship’ was ever going to see the light of day.

“I don’t see how that would get him even remotely close to a full stomach. What about you, Lady Haigha?”

“Who, me? Well, *erm*, we could have the White Rabbit go down into his stomach and attack from the inside, I guess?”

“It could work as a last resort, but I’d imagine he’d get processed by the dragon’s stomach juices before inflicting any meaningful damage.”

Both of their ideas involved the White Rabbit getting eaten, for whatever reason.

“And what about you, Seb? Got any bright ideas?” Hatta asked.

“Two, actually. Although let’s just say, they’re a tad hit-or-miss.”

“What’s the worst that could happen? Lay it on us.”

“If you insist. My first plan is to age the dragon out of existence. Haigha, keep him occupied with your magic barrier. Hatta, rush over to the White Rabbit and tell him what to do.”

And so, the plan was set in motion.

“I-I can’t do this anymore.” The White Rabbit fell to the ground, unable to run any longer. “Goodbye, cruel world.” But just as the dragon was about to sink his fangs into the White Rabbit, Haigha put up her magic barrier. “H-Haigha?! Yippee! I knew our love would win in the end!”

“You done yet? We gotta act fast,” Hatta snapped.

“Act fast?”

“Haigha’ll keep the dragon busy for as long as she can while you age ’im out of existence.”

“That’s...genius!” he exclaimed. “Watch that thing turn to ash when I age him a full fifty years in one go!” The White Rabbit pushed the button down on his pocket watch. Yet, nothing happened. “Huh, that’s weird. How about a hundred years?” He pushed the button down again and again; nothing happened. “I don’t get it.”

“It just dawned on me,” Hatta said, “that dragons live for thousands upon thousands of years. A hundred or so isn’t going to cut it. We need to jump straight into the thousands if we want to put that thing out of commission.”

“It’ll take quite some time. Time I’m assuming we don’t have?”

“Yup.”

“Knew it—”

The dragon broke through Haigha’s barrier, knocking the pair away.

“What do we do now?” Haigha asked.

“Time for Plan B, I suppose,” Seb said.

The two of them were, of course, a safe distance away from the action.

“First, I’ll need you to heal the White Rabbit.”

“Say no more.”

Haigha cast a healing spell.

“I feel...alive,” the White Rabbit said, springing to his feet. “No, no, no! Not this again!”

The wild goose—or rather, rabbit—chase began once more. Having successfully diverted the dragon’s attention, Seb gestured Cheshire over.

“Yeah?”

“I recall you mentioning that we’d have to either put the dragon to sleep or make him pass out to abolish his domain. But what would happen if he was to abandon the room?”

“I’ve never seen him do that. But I think it’d get abolished. Domains are inextricably tied to the user. Well, at least I think that’s how they work.”

“That’s all I needed to hear.” Seb hopped onto the dragon’s back, bringing Alice back in his arms. “I believe I’ve found a way out of this mess.”

“Took you long enough.”

“We’ll just need a little bit of help from our good friend Cheshire.”

“Who, me?”

When Cheshire heard Seb’s plan, he almost lost it.

“Instead of trying to escape the room, we simply remove the dragon from it. That’s...so simple, yet so genius. I’ll do it! Just...don’t tell the Demon Lord, okay?”

Cheshire lifted his hands high up in the air, forming a ball of dark billowy smoke. He then fired it at the dragon, sending him into a pocket dimension. Soon after, the doors reappeared.

“Remind me...never to do that again,” Cheshire panted.

“Thank you, Cheshire,” Seb said. “Haigha, heal Cheshire and Hatta, if you’d be so kind.”

“Will do.”

Alice just kind of stood there, tilting her head in confusion. She’d been so fixated on harvesting dragon scales, she hadn’t paid any attention to her surroundings.

“Seb, what just happened?”

“It’s nothing too crazy, my lady. The dragon’s domain is only active so long as

he is physically present inside the room, so we simply made sure he wasn't."

"Makes sense."

"While we couldn't remove the dragon from the room, we could remove the area around the dragon, effectively yielding the same result. My only real worry was whether or not Cheshire could create a pocket dimension large enough to entrap the beast. But he pulled through in the end, as expected."

Cheshire seemed to appreciate the compliment, smiling an unbefittingly cute smile for a monster.

"Creating a large pocket dimension in and of itself isn't hard," he said. "I mean, the first time we met, I'd turned an entire grass field into one, after all. Fine-tuning one to perfectly fit around a certain target, however, is a lot more exhausting than just blasting the entire room."

Had they enveloped the entire room, the dragon would've still been in it. Hence why they'd had to segment him into a pocket dimension.

"I know!" Alice clapped her hands together. "You'd make a great idol duo with Haigha. You did such a good job today after all."

"Haha, yeah. Wait...what?"

Alice was already scheming up ways to profit off of Cheshire's and Haigha's idol careers.

"Either way, you guys really need to go now," Cheshire warned. "The dragon's not trapped in the pocket dimension; he's just obscured by it. So, if you don't hurry, he might come out any second."

"Good call. Hatta, can you move?"

"A little dizzy, but I'll be fine."

"Off we go then."

And so, they set off for the throne room.

"Hey! You forgot someone!" Cheshire shouted after them, noticing the White Rabbit had been left behind yet again. "I'm the one who brought him in, so I should do the responsible thing and dump him outside the castle, the poor

thing,” the boy monster said to himself, dragging the White Rabbit’s unconscious body.



## MEANWHILE...

“Who’s *that* cutie? Oh wait, that’s me!” Jean gazed at his dress-clad self in the mirror, unaware of Alice’s encroaching arrival. “‘Cutie?’ Jean, get a grip, man! Keep this up, and next thing you know, you’re married to the Demon Lord. You need to take off, and you need to do it now while he’s still changing.”

Jean appeared to have regained his composure, and it told him that if he didn’t do something fast, he *would* fall head-over-heels for the Demon Lord.

“Here goes nothing!” Jean burst out of his room and made a break for it.

## Thirty minutes later...

“How is this even possible?!”

He was back where he started. Was the layout of the castle that convoluted? Well, no. Jean just had no sense of direction whatsoever.

“Look at her go,” one of the Demon Lord’s minions said, watching from a distance.

“I’m not giving up that easy!” he cried and took flight once more. Only this time, he bumped into someone around the corner and fell butt-first to the ground.

“Are you hurt?”

“D-Demon Lord?!”

“Hold still. There’s something on your foot.” He took out his handkerchief, gently wrapping it around the affected area.

What little composure Jean still had left was on the verge of collapse.

“I...I—”

“Let’s go back to our room.”

*If you go with him, you’re never coming back,* Jean thought, panicking. *The*

*point of no return will be crossed, and you're already teetering dangerously close to the edge. Make him despise— No, tell him the truth!*

“Don’t worry about the dress. I’ll get a new one ready for—”

“Look at my chest! Do you see anything? No! Want to know why? Because I’m *not* the princess!”

“What truly matters to me is that it’s *your* chest, Jean. Size be damned,” the Demon Lord responded cryptically.

*I don’t want to do this, Jean thought. I really don’t want to do this! But if that’s what it takes to convince him, then so be it.* Jean quickly reached for his skirt, only for the Demon Lord to catch his hands mid-flight.

“Now, now. That wouldn’t be very ladylike, now would it?”

“Let go of me!”

“I’ll never let go...never,” he promised, looking Jean straight in the eye and hugging him.

“But...but...i-it hurts...” Jean sputtered, averting his gaze, his cheeks flushed red.

Something snapped inside the Demon Lord that very moment.

“Wh-What’re you—” he spluttered as the Demon Lord whisked him to a room inside the throne room—his royal bedchambers, to be exact.



## Chapter 8: Make the Demon Lord Pay!

**ALICE'S** party proceeded onward.

"Not a single monster in sight," Alice noted.

"Bet they just didn't expect us 'mere' humans to ever get past the dragon! Arrogant lot," Hatta remarked.

Onion Boy wasn't even shivering for once, and that was saying something.

"I sure hope so. Also, this place is huge, isn't it?"

The number of forks in the road made them a little concerned wondering if they were actually going the right way.

"Stand back, my lady," Seb said. "It appears we've been going the right way."

They peered around the hallway corner, gazing upon a band of monsters huddled around what was presumably the throne room door.

"What now, Alice?" Hatta asked.

"Let's find someplace to plant bombs like we planned," she responded coolly.

"We lure them away then just waltz in, all sneaky-like. Gotcha."

They went back the way they came in search of the perfect place to plant bombs. They had to choose wisely. Failure to do so might leave them with no time to retreat.

"Lookie there," Hatta said, pointing to a row of identical doors that led up to a passage which, upon further inspection, seemed to branch back into the main path.

"Any one of these rooms should do the trick. We'll set off the bombs, grab their attention, then circle back to the throne room."

"What're we waiting for, then?"

They entered the first door.

“Would you look at all those precious books, Alice?!” Haigha exclaimed, a glimmer in her eyes. “Simply breathtaking!”

“Is it?” Alice pulled out a book from a nearby shelf titled *What Is Love?* “I don’t see what’s so breathtaking about this,” she said, flipping to a bookmarked page. “Love is the most elusive creature of all,” she read out an underlined quote. “Looks like we’ve got a love-struck monster on our hands.”

Little did Alice know that this love-struck monster was the Demon Lord himself.

“Can we go plant the bombs somewhere else, please, Alice?” Haigha pleaded.

“Funnily enough, I just had an inexplicably strong urge to burn the whole place down to the ground, but, if you insist...”

They moved on to the next room, chock-full of historical artifacts and other valuable knick-knacks.

“Alice, we simply *can’t* plant the bombs here,” Hatta exclaimed, a glimmer in his eye. “This place is a straight-up gold mine! Everything you see here goes for a fortune!”

They stumbled upon the treasury, which likely wasn’t locked as no one would be foolish enough to steal from the Demon Lord.

“*Everything?*” Alice repeated, staring at a filthy wreath behind a glass case, protected by layers upon layers of strict security measures as though it was some kind of national treasure. “Can’t say I’ve ever heard of *this* thing.”

That was because it was something her brother Jean had made for the Demon Lord, not a historical artifact.

“It makes me deeply uncomfortable for some reason,” Alice continued, “almost like it’s cursed or something. But I suppose we should go through all the rooms first before making any hasty decisions.”

They moved on to the next room, their eyes instantly glued to a comically large portrait of the Demon Lord hanging from the wall. He looked hot, Alice thought, but his facial expression in this particular piece was just the most insufferable thing ever. Hatta stuck a bomb to the portrait’s face without any

second thoughts.

“Couldn’t have done it better myself,” Alice praised.

“I knew you’d do the right thing, Hatta,” cheered Haigha.

“Fine work,” remarked Seb.

They all felt the exact same way.

“Tell me something about this bomb of yours,” Alice said.

“It’s a prototype I’ve been working on for the past few days. The impact is minimal, but you’d think we just blew a hole through an entire room with how loud the explosion is,” Hatta said proudly. “I’ve made four in total, each with their own separate timer set for thirty minutes by default.”

“Why thirty?”

“You can change it if you’d like.”

“How would I go about doing that?”

“Just hit the circle buttons underneath the numbers to set your preferred time, then push the square button to confirm.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” Alice set the timer to three seconds.

“Are you out of your mind?!” Hatta clasped his hands over his ears, leaping away.

Seb moved Alice out of the way as an ear-piercing explosion reverberated throughout the room.

“That was...certainly something,” Alice said with indifference.

“What’s the *matter* with you, Alice?!” Hatta cried.

“Don’t blame me! Blame the person who came up with this lousy idea.”

“I’m staring at her!”

“Who? Me? Lies.”

Seb ran out of the room, ignoring the pair’s heated exchange.

“They’re coming. We must leave at once, my lady.”

They circled back to the main path and made a beeline for the throne room.

“We made it, and it’s all thanks to you, Hatta,” Alice said happily.

“Don’t mention it...”

The monsters went straight for the source of the explosion down the main path, just as expected. Despite this ideal outcome, however, Hatta was understandably a little peeved.

“In we g— Huh?” Alice noticed something off about the door. “There’s no keyhole. What’s going on here, Seb?”

“We might’ve just picked the wrong door.”

“Haigha, can you feel anything?”

“I can feel...a powerful magical aura. One that could only belong to the Demon Lord, I think.”

“So...what do we do now?”

“Could I see those keys for just a moment, my lady?” Seb examined each individual key one by one and noticed that they gave off a faint glow. “Oh, I see.” He gave the door a light nudge with the keys firmly in his grip as it creaked open.

“What happened here?”

“The keyhole isn’t missing, my lady; it just isn’t needed. Notice that faint glow coming off them? That’s the magic needed to get the door open.”

“I see. In we go, then.”

They set foot inside the throne room, bracing themselves for the final battle, only to be greeted by an empty space.

“The perfect size for a Boundary Stone,” Alice declared. “Now, if only there was a Demon Lord to use it on. Haigha, can you trace his presence?”

“He’s deeper inside.”

They advanced all the way to the throne, and yet, no Demon Lord in sight.

“Might as well.” Alice sat down on the throne, crossed her legs, and grinned

evilily. For a moment, Hatta thought he had just seen the birth of a new Demon Lord, a shiver running down his spine. “Not bad...but this is not what I came here for. Seb, any idea as to the Demon Lord’s whereabouts?”

“There’s a door right behind you, my lady.”

“A door?”

Alice stood up and noticed an indiscreet door tucked away behind the throne and a familiar voice coming from inside.

“HELP!”

Hatta’s and Haigha’s faces tensed up as Jean’s incessant shrieking pierced their ears.

Alice opened the door, slowly and carefully. A half-naked Demon Lord atop Jean in a disheveled dress came into view. Alice quickly closed the door.

“Nobody’s home! Let’s head back.”

The three quietly nodded in agreement, turning around.

“H-Hold up!” Jean burst through the door, clinging to Alice’s feet. “I *knew* you’d come to save me, Alice! Tell him I’m a guy! He refuses to believe a word I —”

“Silence, you mutt!” Alice sneered, dragging her heels across Jean’s face. “I came here to teach the Demon Lord a lesson, not listen to you slobber.”

“Th-That’s just your way of saying you’re happy to see me, right? RIGHT?!”

He tried to delude himself as Alice kept dragging her heels across his face over and over. The sight was so sad, Hatta and Haigha had to avert their eyes.

“Stop this madness!” The Demon Lord burst out of the room, taking Jean inside his loving arms, away from Alice’s wrath. *He even took the time to get dressed. How thoughtful of him*, Alice thought. “Are you all right?”

“I-I’m fine.”

They looked each other in the eyes like lovers out of a tragic romance novel.

“How...how *dare* you do this to my beloved Jean!” the Demon Lord snarled, a black aura enveloping him. “Let’s see how *you* like it when I’m done turning you

to ash!" He went straight for Alice, only to be intercepted by Seb.

"You'll have to get through me first, I'm afraid."

"You're that guy I saw back in the castle. Who are *you* to intercept my attack?"

"I'm just a humble, devoted butler."

They sized each other up in the middle of the throne room.

"Hatta, keep him safe." Haigha handed Hatta Onion Boy as he and Alice retreated to the corner of the room.

Haigha hid behind Seb, Boundary Stone and Holy Water in hand.

"First," she declared, "I add a single drop of Holy Water. Then I direct my magical energy to where the light refracts brightest. Once it starts glowing, I lift the stone overhead and charge it with a burst of magical energy!"

A dome of light clocking in at a diameter of twenty meters surrounded the Demon Lord, Seb, Jean, and Haigha, trapping them inside.

"A Boundary Stone; how cute," snarked the Demon Lord. "You just dug your own graves without even realizing it. The bubble completely separates us from the castle, allowing me to use my full power without reservation. But enough talk...have at you!" he said, lunging at Seb.

Seb warded off the Demon Lord's attack and responded with one of his own, the sheer fluidity of his movements taking away Jean's and Haigha's breath.







“Impressive! But I must ask—where is your weapon?” the Demon Lord inquired.

“I appreciate the concern. But carrying a weapon around is just too much hard work, so I’ll take you on with my bare hands instead.”

“Why, you—”

“No need to hold back. Martial arts are my specialty.”

“Is *that* so? We’ll see about that!” The Demon Lord unleashed a flurry of punches too quick for the untrained eye to register. Seb dodged each and every blow within grazing distance and landed a clean, heavy punch of his own.

“Wh-What kind of inhuman beast are you?!”

It turned out Seb wasn’t kidding when he said the Demon Lord didn’t stand a chance against him in close-quarter combat. The Demon Lord, recognizing this, kept his distance.

“Hahaha! Your physical prowess might be superior, but I can’t sense any magical energy from you. This could mean one of two things: you’re either an inexperienced magic user or you aren’t one at all. Either way, you lose!” the Demon Lord declared.

“I fall into the former category, I’m afraid,” Seb replied, smiling.

“Then why do you smile?”

“Because I have *this*,” Seb said, busting out his spellbook.

“Is that a *P-Poem of Jabberwocky*?!”

Sweat started pouring down the Demon Lord’s brow. And who could blame him, given how *Poems of Jabberwocky* could get quite overpowered.

Haigha’s spellbook letting her dispel illusions was already overpowered enough. But the White Queen’s spellbook allowed her to dispel anything, which was just comically broken.

Even the Demon Lord himself employed a *Poem of Jabberwocky* to curse the entirety of the Nameless Forest. Thus, he knew full well what they were capable of.

What he didn't know, however, was that the one in Seb's possession was a different type of overpowered.

"Make your next move. I'm waiting."

Seb had no business being this intimidating while waving around an egg differentiation spellbook.

"Wh-Who do you think you are! My lightning magic is sure to make quick work of both you and your spellbook!" the Demon Lord muttered, unleashing an indiscriminate rain of dark thunderbolts.

"W-Watch it!"

The fact that Jean was inside the bubble with them had completely slipped the Demon Lord's mind at some point in time. His attention was on Seb and Seb alone.

"Eep!" Haigha instinctively put up a protection spell. But the impact sent her flying regardless.

"If that's the best you've got, I'm not sure I'll even need this," Seb said, effortlessly dodging the endless barrage of thunderbolts like it was nothing. Jean and Haigha, meanwhile, just scrambled for dear life.

"Q-Quit it! You're going to hit—" A bolt of lightning struck Jean as he spoke. And yet, the Demon Lord was still none the wiser.

Haigha was also at her wit's end.

Hatta and Alice, meanwhile, couldn't take their eyes off those two. Although the "epic" battle paled in comparison to their hilarious antics.

"Why, you little..." The Demon Lord spread his arms, setting off a bubble-wide explosion. "Eat this!"

Seb scooted over to a point in the bubble where he'd take the least damage and shielded the rest with wind magic.

Jean and Haigha, of course, just got turned into charcoal.

"Hatta, help! I'm going to die in here!" Haigha screamed, furiously banging on the bubble's walls. "I can't do anything while the Boundary Stone is up even if I

wanted to!”

“You got this, Haigha,” Hatta said. “Remember the ward I gave you?”

“You mean the ‘Good Fortune’ one?! Please, just help me already!”

He would if he could. Not Alice, though; she was too busy laughing at Jean.

“So be it. I’ll blow everything to the ground If I have to!” the Demon Lord roared, accumulating magical energy for one final explosion.

“Remember, you made me do this.” Seb took Jean in his arms, positioning themselves in front of the Demon Lord.

“I knew you’d come to save me... Seb...?” Jean’s voice slowly trailed off as he realized he had a knife against his throat.

“I’d cease this foolishness at once if I were you,” declared the butler coldly. “Unless you’d like me to slit Jean’s throat. Right here, right now.”

“D-Demon Lord! Help! H-He’s not fooling around!”

“Jean?! What happened? Who did this to you?”

*If only we knew*, Hatta thought sarcastically

“Do as you will! Just...leave Jean out of this. He’s innocent,” said the supposed villain of this story, surrendering to his fate.

Seb took the opportunity to deliver a roundhouse kick, knocking the Demon Lord clean off his feet as the bubble retracted.

“Demon Lord!” Jean held his hand, tears collecting in his eyes.

“Jean? Is that you?”

“Yes, it’s me, Demon Lord.”

“Thank you, Jean...for everything. It’s been a pleasure.”

“D-Demon Lord? Demon Lord!”

The Demon Lord went out, smiling...or so they thought.

“You’re not going anywhere ’til I say so,” Alice said, dragging her heels across his face.

“Y-You’re that prince—” The heel-dragging intensified.

“Long time, no see. I’m Wonderland’s princess known for my charming looks. And that there’s my older brother, Jean.”

“Jean’s a... No, that can’t be right.”

“If that’s how you want to play it, fine by me!” A dark aura, even thicker than the Demon Lord’s, enveloped Alice.

Alice picked the Demon Lord right up off the ground and smacked him so hard, it sent him careening into a wall. She then closed the distance before he was even able to process what had happened and proceeded to double-slap the life out of him.





“H-Have mercy...”

“Who am I?”

“Th-The pretty princess of Wonderland.”

“And Jean?”

“Y-Your brother?”

“Which one of us do you find prettier?”

“Wh-Why *you*, of course.”

“Excellent.”

Alice delivered a heavy blow to his stomach. He fell unconscious, coughing up blood.

“Now I can put my mind at ease. Oh wait, I almost forgot.” Alice rearranged the Demon Lord’s body into a groveling pose with a satisfied smile.

Alice returned to her party, drenched in blood, smiling.

“Alice?! Wh-What’s with that creepy smile?!”

“Get away from us!”

Hatta and Haigha shook in each other’s arms as Jean’s soul left his body.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into you two, but pack your stuff; we’re leaving. Seb, fetch Jean. I’ll make a man out of him yet.”

“As you wish.”

Alice exited the throne room with a light spring in her step, as though a heavy weight had just been lifted off her shoulders. The Demon Lord’s minions politely cleared the way, even the dragon. He was so scared, he curled up into a ball.



**AND** so, thanks to Alice acting on her petty grievances, peace had been restored to the land. All’s well that ends well, as they say.

They returned to the coach and were back on their way home.

You’d think they’d be on the top of the world, having defeated the Demon

Lord himself. But not exactly.

Hatta and Haigha wouldn't stop shaking, Jean was still unconscious, and Seb just wanted to go home and rest.

The only one who felt anything remotely positive was Alice as she placed the freshly captured carrot monster next to the potato monster, smiling all the while.

On their way back home, they stopped by the Land of Cards to get Jean something to wear that wasn't a disheveled dress. Alice and Haigha picked out his clothes and returned the Red Queen's *Poem of Jabberwocky* while they were at it.

"If it wasn't for you, we never would've made it," Alice said.

"I'm glad I could be of assistance," declared the Red Queen.

"Now, I'm going to need you to work in conjunction with the Beast King to stifle rumors of me infiltrating the Demon Lord's castle. Think of it as a favor."

"So, the rumors were true after all, although it's not too surprising given that it's, well, you. I'll clear the air...but you owe me."

"Much appreciated."

While the Unicorn Knight Order kept their mouths shut, the Lion Knight Order spread all sorts of myths and legends about her uncle and, by extension, Alice herself. So, following Seb's advice, she decided to employ help from the most powerful individual within Wonderland's borders in an attempt to hide the fact that she ever snuck out of the castle.

"Also, did you see the White Rabbit? Little rascal escaped from the dungeon."

"I think he's in a better place by now."

He wasn't, but he'd come close—many times, in fact.

"Well, if you happen to find him, let me know."

"Will do. And with that, I bid you adieu."

And so, they set off for home. It was a short yet eventful journey. So eventful, in fact, that they all even felt a little homesick.



“Seb, how long ’til the castle?”

“A couple of hours or so, seeing as the monster attacks have all but ceased.”

The griffin-drawn coach made quick work of the remaining distance. Once the city came into view, they let Jean off and instructed him to pretend like he escaped from the Demon Lord’s clutches all on his own.

“We’ll be heading back to the item shop now. See ya around, Alice.”

“Be sure to invite us to your upcoming tea party, Alice.”

“Thank you, Hatta, Haigha.”

Hatta and Haigha left with a smile on their faces. The two were very much “all’s well that ends well” types, which is why they managed to stay friends with Alice despite everything.

“Oh no.”

“Is something the matter, my lady?” Seb asked.

“She took Onion Boy with her.”

“I’m sure you’ll get the chance to meet up soon enough. You live in the same place, after all.”

“I guess you’re right. We’ll be heading back now, Griffy. You’ve been a great help. Now go! Be free,” Alice said as she removed the reins, parting ways with Griffy.

They then disposed of the coach and snuck back inside the castle through a secret entrance. Alice managed to switch places with her decoy without anyone noticing, as they were all too excited over Jean’s return.

That very night, the King threw a welcome back party unlike any before, and everyone loved it. The days to come were marked by peace and prosperity for all. Well, all but Jean, who had no idea what Alice had in store for him next.

## Epilogue: Did You Just Kidnap the Wrong Royal, Again?

A few days had passed since the party's return, and everyone went back to their normal lives. That's when Alice made her move.

"How is he?" she asked Seb.

"He's been making cutesy faces in front of the mirror, collecting various girly accessories, and playing around with wreaths. I think it's fair to say he's on the path toward girlhood."

"Why, that little..."

Jean had been coddled so thoroughly, he had set foot into an entirely new world.

"What's our course of action, my lady?"

"Lock him up and keep it that way except for meals and sleep. It's time for Jean's rehabilitation."

"Sounds like an awful lot of work, I don't know."

"Sorry? Did you *say* something?"

"I said leave it to me, my lady."



**THE** following days were absolute hell for Jean.

Starting with relentless fitness training.

"A thousand sit-ups in one go? Are you crazy?!"

Followed by insane mental resilience training.

"Where am I? I-It's really dark in here, guys. Help!"

Unwinnable monster battles.

"How am I supposed to beat a saber-toothed tiger with a *stick*?!"

And finally, extreme survival situations.

“What do you *mean*, just climb this cliff?! One wrong step, and I’m dead!”

And so, bit by bit, Alice broke Jean down.

“I can’t...I can’t take it anymore,” he said, weeping.

“We’re not stopping ’til I make a man out of you,” she sneered. “Or would you prefer going back to the Demon Lord’s castle and raising his children instead?”

Alice’s rehabilitation was so brutal, he actually considered that a preferable alternative.





“How are you going to protect your poor helpless little sister like this?”

“...Helpless?”

“Sorry?”

“Nothing.”

Slowly but surely, Jean grew manlier and manlier with every passing day.

Fast forward a few months. Everyone, except for Jean, was enjoying their normal, everyday lives.

Alice was no exception as she appeared to have thrown herself a lovely tea party. That’s when Hatta and Haigha popped on over.

“Heya!”

“How have you been, Alice?”

“Long time no see. What’s the occasion?”

“We came to check on Jean’s progress.”

“He’s gotten a bit better. Emphasis on *bit*. But enough about Jean; how about a cup of tea? Seb, treat our guests.”

The three chatted over a nice cup of tea. About what, you may ask? About that time they set out for the Demon Lord of the North’s castle, of course.

“It was quite the journey, all right. We wouldn’t mind going on another one for enough coin. Just, you know, pick something simpler next time, please.”

“You’re in luck because I don’t plan on doing anything that boring ever again, either. I honestly didn’t expect the journey to drag on as long as it—”

Alice was suddenly cut off mid-sentence by a loud scream.

As the four prepared for an impromptu battle, Lilith ran up to them and cried, “The Demon Lord of the South is at the garden, my lady!”

They exchanged glances and rushed off to the garden, only to come across a familiar scene.

“A-Alice! Help me!” Jean cried.

“Hahaha! I’ve got you now, princess,” the Demon Lord of the South cackled, cradling Jean inside his arms.

“Do any of you care at this point?”

“Can’t say I do.”

“Nope.”

“Not really, no.”

And so, they just indifferently watched Jean get abducted.



“**WE’LL** be heading back home now.”

“See you, Alice.”

“I’ll come over to your place next time.”

They parted ways as though nothing happened.

“It’s teatime, Seb.”

“As you wish.”

Everyone else in the palace was busy collectively losing their minds. But these two did not have a care in the world, as always.

Alice went back to her room, only to find a familiar face standing in front of the door.

“Fancy meeting *you* here, Cheshire. Didn’t think you’d just sneak into the palace like that.”

“I heard something interesting was going down, so thought I’d drop by.”

“Something interesting? Whatever could you mean?”

Poor Jean had already been forgotten.

“Actually, how about we discuss that over a nice cup of tea? There’s also cookies.”

“Yay! Cookies!”

They entered the room and enjoyed each other’s company

“So, what did you mean by something interesting?”

“I almost forgot. Remember how the Demon Lord of the South kidnapped the prince?”

“Almost like it happened just a second ago, actually.”

Apparently, she hadn’t forgotten. It just felt like the distant past to her.

“That’s because it did.”

“And?”

“Basically, the Demon Lord of the South is the Demon Lord of the North’s younger brother. Apparently, when he heard his brother had mistakenly kidnapped the prince, he laughed and said, ‘I’d never mistake the breathtakingly beautiful princess for a guy. What a loser.’ And, well...”

The teacup inside Alice’s hand shattered.

“Seb, did he see me?”

“He didn’t just see you, my lady. He took a good, long look and took off with Jean regardless.”

“Did he see a breathtakingly beautiful princess in Jean and not me?”

“Relax.”

“But I’m in a *dress*, and Jean was wearing his prince clothes.”

“Calm down.”

“Why were his cheeks flushed as he was getting carried away? Is he a perv?”

“Simmer down.”

“No, no, no! Are they all idiots?! Or are they just secretly into guys?! How else could they pick so wrong not once but twice! *Twice*?! I’ll kill him! Kill him good! Real good! First, I’ll drag my heels across his face! Then I’ll pick him up and toss him against a wall! Then I’ll slap the life out of him! And then, finally, I’ll make him grovel at my feet in a pool of his own blood!”

A truly fearsome combo the Demon Lord of the North had already experienced firsthand.



Cheshire had vanished sometime into Alice's heated monologue. His work here was done. Now all he had to do was sit back and watch the show.

"Seb, get Hatta and Haigha."

"Speaking of which, Hatta left you this letter."

"Letter?"

*We're leaving. Don't try to find us.*

"They couldn't have gone far. Lilith!"

"Yes, my lady?"

"You know the drill!"

"Yes, my lady."

Lilith was standing nearby just in case she got a chance to taste that sweet, sweet idyllic lifestyle once more.

"First, we pick those two up! Then we infiltrate his castle. Seb, ready?"

"Give me another thirty years or so."

"Come again?"

"Let us make haste, my lady."

And so, they set out on yet another journey, for equally petty reasons. Alice's adventures were not over yet.



## **MEANWHILE...**

"Jean was...a guy. He was a guy all this time..." the Demon Lord of the North mumbled to himself, slouched on the throne room floor. Then suddenly, the door creaked open.

"Long time no see, Demon Lord."

"What is it, Dodo?"

"The Demon Lord of the South kidnapped Prince Jean, or so I've heard."

"He what?! Why I oughta— Oh, what's the point? It's hopeless." He hung his

head in shame.

“What makes you say that?”

“I lost. Even if I somehow got Jean back, that princess and her butler would have my head.”

“I’m pretty sure those two wouldn’t care! In fact, if you help them out, they’ll probably even recognize your marriage.”

“That’s the other issue. Jean’s a guy!”

“So what? Just use sex change magic. You yourself once said that ‘Love overcomes all obstacles.’ Whatever that’s supposed to mean.”

“My younger brother is a formidable threat, and so are his minions.”

“Just ask Aliseb and the others for help. I, too, will assist you to the best of my ability.”

“You’d do that for *me*? After all that’s happened?”

“We all await your magnificent return, my liege.”

He stood up, the flame in his eyes reignited, and unleashed the magical energy he had previously sealed off.

“I’m handing you two Summoning Bells. Once it rings, jump inside the portal, and you’ll be instantly taken to my location. Hand the other one to Cheshire and be ready to fight at any moment.”

“As you wish.”

And so, the Demon Lord of the North set out on a journey of his own to rescue his love.

## Afterword

**TAKUMI** Ootaki here. Work hard, play hard, daydream hard! I do everything hard! I once had some random grade-schooler walk up to me with genuine concern in their eyes as I was crouched on the sidewalk, conjuring up ideas for my novel.

12.2018





**AS THE VILLAINESS,  
I REJECT THESE  
HAPPY-BAD ENDINGS!**

STORY BY: IOTA AIUE  
ILLUSTRATION BY: KUROYUKI  
AVAILABLE NOW!

A romantic comedy oneshot about a villainess doing whatever it takes to stop the heroine from falling in love and dooming the world!

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STORY BY: KIRI KOMORI  
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AVAILABLE NOW!

An endearing slice of life fantasy light novel series about a nonhuman girl's journey to become an alchemist to repay the family who took her in!



**I REINCARNATED AS EVIL ALICE,  
SO THE ONLY THING I'M  
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STORY BY: CHII KURUSU  
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A gothic romantic comedy where the reincarnated heroine's only way to survive this dark otome game is by not falling in love!









cross infinite world



## PAST LIFE COUNTESS, PRESENT LIFE OTOME GAME NPC?!

STORY BY: SORAHOSHI  
ILLUSTRATION BY: YUKI KINAMI  
STANDALONE / OUT NOW

Oh dear, it seems I was reincarnated into a modern otome game from a fantasy world!

## HELLO, I AM A WITCH AND MY CRUSH WANTS ME TO MAKE A LOVE POTION!

STORY BY: EIKO MUTSUHANA  
ILLUSTRATION BY: VIENT  
VOL. 1 & 2 OUT NOW

This is the heartwarming story of a shut-in witch and an arrogant, strait-laced knight whose romance starts from a love potion.



## THE WEAKEST MANGA VILLAINESS WANTS HER FREEDOM!

STORY BY: KAZUKI KARASAWA  
ILLUSTRATION BY: MASAMI  
STANDALONE / OUT NOW

Oh, crud, I just realized that I've been reincarnated into my favorite manga as the first boss defeated by the heroine at the start of the story!



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