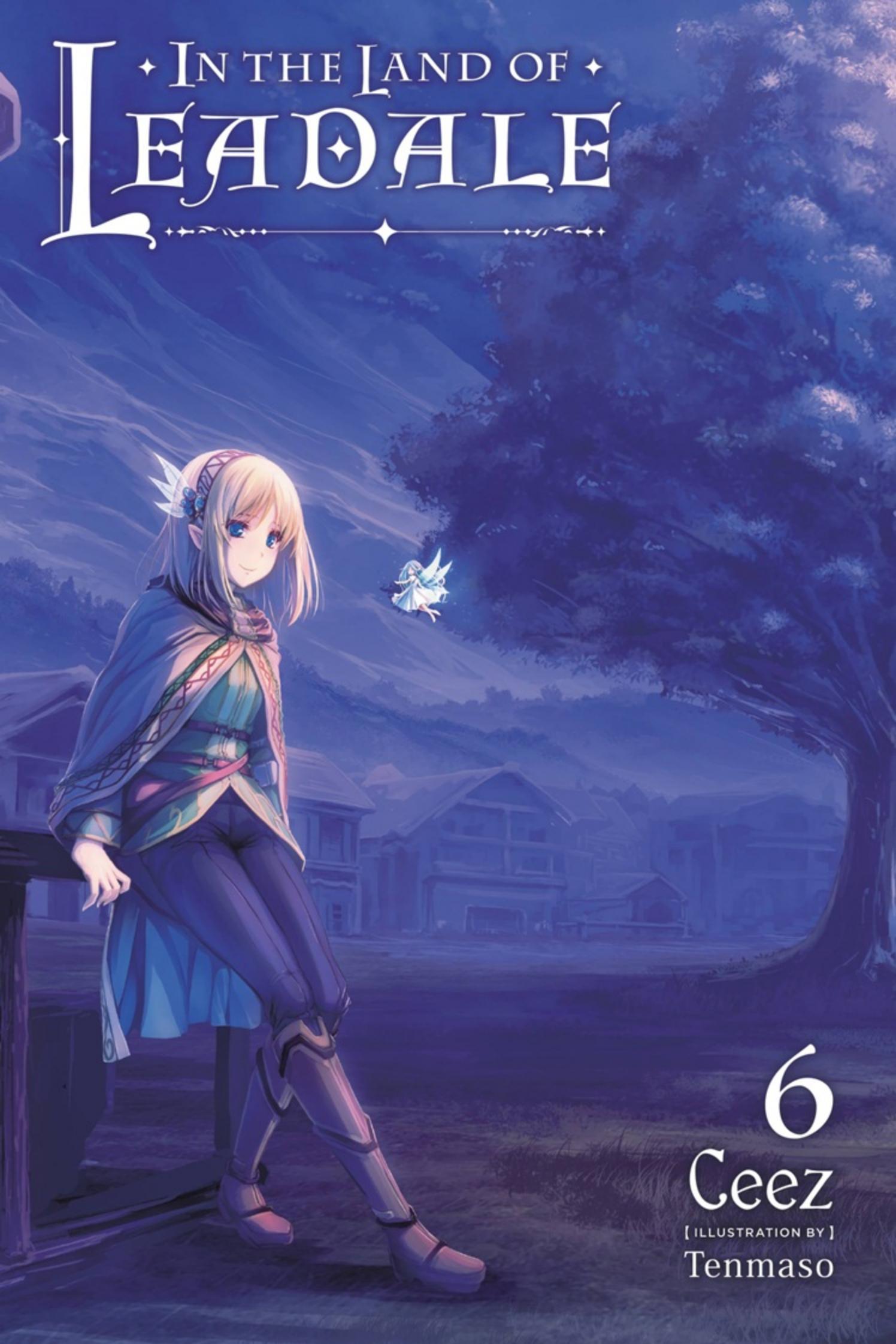


• IN THE LAND OF • LEADALE



6
Ceez
[ILLUSTRATION BY]
Tenmaso

IN THE LAND OF LEADEALE

– Leadale no Daichi nite –

- VOLUME 6 -

-AUTHOR-

Ceez

-ILLUSTRATOR-

tenmaso

[YEN PRESS]



“Who are these
weaklings?”

“What did you
say?!”

CLOFFE

CLOFIA

OPUS

KUU

CAYNA

SIREN

“They appear to
be Lady Cayna’s
companions.”



"Just relax and enjoy
the party. Don't be
so grumpy."

**"And who
exactly made
me grumpy?!"**

L ♦ IN THE LAND OF ♦ LEADALE

6
Ceez
[ILLUSTRATION BY]
Tenmaso



COPYRIGHT

In the Land of Leadale 6

Ceez

Translation by Jessica Lange

Cover art by Tenmaso

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

RIADEIRU NO DAICHI NITE Vol. 6

© Ceez 2021

First published in Japan in 2021 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

English translation © 2022 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On
150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor
New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com
facebook.com/yenpress
twitter.com/yenpress
yenpress.tumblr.com

instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: September 2022

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Rachel Mimms

Designed by Yen Press Design: Liz Parlett

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ceez, author. | Tenmaso, illustrator. | Lange, Jessica (Translator), translator.

Title: In the land of Leadale / Ceez ; illustration by Tenmaso ; translation by Jessica Lange

Other titles: Riadeiru no daichi nite. English

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2020.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020032160 | ISBN 9781975308681 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975308704 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975322168 (v. 3 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975322182 (v. 4 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975333447 (v. 5 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975334598 (v. 6 ; trade paperback)

Subjects: CYAC: Fantasy. | Virtual reality—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.C4646 In 2020 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020032160>

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-3459-8 (paperback)

978-1-9753-3460-4 (ebook)

E3-20220818-JV-NF-ORI

cONTENTS

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

The Story Thus Far

Prologue

Chapter 1

A Confrontation, Heavy Lifting, an Old Friend, and the Road Ahead

Chapter 2

A Journey, the Beginning, Craftsmanship, and the Situation at Hand

Chapter 3

A Growing Family, the Life of the Party, Further Info, and the Truth

Chapter 4

Mental Fatigue, a Skeleton, Camping, and Omnipotence

Chapter 5

A Questioning, a Reunion, Rebirth, and a Future Date

Epilogue

Bonus Short Story 1

The Dungeon Master's Assistant

Bonus Short Story 2

Fish and Cats

Character Data

Afterword

Yen Newsletter

THE STORY THUS FAR

Keina Kagami, a girl bedridden after a tragic accident, lost her life while playing the VRMMO *World of Leadale* when her life support short-circuited from a power surge. However, she suddenly woke up in an unfamiliar inn and was shocked to find she looked just like her avatar, Cayna.

Keina then learned from the inn's proprietress, Marelle, that two hundred years had passed since the Game Era, and the seven original nations had consolidated into three. Unable to return to the past, Keina acquiesced to living on as Cayna and learning more about this new world among the inn's hospitable villagers.

She soon discovered her Guardian Tower from her Skill Master days was still nearby and met up with its Guardian, a talking mural who informed her the other towers were low on magic and presently inoperable. Since Cayna had no contact with the other Skill Masters and figured a visit to each would be a good way to gather info, she decided to set out on a globe-trotting journey.

After meeting a kobold caravan leader named Elineh and his escort, a mercenary leader called Arbiter, Cayna accompanied their group to Felskeilo's royal capital while continuing to learn the ins and outs of her new surroundings.

Once in Felskeilo, Cayna registered with the Adventurers Guild, met prime minister Agaido and his granddaughter, Lonti, and helped the pair capture a runaway prince. Her impressive skills sent the public into a tizzy as she chased the boy across the water before safely apprehending him, earning her Agaido's support as a noble.

She also reconnected with the three sub-characters she had submitted to the Foster System back in the Game Era. Not only were they considered Cayna's "children," the trio had also become important national figures.

First, her eldest son, Skargo, a handsome elf, was now (for reasons unknown) the High Priest and third most influential figure in all of Felskeilo.

Then there was her eldest daughter, a beautiful elf named Mai-Mai. She was now married and served as headmistress of the Royal Academy.

Finally, Cayna's second son, Kartatz, a sensible dwarf, ran a large shipyard.

Cayna, having had no experience with love, let alone marriage, was dumbfounded to find she had suddenly become a mother.

Meanwhile, she confirmed the Battle Arena in the capital to be the Ninth Skill Master's tower. After a series of twists and turns, the awakened Guardian told Cayna more about what had happened in the past and revealed that *Leadale*'s servers had since shut down.

Her hope of meeting other players completely dashed, Cayna holed herself up and despaired. However, Skargo and Mai-Mai rushed in to lift their mother's spirits. With the help of her children, Cayna regained her positive outlook on life.

Afterward, Cayna agreed to serve as Elineh's guard on a trip to the northern nation of Helshper. Along the way, she stopped by a remote village and followed an odd moaning that rose up from the bottom of a well. This turned out to be Mimily, a mermaid who had somehow been swept away from the ocean's depths. After partly renovating the women's bath to give Mimily comfortable living quarters, Cayna used the reward money she earned from the incident to cover the mermaid's daily necessities.

Elineh's caravan left the village and headed for Helshper. They crossed the Ejidd River after Cayna used her skills to fix the fallen bridge, but a horde of bandits from the west attacked them at the border. Nevertheless, the caravan was able to skirt disaster thanks to the creatures Cayna had summoned earlier for unrelated tasks. She then used her immeasurable magic to transform the bandits' leader into an icy flower and shatter him into a million pieces.

After entering the Helshper capital, Cayna met Caerick, the founder of the continent's top merchant company, Sakaiya. She was soon struck by yet another startling revelation.

Caerick was Mai-Mai's son from her first marriage—in other words, Cayna's grandson. Plus, Caerick had a son of his own as well. Cayna had become a great-grandmother with zero effort. It was all too much for her.

A fissure formed between grandmother and grandson after a minor misunderstanding, and Cayna's confusion only worsened when Caerick's elder twin sister, the knight Caerina, apologized on his behalf. But with Caerick's help, Cayna made plans to raid

the bandits' den to the west after learning of another Guardian Tower within the group's territory.

Caerina tried to stop Cayna, but Cayna pushed her way into the bandits' lair and soon realized their leader was actually a demon player. Enraged by his selfishness and deplorable behavior, she challenged him to a battle. The demon was no match for the limit-breaking Skill Master; moments before he seemed about to meet his maker, the Helshper knights arrested him. Since Cayna possessed Game Master-level authority, she was able to use one of her Special Skills to reduce the demon player's strength to only 10 percent.

Seething with resentment, he cursed her name as the knights took him away.

Upon awakening the nearby Guardian Tower, Cayna discovered it once belonged to her no-good friend and fellow guild member, Opuskettenshultheimer Crosstettbomber, aka Opus. When the Guardian entrusted her with a book, a small fairy leaped out and joined Cayna on her journey.

Cayna planned to give Mimily the extra money she had earned by eliminating bandits and creating Buddha statues that had earned Elineh a small fortune. On her way to the village, she came across Kartatz, who was busy building a bridge across the Ejidd River. She was later surprised to see Mimily had become a cheerful laundress after taking a proposal of Lytt's to heart.

After returning to Felskeilo, Cayna accepted a request from the Adventurers Guild to obtain some horned bear meat and simultaneously ran into Lonti and Lonti's friend Princess Mye in town. Cayna agreed to act as their guard, and the three girls embarked on the mission together. Cayna also learned about Princess Mye's crush on Skargo.

Meanwhile, Mai-Mai's husband, Lopus, an avid admirer of Cayna's "ancient arts" (skills), threw his failed experiment into a garbage pit at the Felskeilo Royal Academy.

However, the garbage pit in question happened to be a Collection Point during wartime in the Game Era, and the failed experiment included every ingredient needed to activate it. As a result, a giant dolphin-headed penguin monster manifested in the capital.

When the city fell into mass panic, a few stepped forward to face the threat: the knight captain Shining Saber and adventurer Cohral, former players and guildmates who had

once fought alongside each other.

But even the combined strength of the players, knights, and mages barely kept the monster at bay. Just as all were certain the capital was doomed, Cayna charged in with her mighty magic to land the finishing blow.

Running into the former players Shining Saber and Cohral further convinced Cayna that her awful friend was still stubbornly alive somewhere, too. Cohral gave her some info about another Guardian Tower, and she was excited to take care of that while also searching for this friend of hers.

Cayna then decided to take a quick trip to the remote village, where she met a study group from the far southern nation of Otaloquess. However, this scholarly act turned out to be a ruse. Among them was a spy intent on persuading Cayna to come to Otaloquess, which was ruled by Queen Sahalashade—who happened to be the Foster Child of a high-elf community member named Sahana, who had been like a little sister to Cayna back in the Game Era. This made Cayna the aunt of a queen, which once again rattled her to the core.

A mentally drained Cayna then promised to take Lytt on a flight once she located the next Guardian Tower, known as the Palace of the Dragon King. To that end, Cayna briefly accompanied a squadron of knights who were heading out to take care of the remaining bandits. On the way, a small misunderstanding resulted in everyone believing she was Shining Saber's fiancée.

After parting with the knights halfway through the trip, Cayna headed for the fishing village where the Palace of the Dragon King was supposedly located. What she found, however, was a ruined village shrouded in a strange mist and overrun with zombies and ghouls. It was here that Cayna met two adventurers who also came to investigate, as well as the young girl they were protecting—the village's sole survivor. Exis, a dragoid adventurer, was Cayna's former guildmate who used to go by Tartarus on a secondary account. Mutually overjoyed by their sudden reunion, the pair vowed to work together to take back the village.

After summoning her cat-eared butler, Roxilius, to protect the orphaned girl, Cayna teamed up with Exis and his partner, Quolkeh, to destroy a pirate ship that controlled the souls of the deceased. Cayna awakened the Palace of the Dragon King's Guardian, adopted the young survivor, Luka, and decided to permanently settle in the remote village to properly raise her.

She summoned more help—this time in the form of a cat-eared maid named Roxine—and spent the rest of the way home awkwardly listening to an assortment of colorful arguments that broke out between her two summons. Roxilius and Roxine (a combo like oil and water) helped her settle in the remote village and start a new life with her new family.

Cayna kept her promise to take Lytt on a sightseeing flight and invited a few other children along: her adopted daughter, Luka, and the local engineer's son, Latem.

As they soared through the skies enjoying the wind in their hair, the group witnessed Elineh's caravan being attacked by monsters. Cayna immediately rushed in to save them. Arbiter later told her that hidden monsters had surrounded the village, so she joined the mercenaries to drive them out.

Meanwhile, the children sneaked out of the village to make flower crowns. Just as monsters were about to attack them, a high-level White Dragon appeared from Luka's pendant and repelled the fiends, its very breath leaving fissures in the earth. Cayna heard the deep rumbling that followed and raced back to the village. She took Luka into her arms and wailed with relief that her daughter was safe and sound.

In need of basic necessities, Cayna later flew to Sakaiya and came across Cohral's party. They were responding to a request, and she took this opportunity to introduce them to her great-grandson, Idzik.

Caerick informed her that Helshper and Felskeilo would be conferring along the national border, and Skargo greeted Cayna upon her return to the remote village. He was scheduled to attend a meeting along the border and had decided to pay Cayna a visit en route.

Cayna and Roxilius bolstered the village's defenses, and at the same time, she was surprised to learn from the village elder that the land belonged to the Harvey baron family. Mai-Mai's husband, Lopus, was among their number.

Cayna decided later that a shopping trip was in order and invited Luka and Lytt along so they could broaden their horizons. Elineh's caravan arrived in the village with impeccable timing, and the girls accompanied them back to Felskeilo. Cayna also used this chance to test out her self-sufficient, golem-powered wagon that would help make the journey more comfortable. Unfortunately, this golem stagecoach inadvertently caught the eye of a troublesome noble, and Cayna urged fellow chaperone Roxine to

stay on guard as they entered Felskeilo.

The city was celebrating its biggest event, the River Festival. However, thanks to rumors of a strange shadow in the Ejidd River, citizens were too afraid to kick off the festivities. After receiving a request from the Adventurers Guild, Cayna left the children with Roxine and set out to investigate the river and solve the mystery.

Meanwhile, under the orders of a foolish noble, several members of the city's seedy underworld tried to abduct Cayna's loved ones. Tasked with watching the children in her mistress's stead, Roxine took notice of the shady men's over-the-top measures and fended them off while hardly lifting a finger.

After underestimating their target and assuming a maid and two children could be easily overpowered, the battered criminals fled to their hideout. However, a pair of terrifying demons dropped by, and a harrowing fate far worse than torture awaited the petrified men.

The following day, the knights visited the farthest corner of the slums and discovered the crooks' bodies twisted into grotesque shapes. The men could hardly form words; the knights promptly put the city on high alert upon hearing the name of the fiend who committed the heinous act.

All the while, Cayna followed a lead from the Battle Arena Guardian and soon discovered that the large shadow in the river was yet another Guardian Tower. The tower, an enormous white whale, belonged to the First Skill Master. Cayna enlisted the aid of the knights and Princess Mye to help carry out her plan to settle the moving-type tower in one place, and they formed a ploy to trick the townspeople.

The ruse was a success, and the white whale Guardian Tower was soon situated upstream of Felskeilo's sandbar. With the city's concerns finally assuaged, the River Festival commenced, and Cayna was able to enjoy the festivities with Lytt, Luka, and Roxine.

As the celebration drew to a close, the aristocrat whose loathing for Cayna reached new heights was viciously attacked by a demon and his fiendish companions. The demon determined the petrified noble's punishment with a coin toss.

Cayna next visited the ship factory with the girls and, after leaving them with Roxine, decided to do a bit of solo fishing. A large crowd gathered on the sandbar as she reeled

in one huge catch after the other, and the festival after-party heated up. Then Cayna caught the monster that had been disturbing the river before the white whale ever showed up. Everyone else found its bizarre appearance terrifying, save for Cayna, who gave the baddie a good kick to the keister.

After a number of good-byes, Cayna and her crew headed home. They ran into Skargo and Cohral, who were returning from a meeting. Once Cohral told her about the issues with the game system and the location of the Abandoned Capital, Cayna became more eager than ever to find Opus.

Roxilius had been watching the house while they were gone, but a mysterious person had bested him and left behind a note that said only "*Name her.*"

Realizing this note was referring to Li'l Fairy, Cayna racked her brain and finally decided to name the fairy Kuu. Introducing her to the villagers taught Cayna that fairies were considered symbols of good fortune.

Caerick later called upon Cayna for help with some magical light fixtures, which she took care of while introducing him and Idzik to Kuu. As they enjoyed a nice chat together, Cayna received an urgent Friend Message from Shining Saber and was shocked to learn a horde of monsters were attacking Felskeilo.

After rushing over to the east gate and taking care of the dinosaur vanguard, Cayna headed south of Felskeilo to deal with the main enemy forces. Awaiting her was a rush of monsters so powerful it would take several midlevel players to beat just one. Cayna demonstrated her full might as a Limit Breaker and vanquished the horde in the blink of an eye before continuing to the west gate to aid the knights.

Simultaneously, the southern nation of Otaloquess's famous attraction, a giant tortoise, had shifted directions and was heading straight for the royal capital. Adventurers and knights alike worked together to try to alter its trajectory, and Exis and Quolkeh got caught up in the mess by happenstance.

Together with an old man known as Hidden Ogre, they reached the top of the Guardian Tower's shell and delved into a mysterious TV studio-like building. Inside, the three stumbled upon a production set and answered a myriad of quiz show-style questions. Quolkeh didn't make the cut, but Exis and the old Hidden Ogre just barely managed to score enough right answers to pass. They successfully stopped the turtle just as it was about to slam into the Otaloquess castle.

Another strange incident arose back in Felskeilo, and adventurers were forced to fight strange monsters capable of controlling the knights. Thanks to Arbiter's quick thinking, he and the adventurers were able to (literally) knock the sense back into their knightly frenemies. Cayna soon barged in with Li'l P and quickly took out the monsters possessing the knights.

Cayna later made plans to meet with Skargo, but the king and queen of Felskeilo somehow ended up joining them as well. She was dumbfounded as the royal couple bowed their heads in gratitude for watching over the prince and princess. Cayna also asked Skargo about Kuu's memories of the Night Sanctuary but didn't discover anything of value.

However, Cayna soon realized she had misheard the name and was quickly able to pinpoint Opus's whereabouts. He was in a dungeon the two had designed to mess around with newbies; much to Cayna's surprise, a village now surrounded that same dungeon.

As soon as Cayna set foot in Otaloquess, she was greeted by a startled Cloffe and Clofia, the siblings who had visited the remote village with a team of Otaloquess scholars. The two of them ended up dungeon diving with Cayna and Kuu, although Clofia comedically fell victim to traps over and over again since avoiding them was tricky without any skills.

Halfway through the dungeon, monsters too powerful for any beginner started to appear. This gave Cloffe and Clofia the chance to witness Cayna's might firsthand.

It was here that Clofia also checked her attitude when she learned Cayna was the Otaloquess queen's aunt. She tried atoning for her rude behavior by charging straight into a trap but instead wound up in a sticky situation. After saving the werecat girl, Cayna finally reached the bottommost floor.

Before anything else, however, she had to face a midboss demon. Infuriated by her foe's careless words, Cayna used a Special Skill to annihilate him.

Then, at long last, she came face-to-face with Opus in the furthermost depths of the dungeon.

It was far from a joyous reunion, however. Now hopping mad, Cayna unleashed her greatest attacks in a determined effort to slice Opus in half and, together with Kuu,

turned the dungeon's lowest floor into a pile of rubble.



Prologue

"Hah..."

Keina Kagami vacantly stared out the window and sighed for the umpteenth time that day. The count had to be in the double digits—not that she was keeping track or anything. The ceaseless beeping of her life-support machine quietly echoed in the hospital room, and the faint smell of rubbing alcohol pervaded the air. Her expression was listless, and her eyes held a melancholy gloom. She was exhausted in every sense of the word.

The weather determined whether the window stayed open, but the nurse would crack it at least once each morning when she came to check Keina's temperature. The hospital grounds were sprawling with greenery, so a faint, earthy scent would waft inside to invigorate the senses.

In most cases anyway.

"Haaah..."

Keina sighed so much that she could add it as a hobby on her résumé. Anybody was bound to point this out if they hung around her long enough.

But Keina's only company in the hospital room was her special support AI, Kee, who was integrated into her life-support machinery. There were numerous reasons why sighing had become her favorite pastime, but the current culprit was mostly likely her uninvited guests.

It all started when her doctor invited people around the hospital to come and chat with the bedridden young girl. To be honest, this was probably an invasion of privacy, although that never occurred to Keina.

Waves of patients with nothing better to do visited her in shifts. They ranged from friendly, able-bodied children to nosy, doting seniors. If Keina was more assertive, she could have told the children to stay in bed or ask the elderly patients to get plenty of rest. However, once the shock of losing her parents had finally subsided, she had a hard enough time dealing with her own situation.

The children innocently blathered on about their own interests and tried to win her over whenever she didn't share their enthusiasm. The seniors were usually long-winded. They would pause to give her sweets, but these were often left in a pile on her bed since she couldn't eat them anyway.

This repetitive series of forced conversations needlessly exhausted her. In truth, Keina wished she always had the perfect response—she was simply too afraid to speak. She could hardly move as it was, and the anxiety over what to do if they grew bored left a huge impression on her. The situation could have been easily resolved if only Keina had more confidence, but someone pushed into such a mental corner didn't have the room to realize her problem wasn't entirely dependent on others.

“Hey there! Sorry for bargin’ in. How’s it going?”

“Wha—?!”

Keina couldn’t jump since her body was paralyzed, but her heart definitely skipped a beat when a friendly voice suddenly entered the room. It pounded in her rib cage.

“...I-it’s you.”

“Oops, guess I startled you. Sorry about that.”

Although the door was well within view, Keina had been so distracted she never saw him come in. Embarrassed he’d caught her in such a state, her face and ears turned crimson.

The man flashed a bright, impish smile. He was Keisuke Kagami, the younger brother of Keina’s father; they shared the same last name, but his was written with different kanji. He seemed to get a kick out of startling people, and she always wished he’d just cut it out already. No matter how many times he pulled one over on her, she was injured and could only give so much of a reaction.

He usually brought along his daughter, Ako Kagami, who also worked as his secretary. However, a different woman was with him this time. Keina tilted her head curiously.

“Sorry I didn’t bring Ako with me today. I’m here for business purposes instead of personal ones.”

“Huh? Business?”

She didn’t understand how this explained her cousin’s absence. Perhaps this woman worked a similar kind of job. She was waiting behind Keisuke as she removed a thick stack of documents from an equally thick A4-sized envelope.

"You still use paper?" Keina asked.

"Well, there hasn't been an official announcement yet. We secured a budget, though, so no harm in setting up shop. We'll launch sometime in the next couple months."

"Announcement'? 'Launch'?"

Keina's confusion deepened as Keisuke continued to beat around the bush.

"Mr. Kagami, the young lady doesn't appear to understand your explanation. As our representative, you ought to... I would appreciate it if you refrained from such indirect language."

Unable to idly stand by, the woman offered a gentle rebuke. Keisuke lightly rapped his head.

"Right, right, sorry. We're establishing a VR gaming department, Keina. I was wondering if you could play a beta version and report any bugs."

"By beta... you mean the game isn't done yet?" Keina asked.

"How rude. The prototype is complete. We simply don't have any players yet," the woman replied.

"More like we haven't picked anyone to play."

"I told you already—er, as you might recall, we've been running simulated data as part of our research."

"Replacing a real person with AI won't get us honest feedback."

"Um, excuse me? Hello?"

Sensing the pair was seconds away from an all-out argument over the game's prototype, Keina forced her way between the two. For all she lacked in physical mobility, she seemed to make up for it with her ability to read a room. Further proof of how accustomed she'd become to her days of endless conversation.

"What's up, Keina? Got any questions?"

“I’ve got nothing but questions... The first of which is: Who is this?”

Realizing their faux pas only after it was brought to their attention, Keisuke and the mystery woman looked at each other and let out a simultaneous “Oh.”

“Ah, right, guess I should’ve done that earlier.”

“Indeed. I understand your eagerness to give this young lady an ounce of freedom, but at least allow me to introduce myself.”

“You were itching to tell her, too, y’know.”

“Mr. Kagami, didn’t you get straight to the point the moment you entered the room?”

“Agh, gimme a break! Quit bringin’ up ancient history!”

Keina then realized that her uncle got along better with this mysterious individual than with his own wife. Nevertheless, she couldn’t let the pair carry on forever, so she interrupted once again. Their chemistry was obvious, but Keina wished they would stop bantering already and explain what was going on.

“Guess I’m full of apologies today. She’s the project coordinator for—”

“‘Project coordinator’? Don’t sell me short. I’m in charge of design and development. My name is Rin Kuzuhara. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Oh, I see. You’ve probably already heard, but my name is Keina Kagami. Nice to meet you.”

“Mr. Kagami and his secretary have told me a lot about you. Our meeting today feels like some sort of fate. I hope we’ll forge a long-lasting friendship.”

“Yes, me too...”

As Keina spoke with Rin Kuzuhara, she felt an indescribable nostalgia. There was a twinge in her chest, but neither arm moved to clutch at it. The sensation reminded her of a captivating sunset she had seen as a child while walking home after playtime.

Keina questioned where this sentimentality was coming from and cast her eyes downward. However, she returned to her senses when her uncle asked what was

wrong.

"Ah no. It's nothing."

"Right. If there's anything you want, just say the word, 'kay?"

"I'm not a little kid anymore. I'm fine, really."

"Both you and Ako are still kids to me. Don't be a stranger now."

Keisuke tousled her hair.

"Hey, you'll mess up my hair!" she said with forced cheer so he wouldn't press her further.

After all, Keina had been given whatever she wanted since the moment she entered the hospital. And once she realized why, she stopped wanting anything at all. Both her minders and Kee were mostly likely keeping an eye on her.

Her hospitalization was already putting a strain on her uncle and cousin. Keina vowed to be sensible and understanding so as not to cause them further concern.

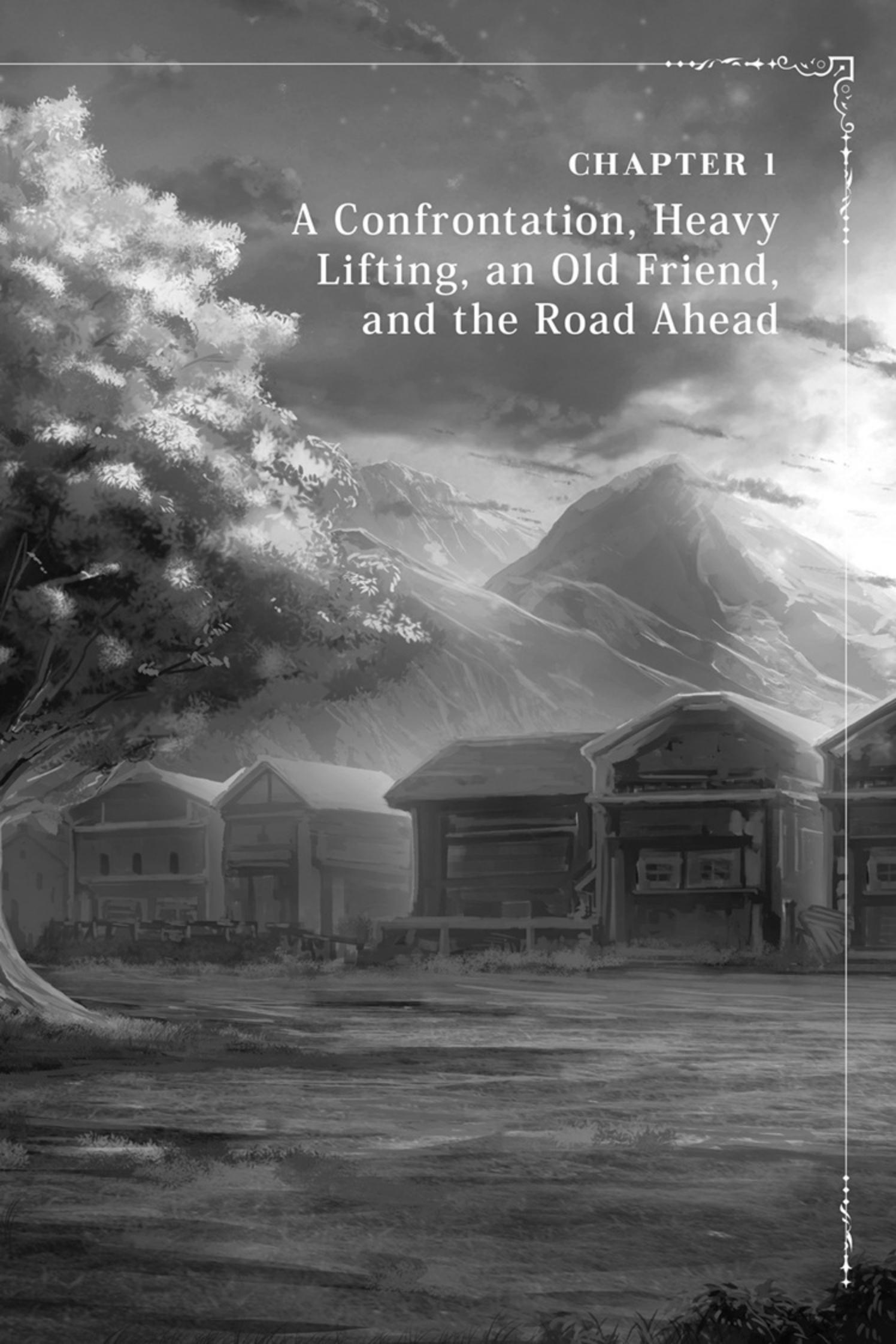
"Might I continue?"

"Ah yes. Sorry about that."

Rin Kuzuhara, who had been quietly observing the touching uncle-and-niece moment, gave a small cough and took the opportunity to interrupt. Realizing she'd been unwittingly disruptive, Keina pulled herself together and listened carefully.

"Allow me to explain. First, this project is a VR game at its core. All you need is the proper equipment and a role-playing mindset. Specifically..."

Keina hung on Kuzuhara's every word as the woman spoke of a game so immersive it would allow her to soon forget all her real-life troubles.



CHAPTER I

A Confrontation, Heavy
Lifting, an Old Friend,
and the Road Ahead

As the silence continued, three human figures held their breath and remained perfectly still, their eyes focused on a singular point. The siblings Cloffe and Clofia, and the black-haired elf maid Siren, who quietly stood at a slight distance, stared fearfully at the piled remains of a cave-in.

They were on the twenty-eighth floor of a dungeon. Their location? A previously massive, stalactite-riddled underground cave Clofia had fallen into after getting caught in a trap. The word *previously* was key here since the ankle-deep water was now gone without a trace. There was also a spawn plank with the image of a lizardman on it. Since the plank needed water to produce monsters, there was no indication the monsters would respawn. Now that the lake had dried up, it was no different than a relief sculpture.

This scenario was all thanks to the massive sword that had pierced the ground from below and torn part of the floor to shreds. The water from the underground lake poured into the new hole, and the giant blade vanished after chopping up the bottommost floor. The weapon didn't stick around for long, but the damage it left was immense.

Some time had already passed after the deadly sword disappeared, but it didn't seem like anyone would rise up from below. The werecat siblings were worried sick about Cayna since she had charged in there alone. As they shuddered at the terrifying thought that the sword might have injured her, time began to move once again.

Rubble from the cave-in stirred, and an instant later, multiple objects blasted away the debris like a fountain and floated effortlessly in the air. The objects in question were small red arrows, their minuscule forms carrying detritus of every size. However, the twirling junk was made of a heavyweight metal impossible to produce with modern technology, and the siblings realized their peril when the chunks directly overhead started crashing down on them.

The hail of litter was so widespread there was no time to seek escape. Cloffe could feel their luck fading fast; he pinned Clofia beneath him without a second thought, his body and heart united to save his sister's life at the cost of his own.

However, the expected wave of pain and agony never came. Cloffe soon heard a heavy, screeching *thud* and felt a gust of wind follow shortly thereafter. When he cautiously opened his eyes, he found all the rubble falling to the floor around Clofia and him as if purposefully avoiding them. Neither sibling had a scratch on them.

“Don’t you have something to do before giving up?”

“Huh?”

Siren was smiling gently next to them even though she had been a distance away moments earlier. She cleared the dust with a graceful wave of her hand.

Cloffie and Clofia had escaped unscathed because every piece of debris that Siren touched scattered in all directions. Her casual intervention just as the siblings were about to be crushed was nothing short of incredible. Nevertheless, Siren held her composure without the slightest inclination to gloat. Exhausted from their brush with death, Cloffe and Clofia collapsed to the ground.

Suddenly, the source of the crimson arrows that nearly sent the werecats to an early grave dreamily fluttered up from the hole.

It was the fairy Kuu. She turned back toward the cavity, huffing and puffing at the two people following close behind her. Kuu, of course, wasn’t the least bit aware of the near-fatal disaster she’d caused. Whatever she lacked in stature she made up for in pompousness, and then some.

“Sheesh. You were only supposed to be the sub, but you’re basically a mini Cayna,” the demon Opus complained as he came into view.

Or more accurately, he rose out of the hole with Cayna over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. She dangled limply, her eyes swirling.

Cloffie and Clofia hadn’t exactly failed to notice her—they were just too terrified to rush to her aid. But soon their concern won out, and they started making their way toward her on their hands and knees.

“Hmm?”

““.....?!””

The moment the werecats’ strange behavior caught Opus’s suspicious gaze, they froze in their tracks. Then his gaze turned pitiful.

“Who are these weaklings?”

““Weaklings’...?!”

“What did you say?!”

Their outrage at being deemed weak dispelled the siblings’ paralysis, but they were soon struck by an intense pressure that kept them rooted in place. The pair nervously wondered what this demon intended. They were also dying to chew him out for treating the queen’s aunt like luggage.

“They appear to be Lady Cayna’s companions.”

“What?”

As Opus stared at Cloffe and Clofia with growing hostility, Siren broke her silence to provide additional information.

“Cayna came all this way with dead weight? She must enjoy making her life harder.”

“Compared to you, Master, anyone would appear that way.”

The scorn and disgust on Opus’s face deepened. He wasn’t being hostile, but it was clear how he felt about Cayna bringing along two (in gamer terms) “newbies.” He asked himself what in the world she was thinking and wondered if Cayna had imposed some kind of challenge on herself.

Meanwhile, Cloffe and Clofia tried to rescue Cayna from her presumed kidnapper while still under the weight of his condescending gaze.

Tried being the operative word here.

Opus sniffed derisively and prepared to intercept the inferior fighters.

However, that was as far as things got.

Refusing to stand by and watch, an interloper stepped in. With a sound like a driving rain, a legion of crimson arrows rose to the top of the cave.

The interloper was, of course, Kuu. Hands on hips, she floated between Cloffe, Clofia, and Opus and puffed out her cheeks.

“Geh!”

“Urgh!”

“Huh?!”

Opus sensed a ruthlessness equal to Cayna’s own destructive violence and stopped in his tracks. Cloffe and Clofia also froze, their faces twisted in a grimace; they had already witnessed the fairy blow previous floors to smithereens. Neither Opus nor the werecat siblings recalled ever acting hostile toward Kuu, so they had no idea why she was turning on them. Only Siren took the situation in stride as she stood serenely beneath the crimson projectiles.

“No fighting!”

The way Kuu flailed her arms in protest was adorable and hilarious, although this was instantly offset by the barrage of missiles floating above her.

“Luka said so.”

“...Luka did, huh?” Opus murmured as he looked up at Kuu with a knowing nod.

He had spotted Cayna’s adopted daughter during the River Festival (albeit from a distance) while he was working behind the scenes and had decided to investigate further. Kuu was mentally around the same age as Luka, so the girl’s childlike behavior was likely influencing the fairy.

“If you fight, you’ll both be in bubble!”

“Huh? Bubble?!” Clofia exclaimed.

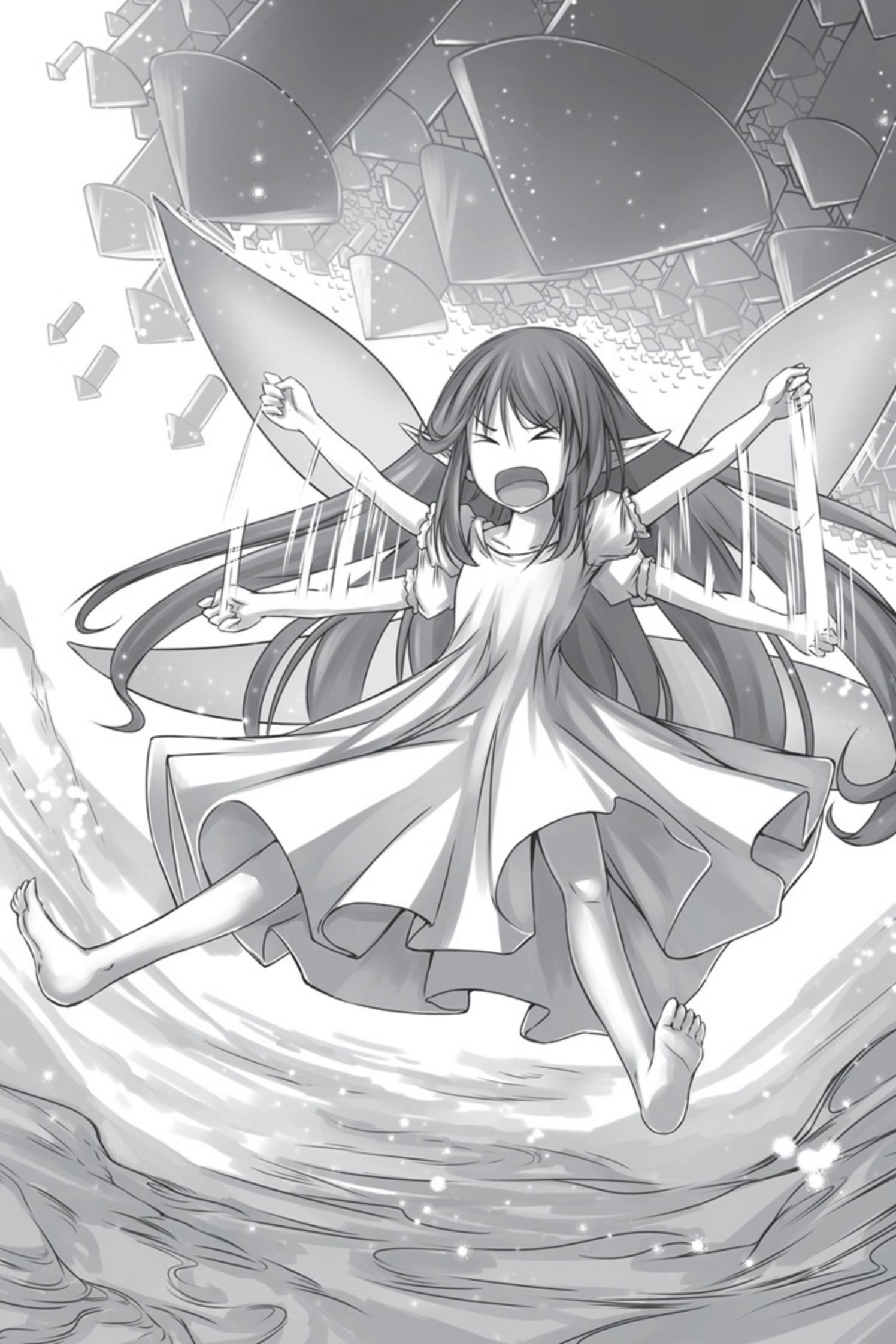
“...I believe she means *trouble*,” said Siren.

It was unclear whether this was what Luka had actually said or if Kuu misheard her, but everyone tilted their heads at the fairy’s turn of phrase. Both sides, which had been primed to strike, paused in confusion. The flurry of red arrows seemed to imply that any fighting would result in more than a few burst bubbles.

“Hold it! We won’t fight anymore, so call off the fireworks!”

Opus was already sweating as he raised a hand and promised unconditional surrender. He looked quite unnerved. Kuu might be tiny and childlike, but Opus knew exactly who he was dealing with here.

Even if Opus and Siren took on the full brunt of the red arrows' wrath, the damage would be negligible. Cloffe and Clofia, however, were a different story. Their levels were only in the double digits. If hit by the same attack, their injuries would be no joke. They might not escape with their lives. Best-case scenario, they'd wind up being lumps of flesh. Worst-case scenario, they'd be blown to smithereens. Opus didn't hate the pair *that* much.



He merely wanted to mess around with them to prove just how weak they were. Instigate them a bit, then dish out a good whupping. That was all. Opus wasn't sure how Cayna would react if he brought down his full might on her friends, which was why he stuck to light teasing. However, Kuu's onslaught was a different story.

"Hmph."

Kuu continued grumbling as her eyes turned from the resigned Opus to the werecats.

The flustered siblings momentarily cowered beneath her steely gaze. Behind the fairy, Opus was urging them to surrender. Cloffe and Clofia looked from the sea of airborne missiles, then at Kuu, and then finally at Opus. They turned to each other and nodded.

"I give."

"I surrender."

Both slowly raised their hands to Kuu as a gesture of goodwill.

But what happened next was scarier than anything else.

"Gotcha!"

Her hard-nosed attitude dissipated an instant later, and Kuu broke into a sunny smile. The crimson arrows, however, still came down in a sudden downpour. Opus, Cloffe, and Clofia had assumed the projectiles would disappear with Kuu's foul mood; their blood ran cold as the deadly daggers pierced the floor with a thundering crash.

Simplistic psycho was certainly an accurate way to describe Kuu. Opus, Cloffe, and Clofia stared at her and the arrow-riddled floor with terror in their eyes.

"Heh. Well, she rampages like Cayna at least..." Opus muttered as he wiped the sweat from his brow.

Before their civil conversation could commence, Siren stepped between the two parties and raised her hand.

"Might I have a moment?"

“What’s up, Siren?” Opus asked. “Going to start things off?”

“No, not quite.”

“Will you perhaps act as a mediator?” Cloffe inquired.

“No, you are both incorrect. Shall we head outside?”

Gesturing toward the ceiling, Siren pointed out the obvious.

Opus looked up while Cloffe and Clofia winced, their eyes darting back and forth. Both parties had spent the entire time bickering only to remember all too late that this was a dungeon. And they weren’t fighting for dominance or prey: The dungeon master had simply emerged from the depths below, while the siblings thought Cayna had been abducted and merely had been trying to rescue her.

Neither party had attempted to communicate from the get-go, so their open hostility created a series of misunderstandings. Opus’s condescension and instigation didn’t help matters, but a clash could have been avoided if everyone had introduced themselves properly. Cloffe couldn’t imagine a worse first impression. A battle to the death likely would have broken out if they hadn’t been so forcefully interrupted. Even with their numerical advantage, Cloffe and Clofia didn’t stand a chance against Cayna’s partner in crime.

“I assume you’ve all had enough of this dark, stinking cellar, yes?”

“Hold it right there, Siren. Did you just insult me?”

“I’m pleased to see you have a modicum of self-awareness.”

“Grah... You truly know how to make a master feel like a sidekick...”

Even if Opus *was* the type of person to act out these pathetic comedy routines with his maid, Cloffe wanted to believe he had assumed wrong.

“How do we get out of here, Brother?”

“Good question...”

When Clofia considered how they’d get back to the surface, she grimaced at the

thought of retracing their steps. After all, it was a trap that had sent her tumbling down to this floor in the first place.

Cloffe, on the other hand, had arrived at the underground lake only after forcing his way past each layer. Even if they wanted to go back, he had no idea where the established route was.

“What’s with you two? Don’t tell me you don’t have Return Magic.”

“R-Return Magic?”

Opus’s question rattled Cloffe. Neither werecat knew the aforementioned spell, of course. The spec difference between a two-hundred-year-old player and any modern-day citizen was just that immense. Furthermore, the magic used by the masses and the magic used by players were two entirely separate entities. The former obviously wouldn’t have a spell that allowed them to escape from a dungeon’s depths in the blink of an eye.

“What a pain... Both of you, stay close to me. We’re leaving.”

“...What?”

“Come along now. Please stay near Master Opus. If you’re frightened, might I offer to hold your hand?”

“Huh? Wait a sec. What’re you doing?”

The delicate maid forcefully drew the bewildered Clofia in close, but Cloffe was quietly obedient. If Opus was truly in the same league as Cayna, he had faith the demon could pull this off. He maintained a distance that was not too close yet not too far, and Opus nodded.

Siren took a half step back to stand beside her master, then dragged Clofia behind Opus. The werecat reluctantly complied.

Kuu, who had fallen silent since her last frenzy, frolicked and twirled around in Cayna’s hair even though the girl was still slumped over Opus’s shoulder. Fairies were truly an easygoing bunch.

Magic Skill: Load: Return

Starting at Opus's feet, a 3D dodecahedron magic circle soon enveloped everyone. Each of the twelve faces was a different magic circle whose fine details were like exquisite works of art. However, this was all merely an effect; the only true technique was beneath the caster's feet.

An incredulous Cloffe and Clofia stared wide-eyed as the spell worked its magic. The group vanished from the massive, stalactite cavern and reappeared somewhere else entirely.

It was an empty, average-sized room with a wooden floor. There were no chairs or any other furniture; along one wall stood a door and a window with sunlight pouring through.

One moment they were in the cave; the next they were hovering over the floor of their destination.

Everyone stumbled forward a few steps.

When Cloffe nervously approached the window and peeked outside, he was greeted by a sweeping view of the entrance to the dungeon village. However, he knew the area well and had no recollection of this house. He was certain it wasn't here when he and Clofia first arrived.

As he tried to piece the puzzle together, the owner of the house explained, "This place is hidden. No one knows about it."

Cloffe twirled around in surprise and was doubly amazed when a bed, chair, and table materialized out of thin air.

"Where did all this...?"

"Brother, they just pulled everything out of nowhere."

Siren had produced these furnishings, and from her haughty expression, this must have all been part of a maid's repertoire.

Opus carefully laid Cayna on the bed as if she were made of glass. Cloffe saw how tender the demon's face looked in that moment, and he felt a small wave of relief.

"Watch over her for a bit."

“Ranger that!”

Kuu deftly leaned back in midair and gladly accepted Opus's request.

She'd jumbled her words again, but no one bothered to say anything. Opus gave a small sigh as a part of him wondered why Cayna hadn't given Kuu a proper education. Giving up was probably the wisest option at this point.

Cayna was unresponsive despite their loud conversation. Her eyes were closed, but the steady rise and fall of her chest indicated she was alive.

“What in the world happened to Lady Cayna?” asked Cloffe.

“Huh? ‘Lady’?”

Opus stared incredulously at Cloffe, then took out a blanket from his Item Box and placed it over Cayna.

“What’s your connection with her?” he asked.

“We’re pretty much strangers, but Lady Cayna is the aunt of Otaloquess’s queen,” Clofia answered.

“What? ‘Aunt’?”

Cloffe’s plan to slowly glean information out of Opus and observe the demon’s reactions was foiled by his sister’s foolish naïveté. He quietly lamented Clofia’s careless blunder and resolved to lecture her later.

“As usual, she makes the strangest acquaintances... I suppose that’s just her thing,” Opus replied tiredly. Based on his tone, he knew exactly what was going on.

Siren brought over a teapot and offered the siblings a seat since they’d been standing for so long.

“Here you are. Why don’t you two relax and enjoy a spot of tea?”

“Ah, thank you.”

“...Sure.”

Cloffé and Clofia ceded to Siren's soothing nature and sat down. Both reached for a proffered teacup, had a sip, and took a breather.

"So about Cayna's condition," Opus began. "She got what was coming to her. When you use up all your magic like that, there's a price to pay."

"A price to pay'...? Is her life in danger?" Clofia asked.

"Not at all. She'll just be fatigued for a day. The most we can do is let her sleep."

Opus's brusque explanation eased Cloffé's and Clofia's visible worry. Cayna's Ancient God's Blade could slice through anything, but it consumed a steady flow of MP, and she'd already used up a significant amount when she went up against Drekdovai in the Battle Arena—hence why she fainted before getting the chance to chop up Opus. The Mega Stat Boost she cast while fighting the dragoid temporarily heightened her stats, but once the effects wore off, those stats were reduced to less than half for the following twenty-four hours.

Cayna was also suffering from a status ailment that compounded her exhaustion and weakened state.

"This happens to us fairly often. Worrying won't help."

Opus taking the time to explain things to regular people, on the other hand, did *not* happen all that often. Characters often became weakened back in the Game Era, but that had been nothing more than a numerical value. He wasn't actually sure how badly Cayna was affected mentally and physically now that she was experiencing this state as a person and not an avatar.

Opus wasn't sympathetic by nature, but he could read the room—mainly thanks to Siren, who was standing right beside him.

She didn't consider Opus her master. If he said something unduly harsh or upsetting to others, she would dish out corporal punishment in the name of educational guidance. He hadn't designed her that way, but perhaps this was his comeuppance for pulling some rather questionable strings to boost her stats.

Opus heaved a sigh, and Cloffé put a hand to his chest in relief. The queen of Otaloquess became even pushier whenever he reported various occurrences throughout the continent and Cayna happened to be involved. He had to take utmost caution in both

his written and oral missives. The prime minister wanted Cayna to have a private audience with the queen if possible, but bringing her to the castle was easier said than done.

After all, Cayna avoided authority figures whenever she could help it. You didn't need to be well acquainted with her to know that almost everyone in her network was a Felskeilo elite. She even had ties to a wealthy merchant whose influence spanned the continent. Cloffe, meanwhile, struggled to understand exactly *why* she disliked the elite so much.

And then another obstacle had appeared in the form of this Opus fellow. Cloffe could easily tell this demon was going to keep him at arm's length from Cayna. Now his duties weighed on him even more.

"Ooh!"

Kuu, who had been doing figure eights while Cayna slept, let out a jubilant cry. All eyes in the room turned to her and saw Cayna panting heavily as she tried to sit up.

She was clutching her forehead, her discomfort plain as day, when Siren rushed over and began tending to her. She managed to lift herself up with the maid's help, then glanced around the room blearily. Her glassy gaze fell on the apathetic Opus.

"...Opus?"

"Yo."

"...Didn't I kill you...?" A scary thing for her to say in her zombie-like state.

"Obviously not! You passed out beforehand," he retorted, annoyed.

"Lady Cayna, please drink some water."

Siren brought a pitcher to her lips. Cayna's frail appearance as she took small sips made her look like the young girl she actually was. Opus was the only one present who knew her true age. Cloffe and Clofia jumped out of their seats to kneel by her bedside.

"...What's wrong?" Cayna asked.

"I am so terribly sorry for all that has happened..."

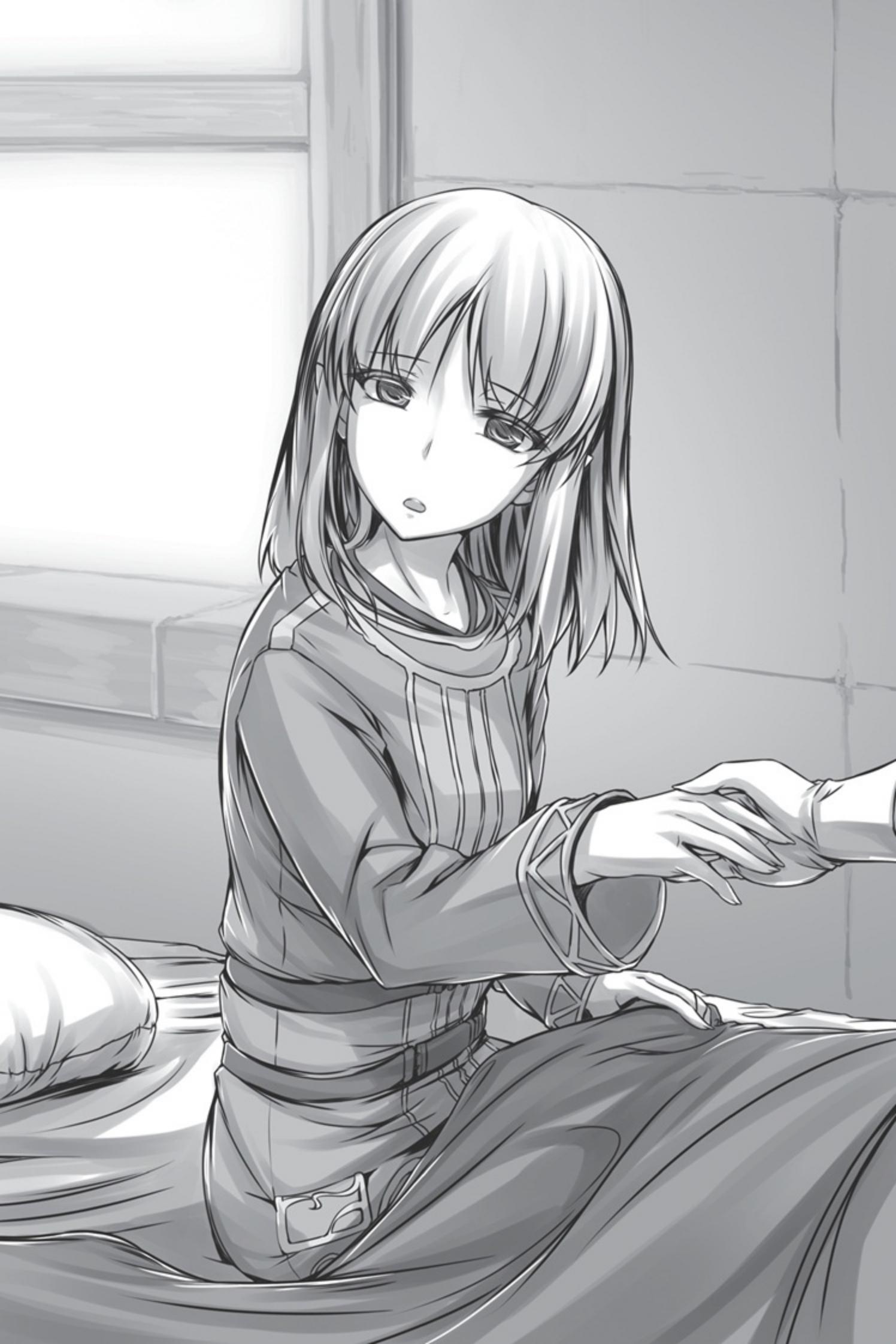
Cayna tilted her head questioningly as Cloffe offered his heartfelt apology. He had essentially invited himself along on this journey, which ended up placing an enormous burden on Cayna. Of course, he only realized this once they were deep inside the dungeon, but he'd had his own reasons for refusing to turn back. Ashamed, Cloffe reflected on his stubbornness and how he had imposed on Cayna's kindness.

Clofia, meanwhile, had only apologized for how disrespectful she'd been to Cayna before discovering that Cayna was the queen's aunt.

"...You already said... sorry... It's really not... a big deal..."

In Cayna's weakened state, everything took a lot out of her; even speaking aloud was difficult.

Seeing Cayna make a frustrated attempt to string together a sentence, Opus attempted to steer the conversation elsewhere. Cayna stopped him with a hand and smiled at Cloffe and Clofia.



"If it wasn't for you two... I would've been left mumbling to myself. So I guess you could say... I'm grateful."

"We were only good for conversation...?" Cloffe asked.

"I'm sorry..."

"Don't look so down," Cayna told them. "Yeah. You guys... made it fun."

If she went into the dungeon on her own, Cayna would have had to deal with Kuu's tantrums all by herself. Having other people around kept the fairy quiet, so she failed to see the siblings' company as a bad thing. She did feel a little sorry for badmouthing Kuu, though.

Kuu and Kee were pretty much her only conversation partners. Kee, on the one hand, usually kept silent unless spoken to, while Kuu was a lost cause in terms of meaningful conversation. Cayna would've had to press onward through the dungeon with nothing but her own grumbling to keep her company. Cloffe and Clofia were a blessing in disguise; Cayna couldn't thank them enough. They awkwardly accepted her gratitude.

"Well then, Lady Cayna. May I submit a report about both this incident and Sir Opus?"

"You mean to Sahalashade, right?"

Cloffe nodded, and Cayna shot Opus a spiteful glare while she pondered how to respond. He brushed this off with a wave of his hand as if it were dust in the wind.

"Mention me if you want. I don't care either way."

"...Are you sure?" Cayna asked.

"We're talking about the queen of Otaloquess, right? You think a foster kid would stand a chance against me? Have a little more faith."

He was apparently aware the queen was someone's Foster Child, though how he acquired such information remained a mystery. Cayna doubted he'd give a straight answer even if she asked.

"...If I thought I could trust you... I would've started a long time ago," she told him.
"Well, there you have it, Cloffe. Go ahead and make your report."

"Yes, understood."

Opus had quashed Cloffe's expectations. He'd assumed someone so powerful would do anything to avoid the attention of influential leaders.

The werecat also couldn't help but wonder if it was really a wise idea to inform the queen about this man. At any rate, Cloffe knew he and his sister couldn't stay in this house forever, so he cast his doubts aside.

"Hmm, I suppose I did give you two a pretty hard time. Consider this my apology."

As Cloffe and Clofia opened the door and stepped outside, Opus's voice stopped them in their tracks. He tossed them a palm-sized bag. Judging by the weight, it must have held several coins. Cloffe gave a brief nod of thanks before departing the hideout with Clofia. Cayna sleepily saw the pair off; Opus's expression remained inscrutable.

When the siblings arrived home, Cloffe remembered the small bag and dumped the contents on the table.

The bag was actually a magic device that could hold several hundred times more than its size suggested, kind of like a mini Item Box.

Over twenty thousand silver coins came pouring out onto the table and buried the floor. Their blinding sparkle nearly made Cloffe and Clofia faint.

Cayna suddenly felt drained, and Siren eased her back into bed.

"Lady Cayna, you must regain your strength. Please rest for now."

Siren was right, but Cayna fought her body's pleas for convalescence and stared dazedly at Opus.

"...Opus. There's something... I want to ask..."

"Just take the day to sleep. I'll answer any questions tomorrow."

Opus placed a hand on Cayna's forehead, and any last vestiges of strength left her. With a bit of help on his part, she drifted out of consciousness. Siren carefully removed

Cayna's equipment for comfort's sake and tended to her gently. The maid's eyes emitted a dangerous gleam when they suddenly met Opus's.

"Master, how long do you intend to stare?"

"Don't mind me. Just focus on her." He waved his hand lightly as if to say *Pretend I'm not even here.*

A flash of golden light grazed his cheek, followed by a *thunk* behind him. Hit with an impending sense of doom, Opus looked back to find a knife halfway stuck in the wall.

"I cannot allow you to watch a young lady change."

"...R-right. I-I'll leave you to it, then."

Siren's mouth was smiling, but her eyes were not. Dejected, Opus left the hideout.

Anyone else would have thought he appeared out of thin air, but no one in the village took much notice. And based on the sturdy barrier Opus erected to keep himself hidden, that was just fine by him.

The hideout was a one-way exit out of the dungeon. Making one's way through the dungeon to return to the house was a drawback, albeit not a major one since both Opus and Siren had an ID Pass that let them avoid the traps and turn the long road back into a relatively short trip. Siren in all her maid glory was well-known thanks to the frequent errands she ran for Opus. Many curious adventurer parties had followed her inside the dungeon only to be met with disaster.

"I might as well take care of some business..."

Despite being coldly cast out of his own home, Opus took this turn of events in stride and headed for one corner of the village.

There stood the only curio shop in town that served as a staple for adventurers. A cheerful, friendly middle-aged man typically stood behind the counter and, contrary to his booming voice, kindly offered his services to passing adventurers.

The man's boisterous calls were now silent. He hid his face behind a sign on the counter and made no attempt to mask his suspicious behavior.

Adventurers and passersby alike glanced at him quizzically, their minds full of questions. Extremely odd behavior for a man who was usually calling out to anyone who would listen.

He peeked out from behind the sign and stared at a fixed point as Opus strode leisurely down the street toward him. The demon was a head taller than anyone except a dragoid, yet he drew no attention. The occasional adventurer or villager would briskly walk past him, pause for a moment with a perplexed look, then hurry along as if they'd forgotten why they stopped in the first place. This was all thanks to Opus's special ability to "remove" himself from people's consciousness. Other than those Opus singled out, it was like he didn't exist.

And currently, he was singling out other players like him.

Opus sauntered over to the shop counter and eyed the aging man trying his hardest to hide behind his sign. Sensing the inevitable, the man emerged from his hiding spot to face the demon customer and broke into a sweat. He valiantly attempted to avoid eye contact, his eyes darting all over the place.

"W-welcome..."

His booming voice was typically audible from the shops across the street, but he was now so timid one had to question whether this newcomer could even hear him.

"Is that any way to treat a customer? You're the owner, right?"

"Yes, well... Everyone has their off days, you see..."

"I'm pretty sure I heard you hollering from the village entrance just a few minutes ago. Sounds like you came down with something at the most inopportune time."

"Health is wealth, as they say... and I *am* trying to be a bit more careful... I assure you the timing is merely coincidental..."

"Hmph. Well, we'll just leave it at that."

Opus's pompous attitude annoyed the shopkeeper to no end, but if the demon was willing to look the other way here, then the man wasn't about to belabor the point. Although still dripping in a cold sweat, he rekindled his resolve.

“So how may I help you?”

“Right. I want to sell this.”

Opus placed a completely average-looking stone on the counter with a brazen smile.

It was no different than any other stone you might find lying on the ground, though some might mistake it as an ore fragment.

“Bwah?!”

And some didn’t consider it a stone at all.

By the time he realized his folly, it was too late; the man’s disguise started falling off with a loud ripping sound. Opus had known who this man really was the entire time, however.

“Gah, dammit!”

“Tripping up at the finish line again, eh, Jaeger?” said Opus.

“Shit! Heimer, you bastard! I knew it was you. When did you notice?!”

“Pretty much right away. I played dumb, but Search can weed out players from average people.”

“Nraaaagh! I forgot!”

The man flailing backward as he gripped his head dramatically was named Jaeger. He was back to using his normal voice, but his ranting and raving had bystanders staring in shock.

“I can’t say I’m enjoying all this attention.”

“It’s always gotta be about you, don’t it? Tch, just hold on a sec!” Jaeger said, jabbing a fat finger at Opus. He retreated into the back of the shop and called, “Hey, honey!”

A few minutes later, the two were in an alley behind the shop.

"Didn't think I'd ever meet ya in the middle of nowhere like this. Life sure knows how to throw a curveball."

"I can't believe you're a married man now."

"A lot's happened. Read between the lines."

"Well, as fascinating as all that sounds, I think I'll stop messing with you for the time being."

"How about forever?!"

One half of the pair was a tall demon in a full-length coat who looked entirely at home in this back alley. Most people would think he was an assassin planning his next hit.

The other individual was a very large, very muscular human male. Some might even mistake him for a gorilla in this dim alley.

"You might be the guildmaster of the great and mighty Silver Watches, but I guess you're no match for the missus."

"Give it a rest! Didn't I just tell ya to keep your nose out of my damn business?"

Anyone privy to Jaeger's delightful conversation with his wife inside the shop earlier would be tempted to tease him, too.

"Sorry, honey—think you can mind the store for a little bit? An old friend of mine just stopped by."

"What? Watching the shop today was part of your punishment. You've got some nerve using that same old story to sneak out again."



"No, I'm serious, he really is an old friend..."

"You say that every time! I know it's just an excuse to hit up the bar!"

"Please, you've gotta believe me this time. I'm not lying, I swear. Just listen to me for a sec!"

There was a *bang* against the wall, followed by a good thirty seconds of silence.

"W-well, I suppose I'll believe you this time..."

"Thanks, honey. I love you."

And that's what had just transpired.

Do neither of them care how loud they are?

The thought of the whole neighborhood hearing them "make up" after every marital squabble was pretty funny.

Opus retracted his earlier comment and grinned darkly.

Jaeger was once the leader of a Red Kingdom guild known as the Silver Watches. The heroic swing of his blade was a visual marvel, and his frequent appearances in promotional footage for the game made him a bit of a celebrity. Perhaps thanks to his heavy fan service, Jaeger even had a fan club. These were mostly male fans who called him "the boss" with unbridled adoration.

The Silver Watches also ranked as one of the game's top three guilds, and their members numbered somewhere between two and three thousand. As the reigning guild in both group-battle Mission Quests and conquest-driven Story Quests, they were always on the front lines during large-scale events and wars. There were likely even two or three Limit Breakers among them.

Jaeger himself was level 800. Once Opus confirmed this, it became clear that, of all the surviving players, he was a top-notch veteran (Cayna excluded). Jaeger and Opus had battled each other countless times during Battle Events, but they were nonetheless good friends who limited such contests to these periods only.

Both also had their asses repeatedly handed to them in solo combat back when they

were first starting out. Opus and Jaeger had a sort of rivalry where they recognized each other's strength but got along well and occasionally teamed up on quests outside of Battle Events.

"So when'd you get here?" Jaeger asked.

"By 'here,' you mean this real-life version of the game? Pretty much since day one."

"Tch. You people and your damn longevity. At your level, you could've gathered up the rest of the players by now."

"True, but as you know, most decent players hate me. Most would ignore me if I reached out."

"...Guess I can't argue that. At least one or two hundred thousand players died by fallin' into your dirty traps. No one's gonna join forces with a cheater like you."

"That was the part where you laugh, not pour salt in the wound."

Despite their mutual ribbing, the pair's relaxed expressions suggested they were thick as thieves.

Their conversation reached a lull, and Jaeger's expression turned serious as he looked at the stone in his hand.

"...Anyway, why'd you try to palm this off on me?"

"To lay some groundwork for what's to come."

"So you're sayin' I'm gonna need it later..."

It looked like a completely average pebble, but this stone was a vital item for random events the Admins frequently initiated. *Leadale* was a game, sure, but it was still difficult for most players to gather at one specific point for an unscheduled event. Therefore, stones were passed out.

Sometimes they were consolation prizes from a capsule machine, or one might be found in a dungeon treasure chest. Some were buried among bandit loot or randomly handed out in the middle of the street. There were plenty of opportunities for players to get their hands on these stones, and enough people stockpiled them that a ranking

system was eventually developed.

In truth, these stones could teleport a player to an event location from anywhere in the game. The process was straightforward: Simply crush the stone in your hand whenever an event popped up. Even if said event or quest was located at the farthest edge of the world map, the stone would take you there directly if you wished to participate.

Unfortunately, these stones only worked for Admin-sponsored events. Sometimes participation was limited as well, so it was first come, first served. Players also repeatedly took to the forums demanding that the stone's function look more obvious, and many were undoubtedly displeased when the Admins stubbornly refused to budge on this point.

Jaeger had a good idea of what lay ahead if he was being offered one of these stones. Whimsy and empty theatrics didn't make him the master of a powerful guild. This was also why he was one of the few people who knew what sort of responsibilities Heimer—that is, Opus—had within the game.

“Are you sayin’ there’s gonna be an event where I need this?”

“There aren’t many players left in the world, but I figured I’ll help whoever I can.”

“You sound pretty confident.”

“I’m just saying we have time before the dam breaks.”

Jaeger scratched his head in defeat and let out a heavy sigh.

“Got it. If you’re okay with this old geezer, I’ll come help when you need it.”

“I’m counting on you.”

The two high-fived with a loud *thwack* as they passed each other and exited the alley in opposite directions. Opus glanced behind him, his devious smile sending Jaeger down memory lane.

“Geez, how much can an old man like me really help long-lived races like him? I’m feelin’ pretty nostalgic now, though. Maybe I should get in touch with those guys...”

Jaeger recalled the friends he had reunited with since coming to this new world. Although he'd aged a bit as a human, his smile said it was nice to feel needed by an old pal.

Murmuring to himself as he reached for the back door of the shop, Jaeger returned to his day-to-day routine.

Cayna was still asleep when Opus returned to the hideout. Siren, however, was snorting triumphantly as she fist pumped the air. A vague sense of doom washed over Opus when he saw her jubilant expression, and he put a hand to his face with a sigh.

He couldn't remember a single time where he had been able to stop Siren once she got like this. Commanding his maid would, of course, be a cinch if he decided to pull rank as her creator. However, Opus thought it was more interesting to allow Siren to do as she pleased than force obedience.

"What's going on?"

"Lady Cayna told me she is in possession of a wagon, so I've started preparing for our travels ahead."

The word *wagon* dredged up unpleasant memories for Opus. This was only natural since he had already witnessed Cayna's creations back in the game.

Regardless, he had one more thing to confirm with Siren.

"Did you wake her up?"

"Goodness no! She momentarily stirred a short while ago, so I spoke with her and inquired about the wagon then."

Siren didn't so much as flinch under Opus's sharp glare. She wasn't frightened by her master in the least, so any attempt at intimidation was useless. Her cheery voice gave the demon a headache, and he sighed with another palm to the forehead.

"I mentioned this before, but she and I can get from one side of the continent to the other in less than half a day. Packing for a trip is completely pointless."

"And I am saying that is why you lack communication, Master!"

"O-oh?"

Siren swooped down on Opus and pointed a finger right at his nose. He felt an indescribable force within that gesture and fumbled over his words.

"You and Lady Cayna have been apart for such a long time, so you ought to chat with her more. There is no question the wall between you is both close at hand yet far off in the distance. I believe this upcoming journey is an excellent opportunity, so please have a niiiiiice long conversation in the wagon!"

Opus stared at Siren blankly as she shot down his argument. He never thought in a million years that he would get lectured over something like this. Honestly, he couldn't remember the last time anyone argued with him, period. The corners of his mouth curled upward of their own accord, and the next thing Opus knew, he was cackling,

"Hmm? What's this? Did I say something funny just now?"

Siren was neither surprised nor confused; she smiled brightly as she brushed aside her master's mirth. Whether as "Opus" or as himself, he'd never laughed so much.

"Keh-keh-keh-keh-keh. Very well, then. Make sure everything is ready for the journey ahead."

"Yes, sir!" Siren enthusiastically replied as she bowed with a hand to her chest. The elated maid then left the hideout. Since she'd gone shopping in town countless times before, her maid outfit was unlikely to raise any eyebrows.

The villagers seemed to think she was the servant of a noble secretly playing adventurer. Siren had also previously sent multiple pickpockets flying with ease, so few in town believed her to be an average maid. At the same time, however, they would probably have a hard time conceiving that she was several times stronger than any grizzled adventurer.

Since Cayna was still fast asleep, Kuu floated around aimlessly.

"I guess even you get anxious..."

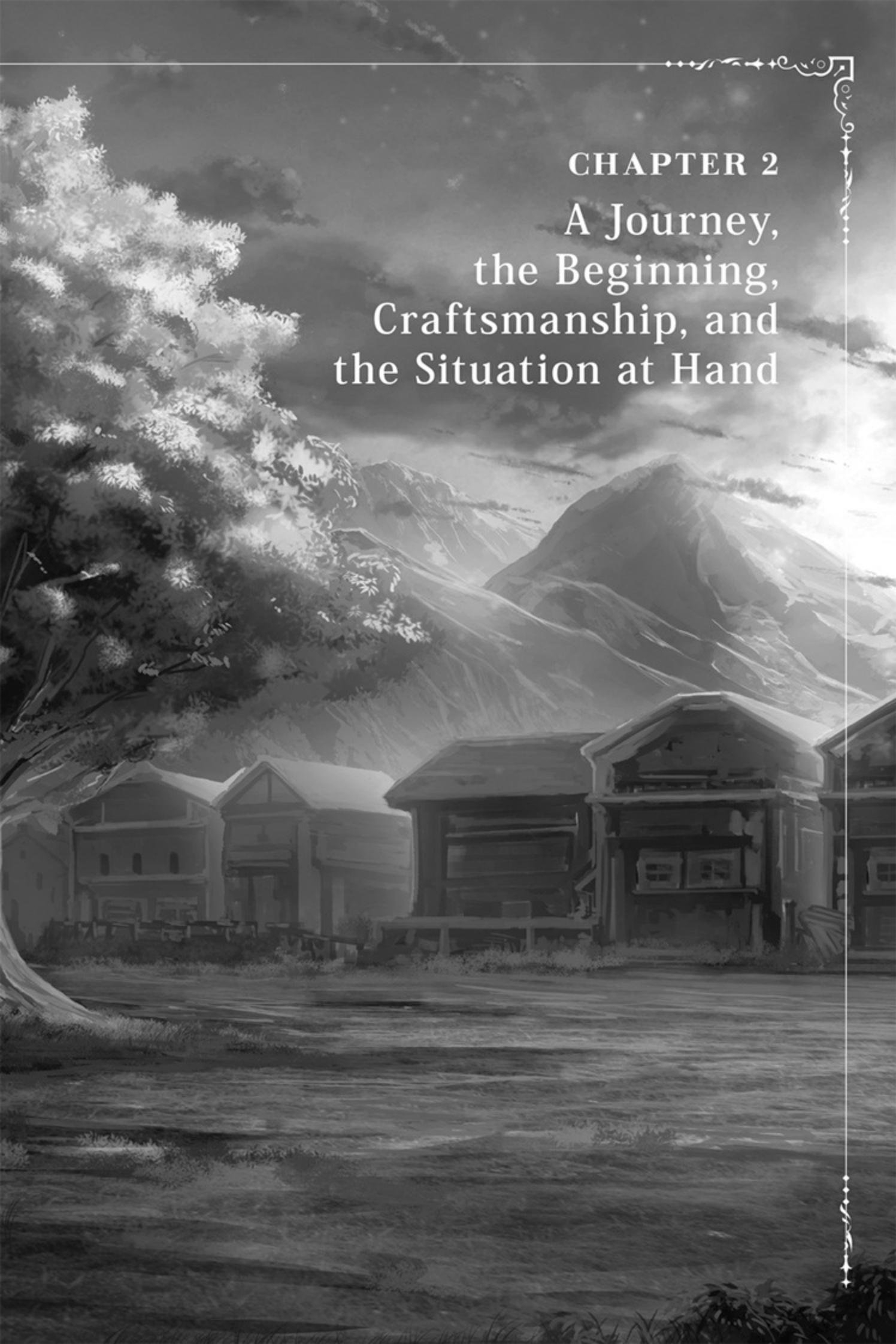
"...She's gonna wake up," Kuu mumbled feebly. She stared daggers at Opus before

burying herself in Cayna's chest.

He could tell she was still glaring at him even in her new spot. Snorting amusedly, Opus sat in a chair and closed his eyes. It seemed the day wasn't over yet.

"Well, then. This should be fun to explain."

So he waited for Siren to return and Cayna to wake, pondering how best to spend the time before sinking into the ocean of his own thoughts.



CHAPTER 2

A Journey,
the Beginning,
Craftsmanship, and
the Situation at Hand

“Nnghhh.”

Cayna blissfully stretched from head to toe, then nodded with a vivacious smile.

“All right, I’m back in business!”

“You did this to yourself, you know.”

“Geh?!”

Cayna’s announcement of her full recovery was like a sunbeam bursting through the clouds, only for a certain demon’s biting quip to hit her like a bucket of cold water. Cayna turned her head with the audible *creeeak* of a broken door and found Opus sitting in a plain chair and scrutinizing her with his arms crossed. Siren expertly tended to the frozen Cayna without offering the slightest indication she knew the girl was as stiff as a board. Kuu, dozing on Cayna’s left shoulder, gave a big yawn.

“So you were finally able to test out those Demerit Skills. Good for you.”

“Heh! Sorry to disappoint, but I already tested ‘em out a long time ago!”

“Is that right? You’re a wreck but still have confidence in spades. How about some compensation for almost killing me?”

“*You’re* the one who pissed me off in the first place!”

Cayna had actually used several Demerit Skills back when she stayed in Felskeilo. However, those effects only lasted between one to three hours and didn’t even come close to Mega Stat Boost’s potency.

Although Cayna had used the spell in the previous battle, she didn’t once expect to deal with flu-like symptoms, muscle aches, and lethargy. Just talking wore her out, and she had difficulty moving around. She couldn’t do much more than sleep, and that frustrated her. It was like she was stuck in a hospital bed again, which felt worse than anything else.

Even after Cayna stopped yelling at him, Opus still stared at her in confusion. She clenched her fists and began plotting her revenge.

“...You should accept the blame here, Master.”

“Huh?”

Siren helped Cayna get dressed, then turned her heartbroken gaze to Opus. This was all his fault—at least, that’s what anyone would assume based on her and Cayna’s expressions. Cayna’s glare was rightfully furious, while the maid’s eyes swam with sorrow.

Once the somewhat clueless Kuu joined in with her sleepy yet piercing stare, Opus was forced to reluctantly concede.

“Okay, okay. I was wrong for messing with you when you first showed up. I’m sorry,” he obliged. “Satisfied?”

“Goodness, Master. You remembered to apologize. How splendid.”

It was hard to tell whether Opus’s long-awaited apology was a result of Siren’s pleas or mere obligation, so the point was a bit moot. His distant gaze left even Cayna dumbfounded.

They all sat in hellish silence for a while, but things at last picked up again when Siren had Opus get to his feet and prepare for the day ahead.

“Come, Lady Cayna. Let’s leave this nasty establishment behind. I seem to recall you mentioned that you are in possession of a wagon.”

“Huh? Yeah, I have one. Wait... Did I tell you about that, Siren?”

In her muddled consciousness, Cayna had evidently forgotten their conversation, so Siren pleasantly recounted the previous day.

“That’s right. You said you had a wagon, so there’s no need to travel by foot.”

“Oh, right. Did we really talk about that...?”

Cayna looked dubious, then stared at Siren when she saw her grinning.

“You’re enjoying yourself, aren’t you, Siren?”

“Oh yes! I possess the Driver skill but have never used it before. Master Opus can travel to and fro with ease, so I’ve been positively itching to give this a try!”

The maid's sincere answer put a smile on Cayna's face but made her twitch at the same time. After all, her wagon required no driver. It seemed that Siren's elation would be short-lived, and Cayna wasn't sure how to reply.

"Fine by me, but we can't use a wagon in this area either way. We'll need to reach a trade route first," Opus replied.

"Indeed. The sun is setting as we dally here. Let us be off while it is still daylight."

The dungeon village was a considerable distance from the outer trade routes. Unlike merchant roads, the paths were narrow and made wagons a nuisance for other travelers. The group would therefore have to walk about an hour outside of town before they could reach an outer route and use the wagon. And though she *did* have a wagon, Cayna felt guilty that she was about to rain on Siren's parade.

There was a minor incident by the village gate as they went to leave since the guard didn't recognize Opus and had to verify his identity. Nevertheless, the four were soon on their way. None of the locals would ever believe the master of the nearby dungeon was among their ranks.

"How the heck do you usually get in and out?"

"Hrm. I usually teleport under the cover of darkness."

"Don't 'hrm' me. At least get to know the gatekeepers. It's no wonder they think you're shady," said Cayna.

"Babble all you want, but wouldn't it be even more suspect if I wandered around town without ever using the dungeon entrance?"

"Your very existence is suspect, Master."

Siren was facing forward, but her blunt quip struck Opus like an arrow to the chest. It was no Oscar—Roses Scatter with Beauty, but the shock was enough to sway his footsteps.

".....Hey, Opus. What did you do to Siren?" Cayna asked quietly.

".....Hell if I know! She's been like that since I came to this world," Opus replied, bewildered.

Something felt off to Cayna, but unfortunately, Opus didn't seem to know any more than she did. Back in the Game Era, Siren had been a meek woman who revered her master and always followed a half step behind him, so seeing her pelt Opus with a barrage of insults came as a huge shock to Cayna. She trembled in fear of a potential Roxine 2.0.

"Goodness, what do we have here?"

Once they reached the main road, Cayna took out the covered wagon from her Item Box. Siren's eyes opened wide in shock.

The horse head jutting out from the middle of the driver's seat gave it an eccentric flair. Kuu, meanwhile, was thrilled. She beamed as she situated herself on the horse's neck. No one else had been able to see her the last time she rode in the wagon.

But unlike the previous trip, the conversations would be a bit more involved.

"Haaaaaaaaah."

With the biggest sigh yet, Opus abruptly took out a paper fan and struck Cayna over the head.

"Owwww?!"

A *smack!* echoed in the blue sky, and Cayna held her head as she angrily whipped around to face her attacker.

"What was that for?!"

"I'm simply blown away by your idiocy. You *still* haven't figured out the problem even after that stupid noble finally gave up."

"Huuuh? I don't know what you're talking about. I just wanted to make our trip comfier..."

"Which is precisely why you were singled out! I thought you'd be smart enough to know what's dangerous to use in this world once you saw it with your own eyes. Was I too optimistic?"

Not quite sure what Opus was so upset about, Cayna looked back at the horse-head wagon. Turning the wagon into a golem appeared to be the least of his concerns.

"Well, I'll at least still be able to sit up front."

Obsessed with her Driver skill, Siren looked to the right and left of the horse's head. It was set in the very center, and there was enough space for one person to sit on either side.

"I suppose you leave me no choice."

Opus raised his hand and cast Create Rock Golem. The ground in front of the wagon undulated as two horses came flying out. These were, of course, horse-shaped golems. Both came fully harnessed with a yoke that could attach to the wagon. Once the wagon and yoke fused, the structure would look entirely average. If they put a cloth over the horse head sticking out from the driver's seat, no one would suspect a thing.

"Nobles target you because you don't even bother adding a horse. Deviating from the norm makes you stand out and invites unnecessary problems. Remember that."

"Yeah, yeah, I got it. 'Use your head,' right? Forgive me for being such a dunce."

Clearly missing the point, Cayna started sulking and fuming.

It wasn't the first time Opus had criticized her over something like this. For Cayna, it was the same old story. She argued with him every time, but the idea that someone with so little life experience could ever win over Opus with a sound argument was laughable. Well aware she didn't stand a chance in a debate, Cayna retaliated by pouting and giving him the silent treatment.

It usually didn't take long for her to reflect on her actions and feel a wave of regret. Opus would anticipate as much and say *Well? You should have listened to me, right?* the following day. This would send Cayna into another sulking fit—and thus their little dance would continue.

"Well, then. I shall take care of the wagon, so please chat to your hearts' content."

The golem wagon and golem horses were pretty much autonomous, but Siren seemed plenty content to hop in the driver's seat. Since her maid outfit was extremely conspicuous, she switched to a full-length brown robe that Opus gave her—a strictly

defensive measure since female drivers were often the targets of unsavory types.

Incidentally, Cayna *did* offer other outfits but threw in the towel when a very serious-looking Siren replied, “Why would a maid wear anything besides her uniform?”

“Fancy.”

“I left the interior design up to Cie. Those are probably Lu’s practice cushions.”

The inside of the wagon had been updated since Cayna’s trip with Luka and the others. The cushions and plush toys Lytt made during sewing practice were strewn all over the place, and a pastel cloth over the table disguised its crude build. The floor was accented with a checkered white and pale blue carpet, and several bins fitted with drawers were placed along the wall.

Roxine had obviously redecorated while Cayna was out running errands for her once they got back from Felskeilo. Everything was a shade of blue—Luka’s favorite color.

Opus casually plopped down on a large cushion and sat cross-legged. Cayna gathered several more cushions and made herself comfortable.

“Well, then. Ready to get started?” Opus asked.

“Right.”

Even though he was the one to broach the subject, Opus crossed his arms pensively as if he wasn’t sure where to start.

“I suppose I’ll start by answering any questions you have. Fire away.”

“Questions...”

Cayna had assumed he would do all the talking, so she wasn’t sure how to react to Opus’s receptiveness. She didn’t even know where to start.

“Um... Ermm.”

“...Go on, ask me anything.”

“So I was thinking, Opus—condescending much??”

“What’re you talking about? I’m no different than usual. It’s only bothering you now?”

“It’s been ages since we last saw each other. Anyone would feel the same.”

“Really?”

“For me at least, yeah.”

“I wouldn’t expect to hear that from someone who tried to kill me out of nowhere. Your body language suggested otherwise.”

“H-hey! Th-that was *your* fault! Y-your attitude sucks! You have *no* idea how to treat a guest!”

“I don’t understand why you’re so upset. Ebelope was far worse.”

“Tr-true, but... these are two completely separate issues!”

“...Hmph.” Failing to see her point, Opus frowned.

Ebelope, aka Sin City, had been a member of the Cream Cheese guild. Something of a big-sister figure to Cayna, she taught the naive girl various facts about health and biology, although at times, her vivid tales of her real-world exploits were more than Cayna could handle.

Cayna bristled angrily for a moment but took a deep breath before asking her first question.

“Hey, listen. I remember logging out in the remote village, but the next thing I knew, I woke up at the inn. So why don’t I remember spending the night there?”

“The answer is simple,” Opus replied. His answer came faster than she expected. “I transformed into you, booked a room, and left you there while you were unconscious.”

“Huh?... Whaaaat?!“

This swift reveal caused Cayna’s brain to short-circuit.

If Opus's claim was true, then she had a *lot* more questions—ones that involved Kee's urgent items on day one and what her body was doing in this world before she even woke up.

Speaking of which, Kee hadn't uttered a word since her battle with Drekdovai. Cayna's mind felt so quiet that she couldn't help but wonder if Opus had been the one behind Kee's existence. Now that they had reunited, she called out to Kee in a panic, fearing he was gone forever.

A feeble voice echoed in her mind.

"Forgive me, Cayna."

"...Oh, Kee. Thank goodness!"

In a typical situation, the two would embrace and rejoice over his return. Unfortunately, one side of the equation was a disembodied being incapable of hugs, so Cayna had to settle for greeting empty space with a cry of relief.

"I reported false information..."

"Don't worry about it. I'm just happy you're still here, Kee."

"I do not deserve such compassion."

"Look, Opus was the one who tricked you. I bet his silver tongue forced you to comply."

"Hey, you're making me sound like some kind of master con artist. Don't drag my name through the mud."

"That is correct. As you have surmised, Cayna, he kidnapped you. Sob, sob."

"Oh, now you're acting like the victim here?! You consented to it! It's too late to backtrack!"

"I do not have the slightest clue what you mean."

"How dare you play dumb with me!"

Kee and Opus entered a war of words, and Cayna finally noticed something odd.

How could Opus hear Kee when Cayna was usually the only one? Furthermore, they spoke to each other like old friends. It was like listening to a conversation between a faithful old butler and his capricious, free-spirited master. In her mind, this mental picture fit them to a T.

“Do you guys know each other?”

“.....”

“.....”

As soon as the words left Cayna’s mouth, the duo’s boisterous blame game ceased.

Kee lacked any facial expressions to read, but he seemed equally as uncomfortable as Opus. Cayna sensed she just witnessed something she really wasn’t supposed to.

“Ah, well, you know. The two of us had a lot of disagreements while I took care of you...”

“Indeed. I sternly advised him to be more gentle with you...”

Even their methods of deflection felt similar. However, something even more unsettling in their conversation made Cayna tilt her head dubiously.

“Opus took care of me...?”

“Pretty much. Your body first came to this world two hundred years ago, so I watched over you. Remember that bed you split clean in half? That’s where you slept.”

“Huh? WHAAAAAT?! ”

Cayna had no success mentally reconstructing the dungeon rubble she’d created. She could only remember where Opus had been lazily munching snacks; nothing about that qualified as a “bed” in her eyes. More shocking was the revelation that, instead of waking up two hundred years in the future, she’d spent two hundred years sleeping in *this* world.

“I don’t remember a thing... Wait. You didn’t seal my memories away, did you?”

“Relax. You were just passed out for two centuries, like Rip Van Winkle. No one remembers anything that happens while they’re asleep; that would be terrifying.”

Cayna didn't feel like much time had passed between dozing off midgame session in her hospital room and waking up in the inn.

"Why is this happening?!"

Meanwhile, Siren hummed at the reins and looked at the cloudless sky.

"Ahhh, what a peaceful day," she murmured to herself.

There was a *wham!* inside the wagon behind her. However, this, too, was "peace." Siren feigned ignorance as if it were nothing more than a gentle breeze across the meadow. Her master had made his bed and now had to lie in it, thus Siren had no intention of lifting a single finger to help. One might ask what kind of maid would do that, but this was precisely the amount of emotional distance Opus requested from Siren.

Cayna whipped out a wooden hammer marked FOR DISCIPLINARY USE and swung it at Opus. Fortunately, he dodged quickly enough to avoid becoming part of the wallpaper.

"Sheesh, have you no restraint? I've told you to quit wielding dangerous objects as a retort!"

A high elf didn't stand a chance against a demon physically. Opus snatched away the giant mallet and put it in his own Item Box.

"Ah, Bam-Bam...!"

"How many times have I told you not to run your mouth and your weapons at the same time? Are you setting poor examples like this in front of your kids?"

"You mean Lu? I doubt it... Besides, you're the only one I treat this way, Opus."

Cayna grinned from ear to ear; Opus could only swallow his words in exasperation. She was going to save all her complaints for a rainy day.

"Great. Glad to know it's more distinction than discrimination."

Considering Cayna's powers of retention, she'd likely forget what she'd been grumbling about in the first place.

"I don't even know how you wound up watching over me. Why'd you do that?"

"You want to know, huh? We may be here a while..."

"Shouldn't you have mentioned that in the first place?"

"He gets easily sidetracked."

"And whose fault was that, exactly?"

Opus almost started things up again with Kee, but the words died in his throat when he remembered Cayna was there. He steadied himself with a deep sigh, then spoke slowly.

"Incidentally, Cayna—say you wanted something so badly but had no hope of acquiring it in your present situation. Who would you turn to?"

"Now you're the one asking questions? I was waiting for an answer."

"Please, don't rush me. There are a few things you should know first."

"Hmm, turn to... Turn to... Who would I turn to...?"

Cayna placed a hand to her mouth. Then, after a moment of thought...

"God?" she replied hesitantly.

"You don't sound very confident."

"Yeah, I guess. Are you surprised, though?"

She would either wish for her body or her parents. After all, Cayna had endlessly pleaded for both right after the accident:

"Please give my father back."

"Please give my mother back."

In the end, she had concluded there was no God. Of course those wishes would never come true; she had no choice but to live on in despair.

“Well, unlike you, a certain someone tried to sell his soul to a demon.”

“...Who?”

Cayna appeared puzzled as Opus alluded to this person in a profoundly familiar manner.

“He seemed very worried about you. If I’d been a second too late, your fine uncle would have been corrupted by the likes of some shady, vengeful spirit.”

“My uncle?!”

“I managed to step in and stop him from getting too involved in uncanny affairs.”

“Glad to hear it! But wait—you’re saying demons exist back in our old world, too?!”

“Not many people can see them, but yes, they do exist. But no established summoning method was ever passed down, so any demons you attempt to summon will be a sham.”

“...Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

This overwhelming revelation left Cayna at a loss for words. Yes, the existence of demons was partly to blame, but if anything, she was shocked her uncle would resort to such methods. Cayna remembered how he’d always say *“You need anything? I’ll make your dad proud and spoil you rotten,”* like it was some kind of personal motto. Cayna’s other visitor, her cousin Ako, would then sarcastically reply, *“You never spoiled me like that, Dad.”*

“Ah, well, your mother and I have different ideas of child-rearing. Know what I mean?”

“In other words, you caved.”

“No, no, no! That’s probably not true! I’m sure I bought you stuffed animals.”

“You mean, like, before I was five?”

“Um, uh... Yeah, I guess so. Ha-ha-ha...”

He was a pretty cool guy when allowed to make decisions, but unfortunately for her uncle, the women ran the roost. Watching him capitulate to his daughter was a little sad.

Regardless, Keina knew Ako treasured the plush mascot she got at a certain amusement park as a child and remembered how incredibly embarrassed her cousin got when Keina tried to tell her uncle about it.

"Um, Uncle Keisuke. Actually, Ako..."

"Wh-wh-wh-whoa?! H-h-hold on, Keina! That's a secret! Don't say another word! Got it?"

"Huh?... O-okay."

At the time, Ako was terrified of looking like a child. The conversation felt like only yesterday, and Cayna felt a wave of nostalgia. She wished she'd known how concerned her uncle was, but Cayna was like a ghost or empty husk before the game came along. She'd given up on everything as Keina, and her mind was a constant swirl of hopelessness as she wondered what good she was if she couldn't even move. She'd been in no state to hear anything to the contrary.

"That was when I proposed a VRMMORPG that could save the heart even if the body was immobile."

".....What?"

"I didn't plan to profit off it initially. It was just a personal venture. I was told to save enough money to cover development costs if I wanted financial support, so I ended up starting a video game company..."

"Huh?... Come again?"

"After that, I needed employees, and the servers had to be built from scratch. As soon as I outlined my specific goals, our team fell straight into pandemonium. It was a rough time. Some fools even wondered who ought to be running the show."

"Wha—? Wait, hold up..."

"Granted, I was only involved in the early stages. I left the development process to my

staff later, but it's still a mystery to me how they came up with such an outlandish aesthetic."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, just wait a second!"

"What?"

"I thought the whole thing about you being an Admin was just a joke, but you're serious?!"

"Haven't I been saying that for a while?"

It was a startling confession. There had always been rumors during the Game Era that Opus was an Admin, but Cayna figured it was all talk and never paid much attention. No one would have ever guessed that Opus himself would confirm such rumors.

"By 'save the heart,' you mean..."

"Precisely. The VRMMO *Leadale* was originally created to save Keina Kagami. Launching it nationwide was just a consequence of that."

"Whaaaaat?!"

The series of bombshells was too much; Cayna's shoulders sank with exhaustion.

Her shock snowballed with each passing moment, and she had a feeling the pace wouldn't let up anytime soon.

In any case, there was no going back after everything she'd already heard.

"You had a great time, right? You used to blubber about how happy being able to move around made you."

"...Oh yeah, I was really fixated on that..."

Cayna was actually a little embarrassed by the memory. She'd completely forgotten up until that point.

When she first joined the game, Cayna had been eager to share her excitement with whoever would listen. This, of course, was rooted in her freedom of movement and

ability to go wherever her legs would carry her. That was why Cayna couldn't help but pour her heart out to Opus the moment they met.

Smiling brightly, she would immediately share her story with random players whether they asked or not. The first two ran off, but the third, Opus, was the only one who calmly and quietly listened to the very end. In fact, when she was finally finished, he gave her a compassionate pat on the shoulder and said, "*That's great.*"

It was fair to say everything thus far was rooted in that very moment. But what if their first meeting had been no coincidence?

"Did you run into me on purpose back then?"

"Well, I can understand why you'd be suspicious after everything I've told you. However, I don't recall planning our first encounter—is what I'd like to say, but I take it that would be too far-fetched for you to believe," he replied loftily. Opus didn't try to explain himself or even admit it. That unapologetic, confident bravado made Cayna laugh.

"Heh-heh-heh."

Regardless of how they'd met, she couldn't end their friendship now and had no intentions to do so.

"Something amusing?"

"Oh, nothing. Don't worry about it. You just look funny when you're all serious."

"Hmph. Nonsense," Opus muttered.

His satisfied nod was evidence he was patting himself on the back. It was one of his few behavioral tics Cayna noticed.

"Okay, so you made *Leadale* specifically for me. That aside, why did you leave me in the inn?"

"Because you lacked self-awareness."

"I lacked *what*?"

"Since the very beginning, whether it be with me or anyone else, you would simply say 'Yeah, sure!' and go along with everything."

"...R-right, point taken. So...?"

Cayna wasn't quite sure what he was getting at but agreed anyway. Opus saw right through this and crossed his arms with a furrowed brow.

"That's why I wanted to let you stumble around unfamiliar situations on your own for a while. It was invaluable experience, correct?"

"Yeah. It was..." Cayna mumbled to herself as she recalled how lonely she felt upon waking up, how she befriended the villagers with the help of Marelle and Lytt and made her own decision to head to the royal capital.

She'd even had a series of fortuitous encounters with her kids and grandkids. The next thing she knew, Cayna was so busy making friends with former players and raising her adopted daughter that her loneliness had long since faded away.

"Thank you, Opus."

"What are you thanking me for all of a sudden? It's creepy."

"I'm being sincere here. Don't be so harsh!"

"I see no meaning in senseless acknowledgment."

"I'm saying I'm grateful. I never knew being left on my own to observe and explore would be this much fun. So thanks."

Then, for the first time, Opus appeared flustered. He placed a hand on Cayna's forehead and murmured, "No fever."

Bewildered, Cayna's face flushed crimson almost instantly.

A resounding *thwack!* followed by a subsequent rumble echoed behind Siren, who sighed as she kept her eyes on the road. Opus had undoubtedly said something insensitive again.

"Honestly, he is so utterly twisted, that master of mine."

Twisted like barbed wire, to be more accurate. The image of Opus mercilessly sending all who approached him straight to hell with his artless, biting words fit him to a T. Siren giggled at her own colorful description.

Inside the respite of the wagon was Opus lying flat on his back, a thorny mace sticking out of the lump on top of his head.

This was an excellent example of just how much damage a demon Limit Breaker could take. Kuu smiled and twirled around his head like a halo of birds while the culprit Cayna sipped her tea with quiet poise. The prickly aura around her indicated how enraged she actually was.

Opus recovered within a few seconds and calmly sat up as if nothing had happened. It was like watching a zombie in an FPS game. Even as a blood effect spurted from his head, Opus yanked out the thorny mace and tossed it back to Cayna. He was, of course, completely unharmed.

Cayna put the weapon back in her Item Box with a single motion and passively set a cup of tea in front of him. For a short while, the two drank in silence.

"...So why did I stay with you for so long?"

She wanted to know why it took her two hundred years to wake up. After all, two centuries was a bit extreme to be considered oversleeping. Cayna previously had several physical impediments caused by her accident but didn't recall ever being *this* lazy. She was well aware, however, that gaming had consumed her waking hours.

"I'll get straight to the point: It took a long time to get you synchronized."

"...'Synchronized'? Like the sport?"

"I'm not talking about swimming."

"So you were making music..."

"No, that's a *synthesizer*. I said 'synchronize.' It means to make two things into one."

"Oh... So I'm a chimera now?"

“There were no monsters or animals involved. I just installed something.”

“Installed?! You mean like a program?! Why?! What did you do to me?!”

“Glad to see you’re quick on the uptake, but there’s no need to get upset,” Opus replied flatly as he sipped his tea with a thousand-yard stare.

“What did you install and where?! Humans don’t even *have* hard drives!”

“They do, actually. In the form of an organ that normally operates at only ten percent.”

“Ten percent... The brain?! You used my brain like a hard drive?!”

“Wait, just calm down! Don’t whip out your Ancient God’s Blade in here!! I only *mentioned* the brain. I never said I put anything in it!” Opus could feel Cayna’s magic levels rising as she soundlessly stared at him with a glazed look in her eyes. He hurriedly waved both arms.

He hoped to clear up any misunderstandings, but Kuu, who had been silent thus far, had a truly terrifying gleam in her eye. She was Team Cayna all the way.

Opus collapsed in exhausted shock when Cayna’s demeanor instantly shifted.

“Eh, I wasn’t gonna use that sword anyway,” she said, admitting to her bluff. “I never got the sense something was installed in me, though... What did you add and where?”

Cayna tilted her head and patted herself all over. On her shoulder, Kuu tilted hers as well.

“First, let me ask a question. What do you think happened to the game system when this world became reality?”

“The game system? Um, it broke free and started floating around somewhere, right?”

“It’s not a castle in the sky. No country would keep quiet if something like that was hovering in the air.”

Even if an airborne fortress did pass by periodically, the earthbound people were unlikely to appreciate it. The three nations would probably conspire to capture it. One of the Guardian Towers was a floating garden that belonged to Hidden Ogre, but it was

so well camouflaged no one would know the tower was there even if they looked straight at it. In other words, a floating tower couldn't be realistic without the proper cover-up.

"Okay, if the sky won't work, what about underground?"

"That's just a standard dungeon."

"Huh? But isn't it hidden?"

"What do you think would happen if the system was left where people could easily find it? Everything would be over if someone looted it."

Opus looked more exasperated with each question.

This was one of *those* times. Cayna recalled how Opus taught her to find answers within a conversation; she felt a chill as his cold, silent eyes bored into her. As she replayed their discussion, his final question made her gasp.

"Are you saying you installed the game system... in *me*?"

"Correct."

Opus applauded and grinned with satisfaction. Following his lead, Kuu cried "Wow!" and clapped excitedly as well. She clearly had no idea what was going on, but Cayna didn't have the energy to complain.

"Aren't there side effects when you install something like that? Um, am I going to turn into a machine if I leave it in? Will I only be able to talk in beeps and boops?"

"Relax! You sound like a retro sci-fi novel."

"Ouch!"

Opus bonked Cayna on the head, forcibly snapping her out of her downward spiral of despair.

"Now that you're an actual high elf, your soul has infinite space. That's where I ported the game system."

"How the heck could you install the game system in my soul?! It's a soul! A *soul!* You can't see it or touch it! There's no outlet, either!"

Correction: She lost her cool after all.

"As a high elf, you're functionally immortal. And high elves spend a lot of time alone. That's why other races can't endure long periods of solitude or replicate the strength of your soul. It's a perfect match."

"At least get my permission first!"

Cayna's aggrieved protests were no match for Opus's smugness. He was positively glowing with accomplishment. She reluctantly retracted her trembling fist and vowed to get her revenge one day.

The game system within Cayna's soul seemed to govern this world dotted with other players. Cohral's comment about how things improved right after Cayna appeared further supported this theory. The incessant bugs and delayed skill effects up until that point must have been a result of the system still synchronizing with Cayna's soul.

But since Cohral was the only one who had mentioned anything odd, Cayna wouldn't know if other players had similar issues unless she asked them. However, she had zero intentions of telling anyone she was synced up with the game system.

Yes, better to keep this a secret. Being glorified didn't sound like much fun at all.

"Still, souls are pretty unstable. How did you install the system anyway?"

"Hmm? Oh, don't worry about that. I'm a master of transference."

"...Um, okay."

Demonstrating utmost confidence, Opus said no more. Cayna found herself nodding along simply because she had no reason to believe he was lying.

"Oh, right. Also, Kuu runs the subsystem. The game system is more efficient when you're together."

".....(Rage)"

Why did this man keep adding fuel to the fire? She couldn't decide whether to scream or cry. Cayna suppressed several emotions, including her urge to punch him right there.

At that moment, she finally understood why Opus forced her to name Kuu and ensured the pair stayed together. The subsystem fairy herself seemed to have no awareness she was the subsystem and darted around innocently. Cayna figured she wouldn't be too worried either if she approached life with such a carefree attitude, but there were a number of reasons why she couldn't throw in the towel yet.

"Anything else you're dying to ask?"

"Ah... I flipped out for a second and forgot my question. Can I get back to you on that?"

"Hmph. Well, I'll be around from now on, and you're bound to have a few questions. If you wish to know something, ask me anytime."

Opus grinned fiendishly and gave a thumbs-up. Cayna listlessly collapsed to the cushion-strewn floor, exasperated that he'd picked that exact moment to use that gesture.

"I'm wiiiped."

"Wiped!" Kuu mimicked energetically, pressing her cheek against Cayna's. The fairy's face was squishy; Cayna felt her mental fatigue slowly subside.

"I don't even know what to tackle first," she grumbled mindlessly.

"Wouldn't be the first time you jumped right in without thinking," Opus shot back.

Back in their gaming days, she often complained to him about quests and players whenever they worked together. Opus would dutifully respond to each one, and Cayna could now feel his presence fill the void in her heart.

I see. Is this what they mean by 'You don't know what you've got until it's gone'?

"I doubt you will grow accustomed to his ego."

Oh, hush. Still, maybe I finally feel like myself again?

"I suggest you do not let him get carried away."

"Trust me, I won't," came a reply from overhead.

Cayna remembered Opus could hear Kee. Still lying on the floor, she stared up at him. He didn't seem any less glum.

"What do you get out of this, Opus?" she asked with sudden curiosity.

In other words, was this really all just for her? She didn't think Opus would have much to gain from helping an online acquaintance. Not to mention that she had no memory of meeting Opus in the real world before the game's launch. She couldn't begin to guess why he'd go this far for a total stranger.

"Look, don't worry about it. I benefit as well."

"...And may I ask how?"

"Oh, you know. A little of this, a little of that."

He was being evasive.

"Didn't you say I could ask anything?" Cayna fired back.

"Don't assume I'll spoon-feed you all the time. Try to work things out yourself," he responded.

"...Yeah, but still..."

What could this man gain by working so hard to create a game for Keina, a girl who was alive in body but not spirit? He even did his best to give Cayna a new life in this world after the game's service ended. His motives were cloaked in mystery. She was no mind reader, after all.

Nonetheless, Cayna racked her brain. In her opinion, what he did was unnecessary. Tagging along with someone who spent her life in a hospital room waiting for death was no reason for Opus to sacrifice his own body.

"By the way, Kee! You initially said I was disconnected from *Leadale's* master system. If the game system has been inside me this whole time, isn't that a huge contradiction?"

Once she started thinking about the system inside her soul, Cayna suddenly remembered Kee's words after she woke.

"Even if I told you... I thought you would not believe me."

“...Yeah, you've got a point. I definitely would've called you crazy if you said something like that!”

Cayna would've likely distrusted Kee afterward. She might have even freaked out and wondered if he came down with a case of *chuunibyo*.

“Kee doesn't lie. Whenever you doubt your loyal retainer, all you can do is repent afterward.”

“I don't need to hear that from you, thank you very much! Who do you think made things so complicated in the first place?! Do you even feel bad at all?! Have you reflected on anything?!”

Opus tried to come to Kee's aid, but this only sent Cayna into another fit of rage. Her fist sent him flying out of the wagon.

“Hmph!”

“Ha-ha-ha...”

In truth, Cayna realized it was the best option at the time. If she'd been told she was synced with the game system, she would have grown dependent on it and never bothered to explore the village or interact with others.

Cayna fell asleep with these thoughts, and they were back in the remote village when she next woke. The time for questions was over.

Meanwhile, in Helshper...

Caerina and her convoy of knights came to a stop in front of the prison-labor mine. The backwoods of Helshper held quarries surrounded by an ore-rich mountain range, and several of these were excavated by criminals as a form of community service. The steep cliffs made escape nearly impossible while forced menial labor distracted the

prisoners from any thoughts of freedom and encouraged self-reflection. If convicts spent too long here, some eventually became lunatics who could do nothing more than pick up stones and yell bizarrely.

The remote mine Caerina and her subordinates visited held the worst offenders. Before they even reached the entrance, iron bars surrounded the facility like an impenetrable cage and radiated a cold aura of rejection. The knights sent word of their visit beforehand, so one of the dwarven jailers who served as a gatekeeper, a miner, and handled an assortment of other odd jobs opened the gate and ushered the group in.

Caerina inspected the criminals' sleeping quarters. Upon realizing the man she came to see was absent, she questioned the dwarven jailer standing at attention nearby. She was here to meet with an inmate.

"Shouldn't you have informed him earlier?"

"...We did, but he's still down in the mine."

The dwarves shook their heads gravely.

After admitting to his crimes, the man apparently had begun obsessively swinging his pickax without end, which hadn't changed at all since Caerina visited a while back. She saw him dig once and thought his heart seemed empty. Rather than trying to atone for his crimes, his sorrow felt more like a form of escapism.

Another jailer led them farther into the mine. As they passed through several branching tunnels and climbed down a ladder, she could hear a voice and various sounds farther down the tunnel the man had been mining before. A dwarf standing guard at the entrance was observing this with a frown but placed his hand on his chest and bowed the moment he saw Caerina. Deeper inside the mine, she heard the systematic *clink, clink* of a pickax against stone.

"The hell?! My level ain't high enough for this skill anymore?!"

She also heard a stream of curses.

Clink, clink, clink!

"Hold on, how 'bout this spell?"

He seemed to be attempting something. An ear-grating screech rang out.

“Grah! Too slow!”

However, he didn’t seem satisfied with whatever spell he’d cast. The *clink, clink, clink* of the pickax resumed.

“Shit!! I can’t even cast wide-scale magic ‘cause of this stupid collar!” he complained as the sound of a crumbling boulder followed.

Caerina looked over at the dwarven jailer, who merely shrugged. The inmate’s behavior was apparently nothing to get worked up over.

“Agh, it collapsed?! Just how weak is this freakin’ thing?!”

In fact, she got the sense that this happened regularly.

“C’mom, me! Just make another! Whose fault do you think this is?!”

The furious clanging continued with strange irregularity.

“I’m roastin’ myself now, ha-ha-ha...

“...Dammit, what am I even doin’...?

“U-U-U-U-U-UWAAAAAAAAGH!!”

Clang, clang, clang, clang, clang, clang, clang!!

These wretched screams faded until only the violent, relentless echo of a pickax remained.

A dwarven jailer staring aimlessly into the darkness turned to Caerina with an indescribable expression.

“You’re coming along?”

“Yes... I am,” she murmured confidently, following the jailer as he stepped into the darkness and out of formation.

"This, too, is for Helshper."

When Caerina arrived at the scene, she saw a man holding a pickax with one hand. He was staring at the wall with his back turned to her; the jailers released the thick shackles around his feet that were attached to the mine cart behind him.

"...You, eh?"

The inmate finally noticed Caerina and looked over his shoulder at her with a dull, unfocused gaze. He looked far worse than when the two first met. There were dark circles under his eyes, and his cheeks were sunken in. His emaciated body was caked in sweat and dust that dyed even his hair gray.

"The great and powerful knights must be pretty bored if they keep droppin' by to visit a thug like me!"

He sluggishly struck the wall with his pickax. That slow motion alone was enough to make a corner of the wall slightly crumble.

"I sent word earlier. I'm taking you with me."

It wasn't clear whether he heard Caerina. The demon's pickax never broke stride.

"Ha-ha, I'm a mass murderer... You really think it's a good idea to let someone like me out into the world? What a bunch of idiots..."

The momentum of his swings picked up when he said *mass murderer*. His expression was rife with self-loathing.

"Relax. You're already dead. Or rather, the bandits have all been publicly executed. There is no one to frighten the public anymore."

This statement made the demon freeze. He himself had been subjected to the guillotine at one point but survived thanks to his special status as a player. He was then deemed deceased on paper and was soon whisked off to the mines.

"...I see... So... they're gone. That makes sense... We *were* pretty wild..." he murmured, possibly recalling fond memories of his former subordinates. He faced Caerina and tugged at the black collar around his neck.

“I’m a total weakling as long as I’m wearin’ this thing. You could kill me right now if you really wanted to, right?”

“I have no interest in killing you before I can make you my subordinate.”

“Ha-ha. So what I heard earlier was true... What do you want from me? I’m just a murderer...”

The pickax slipped from his hand and struck the tunnel floor, its echo as hollow as his heart.

“Right. You’ll start as a foot soldier. You can atone for your sins by defending others.”

“...Sure. If I have to serve anyone, you ain’t a bad option...”

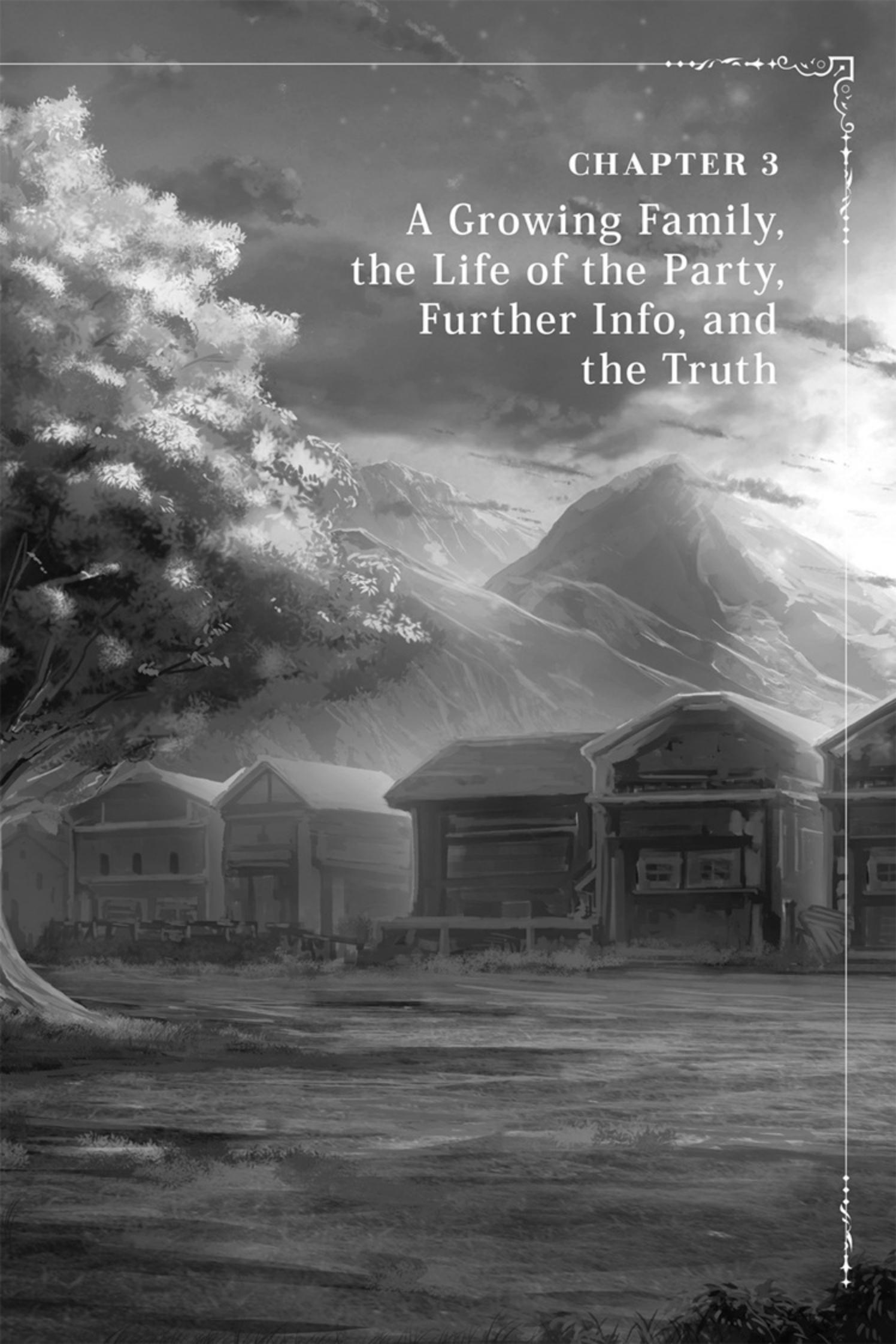
His expression was resigned, but he balled his fists tightly enough to draw blood.

“Come to think of it, I never asked your name,” Caerina said as if this only just occurred to her.

For the very first time, the former bandit leader smiled.

“Took you long enough... My name is...”

Once he introduced himself, Caerina and the dwarves brought him out of the mine.



CHAPTER 3

A Growing Family, the Life of the Party, Further Info, and the Truth

The people of the remote village were briefly bewildered when a familiar wagon pulled by some very stiff-looking horses rolled in. However, their uncertainty soon transformed to sheer joy once Cayna stepped out. Her family had apparently been informed of her arrival, so Luka, Roxine, and Roxilius soon came out to greet her.

The werecats froze upon seeing Siren's cheerful smile, their faces twitching.

"Mommy Cayna... Welcome... back."

"Good to be home, Lu! How've you been?"

Luka pattered over to her and quietly accepted Cayna's embrace, but her eyes widened when she caught a tall, unfamiliar demon staring curiously at her a few paces behind Cayna.

"Hey, Opus. You're scaring Luka!"

"I have done no such thing..."

"You wear all black and have horns sticking out of your head. Who *wouldn't* be terrified? Right, Lu?"

"If you could please stop making baseless accusations..."

Luka was doubly surprised when Opus heeded Cayna's complaint and reluctantly stepped back.



As far as Luka knew, no one had ever acted so casual with Cayna.

While all this was happening, word raced through the village, and anyone with free time on their hands came in droves to welcome Cayna back.

"You sure were gone a long time, Cayna," said Marelle. "You plan on stickin' around here for a spell?"

"That's right. I finished everything I had to, so I'd like to relax for a bit."

"Not just 'a bit'! Stay in the village awhile," Luine urged. "Lytt really missed you."

"Qu-quit it, Sis!" Lytt protested, lightly smacking her sister, who laughed and shrugged.

"So who's this fine young man?" Marelle asked.

"My old friend who I'd been searching for. His name is Opus. He'll be living in the village from now on, too. I hope you don't mind," Cayna said timidly.

Marelle and the surrounding villagers nodded.

"He's a *very good* friend, right? We can't possibly refuse," said one villager.

"Exactly," agreed another. "After all, you have quite the catch."

"...Huh?"

There seemed to be a huge misunderstanding. Even if Cayna tried to straighten things out, everyone would just smile and nod: *Sure, sure, we totally believe you.*

"Might as well throw a party. No time to waste! Lytt, Luine, gimme a hand!"

"Sure thing."

"Okaaay."

"Aghhhh! This *again*!?"

Cayna, head in her hands, watched as Marelle and her family excitedly rushed back to the inn. Luka slipped out of Cayna's arms and looked up in awe at Opus and Siren.

She'd heard before that Cayna went searching for someone, but the scary demon and quiet, gentle-looking elf made a puzzling pair.

Siren crouched down to the girl's eye level and introduced herself.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Lady Luka. My name is Siren, and this is my master, Sir Opuskettenshultheimer Crosstettbomber. He is too lazy to properly introduce himself, but please call him Opus with equal amounts affection and pity. Ah, please feel free to omit 'sir' and similar titles. If you so wish, I believe 'old geezer' and 'loser' will make him sound even more pathetic."

Even Cayna frowned when she heard this. Siren was polite but could be just as wicked as Roxine. Cayna was dying for an explanation as to why maid summons always turned out weird somehow. She doubted anyone was qualified to explain that, though.

Opus paid no mind to Siren's insults and remained as aloof as ever. Luka, on the other hand, didn't understand half of what she'd just been told and turned to Cayna for clarification.

"Um, you can just call him Opus, Lu. Or Big Bro Opus, if you want. He's an old friend. He and Siren are gonna live with us from now on."

"Okay," said Luka. "It's nice to... meet you."

"Yeah, likewise."

"The pleasure is all mine, Lady Luka."

Once Cayna finished introducing her family, the villagers who had been waiting patiently around them closed in. They seemed to have caught the earlier conversation and were eager to shake hands with Opus and Siren.

"Cool, a demon! I'm Latem! I'm a dwarf!"

"I like your energy, kid. I'm Opuskettenshultheimer Crosstettbomber!"

"O... Opeskett...?"

"Keh-keh-keh. My name is quite long, so just *Opus* is fine. Nice to meet you."

"You shoulda shortened it in the first place... Nice to meet ya, Mr. Opus!"

As Cayna observed their back-and-forth, she realized there was something off about the ratio of servants in her household. Now that Opus was moving in, there would be three residents, two maids, and one butler. With one attendant per person, she looked like a minor noble now. But considering how high elves were considered royalty in this world, this setup was actually in-character. Unless, of course, the high elf character in question had well-documented disdain for anything considered royal.

"My name is Opus. I'll be living with you in this village from now on. I hope the experience will be advantageous to both of us."

He was still his overbearing self, but Opus managed to greet each villager as an equal. Just to be safe, Cayna decided to bring him to the village elder's house and introduce the new resident. They would no doubt see each other at the banquet later, but a more personal meeting was faster. Luka happily grabbed her mother's hand and came along as well, which made Cayna wonder if maybe she'd been away from the village a bit too long.

Roxilius tried to follow them, but Siren stopped him with a sharp glare. The maid then grabbed Roxine's head as the werecat tried to go home and placed the pair in front of her.

"Come here, you two. You have some explaining to do first. After that, guide me to Lady Cayna's abode."

"What? Um, but one of my duties is to protect Lady Luka..."

Roxilius tried to explain his responsibilities, but Siren silenced him with just a stern look.

"Are you a fool, Roxilius? With Lady Cayna and my master now reunited, what does young Lady Luka have to fear? Together, those two could escape the world's greatest dangers barefoot. In fact, I daresay they could even conquer the world..."

As disturbing as these comments were, Cayna didn't have the slightest interest in world domination. Opus's feelings, however, were less clear.

The chastised werecats glanced at each other. Roxine's gaze implored Roxilius not to run his big mouth, but it was already too late.

"I've heard quite a bit about the two of you and your constant bickering. Simply deplorable. You hardly sound like proper servants at all."

"No, that's not—"

"We always take care to express our gratitude to Lady Cayna and Lady Luka—"

The pair denied the accusation, but Siren quieted them with Intimidate.

"That is not the issue here. You have these incessant squabbles even in front of your master, do you not? Moreover, I heard you force Lady Luka to intervene. As a servant, it is an absolute disgrace. It's high time you re-discipline yourselves."

A dark, ominous backdrop materialized behind Siren as she filled with rage. The werecats froze in place at the sight of the *hannya* Noh mask, their faces stiffening in terror as they backed away slowly.

Amid this Nighttime Graveyard backdrop, an *onibaba* with enraged, gleaming eyes and a crimson mouth that stretched from ear to ear grabbed Roxine's and Roxilius's faces, then dragged them off somewhere.

The nearby villagers who witnessed Siren's effects were sufficiently freaked out and agreed it was in their best interest to stay on her good side.

"Elder, this is Opus. He's an old friend of mine."

"Sorry for showing up out of the blue. The pleasure's all mine."

"*Again* with the condescension! This is your home from now on, so fix your attitude!"

Cayna grabbed Opus's horns and forced him to bow to the elder. The old man broke out in a sweat but warmly accepted the new demon resident.

On their way home, Lytt called out to Cayna's group.

"Miss Cayna! Mom wants you to bring everyone to the tavern."

"Gahhh. Do I have to?"

“We can’t start without you.”

Cayna knew full well she was going to be the butt of every joke at this party, but resistance was futile. It was simpler to join the party, although this was easier said than done.

Opus relished watching Cayna reluctantly agree.

“All right. But can I stop by my house first? I have to grab Cie and Rox.”

“Sure. See you then!” Lytt said with a wave, then headed back to the inn. When she was finally out of sight, Cayna heaved a deep sigh.

“Ugh. I don’t wannaaaa.”

“Have you had a bad experience with banquets?”

“I’m just not used to being the life of the party or having people put me on a pedestal. Don’t do anything to create misunderstandings, Opus.”

“Hmm? I’ll be careful.”

“I’m... not sure you get what I’m saying...”

Cayna returned home with Luka, Kuu, and Opus, an uncanny sense of foreboding hanging over her.

However, when the group reached the entrance, they found Roxine and Roxilius sitting on their knees on floor cushions made of ice.

“One. You will not show emotion in front of your master.”

““One. We will not show emotion in front of our master!””

“Two. You will strive to maintain a professional attitude toward your master.”

““Two! We will strive to maintain a professional attitude toward our master!””

“...What’s going on here?”

Cayna and company were greeted by the odd sight of Siren holding a small booklet in one hand and the Double Rs repeating the Fifteen Golden Rules of Servitude after her.

Opus, familiar with this sort of behavior, was unfazed. Cayna tore at her hair, and although temporarily dumbfounded, Luka soon rushed over to the werecats' aid. Siren's lesson/tough love only concluded long after dark when Marelle finally came for Cayna's family members who were late to the party.

"All right! Cheers to our new arrivals and Cayna's *very* good friend!"

"""Cheers!!"""

"W-wait, whaaaaat?!"

"Yes, cheers."

"Opus, d-don't agree with them!!"

"Just relax and enjoy the party. Don't be so grumpy."

"And *who* exactly made me grumpy?!"

Across from Opus, Cayna banged on the table in protest but quickly sank into her seat when everyone stared at her in surprise. Marelle soon came over and served alcohol, salad, and an egg dish. She patted Cayna's shoulder and smiled.

"I thought you didn't even know how to yell since you're always so laid-back, Cayna. I'm glad this nice young man brings out a different side of you. You really hooked a good one, didn't you?"

"He's just an old partner I can't seem to get rid of. I can't picture us as anything else."

"Well, if you can't get rid of each other, that means you'll end up just like my husband and me. Don't fight it, Cayna."

"Marelllile..."

"Ah-ha-ha! You take it easy now and have a good time, young man."

"I will. I appreciate the hospitality, Lady Marelle."

"Lady' don't suit me," Marelle said before heading back into the kitchen.

Cayna's hospitality team, of which Siren was now head maid for some reason, offered to serve drinks in Lytt and Luine's stead. Siren and Roxine had originally negotiated taking on *all* the work, but Gatt insisted non-personnel weren't allowed in the kitchen, and Marelle said a tavern needed its proprietress. They were relegated to waitress duties instead.

Thanks to their assistance, Luine was enjoying a drink with her husband while Lytt got to play with the other kids.

"Kuu, did you go with Ms. Cayna?" Lytt asked.

"Yup!"

"You explored a dungeon, right? What was that like?" Latem asked.

"Nuffin' at all!"

"That can't be right. My folks said they're filled with scary monsters, and there's traps around every corner"

Cayna and Opus watched Latem hound Kuu for answers. Opus's dungeon held plenty of traps that could catch people unawares—especially someone as clumsy as Clofia—while the monsters frightened anyone except Cayna. Asking Kuu of all people to recount their adventure was a huge mistake on Latem's part.

"I'll have to give those kids a run-through of my dungeon's terrors some time."

"I am *begging* you to stop right now."

"Why? Curious children need to learn about the dangers of the world."

"They've seen plenty of danger already," Cayna said with a glare.

"Hmph, very well," Opus replied disinterestedly. Even his nodding seemed slightly disappointed.

Carelessly leaving matters to Opus was like riding a roller coaster with no seat belt. It was anyone's guess as to the amount of damage he could inflict if left to his own devices.

"Geez, everyone used to tease us with those same stupid grins back then, too. At least tell them off for once in your life!"

"Lady Marelle meant no harm."

"Shut up."

"Goodness, I see you've forgone all formality."

"I *always* talk to you like this!"

Cayna took a large bite of food and washed it down with the fruit wine Marelle brought earlier. Opus took a swig of his own drink and realized the taste was awfully familiar. He stared into the cup wide-eyed.

The contents had the pleasant scent of wheat—this beer was Cayna's own brew.

"What're you so shocked about? You have the Alcohol Creation skill, too. I usually make mine in the village now. Just beer and whiskey, though. I'm also a part-time adventurer."

"Do you intend to turn this village into a fortress like some kind of offline quest?"

"I installed a few gargoyles, but that's about it for the moment. The villagers don't seem interested in any more upgrades. Oh, I did build a bathhouse, though."

"Sounds like you do whatever you please..."

Cayna frowned at Opus's disapproving gaze and banged her cup down on the table.

"I don't wanna hear that from a shut-in like you! I worked really hard to get even a little bit used to this place! I couldn't find any other players at first, two hundred years had passed, and the whole Silver Ring Witch thing was still alive and kicking, and then, just when I found a certain someone's tower, he was nowhere to be found and left me nothing but a book! Plus, there were all these event monsters roaming around, and I ran into Tartarus and found out Gramps is here but won't even come see me! Then I dealt with a load of big shots and explored an entire dungeon only to be greeted by

the biggest idiot on the planet! Are you freakin' kidding me right now?!"

"Hold on, Cayna, try to control your murderous rage."

Cayna's emotions spilled over with each grievance, and a dark nebula soon surrounded her.

The villagers naturally kept their distance to avoid getting involved and continued chatting pleasantly. Cayna had recently developed a habit of grumbling whenever she got a little tipsy. She'd drag anyone who took notice into her rant, so people were careful to avoid eye contact.

However, now that her opponent was Opus, Cayna lost all grip on reality. She'd gone full bore, and ominous black smoke emanated from her body. It was Active Skill: Cloak of the Death God, a close-range attack that released insta-death smoke around the user. Since the spell's radius was only a yard at most, the villagers were unaffected.

Before anyone could get hurt, Opus quickly cast Special Skill: Breath of the Sacred Lotus, which canceled out all Active Skills.

A shining azure wind purified Cayna's black smoke in an instant. Her bizarre menace had caused the villagers enjoying the banquet to pause for a moment, but they began to clap and cheer in excitement when the blue breeze passed by to reveal her usual self. It seemed that everyone had mistakenly concluded it was all a performance.

Their applause brought Cayna back to her senses, and she realized the disaster her temper had nearly caused. She apologized to Opus and excused herself, keeping her head down to avoid the concerned looks of Luka, the Double Rs, Marelle, et al. Opus assured everyone she was simply drunk and followed her.

Cayna headed to the central plaza and gazed up at the moon. She turned around when someone lightly poked the back of her head.

"What do you want now?"

"You deactivated your resistances. That's why you lost focus and nearly did something you'd regret."

"I had no choice. It'd be weird for a girl like me to knock back a few with zero consequence. Besides, I wanted to join in the fun and drink, too."

Cayna gave a feeble, goofy laugh, and Opus placed a large hand over her head. She wondered for a fleeting moment if he was trying to console her, but then a sharp pain buzzed inside her skull.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!"

"You're free to trash someone all you like but consider the time and place!"

"Ow, ow, owwwww?!"

"If you're not going to use your resistances, then don't drink in the first place. There's nothing wrong with getting into the spirit of things, but you need to know your limits!"

"Okay! I'm sorry; I'm really, really sorry. My head's about to split open, so can you please stop already?!"

Opus at last released Cayna, who ceased her flailing and fell to her hands and knees. Once her ragged breath calmed, Opus lifted Cayna by the arm.

"What? Are you gonna mess with me some more?"

"Here, take this."

He gently placed a mysterious scroll into her hand.

"What is it?"

"A final update. You should use it."

Thinking it was most likely a software update for the game system within her, Cayna added the scroll to her Item Box and activated it.

A gentle, fresh scent seemed to waft by, and Cayna's body filled with energy. She let herself be carried along by the pleasant breeze as a fanfare echoed in her head.

Meanwhile, Opus watched emerald light emanate from Cayna as she floated in midair.

A second later, a magic circle formed beneath her. As soon as it passed through her from top to bottom, trumpet-wielding angels popped out with an audible flourish, then disappeared.

“I... leveled up?”

When Cayna checked her stats screen, she noticed her level had risen from 1,100 to 1,109. The sixteen-digit amount of experience points she’d accumulated since her previous level-up were gone without a trace. It felt a bit cruel that she only went up nine levels, but this change did come with plenty of bonuses: Cayna was now resistant to every status ailment across the board, and she could call summons typically beyond the limits of her race. Furthermore, she was no longer restricted by level limits.

Opus noticed her eyes cloud over as she scanned the numbers.

“What’s wrong? Not happy about something?”

“It’s just kind of unfair... This feels worse than cheating.”

“You’re the heart of the system. The other players will be left helpless if anything happens to you, so it’s a matter of insurance.”

“This isn’t insurance, it’s fortification...,” Cayna mumbled tiredly.

Opus’s exasperated expression clearly said *What’s the problem?*

“?! Who’s there?!”

All of a sudden, he leaped in front of Cayna.

Stiff footsteps echoed in the darkness. Opus didn’t recognize the sound, but Cayna knew that donkey-like clip-clopping anywhere. As soon as she heard the sloshing water, she was certain.

“Cayna?”

“Evening, Mimily.”

The mermaid Mimily appeared before them half submerged in a claw-foot bathtub. She seemed to be on her way to dinner in the tavern and noticed the commotion

coming from the wide-open door. She stared at Opus and Cayna in confusion.

"Ummm, are we celebrating something today?" she asked.

"Uh, sorta. I guess you could say it's the usual?"

Cayna dodged the question out of embarrassment, but her discomfort wasn't lost on the mermaid.

"Oh my," Mimily said with a perplexed smile. "And who might this be?"

"Ah, right. This is my old friend Opus. Opus, this is Mimily. She got lost in the underground waterways, so I invited her to stay in the village."

"My name is Mimily. It's very nice to meet you."

Opus merely nodded, frowning. "...What is a mermaid doing on land?"

"She got swallowed up in some kind of black hole in her village and was tossed out here. I'm guessing it was some kind of cosmic calamity."

"Cayna, doesn't that make it sound like I have astronomically bad luck?" Mimily complained, pouting.

"You wouldn't have met me if you did."

"Well, true..."

Opus glanced at the mermaid as one might a pebble on the roadside.

To no one's surprise, his immediate loss of interest in Mimily ticked Cayna off. She wordlessly approached him, grabbed him by the horns, and began twisting them. A demon's horns were fixed in place; they weren't meant to be yanked around. Doing so would only jerk the demon's head around.

Unable to fight back, Opus heard his neck make a terrifying *crack* before he pulled Cayna's hands away.

The intense hatred rising in her glassy eyes got on his last nerve.

“What is wrong with you?! My horns aren’t exercise equipment!”

“You thought *Her friend has nothing to do with me* just now, right? You got bored and shrugged her off. I hate when you get like this.”

“F-fair enough. That was rude of me. Sorry.”

The response that followed came in the form of an invisible mass. Opus’s eyes shot wide open, and he quickly dodged. An unseen cluster of magic skimmed the tip of his nose, causing Opus to bend so far back he nearly fell over. This attack was courtesy of Cayna, who now stood enraged in front of him.

“I—I apologized, didn’t I? What’s with the rough treatment?”

“How was that a sincere apology? You acted like it was a huge pain.”

She sniffed derisively, and the space around Opus creaked. The golem bathtub carrying Mimily escaped to the tavern to avoid getting caught up in the fray.

The villagers peeked out from the entranceway and nervously watched as a treacherous aura enveloped the pair. Luka and Lytt watched with concern; Roxine’s and Siren’s faces were grim.

“They’re fighting...,” said Luka.

“Yeah. I wonder if Ms. Cayna is gonna be okay?”

“The village will be destroyed if this keeps up...,” Roxine muttered dryly to herself.

She was the only one in the crowd who grew a shade paler, and her statement accurately represented the threat both Opus and Cayna posed. If two over-level-1,100 people duked it out here, the entire area would turn into a wasteland of death in the blink of an eye.

“Shall I stop them?” Siren suddenly called out from behind the children, who jolted in surprise. With a smile as mischievous as her master’s, the head maid quietly awaited Luka’s orders.

Meanwhile, the world’s strongest duo ramped up their war of words.

“Look who’s talking. Blowing things up is all you ever accomplish. How about using your brain for once?”

“I’m not ancient like *you*, Opus, so sorry for my lack of experience. Your days are numbered, old man.”

“Who are you calling old man, little girl?!”

“Little girls these days are tough and adventurous, I’ll have you know. Go crawl back into your cave, you decrepit mole. You sure all those extra naps didn’t kickstart menopause?”

“Ha-ha-ha. If anyone here slept too much, it’s you. The nutrients your body’s been craving have made you swell up like a balloon.”

“Hey, volume increases when you lie down, obviously! Besides, Shining Saber said I’m too light!”

“Keh, you’ve got another man now?! Have some shame!”

“‘Man’ doesn’t automatically equal ‘lover,’ weirdo. What are you, my dad?! This is why old timers are the worst.”

“So I’m a senile crow who’s lost its glossy black sheen?!”

“No one said that!”

Their fight had devolved into a childish argument. Before Siren could march over at Luka’s request, Marelle’s tray went flying.

“What do you think you’re doing, causin’ such a ruckus? You’re the entertainment! Get your butts over here and take a seat.”

““Entertainment?!””

As the only one aware of their true power, Roxine’s heart didn’t stop pounding against her rib cage until things finally calmed down. Roxilius was washing the dishes in the kitchen, so he played no part in the conflict.

“They’re always like this,” said Siren, the only one who maintained flawless composure.

Morning dawned after Opus's welcome banquet. It was a celebration of Siren's arrival as well, but the maid insisted she was merely an accessory to her master. In reality, this was all a ploy to divert the attention from herself so she wouldn't wind up as part of the "entertainment." Siren's awareness of potential danger was incredible even if her refusal to come to her master's aid was less than maid-like. She apparently enjoyed a secret celebration with the village youth instead. Although they were thrilled the new addition was an unmarried girl, none realized Siren wasn't interested in finding a partner.

Soon after breakfast, Opus and Cayna locked themselves away in Cayna's room to have a private discussion. Even Luka wasn't allowed to sit in. Siren kept watch outside the door.

The two faced each other. They had come together to discuss something they never got around to while on the road—that is, the rumors Cayna heard from Cohral and Shining Saber about "someone who died playing the game."

She was fine with Opus's plan to establish a game company with the Kagami Corporation's funds.

It was already over and done with, so complaining now wouldn't change anything.

Keina's father was born into the main Kagami line but entered a branch family after marriage. Upon her parents' death, it was decided Keina would return to the main family. And if word spread that a young female member of the main line died while playing a game run by a subsidiary of the Kagami Corporation, there was a good chance her uncle would come under fire, regardless of his innocence. The company's president, Yuuji Kagami, no doubt tried to keep Keina's true cause of death under wraps. It was unlikely anyone in the "real" world would have revealed this dark secret.

Still, what exactly did those rumors entail? Cayna asked Opus as much.

"The rumors had nothing to do with Keina's death. Soon after you died, some people fell into a coma while playing the game. They brought it on themselves, though."

"Huh? The rumors were about players going into comas?"

"If you were running around in the game's final days and heard service was ending,

wouldn't you think *I don't want the game to end. Let me play a little longer?* The people who took the news especially hard were the ones who ended up comatose."

"So their feelings about the game's end determined whether they lived or died? Sounds like a fantasy to me."

"And yet that's exactly what happened."

After Keina's death, the cornerstone of the VRMMO *Leadale* was placed along a boundary line so the system could synchronize with her soul. The game's foundation overlapped the midway point between virtual reality on Earth and this fantastical realm. If one drew three circles that barely touched, the overlapping part looked like the cross section of a thin lens. This cross section was where the game took place. The lens-shaped world acted as an amplifier that sent powerful thought waves into the minds of people in virtual reality. In other words, this was a type of corrosion where the game world skewed their sense of reality like an optical illusion. This was also why the landscape and culture of both worlds were so similar.

"So it was pretty much a massive invasion?!"

"That wasn't my intention when I created the game. The two worlds connected by chance."

"People don't just link up other worlds while making a game!"

"But that's what happened."

"This whole thing's insane."

Well, none of it was really a coincidence. I probably shouldn't mention that now, however.

"...You say somethin'?"

"Oh, nothing at all."

His answer was fishy. Cayna glared at him, and Opus blatantly avoided eye contact.

The real issue was how these thought waves impacted both sides. No longer players in a fictional universe, victims ended up stuck in their own personal battles for survival. *Leadale*'s creators then discovered these players had been separated from

their physical bodies and essentially died midgame.

"The development team knew the cause, but they couldn't fix the problem. That's why I became a debugger who rescued stuck players. I could tell if someone's connection was off."

"Which was why you were online twenty-four seven."

At the time, Cayna saw Opus every day no matter when she logged in. And given how he was online morning, noon, and night, many speculated about his real identity. For a while, there were even theories among the guilds that he might be an Admin spy.

"So why were so many players like Cohral, Shining Saber, and Tartarus logged in that last day?"

As far as Cayna could tell, all the players she'd met in this world so far had played on the final day of service. She wasn't sure about the bandit leader, though.

"Tartarus? He's here, too?" Opus raised an eyebrow at the name.

"That was his second account. You can meet him when we go to Helshper."

"Well, well. Apparently only the most annoying players are still around."

Opus always used to tease Tartarus just to get a rise out of him; he was probably one of the last people Tartarus ever wanted to see. Worst-case scenario, Tartarus would take one look at Opus and run the other way.

"About that final day..." Opus began hesitantly.

"Yeah?"

Cayna stared at his silent, bitter expression and wondered how bad the situation had actually been.

"We had more logins that day than ever before! And if you're thinking *Hey, I'm sure he handled it on his own just fine*, you'd be wrong! I gave up and joined some guild events!"

His confession tumbled out in one quick burst, and Cayna flopped against the table. Now that he'd just admitted to slacking off, she had a feeling there were still plenty of

other players in this world.

“Um... I’m not really sure what’s going on...”

“It’s about to get even more complicated. If you’re fine with that—”

“Please, no! Spare me!”

Cayna put up her hands in protest. If things got any stranger, her brain would melt down before she had a chance to figure it all out. She was honestly grateful to Opus for creating the world of *Leadale*, but the situation grew sketchier by the minute. There seemed to be several other complex issues involved, but Cayna didn’t know how much more she could take.

Opus crossed his arms and sank into deep thought, contrasting his memories of Keina to Cayna the high elf.

“Ugh... You look like you’re up to something.”

“I was simply remembering how lifeless and lethargic you were back when we first met. I mean no offense. You were so empty I thought you might vanish at any second, but now it’s like you’re a different person.”

“...Huh? What? Have we met in real life?”

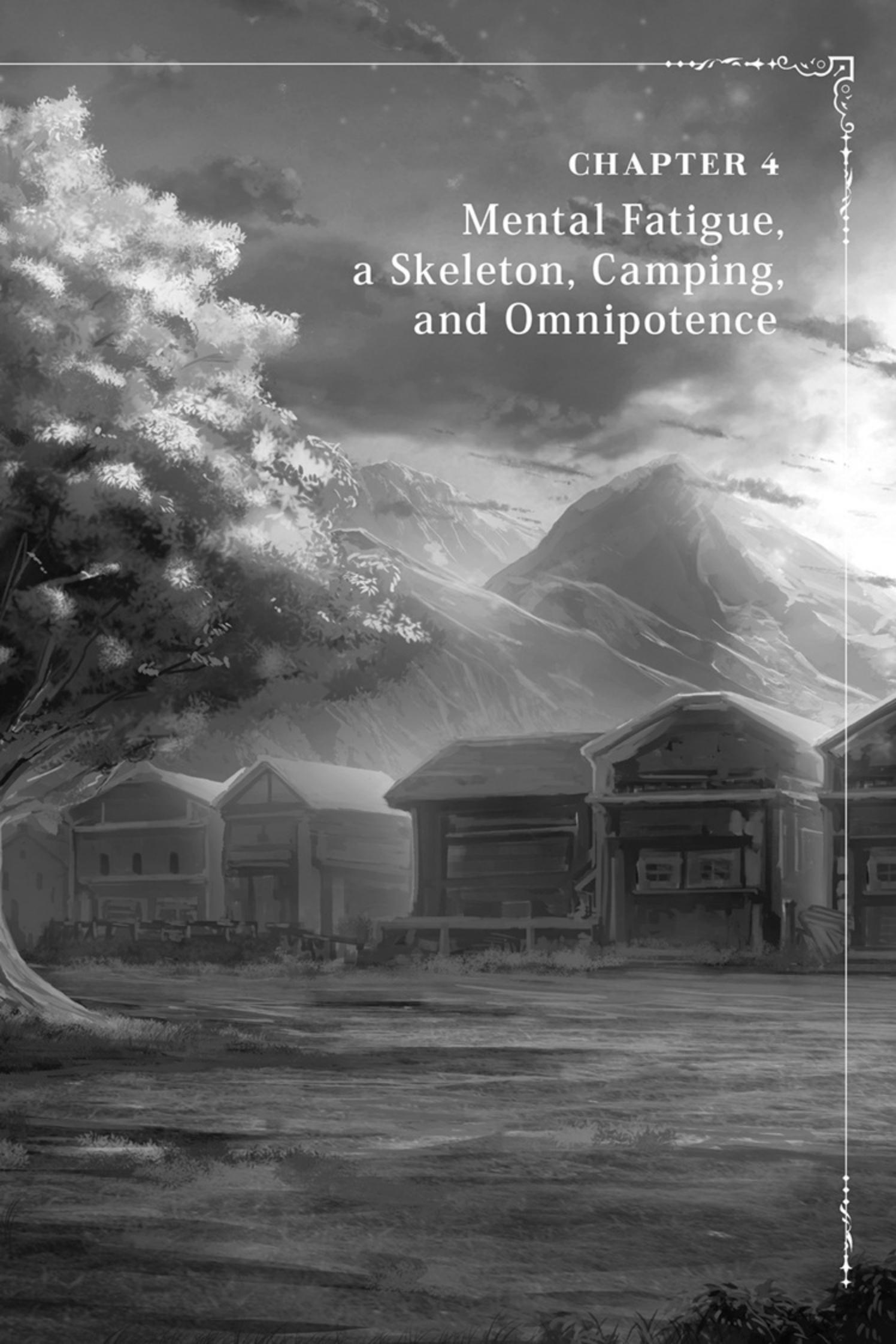
“Only once. I visited the hospital with your uncle and explained *Leadale* to you. I still remember how empty your eyes looked.”

“R-right. There was that one day when my uncle visited me with this secretary-looking person... in a suit... Huh? Wait—Ako is his secretary, so he must’ve come with someone else that time. It was this person who told me about *Leadale* and threw me off whenever their tone suddenly shifted... Hang on. That... woman?”

“Keh-keh-keh-keh. You finally realized?”

The truth that the woman named Kuzuhara and Opus standing right in front of her were one and the same did not compute.

“WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?!?!?”



CHAPTER 4

Mental Fatigue,
a Skeleton, Camping,
and Omnipotence

“Awghhhh...”

“Lady Cayna?”

Spread out against the living room table, Cayna’s current state could only be described as “peak burnout.”

It all began after her secret meeting with Opus. Cayna wobbled out into the living room, and Roxine couldn’t hide her surprise as she watched her master spiral into a tailspin of exhaustion thanks to a sudden and shocking revelation that sent her brain into overdrive. Black smoke poured out of her ears, and Roxine quickly rushed to her aid after peeking out of the kitchen.

Despite the billowing smoke effect, Cayna wasn’t harmed in any way. Her upgraded resistance skills, including Mental Resistance, were gradually demonstrating their potency.

Unaware of this new development, Roxine glared at Opus, who loitered near Cayna with his arms crossed.

“Just what on earth have you done?”

“I merely told Cayna what she wished to know. She’s the one who asked.”

Roxine huffed at Opus’s unmistakable arrogance. Just as she was about to retort, Siren interrupted.

“All right, that’s quite enough. Roxine. You are head of the kitchen, so please hurry and prepare lunch. Antagonizing my master is an exercise in futility, so I suggest you retreat now. It is only a waste of mental energy.”

“...Very well.”

Siren watched Roxine reluctantly slink back into the kitchen, then approached the smug-faced Opus and stepped on his toes. Even though it wasn’t enough to flutter Siren’s skirt, Cayna felt a small, localized tremor from where she was slumped over the table.

Opus crouched down and trembled as he held his foot. He seemed to be in considerable pain, but Siren stood there in tranquil silence as if the vicious strike had

never happened. The only indication anything was amiss was the oddly bulging vein in her temple. Opus had apparently given her the Oscar—Roses Scatter with Beauty skill as well.

Siren took a cup from the living room cupboard, poured water from a pitcher, and placed it by Cayna's head; the cool temperature helped to soothe her nerves.

The maid briskly tended to Cayna while also checking if she had a fever or felt unwell. The agony of Siren's own trembling master went completely ignored.

For better or worse, Roxilius and Luka returned home at that very moment. They gasped and blanched when they saw Cayna.

"M-Mommy Cayna!"

"Lady Cayna?!"

Roxilius rushed over, and Siren stepped back to let him through.

"She's not ill. It's a simple case of mental exhaustion."

"I see. Thank you very much."

Luka scrambled up the chair beside Cayna and peered at her. Cayna was still pressed flat against the table, the cup of water touching her cheek and its cool temperature easing her mind. When she caught sight of Luka, her bleary eyes suddenly cleared, and she shot up.

"L-Lu?"

"Are you... okay, Mommy Cayna?"

"Y-yeah..."

Cayna smiled at Luka and shook off any residual listlessness. Something about her smile seemed off to Luka, and she clung tightly to Cayna, who warmly returned the embrace. She sensed a helplessness in Luka similar to the day they first met.

Roxilius observed this with relief and discreetly stepped away to give both parent and child some privacy.

"I'm totally fine, Lu. Nothing is wrong with me. I'm sorry for worrying you."

"...It's okay."

Cayna felt Luka's hands trembling as she gripped her mother's clothes. She stroked the girl's head; their tender moment continued until Roxine served lunch.

Siren dragged her master out into the hallway.

"What in the world did you say to Lady Cayna?"

"Well, I may have gone a little overboard, but even her servants have to put on a smile in front of her adopted daughter."

"Please at least think before you act. *I'm* the one her servants will end up resenting."

"Duly noted."

Opus didn't seem the least bit sorry. Siren frowned and let out a quiet sigh.

After lunch, the servants rushed Cayna, Opus, Luka, and Kuu out of the house. Kuu had been lazing around in a sunny spot by the window all morning when she was suddenly picked up and tossed over to Cayna, so the fairy had no idea what was going on. Still, even if someone *did* ask exactly what was always on her mind, Kuu would simply tilt her head.

"The weather is lovely, so why not go for a stroll for a change of pace?" Roxine said with a smile as she pushed Cayna and the others out the door and closed it with a solid *ker-chack*, locking them out.

Siren's serene smile as she bowed behind the werecats wasn't the least bit convincing. If a master was a master, a servant should be a servant. Cayna wasn't exactly one to talk, though.

Luka, having never let go of Cayna's robe, ended up joining them as well. Roxine was normally mild-mannered with Cayna, so Luka couldn't hide her confusion over the maid's shift in attitude.

"Cie... was strict."

“Yes, indeed. Like master, like servant.”

“Last time I checked, *you* made her that way, Opus. Drop the smug act.”

Cayna drove her elbow into his stomach and took Luka’s hand.

“Gwagh.”

Purposely ignoring Opus while he played up his injuries, she bent down to meet Luka’s gaze. The girl was still clutching Cayna’s clothes tightly.

“How about it, Lu? Want to spend the day together?”

“Okay... Lytt and Latem... can’t play today...”

“Kuu can play!”

“Yes, yes, we know.”

The ever-upbeat fairy zoomed right over to lift Luka’s spirits. Cayna gently picked her up and placed her on the girl’s shoulder. Kuu was a bit of a pest while flying around, but even she would calm down when in physical contact with someone.

Cayna only caught a quick glimpse, but there seemed to be several guests staying at the inn that day. According to gossip from Marelle, an increasing number of visitors were coming to the village because they heard about the public bath through Elineh’s caravan. The royal capital had bathhouses, but they were expensive and typically for the elite. Travelers also found various reasons to pass through the remote village that served as a common access point to the outer trade routes. Some said they just happened to be going to Helshper, while others hoped to meet the rumored mermaid.

This last point raised Cayna’s concerns for Mimily’s safety, although Roxilius had mentioned that some potential kidnappers who came to the village while Cayna was out looking for Opus had been apprehended. Marelle warned him after noticing their suspicious behavior at the inn, so he was able to neutralize the threat before anything happened.

“Fortunately, they were too conspicuous to accomplish anything,” Roxilius had said.

“We should have just disposed of them, really.”

"Uh, what do you mean, 'disposed of'?!"

Cayna had reeled at the lighthearted way her maid and butler could suggest such extreme measures.

Even if such people needed to be handed over to the proper authorities, the remote village had no guardhouse. The closest one was in a fortress on the border of Helshper. Since Roxine and Roxilius couldn't very well leave the village vulnerable for even a minute, they asked a traveler heading to the Helshper checkpoint to inform the stronghold. Guards immediately rushed over to apprehend the culprits.

Quolkeh and Exis had visited the village previously and said the public bath was becoming a popular destination among guards looking to relax on their day off. Which meant they couldn't just brush off the incident as someone else's problem. They enthusiastically said they'd invent slapdash criminal charges and send the wannabe kidnappers straight to the mines.

"Um, couldn't you two have just turned them to ice or stone?"

"Leaving criminals in the village where Lady Luka might see would be problematic."

"Trash belongs in the trash can."

Cayna gripped her head in agony as she tried to figure out why the two only ever agreed at moments like these. She gave them strict orders to contact her for instructions in the future but was slightly concerned they might instead conspire to report an incident after the fact.

Curious visitors also came to admire the hand-cranked well. As a result, Lytt had to help out at the inn even more, and Latem had to work at his family's small Sakaiya branch shop. With the rest of Cayna's family busy tending to their maid and butler duties, Luka inevitably had plenty of free time on her hands.

Whatever the case may be, Felskeilo's outer trade route to the west was still closed. It was great to see the knights of two nations combine to suppress the remaining bandits and take them dead or alive, but now those forces had to quell the chaos on the main road. Regular requests from the Adventurers Guild to clean up the highways had stagnated while the bandits spread their violence, and monster attacks were nothing to sneeze at. Travelers and caravans heading for Helshper could either take the inner trade route that connected the two capitals (and included tolls) or pass through the

remote village and take the outer trade route to the east.

Rather than going straight down a boring road, people must have thought stocking up and visiting a popular bathhouse on the outer eastern trade route was a far more attractive plan.

Cayna looked over at Opus, who had ceased his antics once he realized crying wolf was getting him nowhere.

“Sorry.”

This apology was unrelated to the punch she’d thrown earlier. Confused, Opus used a skill to float a question mark over his head.

“I was hoping to register you as an adventurer, but I need to put motherhood first.”

“You could bring Luka along without incident, right?”

“I can’t form a party with her, so we can’t make a quick trip. And flying on a summons would be really conspicuous...”

“I see. I should have included a skill that will allow you to forcibly add an NPC to your party. But that’s an easy fix at this point.”

“It’s not about whether you can add a skill. It’s about asking for permission. Wait... Hold on. Is this the ‘update’ you were talking about before?”

“So you noticed? It’s only compatible with you and me.”

Cayna’s shoulders slumped, but she remembered her daughter was watching and quickly stood tall. For better or worse, Luka was oblivious to what the two adults were talking about.

Cayna herself had been sickly since childhood, so the only form of playtime she’d ever known was either reading books or playing video games and such in her room. Even if she *could* play with other children, she was a novice when it came to the great outdoors.

After looking all around her, staring up at the blue sky, and envisioning her tower, she finally remembered something important. Cayna took a Guardian Ring out of her Item

Box and handed it to Opus.

"Hmm? What's this?"

"Your Guardian Ring. Now that its real owner is here, there's no reason for me to keep it."

"Ah, right. You safeguarded it for me, then? Much appreciated. Take this as thanks."

Just as Opus accepted the ring from Cayna, he put a similar yet different-colored ring in her own hand. This one was a dark green. Something about it gave her a bad feeling.

"...Where did you get this, just for the record?" she asked him nervously with a frown.

"From Kujo's tortoise."

"Ah, Kujo's... Waaaait a second! Was the whole tortoise mess *your* fault?!"

"Yes, I just wanted to confirm something. I made sure no one would get hurt even if matters took a turn for the worse, so there was nothing to worry about."

"No, no, no, no, that is *so* not true. How many times have I heard you say those exact words before? It was actually *super* nerve-racking! Can you honestly guarantee you won't endanger the people living here? Actually, it might be more concerning that you even have to make a guarantee like that!"

"Sometimes I wonder if rhetorical questions are your entire brand of humor."

"Argh! I swear tragedy strikes every single stupid time you say stuff like this! Just *who* made an Event Monster respawn during a multination war?! That battle was a total wash! Players from the Purple, White, *and* Blue Kingdoms later jammed the official forums with complaints! Our guild suffered the worst kind of humiliation!"

"All right, just relax. You weren't completely uninvolved, you know. Besides, look. You're scaring Luka."

"...Ah."

Opus's efforts to calm Cayna returned her to her senses. She looked over at Luka, who was still holding her hand but stared up at Cayna slack-jawed and bug-eyed. The only

harsh words in their household came from Roxilius and Roxine during one of their fights. This was the first time she'd heard Cayna sound like such a spitfire.

"U-um, s-sorry, Lu... Did I scare you? I'm not mad at you or anything, okay?" Cayna hastily explained, her face crimson.

"O... okay," Luka replied with a nod, clinging to Cayna's waist.

Relieved to see Luka wasn't too frightened, Cayna gently stroked her daughter's head and heaved an exhausted sigh. Her current relationship with Opus was no different than back in the game. She was constantly swept up in the antics of this overzealous, demonic instigator whenever they interacted—and always with her scowling at Opus while he grinned from ear to ear.

"It sounds like you've been playing nice this whole time."

"Yeah, no thanks to you. Geez, I feel like we're back in the old days..."

Cayna smiled awkwardly, unable to decide whether this was a good or bad thing. Opus noticed her grin wasn't quite as forced as it had been earlier, then patted Luka on the head. She was still clinging to Cayna and searched Opus's face curiously.

"Luka, do you like Cayna?"

"Uh-huh. 'Cause... Cayna is... my mommy"

"I see, I see," Opus replied with a nod before sliding the Guardian Ring on his finger. He nimbly extracted Luka from Cayna's tender, motherly grip. She was momentarily stunned by the empty space in her arms.

"Hey! Don't interrupt our parent-child bonding!" she howled as she stole Luka back from Opus. He cackled at her frantic reaction and gently took both Cayna and Luka into his arms. Unaccustomed to such treatment from men, Cayna immediately turned beet red.

"H-h-h-hang on, wh-wh-wh-what are you—?"

"Just hold still. *One who protects us in times of trouble. I beseech you to rescue this depraved world from chaos.*"

"Opusssss?!" Cayna shouted in a panic.

"?"

Luka, now thoroughly squished, glanced up at Cayna's agitated expression. No one noticed how Kuu, who had been playing around on Luka's shoulder, began glowing faintly.

Opus chanted the password, and their surroundings transformed in an instant.

The group was instantly encircled by Ionic columns, and the sky filled with stars. The ground beneath them disappeared, and the group plummeted like an elevator car on a snapped wire.

To any passing villager, it looked as if they'd vanished into a misty haze. Cayna's random disappearances were already a given, so onlookers simply wondered where she was off to this time and went about their business.

"The people here are *way* too used to this..." Roxilius said to no one in particular as he watched from the window.

Meanwhile, Cayna and the others were forcibly transported to the House of Murder and Malice's main room.

"Gweh."

Her face pale, Cayna gave a small cry and held tight to Luka. As soon as she cast Float, their surroundings shifted to a sight unlike anything in the village.

They had entered the ruins of a temple where everything was a shade of pale green. Cayna and Luka gently floated to the ground while Opus gracefully alighted upon the debris without bothering to slow his descent. Cayna cocked her head in confusion when she found the wide-eyed Luka still in her arms and absorbing the new scenery. She had no idea how a non-party member could have teleported with them.

Kuu fluttered about, shouting "We flew! It's all new!" before landing in Luka's arms.

Luka's eyes turned to saucers as she took in her surroundings.

"Where... are we, Kuu?" she asked.

"I dunno!"

The fairy understood they had teleported but had apparently forgotten that this was where she'd first awoken.

Opus remained as calm as ever. A languid voice then called out to their group.

"Oh my. Is that my master I see? How audacious of you to visit after abandoning this tower. Moreover... why have you brought that morose high elf, a small human girl, and a buzzing gnat?"

"Eek?!"

A skeleton soon appeared, its hollow-eyed profile peering at the newcomers from behind a fan.

This skeleton monarch was the Guardian of the Thirteenth Skill Master Opus's tower, the House of Murder and Malice. Cayna had no clue what its actual name was.

Luka yelped and clung to Cayna. The elder girl didn't see the Guardian as anything more than a skeleton model, so it was something of a novelty to watch a regular person like Luka react. She gently embraced her daughter and stroked her hair reassuringly.

"There, there. Don't worry, Lu. She won't hurt you. Everything's fine. You can relax, okay?"

".....Mm."

Although Luka did calm down, she refused to make eye contact with the Guardian and clung to Cayna as tightly as she could.

"I cannot bear being treated the same as those measly skeletons... But no matter."

The skeleton monarch flipped open its opulent fan with an indignant shrug, then returned to its spot beside the throne, perhaps out of consideration for Luka. Its movements were utterly elegant for such a skeletal being.

"You are truly such a handful," said Opus.

The skeleton gave Opus, the source of all its woes, a good stare down. However, this didn't slow the demon's approach in the slightest.

After checking the throne and the amount of leftover magic, he topped it off with his own MP.

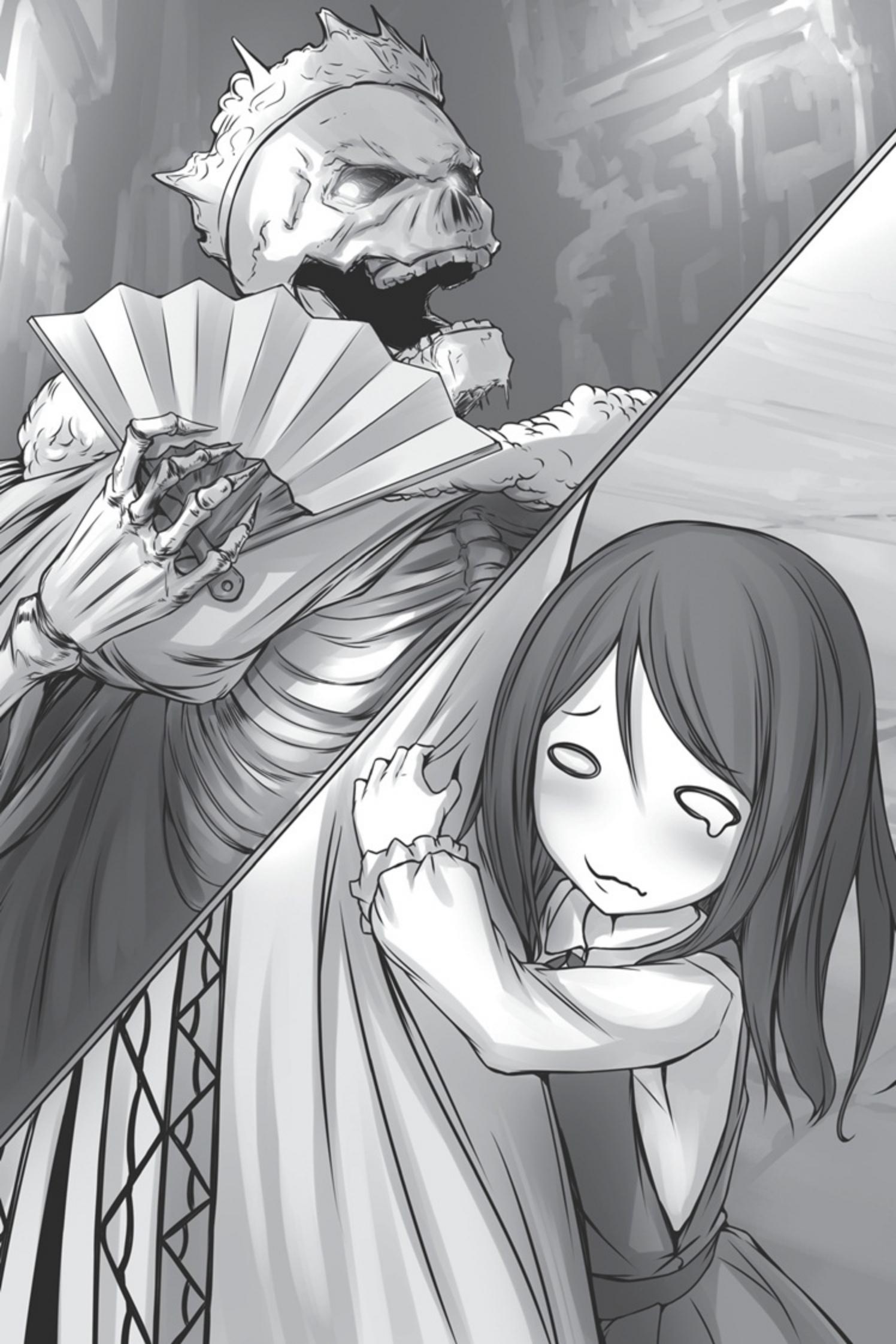
"Did anything strange happen while I was gone?" he asked.

"Only a mere trifle. That pitiful high elf over there resupplied my magic, thereby opening the entrance to the building. Around ten boorish fellows trespassed and were eliminated upon entry. They honestly believed they could challenge this tower with their levels in the single digits. What daft fools. Oh-ho-ho-ho!"

The Guardian let out a high-pitched laugh and hid its mouth behind the fan. Those "boorish fellows" were likely the last few bandits. The House of Murder and Malice had a sign at the entrance warning any who dared enter what dangers awaited them. Waltzing right in without reading it was essentially a death wish.

"This world is a lot weaker than it was in the past as a game, bar anyone whose level isn't in the triple digits. At this rate, the cleanup crew will have too much on their plates and wind up all over the place."

"Very well."



The skeletal Guardian obeyed its true master without a word of complaint. As one might expect, the original Skill Master was better than any substitute. Cayna felt bad for the Guardian in Felskeilo's Battle Arena and the white whale who had to settle for her.

At any rate, Cayna put a hand to her chest in relief now that she knew she could fly with Luka by holding her close. Guardian Rings let specific players teleport to the coordinates in a chant from any distance. If they were able to reach this tower, Cayna and Luka could no doubt teleport normally as well.

With one mystery solved, Cayna wearily realized Opus hadn't even given her a chance to refuse.

"When Roxine said '*Why not go for a stroll?*' she didn't mean outside the village..."

"I knew we could easily return. No need to rush."

What if there had been an accident while teleporting? It sounded like Opus had planned this all along, but Cayna didn't have the energy to argue. Lashing out at him would startle Luka, so she held her tongue.

It so happened that in-game teleportation accidents were the result of distortion caused by interference with the game world. Apparently, the staff didn't notice how dangerously unstable the relationship between the two dimensions was. Opus had been eliminating each distortion one by one, so they'd gradually forgotten.

It wasn't until much later that Opus and Cayna realized that with the game world now gone, teleportation accidents could no longer occur.

In any case, skeletons and zombies and other undead were the source of Luka's trauma. Cayna noticed how Luka remained stuck to her like glue, so she started to say, "Let's go outside—"

Then her surroundings changed instantaneously.

"Outside!" Kuu yipped as a green light enveloped her. Luka was stunned by the viridian fairy in her arms.

They arrived at a Guardian Tower on a small island surrounded by a lake. Based on the panoramic view, the building was clearly a waterfront property. After a moment,

Opus appeared next to Cayna seemingly out of nowhere.

The land was verdant, and the marsh air was muggy. Red tinged the border of the western sky.

Cayna used her Eagle Eye skill to pick out the spires of Helshper's castle and the city's enormous windmills off in the distance. If traveling in a straight line, the House of Murder and Malice was closer to Helshper's capital than the fortress they'd previously constructed to battle the bandits. The lake and wetlands prevented any passage via roads, so anyone interested in doing some sightseeing had to take a detour.

This was why the area was on the decline despite being considered a tourist destination. Nevertheless, many visited for a leisurely jaunt thanks to its mysterious appeal.

"See, Lu. It's okay. There's nothing to be scared of."

"...Where are we?"

Luka had been staring dazedly at Kuu, but Cayna's voice brought her back to her senses.

"We're near Helshper. The village is faaaaar west."

Patting her back lightly, Cayna prompted her to take a look around. Luka's wide eyes darted about as she absorbed the new scenery. Her reaction was no surprise. Flying from the familiar village to some old ruins before finally ending up in a marshland was bound to confuse anyone.

Cayna could teleport Luka to either Helshper or Felskeilo's capital, but their best option was to head straight back to the village. It was important to find lodging quickly, although this would mean leaving Opus behind. Honestly, going on without him would probably be fine, except she wasn't sure what sort of trouble he'd get into if she took her eyes off him. Cayna wanted to keep tabs on him, so she decided to camp out for the night.

"...We're still in a bog, though. It's too tricky to camp out here, so we'll need to walk a bit first."

"I told you to go ahead, didn't I? I'll catch up later."

“Denied. Leaving you alone in this country gives me a bad feeling.”

“...Is that your subtle way of insulting me?”

Cayna had meant it as a direct slap in the face, but Opus didn’t seem to catch on.

She then summoned Fire and Lightning Spirits, albeit less powerful ones about the size of puppies. The baby fire monkey and lightning lion cub darted around Cayna, their inherent cuteness bringing a smile to Luka’s face. The mascot-looking creatures had an irresistible charm to them, but at level 220, they were far stronger than any adventurer around.

Cayna had summoned them to help put Luka at ease, and the monkey’s flames also helped illuminate the area while the cub’s flashes of lightning kept regular people away. This didn’t frighten Luka in the least, and her wariness seemed to dissipate. She couldn’t take her eyes off them as the group continued moving along.

“You’ve already got Kuu!”

Kuu was in a foul mood for some reason, and she repeatedly bopped Cayna’s head in protest. She could certainly claim to be the group’s mascot, but she just wasn’t cut out for the job.

Once they reached a clearing in the forest, the group decided to set up camp. Opus disappeared for a short time before returning with a bundle of dead branches to use as firewood. The baby fire monkey lit these with the tiniest poke, and a bonfire soon burned bright. Players like Cayna and the others couldn’t use Charm Barriers, so they set up a large, domed Isolation Barrier overhead to ward off enemies.

Cayna took cooking ingredients out of her Item Box and left Opus to handle the rest. In the meantime, she placed blankets over herself and Luka, then handed one to Opus as well. It wasn’t particularly cold out, but there was a world of difference between having protection and not. Cayna considered bringing the beds out but nixed the idea since doing so would cause a stir if anyone saw. She always had a spare in her Item Box but stopped bringing it out after part of her realized it looked absurd outdoors.

“Good thing I put some handy camping tools in my Item Box. We caught a lucky break, even if this *is* all your fault!”

“You sound upset.”

“That’s because you got Lu involved... Argh, you’re seriously killing me!”

Opus used Water Flow: Ohta Lest (a spell that fills a container with spring water and is mostly used to create lakes and ponds in dungeons) to top off a bucket he fashioned from some nearby timber. The bucket’s contents never decreased no matter how much was taken out. Fascinated, Luka looked down at the bucket and spilled a bit of the water just to see what would happen.

The baby fire monkey and lightning cub tussled with each other at her feet. Kuu looked like she was itching to join in, but Cayna stopped her.

“You’re gonna get hurt, Kuu.”

“Awww!” the fairy protested, but Luka gently held her close.

“Let’s... go to sleep... okay?”

“Ngh...”

Kuu glanced at the two summons bitterly. Luka wrapped the fairy in a blanket with her.

Opus, meanwhile, was leisurely cooking a meal, grinning as he watched Luka and Kuu.

“Why are you looking at Lu like that?”

“So you haven’t noticed...”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Quit the mumbo jumbo for once in your life. Sheesh.”

“Duly noted. Incidentally, why not learn a bit of cooking instead of relying on skills all the time?”

“Because Cooking Skills are way more convenient...”

“Not only do they encourage binge eating, but you’ll end up using a number of ingredients never before seen in this world. You’ll stick out in the worst way if you’re not careful.”

“Shoot, seriously?”

Unfortunately, it was too little, too late; she’d already demonstrated her Cooking Skills in front of countless people. The Flame Spears and Elineh’s caravan could keep a secret, but Cayna wondered about Marelle and the rest of the villagers. She was unaware Elineh had pulled some hidden strings in return for their silence.

The round, pale moon cast a fantastical light upon the earth as a symbol of the night. It didn’t illuminate everything, but a faint glow broke through the twigs and leaves above their camp.

Who could say what would have happened to such a defenseless group if they’d been mere travelers? However, thanks to their ironclad defenses, an enemy would require their own Skill Master if they hoped to be any sort of threat.

The bonfire ran out of kindling and was already reduced to charcoal, but the baby fire monkey in the center still burned bright as it kept a sharp eye on their surroundings—although its cherubic appearance largely hindered any iota of intimidation or authority.

The lightning lion cub slowly circled Opus and Cayna as they sat around the fire monkey. Its tail was straight as a ramrod, and it kept a reasonable distance so the sparks leaping from its body wouldn’t wake anyone. The lion’s cuteness made it look like a yellow plush toy, but Cayna had played it safe. The cub was powerful enough to take out even an adventurer like Clofia with ease.

“I’m glad Lu could come with us.”

Luka was wrapped in a blanket and fast asleep in Cayna’s arms. Kuu had joined her initially, but she flew out of the covers as soon as the girl nodded off.

“That’s all thanks to Kuu,” said Opus. “You didn’t notice?”

He stared at Cayna in exasperation from his seat across the embers—that is, the baby fire monkey.

“Huh? Kuu did that?”

"Kuu did her very best," the fairy replied.

Visibly surprised, Cayna turned to Kuu, who puffed out her chest and sniffed, "Heh!"

"You can easily add Luka to your party if you make a conscious effort. The entire game system exists inside you. You can't deviate from the rules, but you may act freely within those parameters."

"...Yeah, but I have no idea how I'm supposed to make a 'conscious effort.'"

Even though Opus had explained what happened, Cayna didn't really feel like her soul was assimilated with anything. Telling her to use the system merely made things more confusing.

"Right. Open the Party Formation screen and try adding Luka."

"Um, okay. Party screen, party screen..."

She opened several screens and found the one for her party formation. Cayna and Opus were the only active members. Unsure what to do next, she paused to think.

Opus sighed at her silence and decided to lend a hand.

"Either make a wish in your head or speak a command for Luka to join your party..."

"Oh, um, right."

Cayna tried wishing first. She closed her eyes and thought *Add Lu to my party* about twenty times. However, when she opened her eyes, the window still showed just Opus and her.

Next, she said "Add Lu and Kuu to my party" out loud. This time, the window read *Cayna/Lu/Kuu/Opus*.

"Oh, it worked."

"Excellent. You'll master the process when you can do these things on instinct."

"Don't ask for the impossible when I barely have a grip on the basics."

You could originally invite someone to join your party via a touch panel, although Luka and Kuu wouldn't show up on-screen if Cayna switched to this mode. This was built by design, as players were originally the only ones who could be added to a party.

As she tried to work things out through trial and error, Cayna suddenly looked up and noticed Opus staring at her placidly from across the fire monkey.

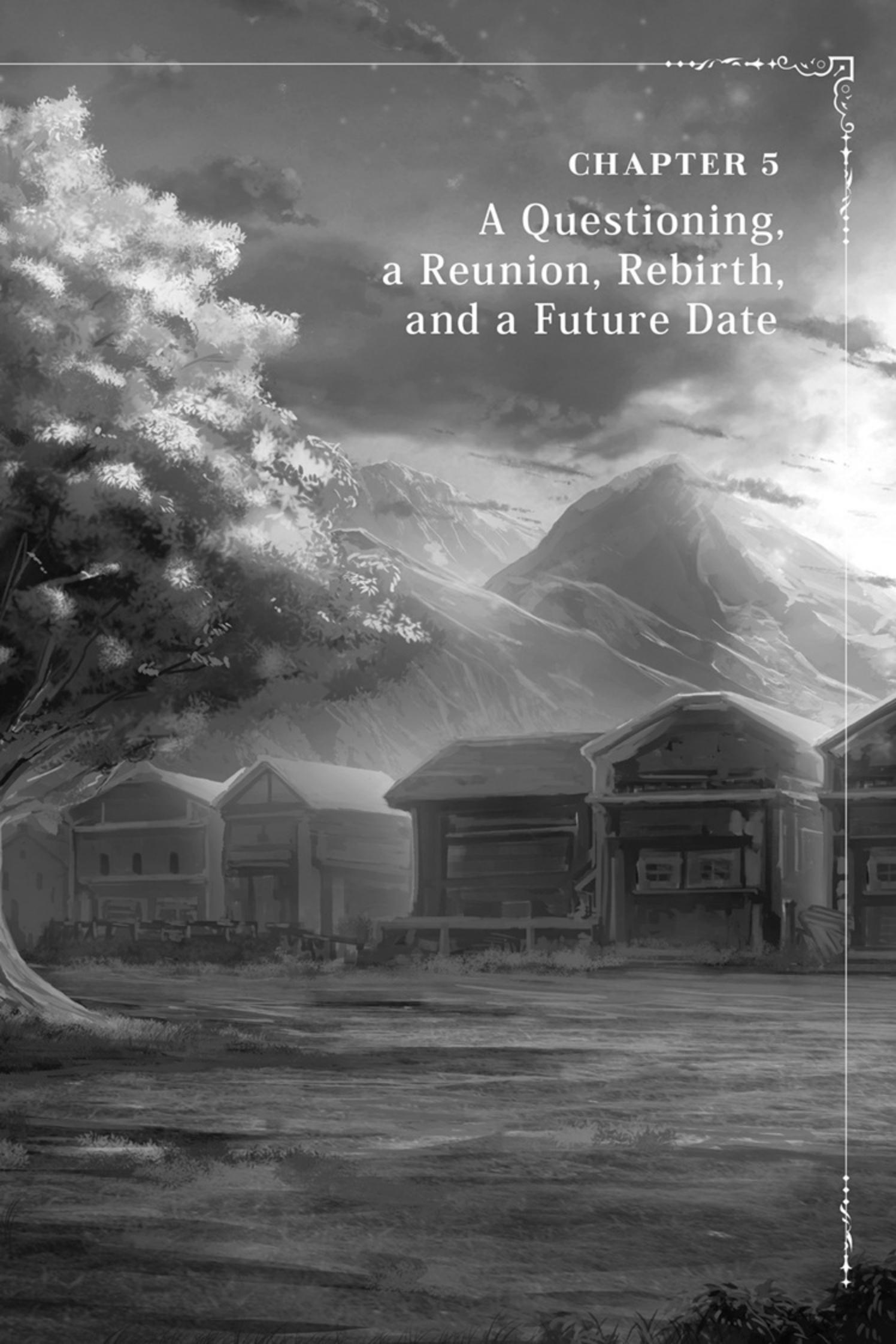
"...You seem to be having fun," she commented.

"It's entertaining to watch your expressions run the gambit as you struggle."

"I'm not here for your amusement."

Cayna's expression soured, and Opus's shoulders shook with laughter. Her reactions only encouraged him, so she wiped any emotions from her face and continued wrestling with the stats screen.

Unbeknownst to Cayna, who had chosen to ignore Opus, the demon squatted down and watched the girls in their blankets, his expression sincere. The look in his eyes was no different from a parent watching over their children.



CHAPTER 5

A Questioning,
a Reunion, Rebirth,
and a Future Date

“Hiding ‘er won’t do you any good!”

“We are not hiding anything. She is simply not home at the moment.”

Several shouts could be heard within one corner of the remote Felskeilo village. Cayna’s home was astir with angry knights trying to force their way through the gate and argue with the maid who was politely refusing them. Locals observed from a distance but didn’t intervene since the knights were too intimidating.

Early that morning, three Helshper knights had charged into the village on horseback, paying no heed to the village elder who rushed to greet them. They furiously demanded to know the whereabouts of the adventurer Cayna.

Roxilius approached the group and informed them that he was one of Cayna’s servants, at which point they rounded on him instead of the villagers. The knights’ boundless condescension on top of their sudden and outrageous arrival had already left the mild-mannered werecat on the verge of exploding.

Roxine raced to the scene as well, but Siren stepped in before the knights’ obnoxiousness sent the werecat maid into a frenzy. She was quickly interrogated in the same manner.

Meanwhile, under orders from Siren, Roxilius slipped past the knights and went around warning each household not to get involved. Cayna had instructed him to protect the village if anything happened, so he was more than eager to eliminate these worthless wretches. However, Siren urged him to hold back.

“We’re here by order of the king of Helshper. Servants oughtta know their place. Let us through.”

“As I have already mentioned, Lady Cayna is not in at the moment. What business do you have inspecting her home in her absence?”

“Weren’t you listening?! We’re here by royal decree!”

“I understand, but this village is within Felskeilo’s borders. Shouldn’t you speak with the king of Felskeilo first?”

“What nonsense. We have noble authority. Your job as a commoner is to say *As you wish.*”

In fact, the knights' ramblings and blatant abuse of authority put even the mild-mannered Siren on edge. Roxilius and Roxine were about ready to snap, and Siren now feared she might fly off the handle herself. No matter how arrogant and disrespectful these knights may have been, this was still her beloved master's castle.

A tiny cottage of a castle, but a castle nonetheless in Siren's eyes.

As the one in charge while Cayna was out, Siren did not wish to break protocol no matter who appeared at her doorstep. She couldn't bear it if she and the werecats handled the situation poorly and sullied their master's good name.

The maid kept her anguish at bay and confronted the three foolish knights with practiced composure. Suddenly, she received good news—a message from her master Opuskettenshultheimer Crosstettbomber. The short note read: "*Went to Guardian Tower. With Luka, Kuu, and Cayna. Will return after we stop by Helshper.*"

She would've preferred that he'd said something as soon as they left the village. Siren would give Opus an earful once he got back, but for the time being, she briefly informed him of the situation. His response was swift:

I told Cayna everything. The rest is up to you.

Trembling with joy now that she could finally eliminate this *enemy* in front of her, Siren locked her heart behind an emotionless iron wall and gave the irksome knights a final ultimatum.

"We have received word from our master. Lady Cayna is currently in Helshper, so she will head to the castle directly."

"Lyin' will only get ya so far. How could you get a message if you're talkin' to us right now? Quit the monkey business!"

Anyone familiar with Cayna's and Opus's maids would be praying for the knights. Without any programs weighing them down, Siren, Roxine, and Roxilius had free will and could override their masters' orders as they saw fit. To the three (Siren in particular), when Opus said "*The rest is up to you,*" what he meant was: "*Lady Cayna is already going to Helshper like they wanted, so there's no further need for a messenger.*" The fact that these knights served a nation and held a degree of authority might as well have been written on scrap paper.

Failing to read the situation, the oblivious knights stiffened as a wave of overwhelming rage rolled off the two maids and butler they'd disparaged only moments before.

Summons like Siren and the werecats possessed one-tenth of their master's skills. Although most were primarily meant for usage in daily life, they had a decent range of combat abilities as well. With a total of four hundred available, there were more than enough options to choose from.

"Take care not to kill them. Murder will likely complicate matters," Siren told the werecats.

"Understood," Roxilius replied.

"So neither dead nor alive," said Roxine. "Very well, then."

"You peasants think you can oppose us?!"

Even the combined levels of the three knights couldn't match a single maid. Going up against level-550 warriors with nothing more than their dull, non-buffed swords might be considered heroic to some, but that didn't mean it was a good idea.

Hardly a few seconds later, the knights' pitiful cries echoed across the village in triple unison. The villagers who heard them were already well aware that Cayna's staff doubled as security. Feigning innocence, they ignored the screams of the careless intruders receiving their just deserts.

"What shall we do with them?" Roxine asked Siren.

"That area is dangerous. They might meet a terrible fate if left to their own devices. We will play it safe: Bury them to their necks and place buckets over their heads."

"Understood."

And so the three knights were lined up in a corner by the village entrance with buckets over their heads.

They moaned on occasion, so the villagers kept their distance. Siren and the werecats had no intention of letting them die, however, so they gave their prisoners water and nothing else. When the buckets began to wail with apology three days later, Siren finally let them go.

After their overnight camping trip, Cayna and the others set out for Helshper. They rose before dawn, and the Fire and Lightning Spirits were sent away.

“You don’t mind stopping by Helshper, right?”

“Do as you like. I have no opinion on large cities.”

“Sounds like a plan, then. Try not to cause trouble.”

“Who do you think I am? If we encounter any issues, it won’t be on my account.”



Opus and Cayna decided to take the least conspicuous path and use Flight. They knew they'd spark a commotion if spotted and kept as low to the ground as possible. Both initially considered casting magic to summon steeds, but the ruckus from possible witnesses meant Flight was their best option. The group stopped halfway to rest when the speed and height started making Luka dizzy.

Meanwhile, Opus received word from Siren that some Helshper knights had come to retrieve Cayna. Of course, those messengers had no idea what fate awaited them.

"The knights? Maybe Caerina wants to talk about something?"

"Aiding any government authority will not end well."

"The government has nothing to do with it. Caerina is my granddaughter. I'm still not really sure how the family tree works, though."

"Your granddaughter?"

"She's the daughter of my Foster Child Mai-Mai. Caerina is a knight, so maybe she sent these guys."

"Hmm. A Foster Child, you say? I wonder whatever happened to mine."

"You submitted foster kids, too...? I wanna see 'em."

"Ah, who were they again? I don't recall."

"You're terrible."

"Never mind all that. What are you going to do about this summons from your granddaughter?"

"It'd be bad if I suddenly stopped by the knights' garrison, and the conversation dragged on, so I want to find us some lodging first. Plus, we've got Luka."

"Hmph, very well."

When the group arrived at the inn Cayna had previously stayed at with Elineh's caravan, they ran into some familiar faces.

"Hey there, miss. Fancy meetin' you here."

"Oh my, if it isn't Lady Cayna. And Lady Luka is with you as well. How rare."

"Hello, Arbiter, Elineh. It's been a while."

"Hello...." Luka said, bowing her head slightly as she held Cayna's hand. Elineh and Arbiter smiled cheerfully.

However, Arbiter's eyes narrowed suspiciously when he spotted Opus behind Cayna. The unusually tall demon sent him into high alert; the sparks flying between the two men were practically visible to the naked eye.

Nevertheless, Opus had more or less heard about Cayna's acquaintances in this world and showed no hostility. He merely returned a glare for a glare. At the same time, he combined several Active Skills that violently struck Arbiter in lieu of a greeting.

Opus just saw it as a practical joke, but Arbiter stood there sweaty and paralyzed as his body reacted to the immense force.

"?! Hey, Opus! What're you doing to Arbiter?"

"He was messing with me, so I returned the favor"

"Your idea of returning the favor is seriously terrifying. Cut it out already! Are you okay, Arbiter?"

"...Y-yeah."

By the time Cayna realized what was happening and interrupted Opus's prank, poor Arbiter looked like he had shaved several years off his life.

"Geez, Opus. Arbiter and Elineh saved my skin. Don't be rude!"

"All right, all right. No need to fuss over every little thing."

"Let's all get acquainted. This is Opus, my old friend who hangs around like a bad cold. He's kind of weird, but I swear he's not a bad guy. I hope you'll all get along."

"R-right... I was out of line, too... Sorry."

"I—I see... My name is Elineh. If there is anything you need, please do not hesitate to ask... Um, are you quite all right?"

"...Are you okay... Opus?"

"...!...?!"

After taking an elbow reinforced with STR Up and Power Boost to his unguarded solar plexus, Opus fell to the ground and was out like a light. The kind mercenaries and caravan who had just been overwhelmed and stupefied by the aftermath of his immense pressure instinctively began to fret over the demon's condition. It was sad, really. Cayna didn't notice the crowd of people trembling behind her in fear of the elbow jab she'd just unleashed. To them, it probably seemed as if Cayna had prioritized Arbiter over her old friend.

Opus, on the other hand, recovered about ten minutes later.

"Ugh, *cough*. That hurt..."

"No whining. You got what you deserved."

The attacker had the strength to pull off such a vicious attack, and the victim had the stamina to endure it. The mercenaries watched the pair's antics with half shock and half envy. Imagine the looks on their faces if they'd been told she was more powerful than when they last met.

Elineh's caravan had finished their business negotiations in town and was preparing to head out.

"Our meeting at Sakaiya was quite productive. Yet another result of being acquainted with you, Lady Cayna."

"Glad to hear it. Still, I doubt even I can convince Caerick to compromise."

"It is true the remote village weighs heavy on Sir Caerick's heart. However, I cannot help but feel I may have taken slight advantage of that sentiment."

"Wow, Elineh. You drive a hard bargain, as usual."

"My merchant nose is always sniffing for potential profit. Do you have business with

Sakaiya as well, Lady Cayna?"

"No, I'm here for something else. The Helshper knights summoned me apparently."

"You came all the way out here for that? And brought the little lady with ya?"

"I figure it'll help Lu with her social skills. A trip now and then is a great way to gain experience."

"Oh yeah?"

"I suppose you are unaware, Sir Arbiter, but expanding one's worldview is crucial to developing a keen eye."

"Um, I never said I wanted to make Lu a merchant."

Their lively conversation continued, and Cayna arranged to return to the village with Elineh if their schedules lined up.

"Well, I'd rather not, but I better get going. Lu, stay with Opus. Kuu, watch over Lu. Elineh, Arbiter, I'm sorry for the trouble. Thanks for your help."

"Not at all. Please leave everything to us."

"Go right ahead. You've got nothin' to worry about, miss. We might be a bunch of bumpkins, but my men can babysit like pros."

""""Think again, boss!""""

Arbiter's joke sparked protests from his men, which soon turned into howls of laughter.

"See you later... Mommy Cayna."

"Leave it to Kuu!"

"I doubt things will come to this, but let me know if you run into any trouble," said Opus. "Depending on how the situation plays out, I can blast away the castle and buy you time to escape."

“Are you insane?!”

Leaving Luka with Opus and Kuu, Cayna headed out with a sigh.

“Why’s she so bummed?” Arbiter asked curiously.

“Let’s just say this isn’t the first time she’s been reluctant to accept a political quest,” Opus answered, speaking as Cayna’s longtime companion.

Back when Leadale was still a game, quests solicited by aristocratic NPCs often rubbed players the wrong way. They led to unsettling discoveries like the real reason some people ended up in servitude or how the aristocracy viewed dissidents. Such quests were meant to limit the number of Skill Masters since the Admins had been concerned that they were getting preferential treatment.

Given the exorbitant number of quests, some were bound to deliver a harsh dose of reality. Even Opus didn’t have a hand in every single one. By the time the game ceased operation, that number had reached over 4,500.

Once he saw Cayna off, Opus had his own plans in mind.

“I suppose I’d better get going.”

“Okay...”

“Oh, are you leaving as well, Sir Opus?”

“I’m going to the Adventurers Guild to get my registration card.”

“You still ain’t a guild member?! Cayna’s friends sure love the quiet life!”

“I had no need for it before. I’ll likely be traveling internationally from now on instead of holing up somewhere, so I’ve decided to register just in case.”

The registration card was a form of identification. Since Opus didn’t plan on participating in the guild anyway, he saw it more like a student ID.

He was here now. As long as his friends and acquaintances knew this, he was satisfied.

Still, Opus couldn't say what might happen in the future, so registering was a form of insurance. Cayna would be mad if he didn't take advantage of half the card's purpose, though...

"Oh yeah? Go ahead and mention the Flame Spears. It'll spare you the paperwork and havin' to explain yourself."

"Thanks. Are you sure, though? We've only just met."

"You're old friends with her, so she must like ya well enough. Don't sweat it!"

Even if Cayna was the primary reason, Opus was glad Arbiter trusted him so much. He was equally thrilled she'd made such good friends.

In any case, just as Opus went to leave the inn, something tugged the hem of his clothes and made him stumble. When he turned around, the demon found Luka staring up at him like an abandoned puppy.

"Where are... you going?"

"Just to the Adventurers Guild. I'll be back soon, okay?"

"I'll... come, too..."

"Kuu, too! Kuu's gonna come, too!"

It wasn't like Opus could brush off Cayna's request to watch her, but he felt bad for Elineh, who had been given the same responsibility. Just as he was wondering what to do, Elineh and Arbiter smiled cheerfully and showed her out the door.

"You'd feel better with someone more familiar. Right, little miss?"

"Yes, although Lady Cayna requested our aid, we are not so small-minded that we would take offense over a matter like this."

"Right. Sorry for the trouble."

Anyone who knew Opus would be dumbfounded by such docility. He bowed to Elineh and Arbiter, hoisted Luka onto his shoulders, and left the lodging. Kuu flew in front of Luka and pointed at Opus's horns.

“You can grab these!”

“Huh...?” Luka’s eyes darted between Kuu’s outstretched finger and Opus’s horns.

“You’re Cayna’s, all right...,” he murmured in reply to the fairy’s brazen instructions as he gave Luka permission to grab his horns.

“It doesn’t... hurt?”

“Not if you don’t deliberately twist them. Just be careful if I turn around to look behind me.”

“...O-okay.”

She timidly grabbed his horns, and Opus smirked.

The size, height, and curve of a demon’s horns were determined in Character Creation mode. Of course, these settings were permanent and could not be edited later on. Opus’s horns were straight and extended behind his temples at a diagonal. In the Game Era, demon players sported a variety of styles such spiral sheep horns, goat horns, or deer antlers. However, these numbers dwindled over time. Despite a demon’s incredible stats, there were also terrible drawbacks.

Mindful of Luka, Opus limited his head movements as he searched for the trio of white towers that made up the Adventurers Guild. According to Arbiter, they just had to head straight down the main avenue from the lodging and continue west.

Sure enough, the guild was easy enough to find. Opus effortlessly weaved between foot traffic and entered the building.

They found themselves in a spacious, empty room. Employees stood behind the counter, but neither hide nor hair of any adventurer was to be seen.

“Guess it doesn’t matter,” Opus muttered to himself as he set Luka down. He approached the counter.

“Welcome to the Helshper Adventurers Guild. How may I help you?”

“I want to register as an adventurer. The leader of the Flame Spears already told me what to expect.”

Arbiter hadn't explained anything, but Opus knew the rules from his visits to the Adventurers Guild in the dungeon town.

"Oh, an acquaintance of Mr. Arbiter. Well then, please fill out the necessary information on this form," she said, handing him a pencil and paper.

He was relieved to cut through the needless tutorial as expected and get straight to the point, but why did she immediately believe him without a shred of proof? Opus sensed the employee was a bit naive, but saying so would only bring the issue to her attention. Since none of it was really any of his concern, Opus quickly abandoned the thought. He entered his name (the whole thing) and his race. He marked his occupation as "warrior" since it was a safe choice and submitted the form.

The girl behind the counter briefly checked his paperwork, then handed him a number placard.

"Please wait just a moment. I will create your identification card," she said before taking the document and disappearing into the back room.

Cayna had to wait an entire day for hers, but the process was brief here. Maybe the employees just didn't have much else to do.

While Opus was at the front desk, Luka and Kuu stared blankly at the wall of requests.

Since the fairy didn't have to worry about unwanted attention, she fluttered and danced around Luka. As the girl skimmed over any sentences and letters she couldn't read with the occasional puzzled gesture, she felt a hand on her head.

Opus approached Luka from behind and lightly put her on his shoulders so she could see the endless wall of requests at eye level.

"Find anything interesting?"

"...I can't... read that one..."

"Hmm."

Opus followed Luka's finger to one request in particular. Perhaps due to the game's influence, the local language used hiragana, katakana, and occasionally kanji. Kanji was often used in the guilds, but since the literacy rate wasn't very high, you could

bring a request to the reception desk and have it read to you. Hiragana and katakana were no issue for Luka thanks to Roxilius's lessons. The request in question included kanji.

"Read it to her," Opus told Kuu, who was close enough to lick the paper.

"Got it!" she replied before peeling herself away to carry out his command.

As ditzy as she appeared, Kuu was integrated with the subsystem. The fairy was by no means stupid.

However, Luka grew visibly depressed as Kuu read to her. She must have felt like she lost somehow since the tiny fairy could read so much faster than her.

"Keep at it," Opus mumbled as he patted her head.

After that, Kuu taught Luka every character she didn't know.

For a while, the pair's question-and-answer session was the only sound in the empty guild. However, a sudden noise from the open doorway cut through the silence.

"Agh, geez. That was awful... Huh...?"

"...Oh."

The newcomer was a fiery woman in light leather armor who had *exhaustion* written all over her face. She carried a saber at her waist and a whip around her arm. And most importantly, she was one of the few people Luka knew.

At the same time, Opus and the others were hard to miss since they were standing right in the middle of the guild. Quolkeh looked momentarily surprised and cheerfully waved to Luka.

"Hey there, if it isn't Luka. It's been a while. How've ya been?"

"...Good."

"Looks like you're not with Cayna today. Who's your demon friend?"

“...This is... Opus. He’s... Mommy Cayna’s... friend.”

Quolkeh’s eyes narrowed at first, but Luka’s stilted speech softened her expression. Cayna had given Opus a basic rundown of all the players she’d met in this world so far, so he had no intention of criticizing Quolkeh’s reaction. He was aware he might be treated with suspicion. However, Luka spared him any roundabout explanations.

Opus zeroed in on Quolkeh and used Search to confirm her level and other data. This went smoothly enough, but problems arose when Quolkeh called to her friend outside.

“Hey, Exis, what’s the holdup?! Luka’s here.”

“You’re the one who went runnin’ on ahead. I’m not as fast as you. Think about how I feel for a second.”

A grumbling gray dragoid soon appeared beside his partner and went to greet the little friend he hadn’t seen in so long.

The instant he laid eyes on the tall demon with her...

Whoosh!! Clang!!

...he crashed to the floor.

The *whoosh* was the sound of his legs slipping out from under him, and the *clang* was his armor slamming into the ground. The whole sequence was incredibly fluid, and it wouldn’t be strange at all to find out this living person was actually a puppet whose strings had just been cut. Quolkeh and Luka were dumbfounded.

“Exis?!”

“...?!”

Quolkeh crouched down to check if Exis was still breathing. Frozen solid by this unexpected development, Luka clung to Opus’s horns. Meanwhile, the demon calmly strode over to Exis and called out to him from overhead.

“You alive, Tartaroast?”

“.....Dammit, O-Opus... Why are *you* here?”

"For the same reasons as you two, I'd imagine. I'm shocked the possibility didn't even occur to you, Tartaroast."

"...I keep tellin' ya, it's *Tartarus*, not Tartaroast! Anyway, that ain't me anymore!"

Exis was lying flat on the ground but nimbly jumped up and tried to snap at Opus.

Of course, Opus predicted the dragoid's movements and was already a safe distance away by the time Exis sprang into action. Besides, Opus couldn't risk exposing Luka to danger.

It was clear he had no idea what Cayna's rage entailed.

...Exis, that is.

"I see, so you're 'Exis' now. Very well, then. By the way, how long do you intend to remain hostile? I don't appreciate you worrying Luka unnecessarily."

"Ngh, that's dirty. How dare you kidnap Luka!"

Exis growled threateningly as Opus stood there with his arms crossed. The demon shrugged and let the intimidation roll right off him.

Nevertheless, he noticed the petrified Luka on his shoulders and glowered at Exis. Sensing something perilous in that calm and collected stare, the dragoid backed off. The alarm bells in his head soon went silent.



Quolkeh vaguely understood the men knew each other and tapped her partner's shoulder as the two continued to stare each other down.

"Relax, Exis. This guy is one of us, right? There's no point in fighting each other."

"I see. So someone here is capable of reason."

"Yeah. The name's Quolkeh. If you need anything, just ask."

Opus gave Quolkeh's outstretched hand a firm shake and introduced himself with a nasty grin.

"I'm Opuskettenshultheimer Crosstettbomber. *Opus* is fine. I'm a Skill Master like Cayna. The Thirteenth."

"Huh? A Skill Master...?"

"Watch yourself around him," Exis warned. "He's Leadale's Kongming and just as notorious as Cayna."

"WHAAAAA—?!"

As soon as Exis mentioned Opus's infamous alias, the shocked Quolkeh withdrew her handshake and scurried away.

"Don't interrupt, Exis. I finally met someone who wasn't aware of my double life."

"How many people have you stabbed in the back with that fake smile?"

"Who knows? I've lost count. After all, no matter how many I slaughter, my heart feels nothing for the masses."

"Eeeek?!"

Kuu cackled as Quolkeh backed away even farther with terror in her eyes.

"Keh-keh-keh. I see I'm not very popular."

"Don't... fight..."

Ever the peacekeeper, Luka tugged the collar of Opus's coat. He chuckled at her timid attempt to mediate and kindly patted her head from her seat atop his shoulders.

"You heard our friend. We shouldn't act so unseemly in front of a child, correct? This isn't the game world. Even I don't intend to behave recklessly."

"Huh? That's a lot comin' from you, Mr. Whatever the Hell I Please," Exis spat.

Quolkeh also couldn't believe what she was hearing from one of the game world's Most Wanted and curiously thought that he was somehow different from what she'd expected.

The duo's reactions went unnoticed as Opus surveyed the deserted guild lobby.

"Is this guild always so empty?"

"Huh? Oh yeah, about that..."

"It's pretty straightforward. There's an upcoming tourney in Felskeilo. Any adventurer confident enough to take on the challenge has already headed over. The rest either take in-town requests only or just aren't interested."

According to Quolkeh, "town-only" adventurers gathered in the morning. Local requests were directly paid by the client, so aside from the odd workaholic, no one approached the Adventurers Guild once they finished for the day. This explained why no one else was around. For Exis and Quolkeh, it was a good chance to take on urgent requests.

"A tourney... Hmph, I see. Aren't you both going to join in?"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, what're you sayin'? We're at a way higher level than today's adventurers. It'd be like shooting fish in a barrel. You'd better not enter, either. Tell Cayna the same thing. She's level 1,100; no one stands a chance against her."

Cayna had actually grown stronger since she and Exis last met, but Opus felt no need to share this.

"Understood. Thanks for the tip."

The reception desk called Opus's name and gave him his registration card.

"Wow..." Luka said with visible delight as he twirled the card in his hand.

Caught up in the moment, Opus captivated her and the guild employees by using his new registration like a magician's deck of cards.

"Hey, hey, hey! What do you think you're doin'?!"

"Hmph. We have plenty of time on our hands. No harm in taking a short break."

"What's that got to do with puttin' on a magic show?!"

Exis always had a snappy comeback up his sleeve. This was no surprise coming from the man once called the Cream Cheese guild's "voice of reason." The dragoid was reminded of his suffering back in the old days.

After bringing a brief moment of joy to the deserted guild, Opus turned on his heel as if to say *Well, my job here is done*. He gave a casual good-bye and went to leave. Still riding on his shoulders, Luka turned around and waved bye-bye to the pair. Kuu waved her arms wildly.

Quolkeh smiled and returned the gesture, but Exis suddenly realized something and took several steps before calling out to Opus from behind.

"Hey, where's Cayna?"

"She came with us, but she's running a small errand right now. She has a habit of getting into all sorts of trouble if you take your eyes off her."

Cayna had found herself in plenty of pickles back when Exis was Tartarus. He paused for a moment of silence in her honor, then nodded sympathetically.

"I mean, she's even got a great-grandkid now, so yeah... By the way, Opus: Feel free to hit me up if you ever need a hand. I still owe you one from our guild days."

"How honest of you, considering you're a different person now."

"Shut up. I wouldn't feel right leavin' things this way."

"In that case, I suppose I'll be calling on you soon enough. Prepare yourself."

They joked and parted ways on friendly enough terms, but Exis later felt a tinge of regret.

“Damn, he’s got somethin’ terrifying up his sleeve...”

“You’re the one who blindly offered,” Quolkeh replied wearily.

Trembling with an ominous premonition, Exis had no choice but to wait and see.

Meanwhile, Cayna arrived at the castle as requested and stated her business to the gatekeeper.

“I’m the adventurer Cayna. Your knights invited me here.”

“Just a moment, please; I’ll confirm your arrival.”

“Thank you very much.”

She had assumed she’d be brusquely sent away but was surprised by the civil response.

Back in the game, I would’ve gotten some obnoxious reply like Get away from the castle, you peasant.

“Perhaps it is because Lady Caerina is an instructor here?”

As a former guild headquarters, the castle gate had a watchtower built on top. In addition to the guard in front of her, Cayna could feel eyes unpleasantly observing her from above.

I’m being waaaatched.

“That is the role of gatekeepers. It is best to accept it.”

Yeah, but still...

While Cayna chatted with Kee, she used Search to take a peek at the stats of the soldiers around the gate. Most hovered around level 10. If a low-level quest boss

attacked at that very moment, the soldiers would get their butts kicked.

I sure hope no more event bosses run wild...

"I must agree."

Leadale's game system was undoubtedly behind those incidents as well. When Cayna remembered Luka's village, she was racked with guilt.

"That was not your fault, Cayna."

Maybe, but whenever I think about it...

The actual cause was a distortion in the Abandoned Capital's barrier, but she was not aware of this yet.

After about thirty minutes of waiting (by Kee's calculations), a familiar face finally appeared.

"I apologize for selfishly asking you to come all this way, Grandmother."

Caerina bowed to Cayna in full view of the gatekeepers. Of course, those in the watchtower also shot the high elf inquisitive looks that seemed to ask *Who is she?*

Still, Caerina was a knight instructor. Such an elevated position ensured every castle employee knew her. If this visitor was worthy of Caerina's deference, no one could protest regardless of their suspicions. If this was her granddaughter's scheme all along, it painted a frightening picture of the future.

Unable to bear Caerina's repetitive nodding any longer, Cayna tried to stop her by getting straight down to business.

"Okay, okay. Enough apologizing, Caerina. I'll look really suspicious if someone of your stature grovels like that. Or maybe you just called me here to apologize, and I can go home now?"

"Ahhh, I-I'm sorry. It seems I've embarrassed myself."

Caerina gave one last bow before ordering the guards to open the service entrance beside the main gate and inviting Cayna inside.

“Please, right this way. There is something I wish to ask of you in private.”

“A request?”

Clueless as to what it might be, Cayna tilted her head and followed her granddaughter. Caerina led her into the castle and proceeded to cut straight through it. Along the way, the ladies-in-waiting and soldiers bowed to Caerina but always appeared mystified as soon as they noticed Cayna behind her.

Feeling very much like a fish out of water, Cayna shivered.

“Are you unwell, Grandmother?”

“No, no, it’s just obvious I’m on the Away Team.”

“Away Team’?”

“Oh, nothing, just thinking out loud. Don’t mind me.”

Caerina had apparently been watching Cayna closely despite facing forward the entire time. Her impeccable hospitality was truly impressive.

Just as Cayna wondered where her granddaughter was taking her, they continued straight through the castle and past a door until they were once again outside.

“Here?”

“Yes, that’s right. The training grounds are over that way.”

“Training grounds? I hope you’re not going to ask for a demonstration.”

“Oh no. I’d like to ask for your help with something else, Grandmother. I am quite interested in your ancient arts, however.”



As she said this, the sparkle in Caerina's eyes went far beyond interest. Cayna also wanted to know what would happen if she tried to pass on her skills but was reluctant to experiment after Lopus's failure.

"I can't just walk out now. Don't tell me that's why you brought me all this way?"

Cayna's shoulders drooped as she stared up at Caerina with reproach. The knight hastily clarified.

"Of course not. I would never dream of deceiving you, Grandmother."

It wasn't like Caerina intended to force unreasonable demands on her grandmother, but the way she had antagonized a response rubbed Cayna the wrong way. The general trend of quests she'd accepted from royals, nobles, and other elites in the past added to her sulkiness.

Call such quests an acquired taste if you will, but everything about them was absolutely foul. Each used the player's moral conscience against them, and if you refused, a beloved NPC would be taken hostage. Upon completion of these quests, players flooded the forums with messages like "*I wanna beat the crap out of whatever writer came up with that scenario. Disgusting.*" and "*The Admins will feel my wrath.*" The volume became so great, it was feared their deep-seated resentment would give rise to something horrendous. Cayna was incredibly relieved *Leadale* was just a game, and such examples were precisely why it was no exaggeration to say Cayna wasn't the only one with a distaste for royal and noble quests.

Nonetheless, she mostly wanted to hurry back so she could keep an eye on Opus. After all, who knew what kind of mischief he was getting into?

Luka was also with him, so this made Cayna even more nervous. She had asked Kuu to keep Opus in line but could just imagine the two cackling together. Her stomach twisted into knots.

At any rate, Cayna's sole mission was to finish up here as quickly as possible. She had to inevitably accept that Opus's very existence was cause for concern.

"Castles are massive no matter where you go, huh?"

"The vast scale exudes a sense of authority. Ah, over this way."

Cayna wasn't the least bit tired, but she'd grown bored of the long, repetitive scenery. Just as she was about to complain and ask how much farther, Caerina pointed ahead at their presumed destination.

The extensive area Caerina called the training grounds was much like a stadium. Raucous voices rang out, and a large group of lightly equipped soldiers stood in a circle. Something was going on.

As the two approached, they could hear jeers and a few scattered cheers. When the girls were finally close enough, the soldiers noticed Caerina and immediately stood at attention.

“Instructor! We apologize!”

“At ease. You're still on break, aren't you? Is he still in the center?”

“Yes. The situation hasn't changed.”

Caerina offered a dazzling smile, and the soldiers stiffened even more with a collective blush. She seemed to be a celebrity among her subordinates. Cayna followed Caerina as the knight parted the crowd, and they drew close enough to see what was happening at the center.

Two people were in the middle of a mock battle. The soldiers around them shouted things like “Get 'im!” and “You're goin' down!”

One fighter was the (presumed) knight captain Cayna had seen before. A bearded man in his prime, he had intervened just as Cayna was about to finish off his opponent. His opponent, on the other hand, was a grimy, bloodied man who fell to the knight's practice sword. His familiar horns and tanned skin told Cayna he was the bandit leader she'd bested earlier.

Gritting his teeth, he endured the agony and forced himself to stand up. He picked up his practice sword, then faced the knight captain. However, the sway of his feeble body made it clear these efforts were in vain. The captain repelled him with one simple swing, and the bandit leader went flying.

Even with the Punishment Collar, a player just under level 40 wouldn't be expected to lose so easily. Moreover, level 10 or so should have been more than enough for a demon like him to put up a fight.

“Um, isn’t this abuse?”

“No, not at all.”

Still unsure why she was called here, Cayna sought an explanation from Caerina.

“I invited him to join our ranks.”

“Pulling crazy stunts again, eh...? He’s probably gonna betray you.”

“Unfortunately, he has been quite compliant.”

“Huh...”

Cayna’s gaze instinctively shifted to the collapsed demon player. What change of heart had this man who wailed so loudly back then undergone?

“Grandmother, are you aware of the vicious monsters that have been appearing in the countryside lately? If we do nothing, the citizens will be in danger.”

Yeah, I’m well aware!

A snarky comment popped into Cayna’s mind, but her expression gave nothing away. For someone like her who had way more than an inkling of what was going on, Caerina’s report was old news.

In all likelihood, the monsters were spilling out from the Abandoned Capital. Caerina didn’t say they ever lost, so the monsters appearing in Helshper were supposedly ones she and the knights could handle.

Come to think of it, I forgot to ask Opus the details about the Abandoned Capital...

“.....”

Kee didn’t voice his thoughts. Considering his connection to Opus, they likely shared a certain level of information, but something appeared to be preventing Kee from telling Cayna what that connection was.

Caerina watched Cayna stand there in perturbed silence. She seemed to understand where her grandmother’s mind was.

"He accepted our offer without question, and this is how we've been refining his character. Initially, he snapped at everyone and lived to antagonize. However, he never lost heart no matter how many times he was struck down. As you can see, he is now well accepted among our number."

A few shouts of encouragement could be heard among the crowd as well. "Do your best" and "Nice!" were fine enough, but the purpose of "Go, go, go!" was up for debate.

"Grandmother, I would like you to unlock his full potential."

"...In other words, you're asking me to take off his Punishment Collar?"

"Yes. You live in the remote village, Grandmother, and I wish to treasure those residents by defending this nation. Enlisting this man's aid will prove to be one way to combat this monstrous threat."

There was a fire burning in Caerina's eyes. Cayna shrugged.

"I handed him over to you in the first place. It's your call, really."

"! Well, then!"

After this offhand response, Cayna left her ecstatic granddaughter behind and approached the knights. The captain was the first to notice, and he stayed his weapon. The demon player didn't see Cayna since he was staring at the ground trying to catch his breath.

"Mind if I step in?" Cayna asked.

"Not at all," the captain replied with a slight bow.

He glanced at Cayna as she entered the ring. When Caerina followed her, the soldiers stood at attention and saluted. She commanded them to be at ease, and Cayna walked over to the trembling demon who still hadn't looked up.

"Hey there."

"...Huh?"

The demon player slowly answered her voice. The moment he saw Cayna, he tripped

over his own two feet in fear and fell on his backside. His face was ashen, and his teeth audibly chattered. This was an understandable reaction when you were suddenly toe to toe with someone who had previously demolished you in both body and soul.

Cayna raised a hand as she drew closer to the terrified demon player. Her hand glowed with a blue light, and the soldiers looked on nervously. Most thought she was going to kill him; however, they were mistaken. Caerina was certain Cayna would never do such a thing and restrained the soldiers who tried to rush to his defense.

When Cayna's outstretched hand touched the utterly terrified demon, she cleared away all the dirt and grime with Purity and healed his wounds with Dewl.

The two spells left the rookie soldier looking freshly groomed, and the others stared in mute amazement. This was on account of the feat Cayna had just pulled, of course.

"Get up."

"...Eh?" The cowering demon hesitantly looked up at Cayna. "...You're not gonna... finish me off?"

"Listen, Caerina's the one who turned you into a soldier. I'll look like the bad guy if I just do whatever I want. You think that'd be fun for me? Come on, get up already!"

The stupefied player obeyed Cayna and slowly rose. She did a circle around him, then said, "Looks like you're all healed up" with a satisfied nod.

The demon had no idea what was going on and jolted when she reached for the black collar around his neck. He jumped back to escape.

"Wh-why?"

"I was asked to take it off."

"A-are you sure that's a good idea...? If—if you take it off... I-I'll probably kill people again..." the demon player said nervously, his expression taut.

Cayna responded to this self-damnation by casting several Active Skills and throwing him a dark stare.

"In that case, I'll turn you to charcoal where you stand..."

“Grandmother... I must ask you to refrain from such behavior.”

A clearly unsettled Caerina stepped in to intervene. Cayna canceled her skills with a sigh, then jabbed a finger right in front of the demon’s nose.

“My granddaughter owns you, so I can’t punish you *my* way. But remember this: I released you because Caerina has faith in you. If you mess up again, my friend and I will erase you from this world!”

“Y-yeah...”

“Well? Do you understand me or not?”

“I... I understand.”

“Got it. Great. You better be grateful to Caerina for the rest of your life.”

The demon player nodded meekly, and Cayna touched his collar. When she murmured “The Third Skill Master releases you,” it fell away instantly.



Cayna caught the collar and put it away in her Item Box. The demon player gingerly touched his own neck, and upon confirming the collar was gone, realized he was free and fell to the ground in exhausted relief.

Several soldiers around him exclaimed, “All right!” and “Good for you!” His attitude had apparently won them over.

“Thank you, Grandmother.”

“Don’t mention it. Anyway, let me know me if this guy causes any trouble. I know someone who can help me obliterate him from existence.”

“There will be no such need... At the very least, please keep it strictly to corporal punishment.”

“Forget me—it’s my friend you’ll have to worry about.”

Caerina could make such mild requests because she had no clue, but Opus didn’t exactly have the patience of a saint. There was no question that Cayna’s and his combined destructive power could wipe out an entire nation. Sometimes ignorance was bliss.

She suddenly remembered something and turned back to the demon player who was getting mobbed by the soldiers. He flinched in surprise, his cheek twitching.

“By the way, I never got the chance to ask your name. I’m Cayna. What’s yours?”

“U-um, it’s Luvrogue...,” the demon stuttered. He offered a smile that belied his earlier gruffness.

“Luvrogue? Like, ‘Rogue of Love’? Fancyyyy,” Cayna teased.

“Wha—?! N-n-n-n-n-no! That’s not it! It don’t mean nothin’! I just thought the name sounded cool!” Luvrogue protested, his face bright red.

Cayna suppressed a giggle. Given his flustered response, someone back in the game or elsewhere had undoubtedly made similar comments.

Her light ribbing broke the tension in a heartbeat. Caerina, the knight captain, and the rest of the soldiers couldn’t stop themselves from gawking in shock at this new,

relaxed vibe.

"Shucks, Mr. Rogue of Love, sounds like you've got your work cut out for you. Maybe I ought to offer you a Name Change."

"H-hell no! Not a chance! Don't you dare!"

"C'mon, don't be shy."

"I said noooo!!"

Luvrogue's tantruming and Cayna's amused instigating left everyone on the training grounds overwhelmed.

"I'm heading home. Keep a close eye on him for me."

"I will, Grandmother. Thank you for your help."

"Hey, Mr. Rogue of Love."

"It's *Luvrogue!*"

"You won't get another chance, so don't even think about going back to your bandit ways. The Silver Ring Witch Cayna and Kongming of Leadale Opus will swoop down to destroy you, so watch out."

"Eek?!"

With her business concluded, Cayna went to exit the training grounds when she stopped halfway and uttered the most feared names in the Game Era as a warning to Luvrogue. His reaction was priceless. Mute and pale, Luvrogue began sweating and trembling from head to toe.

Caerina offered to show Cayna out, but the knight captain said he'd go himself and saw Cayna off. Caerina used this sudden free moment to ask Luvrogue a question that had been on her mind.

"Was Grandmother famous in the old days?"

“‘F-famous’ don’t begin to describe it. She’s the Silver Ring Witch and Meteoric Hazard that rumors say annihilated the Brown Kingdom...”

“I see,” Caerina murmured. She yanked on Luvrogue’s ear.

“Ow-ow-ow-ow-ow?! What’re you doing?! ”

“You may be a soldier, but you’d best watch your language. First and foremost, I shall teach you basic manners. Not to worry. I’ve had no troublesome subordinates lately, so we have all the time in the world.”

“...Huh? Eh? What?”

As soon as Caerina stared him down, the quivering Luvrogue didn’t even have a chance to mention the level difference between them. If he wanted to mitigate the pain in his ear, he’d have no choice but to be dragged along. The soldiers watching this scene play out were very familiar with their instructor’s no-nonsense attitude and looked on sympathetically. A few paused for a moment of silence.

“Wonder how long he can keep up that spunk...”

“Less than three days.”

“I give him five.”

“Nice, wanna bet on it?”

“A bet, huh? How about one silver per day?”

“I’m in. I bet two days.”

“I’ll guess three maybe?”

Seconds later, the bets were rolling in. Without their superiors around, it wasn’t long before the training grounds became a makeshift gambling den.

It remained unclear whether Luvrogue’s spirit ended up shattered into many pieces.

"Up to the castle gate is fine."

"I see," replied the knight captain, a little too close for comfort. He dismissed Cayna's annoyed stare and continued as if he hadn't heard a thing. "There is something I wish to ask. May I?" he questioned calmly.

"I'll answer if I can," Cayna said with a reluctant nod. She was pretty confused and had no idea what a knight captain would need to ask of an adventurer.

"It's about that man's swordplay. His technique is entirely wrong. Was no proper education available two hundred years ago?"

"...Huh?"

Not sure what he was getting at, Cayna tilted her head. The knight captain clenched his fist and went on passionately.

"His movements are erratic. If that was the only issue, I'm certain his skills could rival even the instructor's. However, when it comes to the way of the sword, I daresay he is not even a beginner! I cannot fathom how he has survived for two hundred years!"

The gatekeepers stared in wide-eyed shock when they heard their superior's ardent speech. Cayna was startled at first, too, but she was relieved to know there were still some people out there willing to drop the pretense and just talk to her.

This knight captain wanted to help Luvrogue improve, but she had difficulty answering his question. After all, even if Cayna told him the truth, she doubted he would understand.

The reason was simple: Luvrogue only had rudimentary set moves.

In the VRMMO *Leadale*, players had basic attack patterns set according to their race.

Dragoids were loose and powerful. Werecoats were quick and agile. Elves were nimble and precise. Humans and demons were efficient and reliable. High elves were dependent on weapons and pretty pathetic overall, which was partly why they were so rare.

Things started out this way, but as the players' pleas for more grew louder, they were eventually able to mod their own attack animations.

The road to progress wasn't an easy one. Race-specific animations were initially tossed out, and Character Creation was updated so players could choose whichever set they wanted. Later on, set moves from multiple races could be combined, but this often resulted in wonky movements and quickly went obsolete. Then, by the fourth or fifth attempt, character animations were finally left entirely up to the player. Not only could each person make their own custom set, but they could download others. This jump in freedom created an immediate explosion of possibilities. Of course, the original starters were also available, so less creatively inclined players had no room to complain, either.

Cayna remembered how a wave of new moves inundated the *Leadale* Link Resources forum right after the update. From the delightfully imaginative to complete overkill, there was no end to the madness. The ones derived from history or authentic sword techniques were no issue. However, terrible ideas based on novels, manga, anime, period dramas, and *tokusatsu*, as well as embarrassing names made up by otaku that clearly stuck in middle school, also came pouring in.

Cayna had naturally downloaded a few moves as well, and her options were split roughly fifty-fifty between comical and serious. From what she could tell, Luvrogue's avatar never used these additional animations, which explained his stilted movements. Of course, it was still possible to wield your weapon of choice without them. That being said, it was unlikely even 1 percent of total players had mastered swordplay in real life. This was why Luvrogue looked like a clumsy amateur. Even if he customized his moves to a T, any master swordfighter would almost certainly claim that his techniques left a lot to be desired.

Cayna's own techniques were a combination of several skills and whatever moves she had learned during her no-holds-barred contests with Arbiter. Such ability was a testament to her Skill Master title, and Cayna tweaked them when necessary. In truth, her magic was leagues more threatening anyway.

"Use whatever training you guys think will whip him into shape," she said before leaving the castle. She couldn't really think up a better excuse. Luvrogue's future was now in his own hands, so she was better off minding her own business. In other words, she passed the buck.

Cayna was worried about Opus and had planned to head straight back, but she ended

up stopping by Caerick's place instead.

"Are you sure you can stay, Grandmother? Don't you have other business to attend to?"

"No worries. We got interrupted before, right? It's high time I made it up to you."

"I appreciate the gesture... but please don't push yourself."

"Roger that."

After that, Cayna focused on processing the magic rhymestones.

She didn't have to focus too hard, but that was no reason to settle for inferior work. Time passed quietly. Once Cayna finished the overall process and let out a sigh, Caerick finally spoke.

"Mother informed me of the troubling incident the other day."

"Mai-Mai did? I wonder if sharing info with other nations like that is such a good idea."

"Thanks to Sakaiya's information network, she said it was only a matter of time before the news reached Helshper."

"True..."

He undoubtedly meant the recent attack on Felskeilo. For Cayna, it was the embarrassing memory where everyone learned the giant crater to the west of the capital was her fault. She couldn't bring herself to admit this to Caerick, though, and planned to feign ignorance if the topic was brought up.

"It's unsettling to think such horrid monsters are lying in wait somewhere on this continent."

"The traveling caravans are on edge, that's for sure."

Forget lying in wait somewhere; Cayna could already imagine the monsters pouring out of the Abandoned Capital in droves.

"That's why I have a favor to ask of you, Grandmother."

“I’m guessing it’s related to what’s going on?”

“It is.”

Caerick’s shadowy visage suddenly drew closer, and Cayna felt like she was looking at an old-timey villain.

“Grandmother, could you lend me a summons?”

“...Huh?” she said in a strange voice. This was unexpected. “You want me to magically summon a bodyguard for you?”

“Yes, correct,” Caerick replied, nodding and wringing his hands pleadingly. Sakaiya was turning more into an evil oil baron with every passing second.

“A summons, huh...? How about this?”

Cayna raised one hand, and a small slime appeared on the table. It wasn’t even five centimeters tall, and no one would know the difference if she said it was a tiny blob of red jelly. At first glance, the jiggly slime looked more like a delicious strawberry treat than a monster. However, Caerick didn’t seem the least bit eager to taste test the summons in front of him and instead stared curiously at the helpless-looking ooze.

“...What is it?”

“An ikbekto slime. It attacks by instantly breaking into hundreds of smaller slimes.”

“What?! ”

Cayna burst into unintentional laughter as Caerick comedically tore his face away.

“You’ve got nothing to worry about. This little guy does whatever I say, so it won’t randomly multiply or anything.”

“I—I see...”

Caerick peered at the slime from behind his chair, but Cayna thought this was a bit dramatic.

In the game world of *Leadale*, slimes weren’t entirely synonymous with weakness.

They were pretty strong overall, and ikbekto slimes had absurd physical power despite their flimsy magic spells. Although commonly found in beginner fields, these monsters were usually somewhere between level 30 or 50. For overeager newbies, slimes were their first brush with a ridiculous enemy.

A single ikbekto slime's physical strength was minimal, so players hardly got a scratch as long as they came prepared. However, anyone up against an endless onslaught of hundreds of mini slimes watched their HP almost instantly drop to zero.

"Th-this creature is going to guard me?"

"I'll admit that ikbekto slimes don't have much going on upstairs."

"Are you sure this will work?"

Cayna doubted any monsters she had previously called upon to guard caravans would be allowed inside cities and villages. Didn't her grandson realize that?

Cayna sent away the ikbekto slime and tried another summons. This time, a dog-headed beast appeared from a magic circle in a corner of the room. The creature wasn't particularly cute despite its canine appearance, and he stood as tall as Caerick. The pointed ears were Doberman-like, and his shabby brown robe might be mistaken for old rags.

"It is an honor, My Lady."

"Thanks for dropping in."

The Doberman beastkin knelt before Cayna and bowed with a hand to his chest.

"I have a question, Anubis."

"You need only ask."

Caerick's wariness toward the polite yet unfamiliar beastkin was understandable.

In this world, kobolds were the most common race of dog people. They were usually short and had the heads of smaller breeds. The summon Anubis was a monster deity from the Underworld area. The original real-world god had the head of a jackal, but if Cayna pointed out every liberty the game took, the list would never end.

"Can you spend any time apart from me? Keep in mind how much magic it would cost me to keep you totally self-sufficient."

Anubis licked his nose and fell silent for a moment.

"Understood. My limit is currently three days, but apart from you, I will not last two or three. I will require one month to provide my full services."

"Right, right. And how much MP is that?"

"...Yes, let me see. Twenty times the cost of summoning me should prove sufficient."

"Hmm. I can probably swing it..."

Cayna calculated the MP she'd used to summon Anubis, simply multiplied by twenty, and confirmed there would be enough left over for her. She then touched him on the shoulder and offered the stated amount. Caerick felt the beastkin's physical presence magnify in a matter of seconds, and Cayna's power nearly knocked him off his feet. After all, the little magic lights he and his grandmother made earlier were the most powerful sorcery he'd ever experienced up until that point. Most elves understood the magic arts like no other, but it wasn't Caerick's forte.



“How’s that?”

“Yes, even if we are separated for a month, I believe I can now properly carry out My Lady’s will.”

“Oh yeah? Awesome.”

Anubis opened and closed his hands as if checking for sensation, and Cayna gave a satisfied nod.

“Here you go, Caerick. I’ll lend you Anubis.”

“Haven’t we skipped a few steps?!”

Cayna looked back at Caerick with open arms as if to say *Ta-daa!*, but her grandson’s only reaction was a cry of shock and distress. The beastkin glanced between the two and seemed to realize what was going on. He stood and gave a slight bow. That angle said everything about Anubis’s tonal shift between Cayna and Caerick.

“Hmph. So I have been assigned to you for the time being.”

“Yep. Caerick’s a little short on hands, so help him out. Oh, don’t use any life force magic, though.”

Cayna couldn’t risk saying “Revival Magic” out loud, so she warned Anubis in roundabout terms with a wink. The summons quickly caught her drift and replied, “Understood.”

“I am at your service, Master Caerick. I am well versed in the arts of subjugation and defense, and I am able to bear the brunt of any attack. I seek a bold occupation that will allow me to bring My Lady glory.”

“Um, Grandmother?”

Moments later, Anubis’s tattered robe transformed into the uniform of a veteran soldier. The beastkin was dressed in beaten leather armor and carried a sword at his side. By his impressive attire, one would think he’d just come back from hunting local monsters. Caerick stared at him in shock.

“Anubis, I don’t think merchants are in the business of fighting monsters,” Cayna

commented.

"Hmph, I see. Then I'll need to make a few adjustments."

He switched to a butler uniform complete with a necktie.

"Grandmother... As respectable as he appears, is he truly fit for the job?"

After brief contemplation, Caerick asked Anubis to help clean the warehouses. The summons obeyed without complaint, so he decided to just accept the situation for the time being.

"Make sure you give really specific orders. He might throw out something important if you're too vague."

"What?!"

Caerick only meant for Anubis to supervise Sakaiya's attendants during their various tasks and errands, but Cayna's warning set him on edge. He got to his feet, determined to oversee the job himself and make any adjustments.

"Guess I'll be going now."

"My apologies, Grandmother. I had hoped to show you better hospitality."

"Not at all. I stopped by to make up for last time."

"I will be sure to pay you for today's work in the near future."

"You can just send it along with Elineh's caravan."

"Yes, I did consider that. However... I'm not sure Sir Elineh will agree to transport so much coin."

"How much are you giving me?!"

This time, it was Cayna's turn to yell. Anubis smirked but quickly straightened up when she gave him the stink eye.

Cayna strolled around the market on her way home, then hurried back to the inn as

night began to fall. At the first-floor tavern, Luka was enjoying dessert with several women from the caravan. The sweets were, of course, courtesy of Opus.

“Mommy Cayna... Welcome... back.”

“Hi, Lu and Opus. I’m back.”

“Hey, you’re late. Did you get yet another ridiculous demand forced upon you?”

Opus as well as her mercenary and caravan friends welcomed Cayna back.

Cayna greeted everyone in kind and sat beside Luka. Her daughter carefully held out a spoonful of cake, fruit, and whipped cream, and she accepted it with a smile.

“Mm, that’s delicious. Thanks, Lu.”

“Uh-huh. Opus... made it...”

“Wow, I am *soooo* sorry, Opus! I really put *everything* on you, huh?!”

“You sound scary, Cayna. And why are you glaring at me?!”

Cayna wanted to shout *It means don’t give kids too much sugar! It’s hard enough to prevent cavities in a world where “dental hygiene” is salt and a hard brush!* However, she couldn’t say anything when Luka looked so happy enjoying her treat. Cayna stifled her internal screams and settled for intimidating the culprit.

“Yeah, I was kinda asked to take off a Punishment Collar.”

“A Punishment Collar? Never thought you’d resort to something like that.”

“I had no choice. I’m not around to babysit the guy.”

Cayna told Opus about the events leading up to Luvrogue’s arrest while grumbling about how trouble followed her like a bad cold even though she only ever wanted to awaken Opus’s Guardian Tower.

“Hmm, so there are players like him. I take it he still has room for improvement?”

“Would you just lay off already?! Your terrifying definition of *improvement* has

annihilate in small print! He's finally turning over a new leaf, so just give it a rest!"

"If you're so willing to vouch for him, I'll watch his progress with keen interest."

Opus had partly risen out of his chair but sat back down. Luka looked at him curiously, her fork still in her mouth.

"Anyway, I can't believe you met Exis and Quolkeh..."

"He was so overjoyed to see me that he fainted."

"That absolutely wasn't the reason."

If any Cream Cheese member was going to shudder at the very sight of Opus, it was Tartarus, aka Exis. Of their guild's many oddball players, he was the one constantly begging for a shred of sanity. Cayna obliged on occasion, but if anything, she was responsible for keeping Opus in check.

Fellow Skill Masters like Kujo used to hold their own open discussions. The participants included:

Hidden Ogre, who always stood directly behind everyone and stared.

Kyotaro, who mediated the Skill Master meetings.

Liothek, who only showed up half the time.

And Marvelia, who, although physically present, was usually paying attention to her own notes or jotting something down.

The mere memory of these apathetic Skill Master get-togethers made Cayna want to cry. At least the non-Skill Master guild members had something to say.

However, neither Cayna nor Opus had any idea Exis considered them both the same sort of headache.

"Still, the numbers don't add up. I recall there being a lot more players than those you've met so far."

“You counted the missing ones?”

“As a former Admin, I memorized the discrepancy between logins and logouts.”

“I was talking with Kee earlier, and it seems like people who got caught up in what happened on that final day arrived at different times. Humans and werecats stranded here two hundred years have most likely died from old age.”

“Hmm. Old age...”

“Maybe they left Leadale or went into hiding somewhere.”

“If they left, wouldn’t that mean they died in vain without the system to support them?”

“*What?!*” she exclaimed.

This was news to Cayna. The whole of Leadale seemed to operate under the game system; in other words, she could never step foot outside it.

“If the system is eliminating players...”

“Stop, stop. The idea is too scary to even think about. That can’t be right!”

Cayna hastily cut him off and dismissed the idea. For once, his honesty made her nauseous.

“You seem pretty worried about the players. Is something going on?”

“I just thought it would be useful knowledge for later, but there’s more I need to confirm...”

Cayna was certain the Abandoned Capital was involved. However, all that aside, Opus now seemed open to any questions.

Sensing the private conversation next to her, Luka finished her cake, drank some water, and excused herself. She returned her cup to the counter and, unsure of where else to go, wandered over to Elineh.

“Oh? What’s wrong, little miss? Did your mom pick on you?” Arbiter asked.

"Ms. Cayna wouldn't do somethin' like that. I'd be careful about spreading rumors, or you'll find yourself in a right pickle," Kenison warned.

"Plus, this is Cayna's daughter we're talkin' about. Would she really stop there?"

"She'd blow him up, I reckon."

The mercenaries babbled on despite the person in question being well within earshot, but Cayna realized they were mostly joking and gave a wry smile. Knowing he would have definitely been sent flying already if he said the same thing, Opus cried a little inside.

"Hey, Opus, there's something I want to ask..."

"Oh? What is it?"

Cayna leaned over the table and spoke in a hushed voice. Opus followed her lead.

"What happened to my uncle and Ako after I died?"

"Right, those two..."

Opus thought for a moment, and Cayna's expression darkened.

"Don't tell me something bad happened to them?"

The air buzzed with tension, and a heavy silence hovered as Opus let the suspense build. Then his eyes suddenly popped open.

"I have no idea!"

"Hwaaaah?!" Cayna cried, collapsing against the table in dejection. "What the heck, Opus?!"

"They helped build the company, but it's not like we got together on a regular basis. I was exhausted and had my hands full on that final day. How was I supposed to know what was going on in the real world?!"

“Get off your high horse!” Cayna shouted angrily.

Her shoulders slumped. She would have at least liked to have some idea of their fates, but moaning about it here wouldn’t change anything.

Cayna hoped her uncle and cousin hadn’t sunk into despair. Her one regret was that she’d never been able to thank them for everything they’d done.

“Well, we’re still connected to the other world. I’ll make a move once I settle a few other matters first. Look forward to it.”

“Huh? R-right. What are you planning?”

“You’ll have to wait and see.”

Cayna didn’t yet realize how quickly Opus’s talent would ease her regrets.



Epilogue

The next day, Cayna's group left Helshper with Elineh's caravan. She was a paying customer this time, but with her trusted partner Opus along for the ride, the elf was no average traveler.

She immediately cast magic over the caravan as if the word *discretion* had been wiped from her vocabulary. Even so, it *did* make the trip home much quicker and safer. Nonetheless, Opus earnestly wished she'd see the log in her own eyes before complaining about the speck in someone else's.

"Hey, Cayna. Isn't this a bit much?"

"You think?"

Cayna positioned herself on the carriage rooftop with Luka in her lap. She had considered bringing out her own earlier transportation but had a feeling a covered wagon run by golem horses would stand out like a sore thumb. Cayna didn't want to get Elineh mixed up in any wagon debacles, so she quickly nixed the idea.

Cayna shot Opus an odd look as he stood there questioning her from behind. Incidentally, the roof of the box carriage was the only place they could ride since Elineh's caravan didn't have any set aside for guests.

The scenery whizzed by them.

In short, they were traveling at a speed realistically impossible for the entire caravan to maintain at once.

That said, Elineh and the mercenary guards were undoubtedly more bewildered than anyone else. The procession was made up of two box carriages and five covered wagons, and leading the way was a speedy creature that left a trail of dust in its wake. It was a little over seven meters long and looked like a four-legged rock chimera at first glance. This large reptilian monster was known as a Rock Lizard.

Needless to say, Opus had summoned it on Cayna's request. The Rock Lizard was level 350 and a standard carriage puller (?) back in the game. The summon's current mission was to lead the caravan home, and it was unlikely any monster they encountered could survive the Rock Lizard's charge.

Cayna had cast Boost and Movement Up on the wagons and carriages. Although the horses appeared to be walking, their strides equaled about two steps at full gallop. In

the end, this shaved three days off a trip that would have normally taken several more. The caravan arrived in the village on the seventh day.

“I feel like we passed three horses dragging a bagworm moth.”

“Is that so? I saw nothing.”

“...Well, I probably just imagined it.”

Alas, the two scrupulously wiped their memories of whatever they had encountered.

The maids and butler welcomed Cayna, Opus, Luka, and Kuu back. Elineh accompanied them to the house as well, so Cayna took this opportunity to buy some of the wheat he'd brought with him. It was already dark, so she planned to move everything to the storehouse the next day.

Regardless, the village's main road was dotted with Light Spirits. The sun had long since set, but every path was well illuminated despite the lack of streetlights. Cayna's update had granted her new abilities, so she had placed the Light Spirits all throughout the village. They were nearly invisible during the day but were an excellent nighttime aide for passersby.

“How might one describe it? Only this village holds surprises not found in Felskeilo's capital...”

“Bright streets, baths whenever you want, unbeatable defense. It's like a fortress...”

Cayna joined Elineh and Arbiter for dinner at Marelle's inn, and the men couldn't contain their admiration. Her talent for effortlessly turning a village into an impregnable stronghold was nothing short of awe-inspiring.

Understandably exhausted, Luka ate dinner at home and went straight to bed. Opus had no particular reason to go out, so he was minding the house.

Cayna headed over to the inn to gather information.

“So I heard there's going to be a tourney in Felskeilo in about a month...?”

“Yep, you heard right. You gonna join in, miss?”

"If Lady Cayna entered, her victory would be certain. Spectators may place official bets, so there is quite a profit to be made."

Arbiter and Elineh smirked with the knowledge of her true potential, but Cayna had already decided she'd do no such thing.

"Sorry, but I'm no bully," she said, slamming the door on their dreams.

Cayna had only asked about the tourney because she hoped to somehow broadcast it to the sleepy little village like the Olympics.

One item, the Pair of Eyes, could more or less accomplish this. The magic tool captured footage through one eye and showed it to the owner with the other. It was originally meant for use between two individuals, but there were other support items that could display the footage on a projection screen for multiple spectators.

However, such support items were bought rather than created. None of the game's shops were in this world, of course, and Cayna didn't have such a luxury item on hand.

She knew where she might find one though: her old guild base.

To pass the time, members sometimes used to carry around a Pair of Eyes and comedically report their day. Cayna also vividly recalled how their guild sub-leader Ebelope would spark pandemonium whenever she'd suddenly broadcasted adult footage and forced all minors out of their home base.

Cayna approached Opus with the idea as soon as she got home but encountered a setback.

"The Cream Cheese base?"

"Most of the stuff from the game ended up on this side, too, right? It should be on the northwestern edge of Helshper..."

"It's not."

"...What?"

Silence followed.

Cayna didn't understand Opus's objection. He looked up at a forty-five-degree angle and stared at nothing. His tone was flat, and he wore the expression of an old man about to talk about his past. Opus was a figure of ambiguous gender and age.

"It... happened the day before *Leadale* ended service. Meshmout was the one who complained we should go out with a bang, but the rest of the guild was also to blame since they followed along. As one last big hurrah..."

"...Wait, don't tell me..."

"The Limit Breakers combined their magic and blew away the guild! Yes, those were some amazing fireworks..."

"Are you all *moronnnnnnnnns*?!"

There was no point in crying over spilled milk. All too late, Cayna realized with painful clarity that the members of her guild were indeed the type of people who would do such a thing at the drop of a hat. She was impressed to hear everyone pooled their magic, but they were also a bunch of people firing one huge combo spell at the same target. Once the initial caster's power level set the bar for the rest of the team, each successive member's spell doubled the attack's might.

As the guild's strongest magic user, Cayna would have normally set the standard. However, since she was already gone by then, Opus took her place as the most powerful member. Combustion magic second only to Cayna's was multiplied two to the sixteenth power, creating a spectacular arch of fire that obliterated the guild with a level of panache.

In that final month, the game's building demolition was updated from Version 1.03, and multiple other guilds were destroyed in equally stupid ways. It was no wonder they were nowhere to be seen. Cayna bemoaned the fact that no one had realized their potential usefulness in the future, but who would have ever thought the game world would one day impact a different dimension?

Cayna lifelessly flopped onto the table.

"Hmm." Opus crossed his arms and nodded. "Now that you mention it, we did remove unnecessary items from the guild beforehand. That collection might have what you're looking for. There's no detailed list since we just lumped everything together, but we made room in a warehouse and tossed the items in there."

“Seriously?!”

Wham! Reenergized, Cayna jumped up from the table and leaned toward Opus across from her.

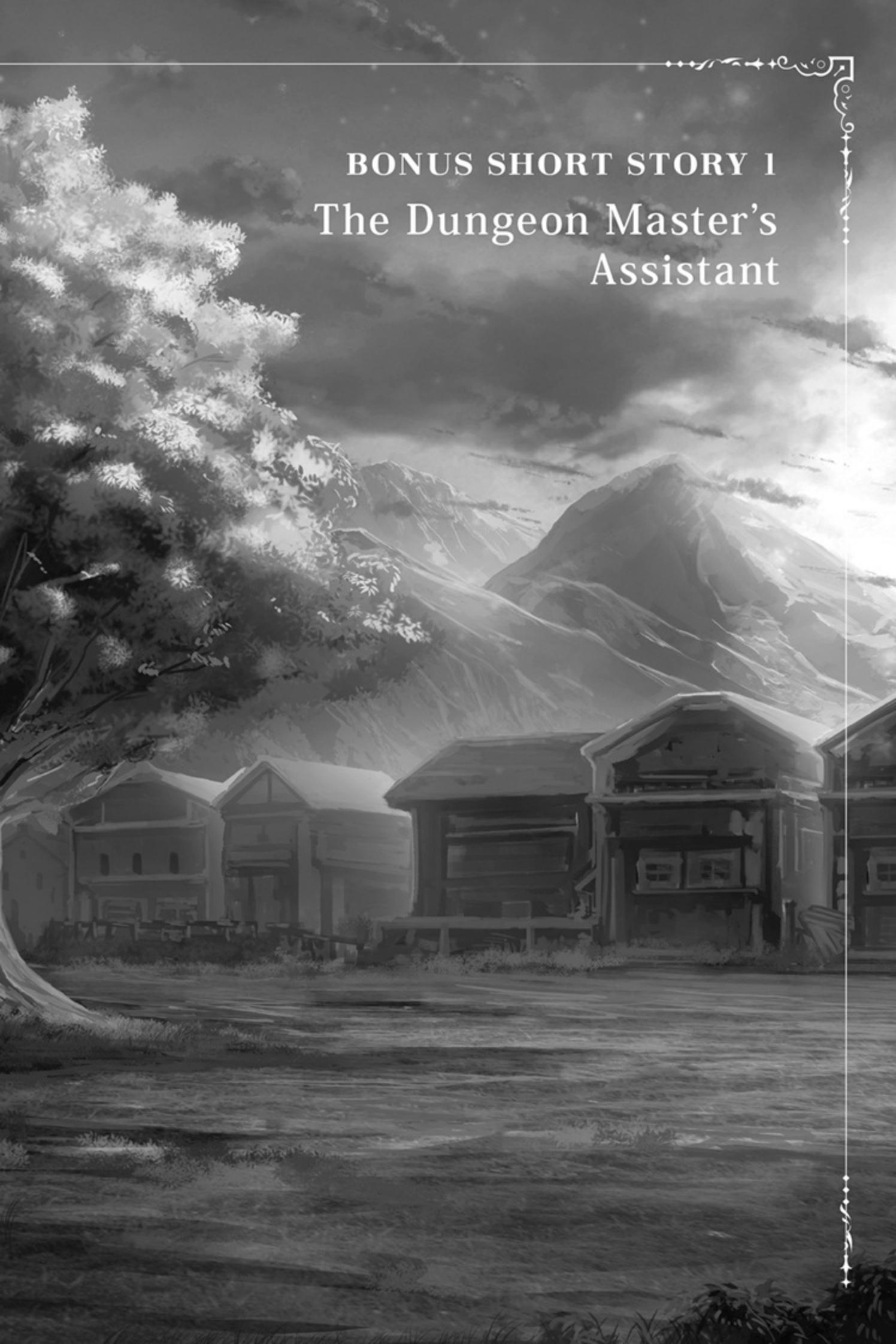
“C’mon, let’s go! There’s no time to waste!” she urged. However, Opus looked at her tiredly and pointed out the window.

As one might have guessed, the beautiful moon was shining palely in the midnight sky.

“Let’s call it a day. We’ll go tomorrow.”

“Oh yeah... Fair enough...”

In her excitement, Cayna had lost track of time.



BONUS SHORT STORY 1
The Dungeon Master's
Assistant

There is a dungeon village on the eastern edge of Otaloquess, although it did not always exist. The place was once a typical forest, and it is said a group of adventurers discovered the dungeon about a century prior when they became lost while gathering medicinal herbs. The dungeon looked like a normal cave at first, so the adventurers decided to set up a makeshift camp.

However, once they ventured inside and saw the man-made paths and glittering gold walls, they were overjoyed by their incredible discovery. The adventurers initially planned to keep the dungeon a secret among themselves, but they raced for the exit when strange and terrifying monsters began to appear. They lost half their party by the time help arrived. Meanwhile, word of the dungeon reached the Adventurers Guild. The guild was skeptical at first, but when a dispatched search team found the dungeon in question, they were determined to conquer it.

Nonetheless, the monsters within were far stronger than expected, and many adventurers never made it past the first floor. It is said between one hundred and two hundred lives were lost during that time. We wish to pay our respects to the fallen taken from us too soon. If you wish to pray for their eternal rest and offer a moment of silence, there is a monument inscribed with their names on the training grounds behind the Adventurers Guild in the dungeon village.

Well then, a glimmer of victory came when a certain adventurer party discovered a gimmick among the monsters. They determined that the dungeon enemies were spawning from murals in the walls and proved the horrifying fiends disappeared once these murals were destroyed.

It would be misleading to say the events that followed were smooth sailing, but progress was steady compared to the adventurers' earlier struggles. Whenever new foes appeared on the next floor, they destroyed the monsters depicted on the murals and eliminated the threat.

Simultaneously, many have been astonished by the array of magical items salvaged from the dungeon. Fire-spitting swords made by command words. Rings that increase one's strength and magic. Armor that allows the wearer to move underwater, etc. Of course, a variety of other magical apparatuses have been discovered as well, but the talking sword is especially famous. Found in a treasure box on the second floor long after countless lives had already been lost, it can clearly communicate in human speech.

That sword, known as History's Most Intelligent Weapon, supposedly chooses its master.

However, no one has yet been able to wield it. The Intelligent Weapon is currently in the Adventurers Guild's custody, and you may meet the Intelligent Sword if you achieve enough success to be recognized by the Guild Master. We hope all adventurers will strive to apply themselves, obtain the sword, and shine before the masses.

—Otaloquess Adventurers Guild PR Department

“What is that?”

“A pamphlet they had on the counter at the Adventurers Guild.”

Opus glanced up from the promotional material he'd been reading to kill time and handed it to Siren. She skimmed over the sparse pages and threw it back at him brusquely.

“Oh dear. Honestly, you're too much. Are others now subject to that poor attitude as well?”

“I feel nothing toward a worthless piece of paper.”

“What a tongue you have...”

Siren's scathing response made Opus pity even the pamphlet, and he gave a wry smile. Even so, the ostentatious treatment bestowed upon the Intelligence Sword found in a treasure box on the dungeon's second floor was indeed sad.

The sword talked big, but it was a worthless item with zero attributes. As a magic tool, it was bottom of the barrel. Even an F-minus rank was too generous. Back in the game, the weapon was also known as Forever Alone. Adventurers became so obsessed with the fact that the sword could talk that they didn't stop to consider whether that was a good thing. You couldn't help but snicker at those tricked by a sword who soon discovered they were stuck listening to its plausible claims.

“Is it all right to ignore such recklessness?”

“...‘Recklessness’?”

“I mean the adventurers breaking the Summon Planks.”

"Yeah, it's fine. They'll eventually realize they're only tightening the noose around their own necks with every broken mural."

To obtain any items not already in a treasure chest, you had to defeat monsters. However, breaking the Summon Planks meant permanently ruining your chances of getting loot. In the game, the dungeon was originally created to tease new players, so the drop items all had questionable effects. Now that the game world was gone, and the average level of adventurers had taken a nosedive, these dicey items were treated like gold. Considering the outrageous prices they were selling for, the only real gold here was comedic.

Even though the treasure den (the room where future dropped items were stored) consistently released items from defeated monsters, it remained well stocked over the years. More than once, Opus took items from here and sold them to the Adventurers Guild. He changed his appearance and name, of course. His disguise of choice was a plain, forty-something-year-old man one might see anywhere. This made him an easy target, and when he first started dropping by the guild to sell magical wares, some ten-odd adventurers would always start trouble with him.

Some would even take him down a back alley and try to "blackmail" him (aka beat him senseless) but Opus the Harmless Old Timer always bested his foes. He'd either take them out in a single punch or blow the hooligans sky-high with magic. The real challenge was making sure he didn't kill anyone, but Opus kept his attacks nonlethal and pummeled the adventurers so bad even their hearts were KO'd. Before long, the middle-aged peddler of magical oddities became synonymous with terror, and the demon earned the adventurers' respect.

"Are you bored now that no one challenges me anymore?"

"I'm relieved there are less people foolish enough to challenge you, Master. Still, if I may be so bold, I do wish you wouldn't ingratiate yourself to others in that disguise. It makes my skin crawl every time..."

At one point or another, Siren had accompanied Opus on an errand to the surface and was appalled to see him keeping a low profile and humbly bowing to others. The shock was so great, her mind had gone blank for several seconds.

Opus watched Siren rub her arms and tremble. He suddenly felt less confident about his acting abilities.

"At any rate, I suppose they aren't coming," Siren continued as she looked up at the ceiling from the bottommost floor.

"I suppose not," Opus replied with a puzzled tilt of the head

"You *did* pass 'it' to her, correct?"

"Yeah. I know she made contact with my tower's Guardian. Shouldn't be too long before she gets wind of this place."

"Still, two months have passed..."

The two were living deep underground for the sake of Opus's scheme/hobby. His companion Siren found the situation intolerable, but as her master's creation, she sadly didn't have the right to argue.

But no matter how long the two waited, their expected visitor never arrived. Once the "goods" were handed over, Opus had estimated that she'd come crashing into his dungeon ten days at the earliest.

Twenty days passed, then forty. As sixty days approached, it became apparent something had been lost in translation.

"Perhaps she hasn't realized your intentions?"

"....."

Now that Siren mentioned it, their visitor wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed. She might be right.

"Or perhaps she stowed the book in her Item Box and had already forgotten about it."

"....."

This, too, was plausible, and a large sweat drop formed over Opus's brow. His visitor likely told herself she'd read the book later and soon forgot about it. It was likely collecting dust in her Item Box.

"I don't believe this to be the case, but she may have also rejected the item because she realized it was from you."

“.....”

As soon as Siren pointed out this most unlikely scenario, Opus began to sweat even more. The chance of their anticipated guest rejecting something because she knew it was from Opus wasn't entirely zero, and the thought that she might detest it put the demon out of commission.

Siren had never seen her master more downtrodden. His usual unflagging confidence crumbled.

“Cheer up, Master. If you're not sure, why not check on the situation yourself?”

“Y-yeah. You're right. What's taking that girl so long? I'm sure she got caught up in some ridiculous mess and made her business with me a footnote.”

Opus forced himself to think positive and stood up with clenched fists. Siren kept her thoughts of *Simpleton* to herself and continued to encourage her revitalized master.

“Well, might I suggest checking on the matter? You could prompt her indirectly as opposed to overtly.”

“Right. I'll head out then. Keep an eye on the place for me!” Opus said with a vigorous nod and vanished with a haze of purple light. Afterglow was a common effect of Teleport.

Siren lightly waved good-bye and shrugged once the last particle faded.

“Well, then. I doubt he will be returning anytime soon, so perhaps I shall take a bit of time for myself.”

Siren prepared some tea and took out a hidden stash of her favorite scones and jam. After all, when the cat is away, the mice will play. Despite her usual demeanor, Siren found Opus's constant presence exhausting. Chasing him away with a turn of phrase so she could have a moment's peace was her guilty pleasure.



BONUS SHORT STORY 2

Fish and Cats

“Good morning, Mr. Roxilius.”

“Good morning. It’s another fine day.”

Roxilius greeted the hoe-wielding villagers while out on his early patrol. After they left to plow the fields in the cool dawn air, the butler made his usual rounds through the village. But although Roxilius followed the same routine, the paths he took alternated each day. After all, a set route didn’t guarantee trouble wouldn’t happen elsewhere.

“Oh my. An early bird as usual, I see.”

“Good morning.”

“You certainly keep busy, Mr. Roxilius. Here, take these. I just picked them, so they’re nice and fresh. Tell Cayna dear I said hello.”

“Ah... I can’t accept such a gift in good conscience. You gave me some just the other day.”

A familiar old woman offered him a small basket of red fruit known for their sharp acidity. Cayna saw these one day and called them “tomatoes,” so the name spread through the village and stuck.

Tomatoes were an excellent food source that complemented a wide variety of staples and salads. Nearly every farm grew them. Agriculture in the remote village was increasingly tomato-based after the pizza and processed ketchup Roxine introduced helped the fruit explode in popularity.

“Goodness, I couldn’t finish all these myself. I’d much rather share with someone than watch produce go bad,” the woman replied with a radiant smile.

Roxilius accepted out of obligation, but words of gratitude felt insufficient.

“If you ever need assistance, please call me at any time. I would be delighted to help,” he said, offering his own services in return.

In short, he was forever conscientious. This made him quite popular among the village women, and they lavished produce and food upon the werecat for the smallest tasks. Every meal in Cayna’s household soon became a colorful feast for the eyes.

Roxine initially begrudged the inclusion of any dish more elaborate than her own. She often snapped at Roxilius and nitpicked every ingredient or dish he brought home, which would, in turn, spark one of their usual squabbles. Such power could uproot the entire house if they decided to go all out.

Roxilius's and Roxine's fear of Cayna's wrath as well as Luka's mediation were the main reasons why the two conserved their strength and hadn't yet destroyed the house. Luka was more accustomed to their spats by now and had recently learned to read the outcome of these verbal arguments. As long as the werecats' comments didn't escalate, she wouldn't interject. The moment the girl stared at them in blank silence and asked "Are you fighting?" they had no choice but to reluctantly bury the hatchet.

Naturally, the Roxilius-Roxine Argument Index dropped farther after Siren became Head Maid. And soon enough, they would endure a punishment far worse than Luka's gaze.

One incident was all it took for both to forsake violence.

Sporting an icy smile, Siren asked Opus to cast his bizarre soul-switching skill on them. Roxilius entered Roxine's body, and Roxine entered Roxilius's. Then, to add insult to injury, each had to follow the other's schedule for the entire day.

This meant Roxine was forced to patrol the village, teach the children (and occasional thick-headed adult), clean the baths, and converse with the villagers. In short, it was her own special purgatory. The work didn't fit her personality, and she didn't have a social bone in her body. On top of that, being in Roxilius's body really grossed her out. Roxilius felt equally uncomfortable in a woman's body, and his stress levels were also through the roof.

Needless to say, from that day on, their fights never escalated beyond words. Thanks to this horrifying experience, the werecats finally agreed on one thing: It would never happen again.

"How should we stop these two from fighting?"

"We'll put them through punishment not of this world."

Opus's ability to answer Siren in a matter of seconds was the stuff of nightmares for the Double Rs. His quick-fire decisiveness even in hostile situations was on a different level of madness compared to their master Cayna.

Which was why, despite paying careful attention to everything Cayna told them about Opus, the two failed to grasp his true nature.

On an unrelated note, Luka inevitably had more free time than ever.

The same day Roxilius received the tomatoes, he chuckled to himself as he circled the village's perimeter to check for the presence of fiendish creatures.

I'm not even a butler anymore.

Well, although protecting their home (the entire village included) was a vital task, he couldn't do much about his lack of stewardly duties. It would have been one thing if Cayna's family lived in an enormous mansion, but with six people in one cozy little house, they had more than enough help. There was no room for a butler.

Cayna had initially summoned Roxilius to watch over a small child, so the constant vigilance required of his current role suited him well. If asked whether he was unsatisfied these days, Roxilius would firmly respond in the negative. For the werecat, his duty was to serve Cayna, honor his master, and provide assistance. If anything, Roxilius never wanted to return to his former prison.

Roxine and Siren felt the same way.

To be more precise, it happened shortly before Cayna summoned Roxilius to watch over Luka.

He suddenly woke to the strangest scene. In a white space that stretched as far as the eye could see, maids and butlers just like the trio were lined up at set intervals. It was a mind-bending image.

Around one hundred coworkers stood on their own podiums like figurines. Their eyes were closed, and each looked like a doll waiting for shipment. Cayna summoned Roxilius soon after that, so he wasn't sure what fates befell the others. Nevertheless, he didn't have the courage to break his current contract and quickly go back to check. No matter how head-scratching his duties became, he would remain by his master's side and prove himself useful. For Roxilius, that alone was enough reason to vow loyalty to Cayna.

That same day, he monitored the village itself to make sure nothing had sneaked inside. Gargoyles set at equal intervals eliminated any foreign threat. They were transformed into adorable snow bunnies to set the villagers at ease, but their strength was nothing to sneeze at.

Since the gargoyles lacked the ability to dispose of enemy corpses themselves, Roxilius would stop by periodically to make sure the area was clear.

“.....?”

Something about one of the gargoyles seemed off. He approached it and soon understood why.

The gargoyle in question was the only one facing toward the village.

The others were turned away from the entrance so there was no need to investigate them further. Even after Roxilius searched the area, he didn't see any signs of a struggle, either. It was truly baffling.

Just as he thought to inform Cayna of the situation, a presence appeared beside him.

“It moved!”

“?!”

Roxilius swiveled around in surprise to find a fairy with light green wings floating there. He hadn't sensed anyone moments before, so he could only assume she had materialized just then. Given his cautious nature, Roxilius nearly attacked her.

“Lady Kuu?”

“I helped!”

Kuu's blue eyes sparkled as she chirped merrily, but he had no idea what she was talking about.

According to Cayna, this fairy who only materialized for the first time the other day had apparently been accompanying them almost the entire time. He was shocked to

hear Kuu had been right by Cayna's side even back when Roxilius was first summoned to protect Luka. After Opus joined them, the demon said Kuu had the power to bring out Cayna's true potential. Roxilius wasn't sure what he meant by this, but it was clear Kuu deserved the same level of respect as Cayna.

"What did you help with?"

"I helped!"

Nonetheless, the fairy's speech was often incoherent, and holding a conversation with her felt like an exercise in futility. Just as Roxilius was starting to think it was no wonder he couldn't understand a tenth of whatever Kuu said without Cayna's help...

A familiar voice cried out from somewhere nearby.

"Kyaaa?!"

"Ah!"

"Lady Mimily?"

Kuu heard the yelp and zigzagged toward it like a UFO. Her flight pattern was so inscrutable it made you question whether she was a fairy at all. Roxilius raced after her but couldn't hope to keep up. Kuu was quickly out of sight.

"How swift. Lady Kuu must be of a high level."

As Roxilius murmured to himself irrelevantly, he passed through a cluster of trees and found Mimily. She was surrounded by some very angry chickens.

"What?"

He wasn't sure what was going on at first. Some ten-odd chickens encircled the tub. Mimily always used to travel on land. She cowered in fear as the savage fowl flapped their wings in an attempt to reach her. Fortunately, the edge of the tub was too high for them to clear in a single hop. Still, the chickens charged at the mermaid from all sides and ruthlessly terrorized her.

The footed tub was both a golem and a transportation device created by Cayna. It was most likely stuck in place because Mimily hadn't issued any orders or considered its

other possible functions.

Kuu arrived first and did her best to shoo the chickens away with her tiny body, but the livid poultry weren't the least bit intimidated.

"Hmph!"

Kuu puffed out her cheeks and gave up on chasing the birds away. Instead, she floated over Mimily's head imperiously as the air around her warped to produce countless red arrows.

Sensing this wouldn't end well, Roxilius rushed in to stop her.

"Please wait, Lady Kuu! If you fire those arrows, the chickens will not stand a chance!"

"But...!"

Roxilius chided the miffed fairy for resorting to violence. Although the chickens roamed the village freely, they belonged to the community. People couldn't just kill them at random.

"Please leave this to me."

As Roxilius approached the flock, he whistled through his fingers and cast the skill Bird Master.

A high, sharp call rang out. The chickens' blind rage slowly abated; soon enough, they were all happily nestled together. Astonishingly, the crimson arrows dropped immediately afterward and dissolved in twos and threes.

"Th-thank you," Mimily said tearfully.

"Hmph! Hrrm!" Kuu pouted as if to say *I did all the work!*

"Now, now," Roxilius said, consoling the fairy as he confirmed the mermaid's well-being. "Are you unharmed?"

"Yes, thanks to you," she answered, looking up at him through a flood of hot tears.

Roxilius questioned her about what happened.

"Um, I don't really understand it either... But I've been trying to touch the chickens lately, and they suddenly attacked me..."

"Oh?"

"The chickens hate you!"

"Huh?!"

Before Roxilius had a chance to think, Kuu blindly jumped to the most outlandish conclusion and ruined his good intentions. He had planned to listen to Mimily and do his best to mend the relationship between mermaid and chicken, but that chance was long gone now.

"No, there must be some other reason. Do you remember anything else you did?"

"...Um, well... I did try to touch their tails..." Mimily replied, one hand on her cheek as she searched her memories.

"That's it!" Kuu shouted.

"Huh? What?"

"Lady Mimily, most animals dislike having their tails touched."

"Eh?! Seriously?!"

Her dumbstruck expression told Roxilius there'd been some kind of misunderstanding, and he asked why she would do such a thing.

"A-actually, merpeople touch fins to show affection."

"Doing so on land will be problematic. I suggest not testing merpeople customs on others."

"Really?"

Beastkin were an excellent example of this. It was common knowledge that, unless you were a close friend or spouse, touching their tails was absolutely forbidden. Most dragoids were indifferent about their tails, but some liked to add lavish decoration.

These were off-limits, and excessive curiosity was met with harsh retaliation. You had to be careful around a demon's horns in the same way.

The light left Mimily's eyes as Roxilius explained this to her, and he decided to save the rest for later.

"Let's stop here for today and continue next time. It will be good for you to gain a general understanding of life on land."

"Wait, you mean there's more?!"

"Of course. You may embarrass yourself otherwise, Lady Mimily."

"Sounds rough!"

Kuu acted like she didn't have a care in the world, but the fairy probably needed those extra lessons more than anyone else.

Crestfallen, Mimily's head drooped.

"Allow me to escort you home," Roxilius offered.

"Oh, uh, right. Thank you!" she exclaimed cheerily.

Her sudden mood boost baffled the werecat, but he was too preoccupied with seeing her safely home to give it much thought. They enjoyed pleasant conversation along the way, and when the topic of how each person's day was going came up, Roxilius realized it was Mimily who moved the gargoyle.

Or more specifically, Kuu commanded the gargoyle to rescue her when Mimily leaned forward to get a better look at the figure and nearly fell out of her tub. This must have been what she meant by "moved" and "helped." The real question was how Kuu was able to move a gargoyle already under Cayna's control. Even if Roxilius asked Kuu himself, her happy-go-lucky mind was an enigma. He would have to mention it to Cayna later.

Roxilius brought Mimily back to the bathhouse, and she called out as he turned to leave.

"Sir Roxilius!"

“Yes? Is something the matter?”

“Um... Will I see you again?”

“Hmm? Yes, I would imagine so. I clean the bathhouse each morning, after all.”

“Oh, that’s right. I forgot.”

“?”

“Okay, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

On his way home, Roxilius ruminated over their incomprehensible parting. Overhead, Kuu shrugged as if to say *You’re hopeless*.

Character Data

Opus

(Opuskettenshultheimer Crosstettbomber)

A demon player from the Black Kingdom and a level 1,100 Limit Breaker. The Thirteenth Skill Master.

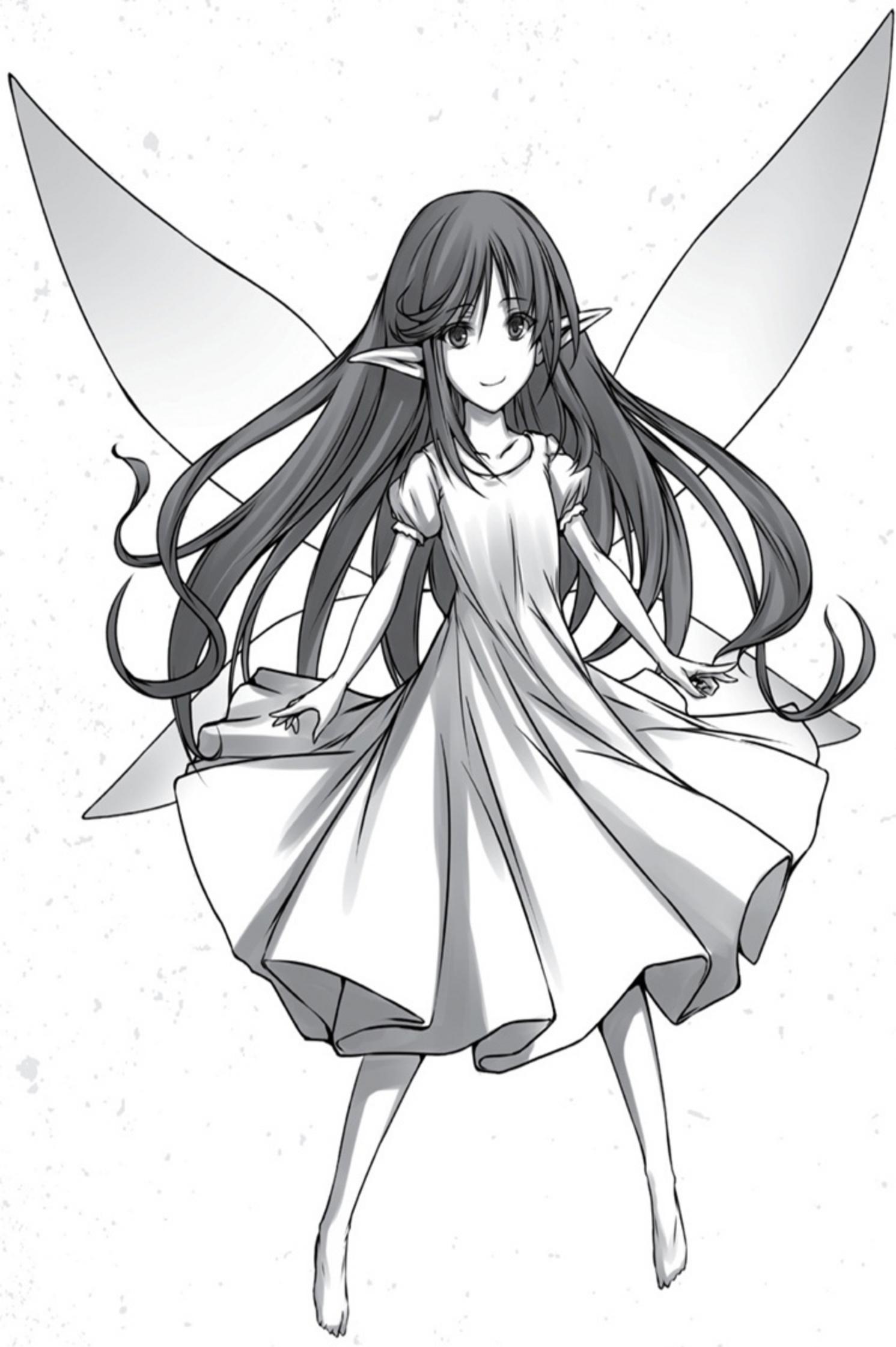
Formerly the Fourteenth Skill Master until a sudden opening allowed him to move up the ranks. The epitome of arrogance and self-assuredness, he earned the nickname Leadale's Kongming thanks to his outrageous war strategies and penchant for tossing players into the lowest depths of hell. He also happens to be the original creator of the VRMMO *Leadale* and a former Admin overseer. His connection to Cayna is still largely a mystery.



Kuu

The mascot of Cayna's household. A twenty-centimeter-tall fairy.

Looks like a charming little girl with light green wings and hair. Her two modes are excited and enraged. Naively innocent at best and conceited at worst. Though she may not look it, this fairy boasts extremely high specs and controls the VRMMO *Leadale's* subsystem.



AFTERWORD

Good morning, good afternoon, and good evening. I'm the author, Ceez. Thank you very much for picking up the sixth volume of *In the Land of Leadale*. It's hard to believe we've already made it this far. When my editor and I first started discussing the series, I estimated each book would be about one hundred thousand characters and wrap up by the fifth volume. Readers of the web novel have been asking "Isn't it weird there are even *five* volumes?" and I must agree.

I did include a scene that sparked some controversy online, but I tried to tone it down as much as possible for this print volume. I was still green back then and didn't know how to keep my cards close to my chest, so I accidentally revealed too much and spoiled the surprise for my readers. There must be something wrong with me if I end up causing problems here, too. I'll just have to accept the fact that I can't write to save my life.

Anyway, if you've seen the ads in this volume, you'll know *Leadale* is getting an anime! I keep asking myself *Is something this huge really happening to me?!* and *Why my work?!* It feels so strange. However, now that everything is set in stone, I want to do my best as the original author to bring even more joy to my readers.

I'd like to apologize to my editor; my illustrator, Tenmaso (thank you as always for the wonderful illustrations); my proofreader; and everyone else involved in the publication of this book for the trouble I've caused. I'll do my best to make sure it doesn't happen again, and I hope for your continued support.

Ceez

Congrats on the *Leadale* anime.
They'll move. Talk. Make noise.
It's incredible. Nuts. Very cool.
The weather's so nice today.
I'll brush my teeth before bed in
anticipation for the anime.

まじめ

Tenmaso



congrats on
the anime
annouNcement!

I'll keep working
hard on the
manga!!

Dashio
Tsukimi

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

[Sign Up](#)

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink



PtF by: traitorATZEN