I Could Never Be a Succubus!

Volume 6



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"Hey, Liz.
Pass me a light."

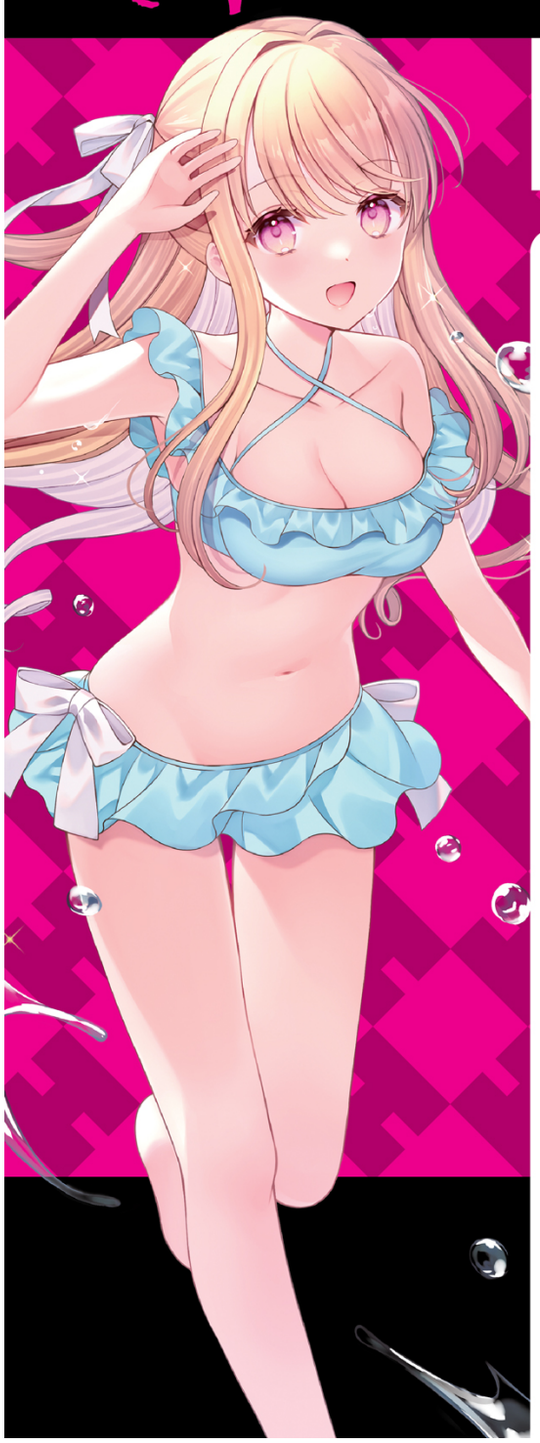

That black bunny outfit with all its exposed skin. Altina wore it bashfully, her face red all the while.


The lifeguard angel's
wings, however,
were pitch-black.


Rachel's top had a very typical design, but the bottom had more fabric than the standard, triangular swimwear, giving it a bit of a tomboyish appearance.
Melvy was wearing a one-piece swimsuit. Conservative and simple, it was a good fit for someone as pure and elegant as she was.
Kuon's plain school swimsuit, unremarkable but formfitting, granted her a rather "niche" appeal.
Altina wore a modest high-neck swimsuit with a flared skirt, designed to minimize skin exposure.
Sylphie's swimsuit—a classic triangle bikini with minimal fabric—only emphasized her natural allure.


"It's over!"
Cain roared as he swung the two holy blades. The magic sphere Liz had been forming broke into four pieces and dispersed into dust.

Introduction



What lies beyond memory loss...

As the other girls grow closer to Cain, Lisalinde—Liz for short— insists, "Cain and I are a complete mismatch." It's almost like she wants to distance herself from the hero.

Liz was once Cain's lover, but her losing all the memories of their time together has reset their relationship to zero.

Hating to see the pair like this, her old comrades are more than keen to meddle for Liz's sake. In order to support Liz's love, they begin putting together a plan to get Liz and Cain alone on the beach.

And wouldn't you know it? Liz and Cain fall for the scheme hook, line, and sinker.

Will their swimsuit date by the sea go as planned?

Will their comrades succeed in making sure everything goes smoothly?

So begins Liz's battle of love.

However, Cain and his comrades have yet to realize that someone who knows the truth of everything lurks just by the sea—and that there is someone who is scheming to snatch Liz's succubus powers away.

A titillating beach in the height of summer, a sea that stretches on forever... There, Liz's true power and deepest love will awaken.

Table of Contents

1. Cover
2. Color Illustrations
3. Prologue
4. Chapter 58: Now—Girl Time Without Honor and Humanity
5. Chapter 59: Then—Girl Time (in Darkness)
6. Chapter 60: Now—A Meddling Date
7. Chapter 61: Then—The Clash! Versus Tentacle Emperor Homo Squidiens!
8. Chapter 62: Now—The Wicked Power of a Hotel Room That Comes with an Open-Air Bath
9. Chapter 63: Now—Chaos Snake from the Dark Sea
10. Chapter 64: Now—Lost and Forgotten
11. Chapter 65: Now—Rampage
12. Chapter 66: Now—Fallen Angel
13. Chapter 67: Then—Lilith
14. Chapter 68: Now—Usurper
15. Epilogue
16. Bonus Textless Illustrations
17. About J-Novel Club
18. Copyright

Prologue

The morning sun grew steadily brighter in the cloudless, blue sky. The temperature was a bit too warm to call refreshing, and the students who were on their way to school were already dripping with sweat.

Some chatted with friends, others walked leisurely alone. A few held hands with their significant others. Each passed through the elegant school gates in their own way, yawning and rubbing their sleepy eyes as they vanished into the building, as though it were sucking them in.

It was a perfectly ordinary morning for students like us.

But today, *inside* the classroom, there was a strange, restless atmosphere. There was something that set this particular room apart from the others. A certain occurrence had become a hot topic, keeping us all in suspense as we waited for homeroom to begin.

There was something that was primed to throw a wrench in our usual routine, and that something was on its way.

There was a clack as our homeroom teacher slid the door open and stepped in. We all jogged back to our seats.

“Good morning, everyone. Now, I’d love to start homeroom immediately, but... Well, as you may already be aware, today we have a transfer student joining our class.”

A ripple of excitement spread through the classroom. A new student was a big deal.

“Please come in and introduce yourself.”

The transfer student timidly stepped into the classroom at the teacher’s cue. It didn’t take more than a glance to notice how tense she was. She was stiff, fretful, and oozing with sweat that wasn’t due solely to the outside heat as she clambered onto the podium.

There was silence.

She gulped as the class’s eyes gathered on her. She must not have been used to standing before a crowd like this. Her body had frozen completely, her blue cat ears twitching back and forth while her tail puffed up, hairs on end.

Another few seconds of silence passed by. The transfer

student took her time to steady her quickening breath.

Eventually, she opened her mouth.

“Hello, my name is…A-Altina. I-I just moved here… A p-pleasure to meet you.”



With movements as awkward as a poorly maintained windup doll, Altina gave a stiff bow. The sound of applause filled the classroom.

Indeed—today was the day that Altina, the newest member of the hero's party, was enrolling at the academy. She was the skilled wielder of the newly discovered holy sword Ikryl and was childhood friends with Cain the hero and his comrade Wolfe.

The girl who once walked around in a tattered coat had arrived at the academy in a brand-new uniform. And what a change it was—a simple change in attire had completely transformed the impression she gave off. The pristine uniform highlighted her beauty, making her shine even brighter. Her skirt had been custom-made with a slit tailored for her tail.

After a beat, the teacher said, "I'll wrap up homeroom early today. Make sure you get along with Altina, all of you. Ah, Altina, your seat is at the very back, that one there."

"Y-Yes sir..."

Our homeroom teacher honored his word, quickly finishing up and leaving the classroom. We still had some time before first period began. And in an instant, the entire class had burst into motion, racing over to Altina's seat like a pack of predators zeroing in on their prey.

"Hey, hey! Altina, you're the second hero with a holy sword, right?!"

"I saw your duel with Sir Cain!"

"You're really strong, Altina!"

Altina flinched at the overwhelming wave. She'd already become rather famous in Academy Town.

This—of course—was all thanks to her duel with Cain. She was a new hero, who'd obtained a second holy sword. What's more, she was a beautiful half-beast girl. There was no way she wouldn't be the talk of the town.

"I've never seen a half-beast before. Are your eyesight and hearing really better than ours?"

"Hey, hey, where do you come from? Are there a lot of half-beasts there?"

"What's your relationship with Sir Cain?! Are you rivals?! Comrades?! Or maybe even—?!"

"U-Umm... Err..."

In response to our classmates' overflowing curiosity, Altina could only look around in a fretful panic. And naturally so. She'd

barely managed to get out her name; she clearly didn't have any high-level social skills.

Cain had said it once before: "You're still a hopeless loner when we're not around."

"That's so amazing! A second holy sword! It's really a real one, right?! Humanity's practically won at this point!"

"I saw the duel, and it really was incredible! Holy magic is something else, and Altina was whooshing all over the arena… I couldn't even follow her with my eyes!"

"So you didn't actually see it, then!"

"Er, umm…"

Unlike her enthusiastic classmates, Altina seemed confused and overwhelmed. *I see. So this is what she looks like when she's in the middle of a crowd*.

When she'd opposed us as the new hero, she had been quite dignified, but apparently she had no idea how to handle friendly interactions with people her age.

Poor girl. A shy country girl suddenly thrust into city life…

Incidentally, I'd started to call her Lady Altina from time to time. I hadn't done so before, but since she officially joined the hero party and transferred to our academy, the change felt appropriate. I didn't have strict criteria, but I generally gave honorifics to the academy students, and the members of the hero party too. Also, to those who were clearly above me.

As for everyone else, I'd refrain more often than not. Sure, there were a few people I showed such respect to regardless, but there really was no set criteria for it.

So, just like that, Altina had been promoted to *Lady* Altina.

"All right, everyone, enough with the interrogation. You're bothering Lady Altina."

"Luna…"

The chaos was contained by my close friend Luna. She looked as refined as always, her light-brown hair in neat plaits. Perhaps her role in the disciplinary committee had made her accustomed to handling such situations.

"Sorry about that, Lady Altina. A new student is always a big event."

"Y-Yeah… Thanks, you saved me there. Umm…"

"I apologize for the late introduction. I am Luna Aske Silvers, eldest daughter of Marquis Silvers. I do hope we can get along."

"Oh, sure… I'm Altina. A-A pleasure…"

Luna introduced herself with elegance befitting the daughter of a marquis. Her beautiful, refined gestures seemed to overwhelm Altina.

“Geh heh heh… The ticket sales, the betting fees, and all the hero merchandise… You wouldn’t believe how much we raked in that day.”

“That duel was pretty much sponsored by the guild, yeah? Must’a been raining money.”

“Mweh heh heh… My allowance got a nice boost.”

“Sounds sweet. Treat us some time, will ya?”

“Of course, Adeline, my girl. A little wouldn’t hurt. After all, my wallet—and heart—are absolutely loaded right now!”

A short distance away, Satina’s eyes were filled with figurative dollar signs, drool leaking from her slack lips as she chatted with Adeline. Satina’s father was the director of the town’s adventurers’ guild and the very individual who’d organized the duel event. He’d surely taken in a considerable sum of money.

Altina’s cat ears twitched. Half-beasts had excellent hearing. Unable to dismiss that conversation, she shot a resentful glare at Altina.

Yeah, I get it. She’d mustered so much resolve to challenge Cain to a serious duel, only for said duel to become something of a public spectacle. Under the weight of Altina’s gaze, Satina began to flounder.

She timidly got up and approached Altina. “Oh, er, sorry about that, Altina! But business is business…and I’m a sucker for money…”

“Well…I know that the adventurers’ guild isn’t a charity. That’s not news to me.”

“I’m glad you understand! I’m the daughter of the guild director, Satina. Please, feel free to use our services whenever you need them!”

Satina rubbed her hands together in front of her face apologetically as she greeted Altina. It was essentially the polar opposite of Luna’s introduction.

“Altina, listen. Hang out with this girl and she’ll treat ya to all sortsa stuff. You gotta make the most of it!” Adeline tried to get Altina in on her sinister scheme.

“Is…that okay?”

“O-Of course!” Satina replied. “After all, this profit wouldn’t have been possible without you! I-I’ll treat you to anything you

want! Within reason. Please keep it within reason!”

“So it’s not *anything*,” Adeline chimed in with a teasing smile.

After some back-and-forth, Altina finally agreed to go out with her classmates.

Even from where I stood, I could pick up the relieved look on Cain’s face from across the room. He’d known Altina for a long time, and he knew well enough about her shyness. He’d evidently been worried she might struggle to fit in with the class. But things were off to a good start. Rather than relying on her ties with the hero’s party—with Cain, Sylphie, Melvy, and the others—Altina was beginning to form new connections in her class. The sight of it seemed to lift a weight off of Cain’s shoulders—his look of relief almost resembled a mother seeing their kid off to school for the first time. *He’d get mad if I teased him about that, though.*

But though Cain had relaxed, there was still someone who was tense as could be. It was none other than Altina herself.

“Hey…” she ventured.

“Yes?”

“You’re not…put off by a half-beast like me?”

She lifted her face with an expression of concern. She was hesitant, anxious, tense… All sorts of emotions had begun to creep into her eyes as she looked at her classmates, these people who were utter strangers to her.

Half-beasts carried the mixed blood of both humans and beastfolk—the blood of both humankind and demonkind. Sharing the traits of both races, they often struggled to find acceptance with either; neither humanland nor demonland offered them a true home. Sad as it was, history spoke of how they were constantly a target of exclusion and discrimination.

It wasn’t too long ago that Altina had suffered a wound to the back, and she couldn’t even bring herself to visit a hospital. If she was put to sleep with anesthesia, there was no telling what might happen—perhaps she would be sold right into slavery. Altina was a girl who had to constantly battle such fears. And so she had lived a life of isolation.

However…

“It’s all right, Lady Altina.”

“Huh?”

Luna sent her a gentle smile. “This academy is very welcoming. We strive to make students from all sorts of different

backgrounds feel at home. People from various countries and races have gathered here—far more than you might imagine. It's a real melting pot."

She was right about that. Academy Town was home to all sorts. The hair and skin colors of the student body ranged wildly, and the cultures we were all born and raised in were just as varied. The presence of a major adventurers' guild branch further amplified the trend. It brought in not only those of different backgrounds but adventurers with a wide array of philosophies and life experiences.

"As someone who was born here and who has lived their whole life here, I can assure you—no one here would think of discriminating against you for being a half-beast... Even if such people do exist, they are a very small minority! You won't find those sorts walking around this town with their heads held high."

There was confidence in Luna's words. Her heart was full of shining pride in the town that had birthed and raised her.

"R-Really? I hope so..."

The faint bit of hope brought a flush to Altina's cheeks. Luna's conviction was so strong, so assured, that even Altina—a deep skeptic—had begun to wish that it was true.

"And wait, if you wanna talk diversity," Satina chimed in, "our academy's got Lady Phimymeria, the elf."

"Right, right."

"What?! You've got an *elf* here?!"

Altina's eyes widened in surprise. Elves were even rarer than half-beasts. They were classified as demi-humans and were seen as closer to humans than demons.

Moreover, elves were known to avoid contact with everyone, supposedly living secretive lives behind the barriers they set up deep in the woods. They only interacted with their own kind, and although they supposedly lived within the forests that lay in human territory, no one had ever managed to find them. They were the stuff of legends.

"How'd they do it? Beats me. But our current student council president managed to get lost in an elven forest and won their trust. We've now got an exchange program with the elven forest for international students."

"What— Th-That's incredible!"

"Yeah, our president just has this natural charisma going for them. Completely unintentional too. If you ever need something

from the student council, you'd better watch out. Lady Phimymeria was done in by their charm."

Altina's mouth hung agape in amazement.

Our president had managed to stumble upon the unfindable forest, earn the trust of the elves, and form an exchange program. They were a bona fide hero in that regard.

Sure, when it came to heroes, most people would picture Cain. But without a doubt, our student council president was a legendary figure whose name would go down in the history books. To be perfectly honest, the presence of an elf made even a half-beast seem perfectly run-of-the-mill.

"Heh heh..."

After a moment of silence, Altina let out a slight laugh.

"Now I feel like an idiot, brooding over being a half-beast..."

It was a self-deprecating smile, but one with a hint of amusement.

"That's right," said Adeline. "Don't sweat the small stuff, I say."

"Small stuff..."

For some reason, Adeline was acting haughty despite having done nothing at all.

"Small stuff, huh..."

Yet Altina repeated the words softly, pleased by the sound of them.

"Heh heh..."

All her worries, her struggles, her loneliness...they had all been dismissed as easily as trifles. Altina savored the thought with a smile.

So, it's a good thing that she didn't leave this town back then. I doubt she'll ever be lonely again.

The town had welcomed her with open arms.

Chapter 58: Now—Girl Time Without Honor and Humanity

I felt I might inadvertently start to drool. A dazzling spread of vivid, colorful, mouthwatering sweets had been spread out before us. There were shortcakes topped with fresh strawberries, glossy flans that—while springy—seemed like they'd melt the moment they hit the tongue, and grand parfaits brimming with fruits and whipped cream.

The mere thought that we could eat as much as we wanted made my heart skip a beat.

"Oh! What an incredible spread!"

"Yes, yes! They all look delicious. I don't know where to start. ♪"

Sylphie and Mely, who'd accompanied me, were both similarly impressed by the intensity of this display.

Today, we'd come to a popular sweets buffet in Academy Town for a girls' day out. The elegant interior, filled with all sorts of vibrant touches, was sure to enchant the heart of every woman with a love of all things cute.

"No need to make the tough choice, Melvy! We just need to eat everything here and we win! Finally, a worthy foe!"

"Er, won't that be a bit much on the calories, Rachel?"

"Well... Wait, you're one to talk, Altina! Do you think I can't see that mountain of cakes on your plate?!"

"I-I mean...they all look so delicious..."

Everyone already seemed to be having a good time. The sweet aroma of the deserts filled the store, preparing the stomachs of these fine maidens for war. We were soon to embark on a colorful feast.

"Well then... Here's to Altina joining the party!"

"Cheers!"

Our glasses came together with a melodious *clink*.

Today's gathering mostly consisted of the members of the hero's party: me, Sylphie, Melvy, Rachel, and our newest member Altina. We'd also invited Sylphie's younger sister, Remphie.

"Now that we're all settled in, if I may be so bold..."

“Oh! Go for it, Liz!”

I humbly raised my hand to get everyone’s attention.

“Lady Altina… How have things been going with Sir Cain since that day?”

“Bwpffft?!”

Clearly, Altina hadn’t expected me to dive straight into it, as she broke into a coughing fit. But this topic was one that everyone had seen coming… In fact, it was no exaggeration to say that we’d all come to hear the answer to that exact question.

“Wh-What do you mean ‘how’? How’s *what* going…?” Altina stammered out, panicking as she tried to steady her ragged breath. But there was no escape—five pairs of gleaming, curious eyes were fixed on her. “U-Umm, well…the thing is…”

Silence.

More silence.

“Er… Eh heh heh.” A bashful laugh slipped out from her as she awkwardly scratched her cheek. Her smile was somehow sweeter than any of the desserts on display.

“Grah!”

“Wh-What a maiden…”

That alone was enough to send a jolt through all of our chests and to tell us exactly the sort of relationship she now shared with Cain.

“B-Being lovers, you know… It’s completely different from how we were before. I-I’m still amazed by it…”

“Different? How so?”

“Like… Like when we’re on a d-date, you know… Cain escorts me so gently. He holds my hand and compliments my clothes,” Altina bashfully mumbled, fidgeting as her head turned redder than the ripe apples at the buffet table.

“Oh, but Cain is always a gentleman on dates,” said Melvy.

“Right, he makes sure to take the lead like a man,” added Sylphie.

“I-I never knew that side of him! We were always bickering, joking around, talking about stupid stuff…”

Melvy and Sylphie made it sound perfectly obvious, but to Altina, the sight of Cain in date mode was new and fresh.

It made sense. The two were engaged to the hero before they even knew him and had come to interact with him as such. It was completely different for Altina, who had gone from childhood friend to lover. That shift was what was confusing her.

“I keep thinking, *so this is what Cain is like on dates*... Just thinking about it makes me... Eh he heh... Eh he he he heh...”

Scratch that. That look on her face was too happy, too dreamy for her to have been confused about anything. She was on cloud nine. A secret crush she had fostered since she was a little girl—feelings of affection she had hidden for many long years—had finally borne fruit, and she was currently savoring the sweetest nectar of it.

“Just being by his side is enough to make me happy, and yet, now that he knows how I feel... Eh heh heh. And there’s even more than that...”

“More than that?”

Altina’s face turned even redder. This was no longer about innocent romance; there was something deeper...something more intimate.

“U-Umm...he’s...very intense...as a man...”

“Are you talking about the sex?!”

“Wah?!”

Before I knew it, I was leaning over the table, asking outright.

“You’re having sex, then! With Cain! What are you into?! Do you like it gentle at first?! Or is it more intense than that?! Perhaps you’re starting off with something a little unconventional?! I always had the feeling you had the makings of a masochist, Lady Altina! If you’d like, I would be more than happy to give you some careful and thorough instruction! What do you say?!”

“H-Huh? What?!”

“Hey, Liz. Keep yourself in check.”

“She’s right, Liz. We’re in public, you know.”

“Remiphinia’s too young for this. Come back to reality, stupid.”

“Hah?!”

With a sharp smack from Rachel, I came back to my senses.

“What did I just... What was I talking about?!”

Sylphie, Melvy, and Rachel, in what seemed like a well-practiced routine, had already bound me with a rope, securing me tightly to my chair.

“Y-You have it all wrong! This has to be some sort of mistake! The sweet smell of the buffet did something weird to me... I’m more worked up than usual...”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Don’t blame it on the buffet.”

“Ngaaaaaah!”

I could do nothing but let out a defeated wail.

“Please don’t back away from me! Altina…!”

Her face flushed, Altina subtly shifted her chair a bit farther away. The way she wanted to put as much distance between us as possible was breaking my little heart.

“*Ahem*. We should change the topic.”

“Yes, yes. That sounds like a good idea.”

Unlike Altina and Remphie—whose faces were both bright red—Sylphie, Melvy, and Rachel seemed completely unfazed. They seemed used to these kinds of conversations… *Do the members of the hero’s party chat about these obscene things on a regular basis?*

“Oh, if we’re changing the subject, there’s something I’ve been curious about…”

“What could it be, Altina?”

Altina timidly raised a hand, offering a new subject.

“Well, I’ve heard a few things. Like how our Wolfe may or may not be going after Princess Remiphinia, and how he may or may not have become a pedophile, and how he’s being a bother to the police because of it… So, what’s really going on there?”

“Oh, yes! Sir Wolfe and I have become very close! Lady Altina, you’re a childhood friend of his, right? I’m sure you will be seeing more of me, so I look forward to your continued support!”

“U-Umm…r-right.”

Princess Remiphinia—Remphie for short—sent Altina a saccharine smile, making no attempt to deny the story. But Altina was making one crucial mistake. It was actually the other way around. Remphie was the one on the attack, while Wolfe was simply putting up whatever futile defense he could muster.

“Altina, the thing is…”

To avoid any misunderstandings, I provided some accurate and objective information.

I detailed how, a few years ago, Wolfe had dramatically come to Remphie’s rescue, and how that had sparked her crush on him; how they had recently reunited by coincidence; how Remphie’s ardent attempts to woo Wolfe had him cast as a pedophile, often resulting in him being detained by the police.

Remphie was Sylphie’s sister, third in line to the throne of Bahelgarn. Naturally, this meant she ranked far higher than Wolfe where status was concerned. Undeterred, Remphie

continued scheming day in and day out to overcome this hurdle.

"Ah ha ha! So that idiot's got his troubles, huh?"

The tragic troubles of her childhood friend, constantly apprehended and arrested, sent Altina into a fit of laughter.

"I knew everything up to that point," said Rachel. "So? How's it been lately? Anything new happen?"

"Yes, Lady Rachel! Just the other day, we made a huge step forward!"

"Oh?! Good going!"

Remphie clenched her fists before continuing, "Recently, we had a medal-awarding ceremony at the royal palace..."

The kingdom's medal-awarding ceremony. I'd been there too, as a matter of fact.

It was to celebrate Remphie's rescue from the treacherous captain of the royal guard, Brian, as well as the suppression of the revolt instigated by the very same man. As we'd both contributed greatly to the resolution of both incidents, Wolfe and I had both received medals for our accomplishments.

With that said, the ceremony itself had been unofficial. The kidnapping of a royal princess was a serious crime indeed, and the thought of such a crime—on top of a rebellion—being perpetrated by the palace's own guard? An incident like that would be a huge disgrace to the kingdom. It couldn't be leaked to the world at large.

So, it had been celebrated in secret. Those who had resolved the incident were quietly awarded their medals and honors in an informal ceremony.

It was at this semiprivate event that Remphie had seized her chance to act boldly.

"I gave the news to mother and father. Together with Sir Wolfe..."

"Huh...?"

"The news...?"

We were on the edge of our seats.

We could all tell it wasn't some average, everyday news. Not some minor report on how her days had been. A girl, introducing the man she pined for to her family... There was something heavier about the news she gave.

Indeed, we'd been granted some speaking time before the ceremony kicked off. A chance to talk to Remphie's parents—the king and queen of the nation—where we decided on how the

proceedings would play out in advance.

"I made a declaration to my parents. 'I consider this man, Sir Wolfe, to be my fiancé!' I told them!"

"Whoa..."

"That's heavy..."

The moment his daughter made such a lofty declaration, the king had frozen on the spot. It left quite an impression on me.

What's more, her parents hadn't been the only ones there. The Minister of the Left and the Minister of the Right, along with a bunch of other important figures that stood at the core of the nation, had been present. The room had fallen into chaos as they processed Remphie's resolve.

Wolfe's stunned face from the moment was still fresh in my memory... His eyes were wide, and it was like his soul was escaping his body through his gaping mouth.

"And during the ceremony itself... Hee hee! ♪"

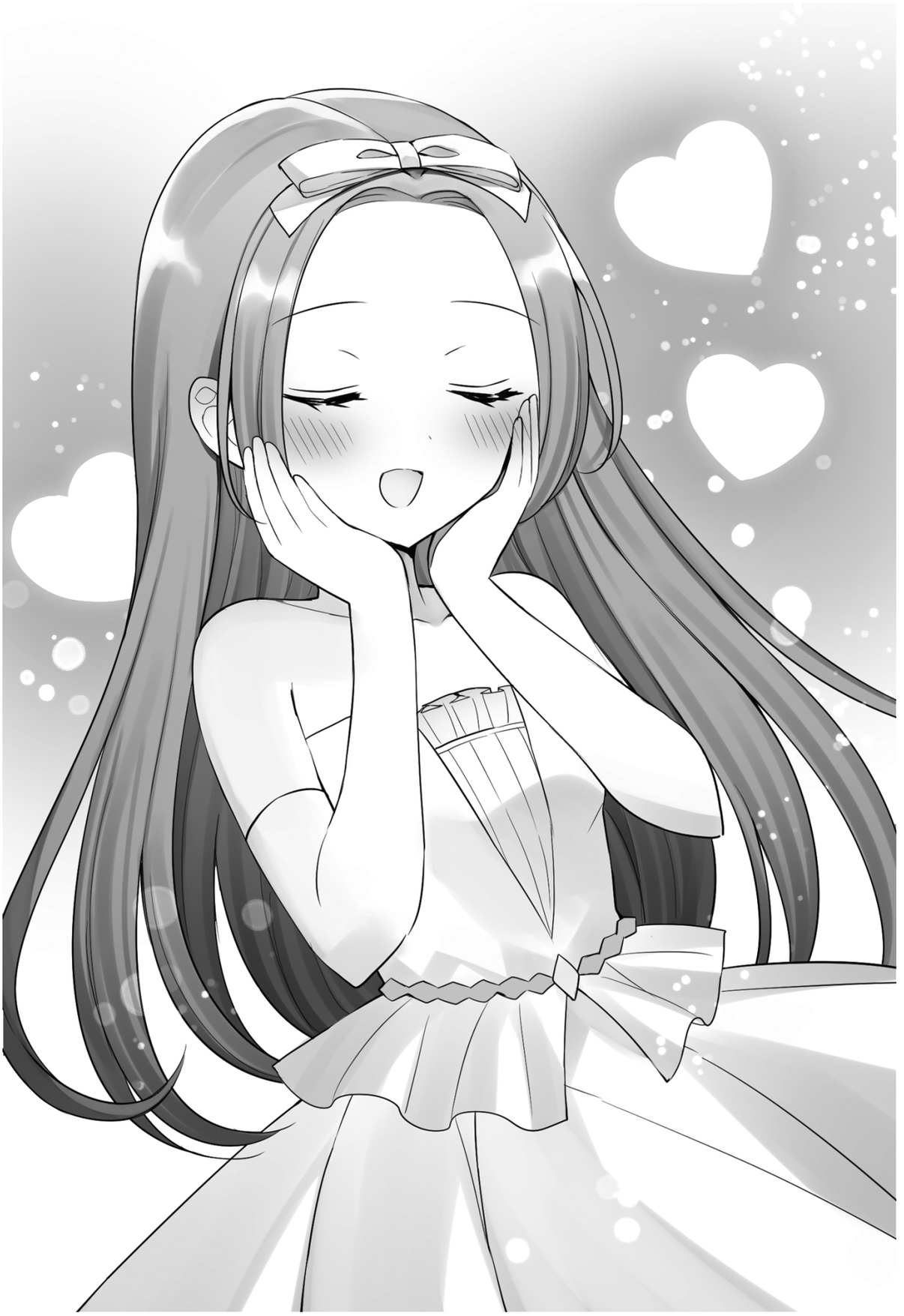
Remphie's scheme didn't end there. Altina shuddered at the impish girl before her as she timidly asked, "Th-There's more...? What did you do?"

"Right as I handed him the medal, I leaned in and kissed him on the cheek."

"Wh-Whoa...!"

"Incredible."

Perhaps recalling the scene, Remphie's cheeks flushed a faint pink as she squirmed in adorable bashfulness.



Yet despite that, her actions were ruthless—heartless, even.

Sure, the ceremony was unofficial, but she'd been quite bold in a formal setting. She harbored deep feelings for Wolfe, a man from who-knew-where. Her fierce offensive had cemented their supposed relationship in everyone's minds.

It was now recognized on a national level. Remphie personally made sure that everyone knew her intentions. It wouldn't be long before actual engagement talks came for Remphie, but she had taken preemptive steps to keep the adults around her in check.

Now that she'd gone as far as to kiss him in front of a crowd of VIPs, this could no longer be brushed off as the whims of a young girl. From now on, the nation's high officials would be genuinely troubled over her marriage.

"That interloping brother of mine wasn't there, so I could do as I pleased!" Remphie recounted with delight.

"Hey now, Remphie. Calling our own brother an interloper is a bit much," Sylphie chided her.

"Master Aina told me, 'Fill in the outer moat as much as you can! That is how the castle falls!'"

"Oh, so it was Lady Aina's teachings..."

Aina. She was our classmate. For a time, she'd been desperate to build a faction within the academy, and so she had become a woman highly skilled in the art of seducing men. During our pajama party, she'd impressed Remphie with her masterful technique, and Remphie had decided to become her disciple.

We hadn't seen much of them together since then, but it seemed this master-disciple relationship had continued and Remphie had picked up various skills.

Aina... Your disciple is outstanding.

Thanks to the ingenuity and strategy of this outstanding disciple, Wolfe was losing his escape routes one by one.

"A pitiful fool he is, that Wolfe..."

"Right..."

What was this feeling? From an objective standpoint, he'd landed an incredible match. He was marrying into money and status; he was supposed to be in an incredible position... But for some reason, I felt sympathy for him.

The mood felt a little heavy. The sweets—which were supposed to be overwhelmingly sweet—now carried a hint of bitterness.

Be strong…Sir Wolfe…

"On another note, how are things with you, Rachel? Are you getting along well with Mitter?"

"M-Me?!"

Rachel was caught off guard when the conversation suddenly turned to her. Sylphie had rather forcefully changed the subject, averting her eyes from her younger sister, who'd grown into quite the predatory girl.

"U-Um, I'm…er…"

"Yes, yes?"

"We had a fight the other day."

With just one sentence, Rachel's mood took a dark turn.

"It's all over. He hates me."

"Um…"

"R-Rachel?"

"I've got no feminine charm. Mitter's got to be sick and tired of me."

Rachel's shoulders drooped, a dark and heavy air looming over her. Seeing her like this made Altina and Remphie glance around frightfully, unsure of what to do. They had only known Rachel's cheerful, self-assured side so far and couldn't hide their unrest as they took in this new side of hers.

That said, Rachel really *was* a full-on wuss when it came to romance. Whenever love trouble arose, her confidence immediately crumbled and she sobbed as though it were the end of the world.

According to Cain, she'd always lived so far removed from romance that when she had finally succumbed to it, she'd been left completely defenseless.

"*Hic*… I'm impertinent, and my words always come out harshly. It's only natural that he hates me. I mean, there are plenty of girly girls around him who are way girlier than me. Waaaaaaaaaaah!"

"Now, now, calm down Rachel. This is Mitter we're talking about."

"Yes, yes, that's right. He only has eyes for you."

"How can you be sho shure?!"

Rachel blew her nose with a long, loud honk.

"C'mon now. Settle down. I'm sure Altina has some good advice for you. Isn't that right?" said Sylphie.

"M-Me?!" The sudden address sent Altina into a panic.

“I-I-I-I can’t! I don’t know how to give advice! You all know, don’t you?! I’m just as bad with love! I don’t even know how I managed to get with Cain!”

She frantically waved her hands around, going weak at the knees. In fact, I hadn’t known her for long, but Altina certainly didn’t come off as a love expert.

“Remphie, then. Do you have any good advice?”

“Umm, er... My apologies. Next time, I’ll ask Master Aina how to make up after a fight!”

As it turned out, Remphie’s lessons were mainly about how to go on the attack; she had yet to learn how to maintain a relationship afterward.

Meaning... I turned my eyes to Sylphie and Melvy—the only ones left. Realizing I was looking at them, they met my eyes.

“Seeking advice from us is pointless, Liz. It’s the same with us; we’re as hopeless as ever when it comes to romance.”

“Yes, yes. Getting advice from us would be completely antithetical.”

Now that I think about it, I heard that from them before. They’d become Cain’s fiancées for the convenience of the nation and the church, and it wasn’t like they’d won his love through their own efforts. Though they had a good relationship with Cain, that wasn’t something they’d seized for themselves.

However, they had accepted their lot. They were bold and confident in their complete lack of romantic prowess.

The hero’s party is full of nothing but weaklings! How have they managed to get by for so long?!

Despite it all, these two were the only ones entirely unfazed by Rachel’s outburst.

“Well, Rachel’s always like this. I’m sure it’ll work out this time too.”

“Yes, yes. It happens a lot. Mitter will take good care of it, as he usually does.”

They munched on their sweets, so calm one got the impression that they’d gone through this song and dance a hundred times before. I couldn’t feel the slightest hint of anxiety from them. It seemed that disarming the bomb that was Rachel was something they left solely to her boyfriend Mitter.

“Take good care of it... How would he do that, specifically?”

“That’s... Er...”

Altina had posed the question, perhaps hoping to use it for

future reference. Yet Sylphie and Melvy stumbled over their responses.

“Well, in various ways, as I’ve been told. Like taking her on dates, whispering to her softly, giving presents, and the like.”

“And…umm, er… That. You know, *that*.” Melvy’s cheeks flushed slightly as she built up suspense. “How should I put it? The thing that most deeply confirms the connection between man and woman.”

“You mean sex?!”

“Wah!”

I slipped out of the rope and leaned in.

“They’re going to have sex, yes?! Why of course! When it comes to confirming the bond between two lovers, the greatest and most effective method has to be sex! It’s the most reliable way to patch things up too! Yes, sex is the safest and most reliable way to repair the relationship between a man and a woman! I read somewhere that a couple’s general happiness can be accurately calculated by subtracting the number of fights they have from the number of sexual encounters they share! In other words! Have lots and lots of sex and everyone’s happy! I knew it! I’m a genius! Copious sex is what will lead all sorts of lovers to happiness!”

“Hey! Stop right there, Liz!”

“We have a small child here!”

“Ah!” I returned to my senses. “N-No, this is some sort of mistake! It’s…it’s sweets! It’s the magic of sweets that ties into the sweet relationship between couples that—!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Sweets don’t have that kind of power.”

“Gaaaaaah!”

Once again, Sylphie and Melvy tied me up, this time far more securely.

“I-Incidentally, what about *you*, Liz? Do you have any love stories?”

“Me?”

Altina directed the conversation toward me, the pitiful sinner tied to the chair.

What can I even say? I, well…

“I don’t really have anything. I’ve never involved myself in romance.”

“Hmm? Really? You seem like the popular type.”

“Ah ha ha. I have gotten confessions before. But none of them quite hit home with me, so I turned them down.”

“Hmm.”

I had given a perfectly inoffensive response. However, for some reason, Remphie was staring at me.

“U-Um, Liz?”

“What is it, Remphie?”

“Umm, er...do forgive me if I’m wrong about this, but...don’t you have feelings for Sir Cain?” Remphie hesitantly asked, lacking confidence in her words.

Yet she’d hit the mark.

For a moment, I was speechless. Sweat trickled down my forehead as I struggled to come up with a response.

“Hey, you know better than that, Remphie.”

“Huh? Ah, sorry, sis. Did I ask something I shouldn’t have?”

It wasn’t that the question was off-limits. But to think that Remphie, of all people, would pick up on it... Judging by her reaction, it seemed Sylphie had noticed too.

Am I that easy to read?

I wanted to take a sip of coffee to calm myself down—I really did. But the rope made that rather impossible. After taking a deep breath, I finally spoke up.

“I am aware of my attraction to him.”

“Uh— Huuuuuuh?! Really?! And yet you still did so much for me?!”

Altina laid bare her surprise. On the other hand, Melvy and Rachel didn’t seem surprised at all.

Hm, have I always been such an open book? That’s a little shocking, to be honest.

“However.” I steadied my breath. “Cain and I are a complete mismatch. It would never work out, and I doubt these feelings will ever reach him.”

“Mismatch?”

“Yes. Cain is a world-renowned hero. By contrast, I am nothing more than an ordinary student. No matter how you look at it, there’s no way we’re a good fit for one another.”

As I spoke, a heavy silence filled the air. I felt guilty about ruining the fun mood of the buffet. Yet I was certain that what I’d said was the absolute truth. Cain was simply too amazing, too strong. I didn’t deserve to be in love with him.

“Th-Th-That’s not true!” Melvy stammered. “Y-You mustn’t give

up!”

“Th-That’s right!” added Altina, “If there’s anything I can help with, just let me know! I mean, I have no idea what I can do… But, I don’t think love is about matching or mismatching, or any of that stuff!”

“Altina’s right! What matters is the heart! The heart!”

“Thank you, Remphie. Altina.”

They were both doing their best to encourage me. I couldn’t be any more grateful.

“Thank you, everyone.” My thoughts on the matter hadn’t changed. “But I’m satisfied just watching over him from afar.”

I put on a smile, holding it in, taking great care to let none of my emotion leak onto my face. Everyone looked bewildered, Sylphie most of all. But I was not wrong. My choice was surely the right one.

My relationship with Sir Cain is fine as it is.

I wriggled one arm out of my restraints and plopped a strawberry into my mouth. But though it should have been nice and sweet, it had a faint bitterness to it.

* * * * *

That night, as the stars glistened overhead, four women gathered in a hotel room. They were Sylphie, Melvy, Rachel, and Altina, all the female members of the hero’s party—save for Liz.

They were meeting in the room that Sylphie was using for her extended stay to continue their girl-time gathering and keep it a secret from Liz.

“Huuuuuuuuuh?! Then Liz really is…a *true* member of the hero’s party?!”

“She’s not just any member either. She was Cain’s first-ever comrade, and she was our party’s second strongest.”

For the first time, Sylphie and the others explained Liz’s peculiar circumstances to Altina: that Liz had once been a member of the hero’s party, and that, like Sylphie and Melvy, she had been Cain’s lover. But she had suffered a severe injury in the battle with the demon lord and lost both her memories and her power.

“Sorry for taking so long to explain this.”

“W-Well, it’s not your fault. I was pretty busy too, filling out all the forms for the transfer… But color me shocked.”

Altina's eyes were wide, the feeling of surprise still lingering.

Thinking back over what she knew about Liz, she had, in fact, used outrageous Spatial Distortion Magic and caused all sorts of chaos. It was obvious to Altina that she wasn't just an average, everyday student, but who would have imagined she carried such a crucial secret?

"Th-Then, the reason Liz sometimes goes crazy..."

"That's her nature as a succubus leaking out."

"It's very exhausting being at the mercy of Liz when she's gone completely unhinged, ha ha..."

Those who'd experienced Liz's former self all stared off into the distance, recalling those harrowing times. They all loved Liz and trusted her too. From the bottoms of their hearts, they wished for her to recover and return to who she was truly meant to be. But that was beside the point. No one would ever claim that it was anything short of a huge undertaking to deal with all of that girl's quirks.

"But Liz... Today, she..."

"Yeah, that's the problem."

During their romantic discussions, Liz had proclaimed she would take a step back from Cain.

Since her memory hadn't yet returned, it was understandable that she felt some distance from Cain, a globally renowned hero. But even so, Liz and Cain had originally been lovers.

Sylphie and Melvy were still getting along well with Cain. And thanks to Liz, Altina was able to have her one-sided love of so many years finally requited. In all of this, Liz was the only one who was being left out.

As comrades who had journeyed together for some time, they wanted to do something for her.

"I think we should support Liz's love. Who's with me?!"

"Yes, yes! I think that's a wonderful idea!"

"I'll bet Cain misses her. I'll take one for the team."

"I-I'll help too! Liz has done a lot for me!"

The friendship between the girls shone bright. They were comrades in the same party, as well as women who (for the most part) shared a love for the same man. Leaving one of them out simply wasn't an option.

"Let's cheer on Liz and Cain's love!"

"Yeah!"

And so the friends' meddling began.

Chapter 59: Then—Girl Time (in Darkness)

“All righty! I’ve been walking around all day, gathering treasure!”

“O-Okay…”

The four women of the hero’s party—Liz, Sylphie, Melvy, and Rachel—had gathered in a hotel room for some girl time.

Treasure… Typically, this referred to gold, silver, and other precious items. These women had indeed collected their fair share of valuable loot in their time exploring dungeons and slaying monsters. But the treasure Liz was talking about today was a little different. Sylphie and the others glanced at the paper bag in Liz’s hand, all of them looking rather apprehensive.

“Now presenting…the treasure!”

“Wh-whoa…”

“That’s…something, all right.”

Liz extracted her haul from the bag and spread it out over the table. Her friends’ faces immediately tensed up.

The treasure was what people would typically call “adult” toys—items meant for nighttime activities. Fleshlights, lube, dildos, magic-powered vibrators, and magic-powered bullets… Liz had apparently decided that this all-girls meeting was going to feature a showcase of her latest purchases.

“Uh, this is one of *those* things, right? The one where it vibrates and starts up the pistons if you channel mana into it—wah! It’s pretty intense!”

Melvy gingerly picked up a magic-powered vibrator, activating it with her mana. The vigorous movements it produced were clearly beyond what any normal man could achieve.

“A fleshlight, huh? That’s like those things that guys use… Wow, the inside’s all bumpy.”

“Hmm, a magic-powered bullet, eh? I’ve never used anything like this before. Does it really feel good?”

“Do you want to try it? Right here, right now?”

“I think I’ll pass. I see a travesty in the making.”

“Tsk.”

Apart from Liz, it seemed that no one was keen on trying out any of the goods on the spot. If they tried for even a second to

test any of the goods, they just knew they'd be swept up in Liz's wake, kicking off a banquet of wretched debauchery. The girls knew it all too well.

"Hey, hey, there's something weird in here."

"What's that supposed to be?"

"It says 'nipple massager.' Can something like this really feel good?"

"Oh, that's for nipple play," the resident expert chimed in, "It's a tool that helps stimulate the nipples to achieve nipplegasm."

"Teacher, I have a question."

"Yes, Melvy?"

"Can someone really climax just from nipple stimulation? That doesn't sound real."

Although they had initially been weirded out, the girls were gradually starting to get comfortable with the conversation, now casually fishing through the items on the table. They were all seasoned soldiers who had gone through special training for this.

"Nipple climax... It does take development and practice. Over time, by continuously stimulating and playing with the area, you can gradually increase your sensitivity. Once you've pinched and rubbed them enough, they will gradually begin to feel good. Eventually, with enough training, you can reach the point of climaxing through nipple play alone."

"Over time... How long are we talking about?"

"Well, nipple sensitivity varies quite a bit from person to person, so it's hard to say for sure... Generally between two weeks and a month is what they say."

"A month, huh..." muttered Rachel. As she poured in her mana, the nipple massager began to give off a whirring sound as it came alive.

"With my magic, I can forcefully make you climax with your nipples. If you like. Though I'd recommend the natural approach."

"Huh? You've tested that?"

"Want to try? Just once?"

"No. I'll pass."

"Tch."

They weren't going to make the wrong choice. They knew it was never 'just once' or 'just a little bit' with Liz. Exactly how many times had they been fooled with those words? They'd

learned their lessons the hard way.

"I don't see any aphrodisiacs here. Couldn't find any?"

"Those require very specialized knowledge and skill with potion-making, so they aren't widely available."

"Yet our Liz whips them up like it's nothing."

"Tee hee hee… I *am* a first-class succubus, you know," Liz said, mischievously licking her lips.

"Hm, now that I'm seeing them all lined up, though, there really aren't many adult toys made specifically for men, are there?"

Melvy tilted her head as she closely inspected the adult toys lining the table.

"Sure enough…"

"They've got fleshlights, with the lubricant that goes with them. And that's about it. Everything else is geared toward women—not that men can't use them, but…"

Melvy and Liz were right; there wasn't much variety when it came to men's toys.

"Well, I suppose this is just one of *those* things."

"Do you know the reason, Liz?"

"For most men, a fleshlight is all they need."

"Oh…"

The others quickly came to terms with it.

"If they do seek additional stimulation, then the natural next target would be the backdoor, which is a little niche…"

A man's sexual pleasure was mostly centered on their primary sexual organ. Anything beyond that… Well, many men felt uneasy about using their rear end, and that required preparation such as enemas. It never became a mainstream preference.

"Hm, that feels like such a waste. Fun times don't just have to be limited to the meaty member." Liz put a hand on her chin and thought. "All right, I've made up my mind. As a first-class succubus, it's up to me to rise to the occasion!"

She sprang up with gusto, making a grand declaration, "I'll develop the ultimate rear gear, for the sake of all the men in the world… *Nay*, it will be the *ultimate* adult toy, one that anyone can enjoy!" She was brimming with motivation. "I can do it! I can! I'm going to give it everything I've got!"

Her resolve was fierce, and her dear friends shared a sinking feeling in their guts.

And so, it came to pass. Liz's so-called "ultimate adult toy" was finally complete.

"Now, Cain! Bear witness to perfection! This is my masterpiece!"

Liz ushered Cain into her hotel room. There, he found himself staring in a daze. A bizarre contraption stood at the center of the room, exuding an ominous aura.

It was pillar-shaped and about the girth of a person, with myriad writhing tentacles sprouting from its sides.

"This is… What is it, exactly?"

"This is the supreme adult toy, developed by yours truly. I call it Girl Time (in Darkness)!"

Cain's question was met with an answer that only made things more confusing.

"Stop me if you've heard this one before: You're looking for new stimulation! But you're a little scared to take it in the back! Well, look no further than Girl Time (in Darkness), the toy for men and women everywhere! These countless tentacles will gently capture nervous thrill seekers while injecting an aphrodisiac-laced lubricant right up their rear! And that's not all! Some of the tentacles are tipped with magic-powered vibrators—the top of the line! It won't hurt even for first-timers! No pain! No fear! Just leave yourself to this magic device, and let it take you to ecstasy beyond your wildest dreams…!"

"Um, I don't even know where to start. Are you stupid?"

Cain clutched his head. The grotesque effigy before him looked idiotic as all hell, but it had been crafted by Liz. It was bound to be incredibly dangerous.

"But wait, there's *even more*! The true strength of Girl Time (in Darkness) is its versatility! Each individual tentacle serves a different purpose: some are bullets, others are fleshlights! It even includes a nipple massager function, complete with a two-week nipple development course programmed right in! With this simple device, you too can become a nipple play expert!"

Girl Time (in Darkness) was Liz's creation, and it could operate autonomously until its stockpile of mana ran out.

Suddenly, something shot out of the device, whizzing toward Cain at breakneck speed.

"Whoa!"

He deftly smacked it away with his sword, then caught it, only to find—

“What’s this? A cookie?”

“That’s right! It also includes the ability to launch my handmade cookies straight into the mouths of its clientele!”

“Oh, hell no! Are you insane?!”

Liz’s cookies were incredibly potent. Anyone who bit into one would find their bodies overtaken by a powerful aphrodisiac, unable to defy a powerful surge of desire. These handmade cookies had caused immeasurable suffering for the members of the hero’s party.

“Girl Time (in Darkness) brings every possible adult pleasure, all wrapped up in one device. It offers supreme pleasure for everyone! I’ve made the ultimate adult toy, jam-packed with *every function imaginable*!”

Liz proudly puffed out her chest. She had done the impossible. She stood there, a proud craftsman convinced she’d reached the absolute pinnacle of her craft.

“Now then! Sir Cain, go ahead and try out my magnum opus!”

With a gleam in her eyes, she flipped a switch on the device. Girl Time (in Darkness) began to move, its tentacles writhing in an uncanny manner as it edged closer and closer to Cain.

“Holy Sword! Release your light!”

Cain held his blade high to the heavens, then a brilliant slash, he cleaved Liz’s creation straight in two.

“Girl Time (in Darkneeeeeeeeess)!!!” Liz cried out.

And so, the sinister magic device was purified by the holy light, expelled from the world without leaving even ash behind. Girl Time (in Darkness) vanished to the ends of time before it had ever seen the light of day.

On that day, the threat of darkness was banished, bringing peace to the world once more.

Chapter 60: Now—A Meddling Date

“Sir Caaaiiin! Sorry to keep you waiting!”

“S’cool, I haven’t been waiting at all. No one else is even here yet.”

We were standing at the entrance of Academy Town. The massive fortified gate, though built to ward off enemy invasions, had never been given the chance to fulfill its purpose. It merely stood there, tall and pristine, a testament to its expert craftsmanship.

It was nearly noon now and the sun was shining bright. I stepped quickly into the shadow of the towering gate and approached Cain, who was waiting there.

“I’m only the second one here, then?”

“That’s right. It’s almost meeting time, but no one else has shown up.”

Today, the members of the hero’s party were all supposed to go on a short trip together—a one-night, two-day trip planned partially to welcome Altina as our newest member.

This gate was supposed to be our meet-up spot. And yet…no one else had arrived.

“Oh, right. Sir Cain, Sylphie and Rachel asked me to pass on a message. They said that something urgent came up, and they can’t participate in today’s activities. They wanted me to apologize for them.”

“Huh.”

Sylphie and Rachel were sitting this one out. It was unfortunate, but there wasn’t much we could do if they had something important to attend to. *I should buy some nice souvenirs for them*, I thought. But Cain’s expression stiffened the moment he heard those words.

“I got a message too. From Altina and Wolfe. Same exact wording.”

“Whuh?”

I, too, was momentarily stunned. If the message was the same, then that meant…

“Lady Altina and Sir Wolfe aren’t coming either…?”

“Guess not.”

Something felt off. Melvy had already mentioned that she couldn't join due to scheduling conflicts. That left only Mitter and Lalo... Just as the thought occurred to me, a courier approached us.

"Pardon me. Would you happen to be Sir Cain and Lady Lisalinde?"

"Yes, that's right."

"I have letters addressed to both of you. I was specifically instructed to deliver them here rather than to your residences."

The courier handed over two letters. They were from the same two people I'd just been thinking about: Mitter and Lalo. Cain opened the letters and read through them as I signed for the delivery. And just like that, the courier thanked us and left.

"Those bastards!"

Cain frustratedly slammed the two letters to the ground.

"Um, what did they say?" I already had my suspicions, but I asked just to be sure.

Furrowing his brow, Cain sluggishly replied, "More 'urgent business.' They can't come either."

That settled it. Everyone else had canceled at the last minute, leaving only Cain and me for the trip. Even I could tell—this wasn't a coincidence. Everyone had conspired to bail, forcing Cain and me to be alone together.

Is this because of what I said during our girl time the other day? Maybe my negativity made them worry about me.

"Wh-What do we do, Cain? Should we cancel the trip?"

"No, we already booked the inn. Canceling day-of would be a waste of money." The reservations had in fact already been made and confirmed by letter. "Besides, knowing those guys, they'll come up with a Plan B or Plan C if we cancel."

"That sounds like a pain." I couldn't help but chuckle at this act of mischief.

"It'd be easier to just go and enjoy the trip. I'd wager they're spying on us from somewhere right now."

"Can't you sense where they are?"

"Nope. They've got Melvy and Lalo on their side. Their magic is beyond me. Sylphie and Altina can provide magical support too..."

"In short, we're outnumbered," I sighed.

Even if Cain was near-omnipotent, his comrades all possessed powers that almost rivaled his own. Worse yet, Melvy and Lalo in

particular actually *outclassed* him in magic ability.

The combined might of this collective bunch was enough to pull the wool over even Cain's eyes.

"Unless they make a huge mistake, it'll be hard to track them down."

It was all playing out exactly as they'd planned it. *Good grief, what troublesome friends we have.*

"But if they try anything funny, I'll nab them myself."

"Ah ha ha ha..."

I could see Cain's eyes suddenly focus like a hunter's. We were going to go ahead and enjoy the trip normally—there was no point in looking for them—but if they slipped up, Cain wouldn't hesitate to pin them down. It seemed that rest and relaxation had just moved *down* on his list of priorities.

"Well, how about we get going? Forget about them and have fun."

"Y-Yes! If that's all right with you, Cain, I'll gladly accompany you!"

A trip alone with Cain... In other words, a date.

Ah, I'm getting a little nervous.

"I-I may be inexperienced, but I hope you'll take care of me..."

"What? Are you proposing to me or something?"

Cain cackled. I could feel my cheeks turn red.

And thus, beneath the blazing sun, began our "blind" date—courtesy of a band of busybodies.

"It's the sea!"

"Man, what a crowd."

We had arrived at our destination. Our itinerary had brought us to a seaside resort. An endless expanse of blue ocean stretched as far as the eye could see. The water's surface shimmered beneath the sun's light, reflecting its brilliance in a way I could only describe as breathtaking.

Although this was the closest beach resort to Academy Town, it still took about a week to reach by carriage. While relatively close, it wasn't the sort of place we could casually stop by.

Or, at least, it wouldn't have been *normally*, but we had cheated a bit with spatial distortion magic. It was a technique I'd learned during that mess we'd had with Altina, one I'd figured out by imitating Kuon. Perhaps owing to Cain's assistance, the process was far easier than when I'd attempted it alone. Thus,

our journey had been cut down to a mere minute. Truly the epitome of an easy getaway.

"I've only seen the sea a few times before. How about you, Sir Cain?"

"I've seen plenty of it. When we were journeying around, we traveled by boat a lot."

"I see."

"And there was that time we took down the demon army's naval branch... No, let's not talk about that."

"Hmm?"

Cain abruptly put an end to that story. *Is it difficult to talk about? Maybe something tragic occurred, or it involved some sensitive information. If he doesn't want to talk about it, I shouldn't press him.*

Besides, right now, it's all about the sea!

The ocean seemed to stretch to the ends of the world, from coast to horizon. The beach boasted a long shoreline, ensuring that its guests didn't feel suffocatingly packed. It promised a pleasant day ahead of us. The heat of the sun scorched the white sands, bringing a tingling, stinging sensation to the soles of my feet. Each step we took left a clear print behind. The salty scent of the ocean wafted in from the waves, while the smell of something delicious on a grill drifted in from the beach house behind us.

The sky was a perfect, cloudless blue. The weather was so perfect, it was almost screaming that this was how a beach was *meant* to be.

"Oh, Liz. Um, how should I put this?"

"Yes? What is it, Sir Cain?"

"That light blue swimsuit... It looks good on you," said Cain, somewhat bashfully.

I was wearing a medium-blue bikini bedecked with frills, which lent it an air of cuteness and youth. I'd spent a good bit of time picking out the perfect one just for today; it was my favorite swimsuit.

"Eh heh heh... Thank you, Cain."



“Y-Yeah…”

Cain turned his face away, a faint red tint to his cheeks. He was adorable to look at, and his compliment made me happy too. I couldn’t keep a grin from spreading across my face.

“Your swimsuit looks good on you too, Sir Cain.”

“Men’s swimsuits are all pretty much the same. I just threw on whatever I could find.”

“No, no, that’s not true at all.”

Cain was wearing dark-navy, loose-fitting swimming trunks. True, it was a common design for men’s swimwear. However! The true joy of men’s swimwear was not in fact the design, but the physique beneath it! That didn’t mean it was okay to neglect the design entirely, but Cain was a world-renowned hero. His body was sculpted to perfection, his taut muscles honed to the extreme!

“Your pectorals, your abdominals, your biceps… *Hff*…*hff*…”

“Hey, now.”

I hadn’t even noticed that I’d started panting. How could I not be excited in the presence of such a masterpiece of human anatomy? His body was so beautiful that I’d begun to hallucinate a divine light radiating from him. I was doing my absolute best to suppress the blood that threatened to burst from my nose.

“*Hff*…*hff*… Such sculpted deltoids… Those well-toned traps, the external obliques, tibialis anterior…and the glimpses of quadriceps peeking out from the edges of your trunks…!”

“Contain yourself, Liz.”

“This is heaven. I’m in heaven… *Hff*…*hff*… Heh heh heh…”

“How are you sounding even more like a middle-aged man than any man I know?”

Cain gave me a smack on the head.

Huh?! What was I just…

I snapped back out of it, regaining my sanity…but still, no, I couldn’t deny it. His swimsuit-clad figure was positively stunning. My reaction was perfectly natural—anyone would get worked up if they saw him like that.

It’s not my fault today. The true culprits are the sea, the sun, the sand, and most importantly, Cain’s beautiful body.

Then, as I was admiring his figure—

“B-Big trouble!”

“Huh?”

“Hm?”

A rather panicked voice rose from somewhere nearby.

"Someone's drowning! Out there, in the open sea! A kid is drowning!" shouted a man. Looking in the direction of his outstretched finger, I saw a small shadow flailing about a fair distance from the shore, churning the water's surface. It was a child, panicked and thrashing, clearly in danger.

"We have to help!"

"Someone needs to get out there!"

As the news spread, the adults around us began to panic as well. We had to save him—but the child was too far. If someone jumped out now, would they even make it in time?

And in my moment of hesitation, a strong gust of wind blew over us.

I held down my hair, wondering what had happened. That's when I saw them—a figure with wings spread wide, cutting through the wind as they flew toward the drowning child.

They were moving fast—*too* fast. With a flap of their wings, they reached the child in a flash and immediately scooped them out of the sea. And then, they were back to the beach just as fast as they'd left it.

It was over in an instant, accomplished as easily as a yawn.

"Are you okaaay? Are you hurt anywhere?"

"Waaaaaah! Thank yooooooou, Miss Angeeel!"

"You can't go out that far on your own, okay? The ocean is a scary, scary place."

The woman with wings spoke in a lazy drawl as she comforted the child. She was an angel—a literal one just like the angel cops we occasionally saw in town who were often troubled by Wolfe's alleged tendencies. But this one wasn't wearing a police uniform. Instead, she had donned a modest and functional swimsuit. It seemed this lady angel was a lifeguard. She kept an eye on the beach, scanning it for any potential danger and making sure no one drowned.

The lady angel escorted the rescued child to a first aid station before returning to her post on a tall watchtower, continuing her work.

"I guess angels don't just work as coppers, huh?" Cain mused. "They're lifeguards too."

"Indeed. It's quite admirable."

The good angels were evidently working tirelessly in all sorts of roles to maintain peace and safety in the world.

But…I observed the angel a bit longer. I couldn't seem to tear my eyes away from her. There was something about her, something clearly different from the other angels.

It was her wings. Most angel officers had pure-white wings. The lifeguard's wings, however, were pitch-black, so alluringly dark, they seemed to swallow up every last trace of light. Her long hair was unique too—while it started out white at the roots, it grew darker the farther down it went until it reached a similar shade of black. It was rare to see a gradient like that.

And now, I noticed something else too…

"Cain, that…that angel lady…"

"What?"

"She's got a super nice body!"

I could practically hear my brain going *awooga*. She had the ideal proportions with curves in all the right places. A body like that would make any woman envious. I cursed her swimsuit—her lifeguard uniform, I supposed—for exposing so little. I needed *more*.

"Stop ogling working professionals."

"Ow!"

Cain flicked my forehead.

"B-But! You think that angel woman is a stunner too, don't you?!"

Cain suddenly seemed at a loss for words.

"See?!"

His silence spoke volumes.

"Ah!"

And there, I was hit by another shocking revelation. I had been too fixated on Cain's swimsuit and the perfectly sculpted figure it highlighted. I was captivated by the beauty of the endless sea. But the fact was: we were on a crowded beach. There was something else—something far more vital I should have been looking at!

Indeed, all I had to do was just turn my head, and—

"Gorgeous women! So many of them!"

"Hey."

All around me, women in revealing swimsuits filled the beach. It was a feast for the eyes, truly the pinnacle of visual artistry!

How could I have overlooked this? There were sexy swimsuits, cute swimsuits, bold and daring ones—all adorning stunning women, each radiating their own unique charm. They were all

gathered right here in front of me!

By merely turning my eyes, I was treated to the sight of all these incredible women for free. *Free*! How was this even allowed?! *Was* it even allowed?!

Of course, there were plenty of wonderful gentlemen too, but standing right beside me was none other than Cain, the manifestation of physical perfection. With him here, no other man had the faintest hope of stealing my attention.

But more importantly, *women*! Swimsuit beauties! Everywhere!

Was it really fair for me to enjoy such bliss without paying a price?! Was the beach simply a facade for the gates of heaven?! I mean, given there was that beautiful angel, just maybe…

"Gweh heh heh heh heh… So many pretty ladies, and I get to ogle them as much as I want, gweh heh heh heh heh…"

"Enough, you old perv. Snap out of it already."

"*Owww*!" I cried out as Cain rapped me firmly on the head with his knuckle. "Augh! What was I just…" I snapped back to my senses.

"Quit babbling and come on. Let's get in the water already."

"Oh…"

He gripped my hand firmly and began running toward the waves. I could feel the sand scorching the soles of my feet each time I kicked off, sprinting behind him. There before us stretched the sea. We leaped in feet-first, spraying water everywhere.

I gasped as the numbing coldness of the sea splashed up my thighs like pinpricks. The waves lapped against my legs, teasing them as I began to feel the ocean's soothing embrace.

"Take this!"

"Waaah?!"

And as the sensation of the ocean distracted me, Cain caught me off guard with a palmful of water. The cold seawater struck my sunbaked skin, catching me fully by surprise. The contrasting temperatures sent a chill through my entire body.

"C-Cain?!"

"Ha ha! It's the beach! How could I resist?!"

He laughed an innocent, mischievous laugh.

"S-Seriously?! Well, I can do that too! Take this! And this!"

As payback, I scooped up some water with my hands, sending it flying toward him.

"That's just an afterimage."

"Say what?"

Or so I thought, but suddenly he vanished, his voice for some reason coming from behind me.

He circled behind me at super speed!

“Hrah!”

“Gyaaaaaah?!”

With a powerful kick, he raised a massive wave that engulfed me whole; the force was so great that I found myself helplessly spinning underwater.

“Pwah!”

I gasped for air as I broke the surface. In an instant, he had me completely soaked.

“Is this really how a beach date is supposed to go?!”

This isn’t what common sense dictates, as far as I’m aware!

“Ha ha ha, my bad, my bad! Got carried away!” he cackled as he reached out and pulled me back to my feet. None of those lovey-dovey beach dates from the books I’d read had anything to do with afterimages or devastating water attacks.

“I’m a little worried you’ll turn this into some kind of training and tell me, ‘You can’t leave until you hit me with a single splash.’”

“I won’t, I won’t. Let’s just enjoy the day normally.”

I turned my head away, puffing my cheeks out a bit and pretending to sulk.

“I said I’m sorry, Liz. Forgive me, would you?”

Cain took a half-step closer—and that was when I saw my chance.

“Got you!”

“Huh?”

I wrapped my arms around his body, holding him tightly as I pulled him down into the water with me. We both went under with a massive splash.

“Pwah!”

“Bwah hah! Hah hah! You got one over on me!”

We popped our heads out together, Cain still in my embrace. He was sopping wet now, just like me, his black hair drenched and dripping.

The word ‘slick’ came to mind. A slick man—perhaps that wasn’t quite right, but it certainly fit him right now. I couldn’t help but stare, mesmerized.

“The ocean isn’t so bad, right?” Cain muttered, staring out at the vast sea.

“Yes, you’re right…” I agreed, but only in words. My focus was somewhere else entirely. My eyes remained fixed on him as I spoke. I was still clinging to him, selfishly monopolizing his body heat that came as a stark contrast to the chilly seawater.

Is this…okay? I wondered. I wasn’t even in a relationship with him. A pang of guilt accompanied the rapid pounding of my heart. It was throbbing so violently, I thought my chest might burst.

* * * * *

“Well, well, look at those two.”

“Umm! They’re, uh, definitely hitting it off!”

“Indeed. Our efforts are bearing fruit.”

From a distance, a group of familiar faces were spying on Liz and Cain like Peeping Toms. They were the members of the hero’s party who had been supposedly unable to attend this trip: Sylphie, Melvy, Rachel, Altina, Mitter, Lalo, and Wolfe. Joining them as a special guest was none other than the former demon lord, Kuon.

“Umm, umm, it’s their first solo date in a long time. I just hope they enjoy themselves,” Melvy said cheerfully.

“I’d say it’s going well so far,” Sylphie chimed in, “Even without her memories, those two are just a good match for one another.”

They had yet to be detected by Liz or Cain. Thanks to the magical expertise of Melvy and Lalo—and Kuon as well—the group had been rendered completely invisible to Liz and Cain. The spell had been amplified by narrowing its scope to only target the two of them.

On top of that, Sylphie and Altina were providing additional magic support. With Liz’s powers still not fully restored, Cain alone couldn’t possibly break through the obscuring spell being maintained by the combined might of his allies.

The beach boasted a very lengthy shoreline. By enhancing their vision and keeping a safe distance, they could peep and relish in the scene without any risk of being found out.

“My, though, Sylphie, you really do have a good figure.”

“Hmm? You think so? I’ll take that as a compliment. But, Altina, your toned physique is quite admirable as well.”

“Quit it! Hearing that from someone I know I can never beat is just sad,” Altina grumbled as she closely inspected Sylphie’s

swimsuit-clad form.

Of all of them, Sylphie undeniably had the best figure. She was tall and sported the largest chest on top of a well-toned body sculpted by rigorous training. She truly had the build of a model. Her swimsuit—a classic triangle bikini with minimal fabric—only emphasized her natural allure.

In contrast, Altina wore a modest high-neck swimsuit with a flared skirt, designed to minimize skin exposure. It reflected her preference for simple, understated clothing; in fact, it had been chosen based on the same philosophy with which she'd picked out her undergarments not too long ago. But it had still been carefully selected by her comrades—while the exposure level itself was low, it still had a stylish design that suited her well.

"On that note..." Sylphie trailed off, "Kuon, why are you wearing a school swimsuit?"

"Wearing school-issued stuff on a beach... That's going to stand out, you know?"

"Silence! Ye lot summoned me here at the last second! What time had I to prepare a swimsuit for mineself?!" Kuon shouted. Her plain school swimsuit, unremarkable but formfitting, granted her a rather "niche" appeal.

She'd been invited in a hurry, and that was because of the spatial distortion magic she possessed. Spatial distortion was a very high-level spell, with Liz and Kuon being the only users they knew of. And so she—not strictly a member of the party—had been hastily mixed in among their ranks. Thus, the school swimsuit.

"Umm, umm, I'm sorry, Kuon. It was rude of us to call you so suddenly."

"My thoughts exactly! Yet the beach doth hold some enjoyment. And I had naught else to pass the time. But the fact that I could only prepare a school swimsuit is just...! Next time, give me more notice, Melvy!"

"Yes, I'll make sure of it. Speaking of which, could you teach me your spatial distortion magic sometime?"

"Me as well," said Lalo. "If it is all right with you, I would like to learn under your guidance."

"Hmph. You two, eh? Yes, magicians of your caliber might just be able to learn it."

As they were all magic professionals, their conversation naturally shifted into high-level technical discussions. Kuon's rare

spatial distortion did wonders to pique their curiosity.

On the previous topic, however, Melvy was wearing a one-piece swimsuit. Conservative and simple, it was a good fit for someone as pure and elegant as she was. It served to accentuate the adorableness of her petite build.

That said, Melvy suddenly noticed something—whether she liked it or not.

Kuon's swimsuit was a one-piece as well. Yet there was a stark, undeniable difference between the two. Melvy's gaze slowly, inevitably settled on a specific point on Kuon's body.

"Kuon, you're not exactly...*lacking*, are you?"

"B-Beg pardon?"

For some reason, a sharp, violent aura had begun to emanate from the usually gentle Melvy, her very emotions leaking out of her in an ominous blackness.

Even Kuon, the mighty demon lord of darkness, couldn't help but break into a nervous sweat.

There was a long, awkward silence. And then, Kuon realized it too.

Her chest. Her bust.

Melvy's eyes were fixed intently on her bosom. Both Kuon and Melvy were short in stature and had petite builds. However, not all their physical traits were equally distributed.

"W-Well... I am not wholly lacking, nay... Eep?!"

At that moment, an overwhelming bloodlust filled the air. Everyone in the general vicinity instinctively shuddered at the dread they felt overtaking them. With just a cold glare from the girl, the temperature at the beach seemed to drop by several degrees.

"Oh, Lord, why must the world be so unfair?"

The world's most renowned saint lamented the injustices of life and put her hands together in prayer. However, the contents of her prayer were anything but saintly.

"Hey, Kuon. Is there a demonic magic to, say, tear someone's chest off and make it your own? Kuon?"

"Of *course* not! Do not even dare think to seek such a terrifying spell!"

"Oh, Lord..."

Saint Melvy offered her prayers to the heavens. The breast-hunting barbarian, consumed by selfish desire and impure thoughts, was lifting the most frivolous of prayers.

“Let’s keep our distance from Melvy for now.”

“Agreed.”

Rachel and Mitter were the first to depart. The others quickly joined them in distancing themselves from the newborn fiend.

“By the way, Rachel, your swimsuit really suits you.”

“Fwaaah?! Wh-What are you saying, all of a sudden, Mitter?! C-Complimenting me won’t get you anything!”

The remark caught Rachel off guard. Her face flushed instantly.

Her swimsuit was marked by its short-pants-style bottom. The top of the two-piece had a very typical design, but the bottom had more fabric than the standard, triangular swimwear, giving it a bit of a tomboyish appearance. It perfectly matched Rachel’s bold and brash demeanor.

“I mean it. It really does look great on you. I am very proud to have someone like you by my side.”

“I-Idiot! What’s flattery gonna do for you, huh?! I’m short, and my figure isn’t even good.”

“That’s not true. I love you, Rachel.” Mitter whispered sweet words into her ear, turning every inch of her red from head to toe. The exposed skin of her swimsuit left her with no way of hiding it.

The others watched their antics like it was some sort of sideshow.

“Oh my, things are heating up over there,” muttered Sylphie.

“Didn’t she say they were fighting just the other day?” asked Altina.

“That’s probably why Mitter’s working so hard to get her in a good mood. When it comes to handling Rachel, Mitter is a professional.”

Mitter had become quite used to defusing these ticking time bombs. Having been in the relationship for nearly two years, he knew all the tricks of the trade.

“All right, we’ll leave Rachel to Mitter.”

“And let’s get on with enjoying the beach ourselves.”

“Right, umm, er, we should have some fun too! While watching Liz and Cain, of course!”

“Oh, welcome back, Melvy.”

The chest-hunting barbarian had regained her sanity, and everyone waded into the sea, enjoying the cold touch of the water—all of them except for one.

It was Altina. She stood at the edge of the waves, fidgeting and glancing around nervously. Each time a big wave came in, she would timidly retreat a few steps. Being a cat half-beast, she was naturally bad with water. Additionally, this was her first time seeing the sea, and the sheer volume of liquid left her mildly terrified. And so, she continued to go through these indecisive motions just beyond the water's reach.

"Just get in already, dummy."

"Gyaaaah?!"

As she waffled, her childhood friend Wolfe kicked her from behind, sending her splashing straight in.

"Nyaaah! Nya, nyaaah! Nyaaaaaah!"

Altina flailed around in a panic, kicking and screaming out in catlike sounds she didn't usually make. But the water was incredibly shallow—she didn't even have to stand up. She could sit and her head would still be well above the surface.

"*Hff*... *Hff*..."

Once she'd finally regained some composure, she took a few deep breaths to steady herself.

"Wah ha ha ha ha! Take a look at yourself!"

Wolfe burst into laughter as he watched her. Altina turned to him, her sharp gaze full of murderous intent as she glared at her old friend.

"*Hrah!*"

"Whoa, there."

She immediately launched a flying kick, which Wolfe only barely managed to parry. Then came another, and another. Each blow was accompanied by a violent splash of water. In a corner of a beach resort, a climactic battle between two superhumans had begun.

"I'm glad you're having fun, but don't bother the other beachgoers, okay?"

"Umm, err, is this the first time at the beach for anyone else?"

Sparing barely a glance for what had essentially become a deathmatch, the other members had begun to enjoy themselves in earnest. They swam around freely and relished in the cold sensation as they submerged themselves under the water.

"Indeed, 'tis my first time by the sea."

"Really, Kuon? I didn't know that."

"Or rather, 'tis my first time by the sea in humanland..."

Kuon's words had everyone tilting their heads curiously.

“In demonland, one cannot actually enter the water…”

“Why not? Oh, wait…”

Just as the question escaped their lips, they all recalled the answer. The members of the hero’s party had entered demonland time and time again to do battle. They all thought back to the sea they had witnessed back then.

“The seas of demonland, alas, are steeped in a poison most potent. They be black and purple bubbly things. To enter them is to meet thy doom, for thy body will wither and decay instantly, leaving naught but bone. Eventually, that very poison shall coil around those bones, giving rise to monsters. It is a black sea, ever swirling with nothing but resentment and regret.”

She continued, “But though thou mustn’t enter the water, to take in the scent of that powerful miasma is, as you might imagine, the great and invigorating sea experience.”

The others recoiled a bit at her words. They knew, of course, that different cultures would have different ways of enjoying the sea. But there didn’t seem to be any fun to be had there for humans like them. The smell of miasma was one thing they wanted absolutely nothing to do with.

Before them was an endless expanse of watery blue, a blazing sun, and the ebb and flow of the waves.

And yet, everyone there was too struck by the huge culture gap they had with the demons to notice.

The sun, once sitting so high in the sky, had dipped low and taken on a reddish hue.

I’d enjoyed the day to the fullest! I’d splashed around in the sea with Cain, swam my heart out, and even used a water-walk spell to lounge around lazily, sunbathing right on top of the water.

At the beach house, I’d devoured a shaved ice that went straight to my head with a painful sting, and I tried a bit of something called “surfing.” Though I kept falling down at first, I managed to maintain some semblance of balance by my last attempt.

It had been such a fulfilling day, I just had to let out a satisfied sigh. Time really does fly when you’re having fun.

Presently, Cain had gone to get drinks for the both of us. I gratefully allowed myself to be spoiled by his kindness as I sat on the beach, gazing absentmindedly out at the sea.

The crimson sun cast a faint glow over the sky and the sea. A

once vibrant blue world transformed into one of amber hues. Though beautiful, the darkening sea was dangerous, and people had begun to leave the water. The angels on lifeguard duty called out warnings. What was once a crowded beach was now desolate. The time for fun was over; the veil of night was fast descending.

“Hey there, pretty miss. All alone?”

Then came a flirtatious voice that took me straight out of my sentimental reverie. Turning toward it, I saw five men approaching me.

“How about you hang out with us?”

“You might not know, missy, but this is when the real fun begins.”

“We’ve got a room booked at the hotel. A real huge one. How about you come join us?”

They were hitting on me. In a very boorish way too.

The men had tattoos on their bodies and piercings on their noses. Judging people by appearances was a bad thing—I know—but they certainly looked very conspicuously delinquent-like.

“No, thank you. I’m here with a fine gentleman today.”

“No worries! Forget about that guy and come have some fun!”

“Damn, what a catch! Heh heh, tonight’s gonna be good.”

Their sleazy smiles grew as they moved closer. I could sense from their demeanor that they had no intention of letting their “prey” escape. Even when I declined, they persisted, undeterred. To them, I must have seemed like an easy mark.

“Please stop. I’ll call the police.”

“Yeah, nah. You’re gonna come with us... Right?!”

One of the men tried to pull me in by the shoulder, but I dodged him with ease.

“Huh?”

The man gave me a puzzled look as he barely kept himself from stumbling forward.

“Hey now, missy, don’t run away...”

This time, he reached for my arm. I brushed aside his grab with my elbow, causing the delinquent to lose balance and almost fall over.

“You’re being very persistent.”

“What’s with this chick?”

“C’mon now, missy. We just want to have a good time.”

“If you keep resisting, you’ll leave us with no choice but to be

a bit forceful."

The five delinquents surrounded me. Honestly, handling thugs like these would be a piece of cake. Having been trained by the hero's party, and having faithfully continued the 'Anyone Can Do It! Hero-Style Boot Camp!' training regimen, these guys were small fry to me.

The problem was, I didn't know the best way to handle it. I wanted to avoid being seen as the aggressor, and causing a scene that would make me seem like I was in the wrong... Essentially, I didn't know what level of force was appropriate to deal with men hitting on me. *Should I knock them out to shut them up? If I strike first, will the fault lie with me? Is there a way to slip out of this?*

It happened as I was weighing my options.

"Hey."

Another male voice called out from behind the men. It was Cain. He approached us, a drink in each hand.

"That's my woman you've got there. Scum like you? She's way out of your league."

"Come again?!"

"You heard me. Take a dip and get some fish to suck you off—it'd still be more than you deserve."

"The hell?! You think you can just show up outta nowhere and act like you're hot shit?!"

Cain's blatant provocations had the thugs' veins bulging with fury as they glared at him.

"How about you take a nap, punk?!" one of them cried out while running at Cain, fist ready to swing.

A wicked smirk spread across Cain's lips. He'd most likely been waiting for them to make the first move. And it was playing out exactly as he wanted it to. Cain tossed the two drinks high into the air. Then, faster than you could blink, he had knocked all five of the men out.

Not understanding what had happened to them, the delinquents collapsed to the ground with those looks of fury still plastered on their unconscious faces. And with that, Cain had dealt with them, barely even disturbing the air around him.

"There we go," Cain said as he caught the falling drinks with skillful ease. He hadn't spilled a single drop of the liquid within. It was like watching a master acrobat at work.

"Sorry for the wait. Here, this one's for you, Liz."

“Oh, th-thank you…”

“How about we head to the hotel?”

He handed me a drink and started walking as if nothing had happened, stepping on the unconscious delinquents along the way.

“You were cool back there, Sir Cain…”

“How so? You coulda handled them on your own, Liz.”

“Well, that’s true, but…”

I took a sip of the iced latte Cain had handed me. The pleasant chill of the drink was nice and soothing on my throat.

“Having a man stick up for you… It’s a woman’s dream, right?” I explained.

My cheeks turned red, but it went undetected in the glow of the setting sun. Though my body was heating up, the cold drink helped cool me down.

They were just a bunch of insignificant delinquents, hardly worth mentioning. Even with five of them, they hadn’t come close to posing a threat to me. And yet my chest and mouth were filled with an unexpected sweetness.

* * * * *

The sun was now sinking below the horizon. It was that time of day when the sky and sea were drenched in the darkness of night, with only the last remnants of the evening’s red lingering. Hardly a soul remained on what had previously been a crowded beach area; they’d all headed to one of the nearby hotels to rest for the night.

And yet, something unusual was stirring in the night sea—a sea which had seemed so ordinary. Far from shore, deep beneath the waves where no human eyes could see, something—a great many somethings—were moving in orderly formation.

They were not the normal creatures of the deep. They held weapons and marched along the seafloor.

It was the demon army—though if Kuon had anything to say about it, they would be called the “rebel army” instead. This unit in particular was endowed with such immense vitality that its troops could survive even in the poisonous seas of demonland. They had marched on and on, day and night until finally they had reached the water of human seas.

They were fishmen. Their bodies were covered in scales, but

they walked upright on two legs, wielding weapons with their two hands. These creatures, possessing traits of both fish and humans, formed a distinct class of demi-humans. And of all the fishmen, this particular group was an elite unit endowed with specialized, durable bodies capable of enduring the foul seas of demonland.

Their destination was the nearby beach. Their mission: a nighttime raid to cause devastating harm to humanity and to occupy the area.

The fishmen marched silently across the sea floor. Every sound made by their movement was swallowed up by the water, leaving the surface world blissfully unaware of their approach. Humans, unsuited for sea life as they were, couldn't survive underwater for more than a few dozen seconds on average. There was no way for any ordinary humans to detect the advancing army. The fishmen had an overwhelming territorial advantage. Leveraging this boon, the demons were set to bare their fangs against the human world.

The operation was set to begin at midnight. This was when the fishmen would reach shore and the humans would be fast asleep.

"Men! I trust you are all prepared! Today, the demon army's fishmen division will bring the hammer of judgment down on humanity!"

"Ooh hoo hooo!"

"Let us stain the land and sea red with human blood, and turn the tides of this war in our favor!" The fishman commander, a demon executive, rallied his troops, but even their deafening war cries could not reach the world above the waves.

The clear blue sea echoed with joy and laughter during the day. But now, something crept closer step by step, each step drawing closer to an impending tragedy.

Chapter 61: Then—The Clash! Versus Tentacle Emperor Homo Squidiens!

The blue sea! The vast sky! The hot, sandy beach!

And of course, the massive squid with countless wriggling tentacles!

“Uwaaaaaah!”

“S-Save meeeeee!”

The screams echoed across a certain beach where a particular demon was wreaking havoc, attacking people and causing widespread destruction.

This demon’s name was Tentacle Emperor Homo Squidiens. He was a powerful and capable foe who had been appointed as a commander in the demon army. He sported a massive body stretching several tens of meters and, on top of ten thick, strong appendages (two long tentacles and eight shorter, as with most other squids), he also sported countless smaller tentacles, which sprouted from all over his writhing mass, all of which he leveraged to deal massive damage to the human soldiers.

“Squiddy-squid-squid! Humans are such feeble creatures, squidn’t you say?”

“Gwaaaaaaaaah!”

The human soldiers stood no chance against those ten thick appendages and innumerous tentacles.

“So, what? We just have to take that thing down, right?”

“Hmph. What a strange-looking demon.”

“Squiiid?”

At that moment, powerful reinforcements arrived—the hero’s party. They’d come to the beach to slay this mighty demon.

“It’s the hero!”

“The hero and his comrades have arrived!”

“Look out! Those tentacles are ridiculously fast, and its arms are absurdly strong!”

The arrival of Cain and his party was a game changer; in an instant, the morale of the soldiers had been restored. But the Tentacle Emperor Homo Squidiens showed no signs of panic.

“Goo hoo hoo hoo! So many squiddingly cute girls, I see! I

can’t wait to grab you with my tentacles and tear off your clothes bit by bit!”

“Wha—?!”

This vulgar declaration left Cain and his party members stunned.

“Wh-What in the world?! He’s a pervert!”

“A pervert who lusts after humans!”

“I thought the only demons that lusted after humans were the orcs in eromanga! So it wasn’t just my fantastical creations?!”

Ordinarily, demons did not harbor sexual desire toward humans. Just as humans found orcs unattractive, orcs viewed humans the same way. Such ideas were supposed to be contained to the recent new trend in eromanga. But there were always exceptions, and the Tentacle Emperor Homo Squidiens was one of them. As his name suggested, he had a small amount of Homo Sapiens—human—blood mixed into his lineage.

“In short, we just have to avoid getting caught by those tentacles.”

“Sounds about right. Why don’t we rip out those creepy things one by one?”

Sylphie and Rachel, though slightly unnerved, readied their weapons and braced for battle.

“Seriously, though. Watch out, guys.”

“Of course!”

“We know!”

They nodded at Cain’s somewhat concerned words. This battle carried a sort of danger a little different from the usual.

“No way! I’d like to see you squidding try! There’s no escape from my many tentacles!”

The Tentacle Emperor flailed his tentacles around. But the heroes were ready for it. This was a fight to protect the peace of the land—and their dignity.

“Please wait!”

“Hm?”

Yet there was someone who would dare put a pause on that battle.

It was Liz. Liz’s voice stopped them all in their tracks.

“Liz, what’s wrong? Wait, what? What’s that circle?”

Liz was drawing a sizable magic circle on the sand at their feet. What was she trying to do? Cain cocked his head at her antics. But Lalo—someone just as well-versed in magic as Liz—

was able to discern the meaning behind Liz's intricate construction.

"That is...a summoning circle, correct?"

"Yes, precisely, Sir Lalo! I am about to summon the perfect opponent for that tentacle demon!"

A summoning circle was a highly advanced spell used to summon a contracted familiar across space. Still, her companions were puzzled. Liz was no summoner, and as far as they knew, she'd never formed a contract with any kind of familiar. And what exactly would the perfect opponent for a squid demon be?

As all sorts of questions swirled in their minds, Liz completed the final stroke.

"Here I go! Come forth! My beloved soldier—my great contractee!"

There was a dramatic pause.

"Answer my call! Girl Time (in Darkness) Mk. II...!"

"Whoaaaa?!"

In an instant, with a massive burst of sand, a gigantic object materialized on the battlefield. It was a massive, cylindrical structure comparable in size to the Tentacle Emperor himself. The entire expanse of its several tens-of-meters-tall body was covered in countless tentacles, each writhing in a sinister, unnerving fashion.

At the tips of these tentacles were numerous magical devices made to serve numerous functions—arcane vibrators, enchanted bullets, magically enhanced fleshlights, and more.

"Th-That's..." Cain gasped.

"D-Don't tell me..." stammered Sylphie.

Cain and the women of the party all burst into a cold sweat.

"That's right! Modification after modification has led to the ultimate masterpiece! I present to you: Girl Time (in Darkness) Mk. II!" Liz puffed out her chest with pride.

She had previously crafted Girl Time (in Darkness), the ultimate adult toy. And although her creation had ultimately been atomized by Cain, leaving not a single trace, Liz had secretly been slaving away on an upgraded version.

Now, this colossal creation was making its debut on the battlefield.

"You've gotta be squidding me!"

Even the mighty Tentacle Emperor was visibly shaken by the

bizarre construct before him.

“Now, go forth, Girl Time (in Darkness) Mk. II! Teach this squid demon who really stands on top—and show him an overwhelming world of pleasure while you’re at it!”

“Bwoooooh!”

Girl Time (in Darkness) Mk. II let out a sinister sound as it charged. The battle had begun.

“Don’t underestimate me, you squidiot!”

“Bwoooh!”

The Tentacle Emperor lashed out with his countless tentacles in an attempt to intercept the machine. However, his foe was a wielder of tentacles too. The battlefield quickly devolved into a chaotic tangle of limbs where neither side could gain the upper hand.

Tentacle for tentacle, matched in quantity, speed, power, and size, the two combatants were evenly matched.

“We’ve got this! We can do this!”

“You sure about that?”

Despite Liz’s excitement, her comrades remained apprehensive. Still, there was no denying that a high-level exchange of offense and defense playing out before them was intense.

“Th-Then try this on for cephalo-size! Ink Spray!”

“We won’t be outdone! Aphrodisiac-Infused-Lotion Spray!”

The pitch-black squid ink from the Tentacle Emperor’s mouth was countered with a forceful discharge of sticky white lotion from Girl Time (in Darkness) Mk. II’s tentacles. Even though the Emperor’s Ink Spray had been designed to shoot a torrent of ink with enough force to inflict serious damage, the pressure from the lotion spray had somehow matched it. Yet again, they were evenly matched.

Black ink and white lotion collided in midair, creating an explosive splash that rained down all over the battlefield.

“Uwaaaaaah?!”

“Watch out! The ink is dangerous, but so is Liz’s lotion! Don’t let it touch you! There’s no telling what will happen!”

Cain shouted not just to his comrades, but to the soldiers as well. Their foe’s attack wasn’t the only force to be feared. He knew all too well the dangers posed by a certain succubus’s questionable innovations.

“Grrrrr... Huff... Puff... Squuuiiid!”

Eventually, the balance crumbled; Homo Squidiens gasped for air, unable to maintain the ink stream any longer. Sensing that opening, Girl Time (in Darkness) Mk. II intensified its lotion assault, striking the great demon with relentless force, and toppling his massive form.

“Grrrrrr! You’re squidding me! Me?! The great Homo Squidiens, struggling against this ridiculous toy?!”

Homo Squidiens immediately lifted himself out of the sea, but the viscous aphrodisiac lotion clung to his body.

“We did it!” Liz rejoiced. “We got that squid covered in white goo!”

“And what does that accomplish?!” Cain demanded.

“Everything gets a bit lewd when it’s covered in white goo, doesn’t it?”

“Quit getting turned on by poor Homo Squidiens!”

There didn’t seem to be any real significance.

“Huff… Puff… Wh-What the shell…? My body… It’s so…hot?”

But something was, indeed, happening to Homo Squidiens. He began to pant heavily, his white skin flushing a deep red as an unnatural warmth overtook it.

“Heh heh… I see my aphrodisiac even works on squids! Don’t think you can hide that blush from me!”

“I didn’t know squids could turn red outside of being grilled…”

Liz’s aphrodisiac had caused a change in the great squid demon.

“Guh! This ain’t enough to get a good squid down!”

The Tentacle Emperor went on the counterattack. Instead of using its countless tentacles, it instead used its ten main appendages to strike the machine. These arms were larger, thicker, more powerful than the others, and Girl Time (in Darkness) Mk. II had no way to contend. The sheer force was causing cracks to spread across its mechanical body.

“Bwa ha ha ha ha! I should’ve shucking done this from the start!”

“Guh! We won’t last much longer! We need a new strategy! Someone tell me where a squid’s butthole is, stat!”

“A squid’s butthole?”

Liz knew it was time to use Girl Time (in Darkness) Mk. II for its original, intended function.

“Umm, er, Liz.” Melvy spoke up. “A squid doesn’t have a traditional butthole… Rather, its excretory organ is a funnel-

shaped organ called a siphon. You saw where it shot ink from, right? That's the one. It expels ink, water, and internal waste from there."

"So it's essentially a butthole, right?! Perfect!"

Taking Melvy's advice into consideration, Liz set her aim. She channeled her mana into the machine, commanding a single one of its many tentacles to shoot out at a tremendous speed. Quickly, precisely. She personally took control of its trajectory.

"Onward, Girl Time (Darkness) Mk. II!!!"

"Bwoooooh!"

That tentacle stabbed straight into Homo Squidiens' siphon—its butt-like organ.

"Hngah?!"

"And then—! Lotion injectiooon!!!"

"Squiiiiiiiiid?!"

That same aphrodisiac lotion from before was expelled directly into Homo Squidiens' body. With force, it flooded into the demon through its behind, causing him to thrash in pain.

"But that's not all! Enchanted Vibrator! Activate!"

"Squuuiiiiiiiiid... ♡"

Girl Time (in Darkness) Mk. II's tentacles were equipped with a wide array of functions. One of them was the Enchanted Vibrator. The thick and hard tip began stirring in strong, pulsing movements, while simultaneously pumping in and out like a piston.

"Squid! Squiiid...! Squuuiiid... ♡"

Homo Squidiens' cries shifted from roars of pain to strange moans of ecstasy. Every inch of his body had by now turned a deep red.

"We can do this! It's working! We're helping Homo Squidiens open a new door to anal pleasure!"

"What?! What filth are we witnessing here?"

Liz burned with the heat of battle while Cain and the others could only watch on, aghast. No one knew what to do at this point.

"Squid... ♡ Squuuiiiiiiiiid!"

Homo Squidiens, on the verge of succumbing to Liz's despicable scheme, mustered the last of his strength to launch a counterattack. He wrapped his ten stalwart arms around Girl Time (in Darkness) Mk. II and squeezed with all his might. He was trying to crush its cylindrical body through brute force.

“Bwoooh! Bwooooooh!”

It was almost like screams of pain were emanating from the lifeless machine. Its body began to grate and jar, the cracks spreading wider under the relentless pressure. It was only a matter of time before it fell under the crushing force of ten powerful arms.

“Squiiiiiid... ♡ Squiiiiiiiiid!”

“Bwoooh! Bwooooooh!”

Yet still, Girl Time (in Darkness) Mk. II refused to give up.

It continued to expel lotion through the tentacle jammed into the squid’s siphon; it continued to vibrate and pump with every ounce of strength it had left.

Homo Squidiens was nearing his limit too. His eyes could no longer focus and he looked like he would faint at any instant. The only thought left in his head was to squeeze, crush, destroy the enemy before he lost consciousness. There was no room for any other thought.

“Squid! ♡ Squid... ♡ Squuuiiiiiiiiid...!”

“Bwoh bwoh! Bwoh bwoh bwoh bwoh! Bwooooooooooh...!”

They were both on the ropes. Who was going to break first? It had come down to a battle of endurance—nothing but a mano-a-mano showdown of pure, unadulterated willpower.

“You can do it! You’ve got this, Girl Time (in Darkness) Mk. II! You’re my powerful girl! I believe in you!” Liz cheered on her creation, tears in her eyes.

“Y-You can do it!”

“D-Do your best! Don’t Lose! Girl time... umm, Mk. Something!”

“Take down that dangerous demon!”

Spurred on by Liz’s fiery passions, the bewildered soldiers around them began cheering for Girl Time (in Darkness) Mk. II. They still didn’t fully understand the nature of their tentacular ally, but they knew one thing to be true: its victory would bring peace to the ocean.

“Squuuiiiiiiid... ♡ Squuuiiiiiid... ♡”

“Bwoooh! Bwooooooooooh!”

“Keep at it! Don’t lose!”

“I don’t really know what you’re doing, but...k-keep at it!”

“Protect the peace of these seas!”

The battle was reaching its climax. Both sides pushed past their limits, desperately vying to come out on top. The decisive

moment was near. There were no squids, no machines. There were but two stalwart men, refusing to throw in the towel. These were the last moments, the last show of will, the proof that these two beings had existed in this world. Everyone watched with bated breath.

“Holy sword!”

“Huh?”

And then…someone intervened in this heated, manly showdown.

“Release your light!”

“Squuuuuuiiiiiid…!”

“Bwooooooooh…!”

It was Cain. Holding his holy sword high, he unleashed a blinding light. The powerful light from the holy sword took on the form of a massive blade, dozens of meters in length, bisecting squid demon and adult toy alike. The blade cleaved through the sea, severed the squid, and shattered the machine.

“Girl Time (in Darkness) Mk. II! Noooooooooo…!”

Liz cried out in anguish.

Thus, peace was restored to the ocean—thanks to the sacrifice of a brave magical device and a hero’s holy sword. Once condemned as an evil contraption and judged by a hero, the machine’s soul was reborn with a heart of love and courage. It faced a terrifying foe head-on and fought valiantly to the bitter end.

Those who witnessed that day would never forget that the proud warrior who rose to protect the sea had once stood on these sandy shoals. This brave soul who had departed into the light…

And so, through the noble sacrifice of Girl Time (in Darkness) Mk. II, the world lived another day in peace.

Chapter 62: Now—The Wicked Power of a Hotel Room That Comes with an Open-Air Bath

Cain and I stood together in stunned silence. Before us lay something rather troublesome. Namely: a double bed.

It was the sort of bed that was extra wide, designed to facilitate two people sleeping side by side. It was just a bigger bed, nothing more, nothing less.

There was nothing particularly unusual about the furniture itself. It was a perfectly ordinary double bed. But this was a private room in a hotel.

The problem here was that a double bed had been installed there in the first place. This was a luxurious guest room with elegant furnishings. A double room booked by the same comrades who'd forced us to be together. And in it, a double bed.

What's more, the ones staying in this room were me and Cain—one man, one woman. Just the two of us…

The implications were clear as day.

Allow me to explain things in order. After enjoying our beach time until sunset, Cain and I promptly shifted over to the hotel. The reservations had been made in advance by letter.

Who made the reservations again? I think it was Melvy, if I'm remembering right.

It was a nice, tidy hotel. The lobby was spacious and clean, offering a breathtaking view of the moonlit sea through its large panoramic windows. It was undoubtedly a first-class establishment.

We received the room key from the front desk and proceeded straight to our room. It was a luxurious, spacious room with a view that couldn't be beat… But enough beating around the bush. It was a *double* room. Up until this morning, this was supposed to be an eight-person trip, and yet the only reservation anyone made was for a double room. There was no longer any room to doubt that this was a premeditated crime.

Well…that's not really news. I already figured that out this

morning.

That much was fine. The fact it was a double room—I could live with that.

The problem was that the bed that came with the room was also a double bed. Normally, when people who aren't romantically involved stay at a hotel, they stay in a room with twin beds. A room with two single-person beds would ensure that no mistakes would be made. Or at least, make it difficult.

But here, we were met with the reality of a double bed. A man and a woman in a room for two. One bed, large enough for two people to sleep in together.

The message from our comrades was all too clear. "Go for it!" they were screaming at me.

"H-How indecent," I grumbled, my face flushed red. "We're not even a couple or anything. It's improper, this sort of thing! It's a breach of decorum!"

"It's strange hearing that from you, Liz. But I actually agree this time. Getting swept up, going along with the flow... It just doesn't sit right with me."

Though the first part of his comment bothered me, Cain seemed to be on the same page. *I am always a pure and virtuous noblewoman of irreproachable character!*

"Well, if it comes to it, I'll sleep on the sofa," said Cain. "We could also check with the front desk to see if they've got another open room. Worst case, I don't mind sleeping on the floor."

"Th-The floor is a bit much..."

I couldn't allow Cain to do something like that. But Cain recounted the experiences he'd been through on his travels. "We had to sleep in jungles that reeked of animal shit. Compared to that, having a roof and walls is heaven."

I stared at him silently. *Come to think of it, I think I heard something similar from Rachel. For these rugged people, any proper sleeping arrangement would probably be a luxury.*

"Well, whatever. We can deal with that later; it's not a big deal."

"Y-Yes, of course!"

I felt a bit relieved when he said it wasn't a big deal. At the same time, an idiotic thought crossed my mind: *Could there be a chance, however slim, that Sir Cain and I might end up sharing that double bed? I do have a bit of confidence in today's underwear...*

No, no! That can never happen!

I shook my head to drive such utter idiocy from my brain.

“I mean, I’m nowhere near worthy of being Cain’s lover.”

“Hmm? You say something, Liz?”

“N-No! Nothing at all!”

“Hmm?”

Even though I’d kept my voice down, Cain had still reacted to it. It was barely a breath, barely a murmur. They were not even proper words, and they were meant only for me.

It seemed I’d underestimated the sharp senses of a hero.

“So anyway… We’ve been pretty fixated on the double bed, but…”

Cain shifted his gaze from the bed to the large window, and to the veranda beyond it. There, he eyed a special feature of our hotel room.

“It’s incredible, isn’t it? To think the room has its own private open-air hot spring!”

“A guest room with an open-air bath. They really went all out.”

On the veranda was a hot spring with massive clouds of white steam billowing up from it. A private room with a hot spring—what an unexpected but delightful surprise.

“This is the first time I’ve ever seen a room with a private open-air bath!”

“I’ve been in a few; there’s just something about it. The ambience is different from a large, public spring. There’s a certain charm in having a quiet space to yourself…”

Our excitement rose. What a thoughtful gesture—and what a nice touch of luxury. Though I’d initially felt like we’d been set up the moment I saw the double bed in the room, I couldn’t help but be grateful to Melvy and the others for this wonderful surprise.

“Cain, you first. I’ll go in after you!”

“Hmm… Yeah, well…” Cain gave an ambiguous response, folding his arms while thinking over something or another.

What could it be?

And then, that wicked grin crossed his face.

“While we’re at it, how about we get in together?”

“Huh? Huuuuuuuuuh?!”

I was shocked.

Bathing together… The image of a naked Cain suddenly appeared in my mind. Certainly, a private open-air bath was good to enjoy as a family—but apart from that, it was ideal for

couples to flirt and have fun together. My face flushed in an instant.

"No, no, no! We can't! That isn't much different from sleeping in the double bed together! Didn't we just agree that was off-limits?!"

"Ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

I panicked, desperately denying the suggestion, while Cain was holding his belly in laughter. It was almost like he was enjoying watching me lose my mind.

"I know, I know. I'm joking. Ha ha ha ha!"

Cain cackled away, promptly revoking his proposal.

And then it hit me. I was being *teased*. He'd made the proposition knowing it would be shot down from the start; he just wanted to see me panic at the thought of it. My eyes widened at the realization, and the next emotion that bubbled up was indignation—humiliation at being so blatantly used as a toy.

"A'ight. Then I'll go ahead and take my bath first. No peeping, Liz."

Having laughed to his satisfaction, Cain nonchalantly began to prepare for his bath.

However, I pinched the hem of his shirt from behind. This got him to stop and turn.

"Liz?"

"Fine..."

"Hm?"

"Fine, let's do it, then!"

"Huh?!"

I made a loud proclamation.

"L-Let's... Let's bathe together, why don't we?! Let's get in that bath!"

Even I could hear how high-pitched my voice had become. But I pushed through, meeting his provocation head-on. This time, it was Cain's turn to stare wide-eyed.

"C-Calm down, Liz... Bathing together's a bad idea."

Even though he was the one to bring it up, he was now trying to put a stop to it.

"In terms of exposure, a bathing suit is hardly better than being naked! Yes, that's it! This is no different from our time at the beach!"

"It totally is, Liz! They're completely different! It's about

whether the important bits are covered or not! S-Settle down, it was my fault! I'm sorry, okay?"

"There are no take-backs! I've already made up my mind!"

Still out of sorts, I boldly strutted my way toward the bath. My mind was blank, my eyes were spinning. But there was no turning back now. *I have my own pride. I have courage. I don't have dreams or talent, but there's one thing I do have, and that's boobs! No…I mean, I have dignity!*

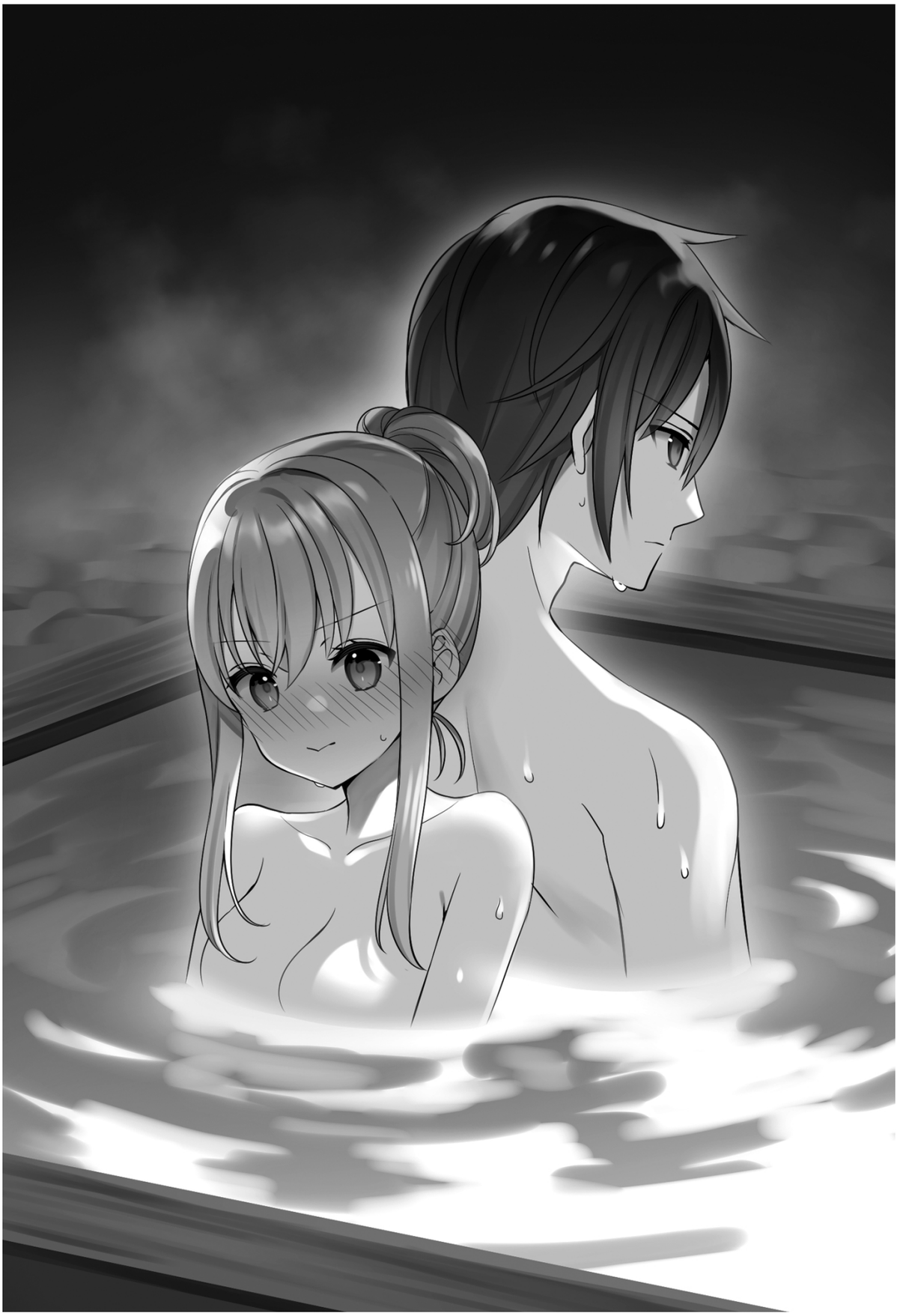
Bathing together is nothing dagnabbit!

"Y-You sure about this?"

The dumbfounded expression on Cain's face left quite an impression on me.

The lights of the veranda bled in faintly through the soft haze hovering over the bath. The milky water shimmered as it caught its glow. Cain and I sat facing away from one another, not a shred of cloth between us.

The silence was deafening.



It's so hot...

I could no longer tell if it was the heat of the hot spring or the rapid pounding of my heart raising my body temperature. My back was pressed against Cain's, our skin stuck together. This was the least we could do to ensure we didn't see one another naked, but the warmth of his skin was transmitted so vividly that I had become frozen stiff with nervousness.

The gentle sound of flowing bathwater mingled with the sound of nearby sea waves. The atmosphere was subdued, gorgeous, and refined—and utterly healing. The scenery, the sounds, the heat of the spring, the scent of the sea...and the twinkling stars and radiant moon in the sky; every element came together to create the perfect environment for blissful relaxation.

However, none of it even registered to me. Right behind me was Cain, naked. And to top it all off, I was naked too. We were pressed tightly to one another, skin against skin.

What would the fans of the hero think if they saw this scene? There would be anger, madness, a public execution, a beheading, a body paraded around the town square... They would surely be more jealous than I could possibly imagine. Perhaps my friend Luna would even faint from the shock.

My heart wouldn't stop hammering away. My cheeks—which hadn't even touched the hot water—were burning up. Part of me regretted going along with Cain's provocation, but another part of me felt like I was blessed to feel the warmth of his body.

Maybe this is what true happiness feels like? I thought to myself, placing my hands on my cheeks.

And at the same time...I noticed it: the smell of sweat. I was currently sweating heavily. It was only natural to sweat when bathing in a hot spring, but I couldn't help but wonder: *Can Cain smell it too?*

Our surroundings were filled with the scents of sulfur and other minerals, so surely no one could tell which of these smells belonged to me. Surely... But this was the hero I was dealing with. Just maybe—he could discern the smell of human sweat from behind him...without breaking a sweat of his own!

No! That's the one thing I can't let happen! If he notices, I'll die from embarrassment! I should never have entered the bath with him! Though I had come so far, I was struck by a powerful wave of embarrassment. I hoped that my odor wouldn't reach him. My

mind was in chaos; my maidenly dignity was on the line!

"*Oh!*"

"Hm?"

Another thought occurred to me—a change in perspective. If I was sweating, then surely Cain was sweating too. Would *I* be able to pick up *his* scent?

"*Snfffffff…*"

I took in a deep breath. It was…difficult. The sulfur smell was powerful, and the beach was close enough for its salty sea air to reach us. It was nearly impossible to single out Cain's scent amid all of it.

But how could I possibly give up now? Was that the extent of my resolve? Was I at my limit? I should think not. It was very possible that I might never get another such chance… In fact, the odds of my having ended up in my current situation in the first place were practically zero. If I gave up now, I would be cursed to live my life never once smelling Cain's sweat.

Are you really going to accept that, Liz? Are you really going to go on without seizing on this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity?

"*Snfff, snfff! Snfffffffff!*" I wriggled my nose, concentrating every single nerve in my olfactory system. "*Snfff, snfff, snfffffffff! Pwah! Snffff, fwaaaaaah!*"

I'll do it. I know I can.

No matter how strong the sulfur was, no matter what obstacles I faced, I was going to pull it off! I knew that paradise was just within reach. If I didn't take up the challenge, then could I truly call myself a woman?!

"*Snfffffff!!! Snfffffffffff!!!*"

I poured every ounce of strength into taking in the smells around me. I needed to experience the ultimate heaven—to pick up the smell of Cain's sweat!

"Why are you breathing so heavily…? Liz?"

"Y-Yesh?!"

I snapped back to my senses at his voice.

What am I even doing? A pure and virtuous lady such as myself would never be driven by a perverted desire to smell someone else's sweat. Phew…vacations are scary. They liberate you in all the wrong ways. I was only driven to something so perverted because of this trip, and the special situation of having a room with an open-air bath… Yes, that's definitely it.

"Oh, it's n-nothing. I was just taking a deep breath…"

“Hmm…”

“Y-You know! The hot spring has quite a distinct smell, right? I was just enjoying the scent a bit.”

“Yeah, the sulfur smell here is pretty strong.”

Phew…that was close. I should have expected him to suspect something at this distance.

But the idea of me trying to pick up Cain’s sweat smell in a hot spring was such a bizarre and nonsensical notion. There was no way it would even occur to him.

“Look, I’m fine with you trying to sniff out my sweat. Just don’t do it in public, okay? You look like a real creep when you do.”

“Y-You knew?!”

My body jolted in shock. I never thought he’d be able to read my intentions. After all, no one would expect someone as pure and proper as me to do something like that… Even *I* was surprised by my own actions!

Cain… You’re not someone to be underestimated.

“P-Perish the thought! I would never do something so p-p-perverted! Aha ha…ha ha…”

“Didn’t you just say, ‘you knew’? No, forget it. Let’s drop it.”

“W-Would you look at that, apparently this hot spring is good for improving skin quality and blood pressure and for relieving fatigue!”

I got to work blatantly changing the topic; I read out the benefits listed on the side of the bath.

“Yeah, they say all sorts of stuff about ’em,” said Cain, “But how effective are hot springs, really? Take ‘relieving fatigue,’ for instance. That feels like the sorta cheap label you can slap on anything.”

“Lady Kuon’s Super Bathhouse at the demon lord villa claims to help with cold sensitivity, wound recovery, and fatigue too.”

“Huh? What? You still remember that?”

“Lalo, Melvy, and I still use that bath quite regularly.”

The reason Cain and his comrades transferred to our academy had originally been because of the heavy wounds Sylphie, Melvy, and Lalo had suffered at the hands of the demon army. Sure, there were other reasons too, but that was the official one. Although Sylphie quickly made a full recovery, Melvy and Lalo still had some lingering injuries and needed recuperation. Since the Super Bathhouse had a good reputation for speeding up natural healing processes, we had become quite

the regulars there.

"I see, so that's why... I hear Melvy's nearly back at full strength."

"Yes, she said so too. She said she's no longer hindered in combat."

"That just leaves Lalo. He might take a while."

"He's getting on in years, after all."

Lalo was the sole elder of the hero's party. Understandably, this meant he took longer to recover from wounds than the others.

"So? Why have you been bathing with them, Liz? It's not like you're that beat up."

"The muscle pains are killing me! All thanks to that *Anyone Can Do It! Hero-Style Boot Camp* you've been putting me through day after day after day!"

"S-Sorry. But it's necessary if you want to get stronger."

"I understand that!"

The muscle pain wasn't as bad as it used to be, but it was still a regular struggle. And as I grew stronger, the training regimen became harsher as well. For now, it seemed I'd remain a frequent visitor to the baths.

"The Bad Bunny costume training also takes a toll," I muttered. "What with the poison and the paralysis... Even though I get healed afterward, all those status effects build up a lot of fatigue."

"Yeah, it's rough. Even Rachel and Lalo had a hard time with it."

The Bad Bunny was a training implement imposed on all newcomers to the hero's party. Participants would don a special outfit as they went about their normal training. This specially made outfit inflicted its wearer with dizziness, poison, and reduced abilities among other awful status conditions.

Enduring these conditions would train the body to recognize and counter them; it was a method to quickly and effectively build up all sorts of status resistances. The Bad Bunny truly was an incredible piece of training gear. But whoever thought of it must have been *insane*!

Get afflicted with status ailments to get rid of status ailments? Who even came up with that idea?! Someone tell me! What madman thought this was a good idea?!

More importantly, why did the outfit have to be a bunny-girl

costume?

“Ah, just remembering it is making me feel ill. It does not seem like I will be graduating from the Bad Bunny anytime soon.”

Once I’d picked up all the resistances, I’d be able to move on from the Bad Bunny. This was the first checkpoint for every new recruit.

“But hey, we just got another new recruit, right?”

“Yes, Lady Altina! She looks absolutely stunning in the Bad Bunny! It suits her perfectly!”

Sure, she wielded a new holy sword, and sure she was already a hero in her own right. But a new recruit was a new recruit. Altina was also wearing the Bad Bunny while she trained. I could picture her in my head. That black bunny outfit with all its exposed skin. Altina wore it bashfully, her face red all the while.

Of course, the appeal went beyond that, as her half-beast traits added an interesting twist to the getup. She already had natural cat ears, with the bunny ears added on top of that. She already had a cat tail, yet that was bolstered by another white and round bunny tail. This resulted in a unique beast hybrid—part cat, part rabbit.

“Seeing Lady Altina dressed like that really gives me the motivation to make it through my training!”

“I get that.”

For once, Cain was agreeing with me. I was never told who created the Bad Bunny outfit, but for all the resentment I had built up, that was the one point that made me feel rather grateful to them.

“But Altina came in already pretty skilled,” I sighed, “So I’m sure she’ll graduate from the Bad Bunny before long.”

“Yeah, I guess so. We should take a ton of pictures and burn the image into our heads while we can.”

By the time she joined the hero’s party, Altina had already built up a decent resistance to status effects. She’d likely get over it before me.

“Wolfe should graduate soon too. Honestly, I’m hoping he gets out of it sooner than later.”

“Indeed.”

Wolfe, with his sturdy, muscular frame, was also training in the Bad Bunny. It went without saying that the outfit didn’t suit him in the slightest. His own complaints notwithstanding, the

rest of us weren't happy about it either. No one benefited from this. But new recruits still had to be trained. What a dilemma it was... *No, if we're being real here, we just have to craft something else with the same functions*.

Incidentally, Remphie had once come to watch our training; she happened to witness Wolfe in the Bad Bunny. I thought she'd be horrified, but instead, she simply said, "This is all right. In its own way."

That was when we all realized how badly love could cloud one's rationality.

"Oh, speaking of Lady Altina... How should I put this..."

"What?"

I changed the topic a bit. "Sir Cain, are you a womanizer?"

"Bfft?!"

I heard him do a spit take at my rather blunt question. He spat, even though there wasn't even anything in his mouth.

"Well, er... You know. Lady Altina became your new lover just the other day, didn't she?"

"R-Right... So, what about it? Are Sylphie and Melvy complaining about it or something?"

"No, not at all. Surprisingly. I was just wondering if you were planning on adding more girlfriends in the future... Well, not I. *We*. It became a topic with the girls, you know."

Silence. Cain seemed hesitant to answer. I could feel it through his back.

After a pause, he finally spoke up. "I don't think I'm that crazy about women, if you can believe it. For what it's worth, my engagements to Sylphie and Melvy are political. They mostly came from the power struggle between the nation and the church."

"Yes, I've heard."

Sylphie and Melvy had both been selected as the hero's fiancées for the convenience of the nation of Bahelgarn and the Russel-Bell Church. Their personal feelings had not been taken into consideration.

Yet despite the circumstances, the interpersonal relationships within the group never grew awkward, and everyone got along pretty harmoniously. It was genuinely impressive, in my opinion. *Does Cain have a silver tongue?* I wondered.

"That being said, it wouldn't be strange if some other organization decided to nominate a new partner for me. I intend

to turn ’em down unless there’s a real good reason. In fact, I’ve already turned down a bunch of them. But on the off chance there’s some reason I can’t avoid it…”

“You’d be forced to accept another fiancée?”

“Power and politics are way too convoluted. You can’t just cleave them apart with a sword.”

Cain sounded genuinely frustrated as he heaved a heavy sigh.

I glanced back at him, staring at his hand for a brief moment.

“And so,” he went on, “I know this might not be the manliest thing to say, but I can’t guarantee I won’t have more fiancées in the future. That’s my conclusion.”

“If you weren’t the hero, that would be a statement deserving of a slap.”

“No doubt about that.”

We shared a cynical chuckle. Being a hero was just a difficult position to be in. Sylphie, Melvy, and Altina all understood those circumstances well, and that had thankfully kept any quarrels from breaking out between them. *A lot of effort must go into maintaining the peace*, I privately concluded.

Cain turned too—just a bit—staring at my hand as well.

“But I never thought you’d be the one asking me that, Liz. It’s strange, in a way.”

“Huh?”

He gave a wry smile. A smile barely masking a sad sigh. For some reason, I could feel some conflicted emotions behind his expression.

What’s so strange about me asking?

“Hey, Liz…”

“Yes, Cain?”

He took a small, measured breath.

What could be so hard to address?

“Say I go out and proclaim I plan to get more girlfriends…”

“Y-Yes?”

“Would you…consider putting yourself forward? Or would you not?”

“Huh? Huuuuuuuuuh?!”

My face instantly flushed again. His question was so sudden, so bold that it stirred my mind into a chaotic soup. I could hear Cain chuckling behind me.

Oh, I get it now. He’s doing it again. I’m being teased. Just like when he suggested bathing together.

If Cain was provoking me, it was only right for me to fight back!

But why was it? Amid the warmth of the hot spring water, my head rapidly cooled down. It was like clarity was seeping in from the steam.

“I-I…”

“Yeah?”

Some lines were never meant to be crossed. This felt like one of them. That was why I’d suddenly sobered up.

“I don’t think I would,” I said softly.

But why? I could feel a faint sense of disappointment from his back. Surely it wasn’t because he actually liked me or anything like that.

“Umm, er! The hypothetical situation you brought up would of course be a very, very great honor for me. But I am not worthy of someone like you, Cain.”

“Not worthy?”

“Not worthy.”

I dipped the tip of my chin into the water as I nodded.

“You are a world-renowned hero, Sir Cain. Meanwhile, I’m just an ordinary student. There is no way I could ever measure up. Surely no one would accept it—not politically, not socially.”

“So even you worry about trivial things like that.”

“Are those worries really so trivial?” I sighed. I could feel the sadness in my chest growing heavier and heavier. “No, they’re enormous… Immense… I mean…you’re the *hero*.”

A heavy silence settled over us both, one that swallowed up even the soothing sound of running water, the gentle roar of the waves. Everything sank away into the darkness of the night.

The moon hung large and bright in the night sky. But no matter how far I reached out, I would never be able to grasp it. There wasn’t a single thing about me that would qualify me to stand by the hero’s side.

“Well…let’s drop this topic for now. It’s all hypothetical anyways.”

“Yes…”

Without a sound, Cain rose from the water. Even the ripples were soft as he stood and was gone.

Alone in the hot spring, I muttered softly, “This is for the best…”

Today was a fun day. I’d spent time at the beach with Cain,

we'd seen each other's swimsuits, and we even shared a bath together. This was my greatest fortune—and it was also where my courage ran out. Sitting together in an open-air bath, gazing out at the stars—that was the furthest I was allowed to go.

Anything beyond that was more than I could wish for.

* * * * *

Elsewhere, at nearly the same time...

There was a large room in the very same hotel. This one lacked an open-air bath, but it was large enough to accommodate ten people, and luxuriously furnished. A group of young men and women had all huddled up in one corner, fervently listening to something.

"Sir Cain, are you a womanizer?"

"Bfft?!"

"Oh! That's it! Liz is on the offense!"

"Go! You must press onward, Liz! Tackle him and pin him down!"

This group consisted of all the members of the party—save for Cain and Liz, of course. They were all eavesdropping on this private conversation.

Booking the hotel rooms had been Melvy's job. Taking advantage of that position, she and the others had slipped into the couple's room beforehand, secretly planting magic listening devices. She set up the corresponding receiver in the party's room, allowing them to listen in on every word.

"I was just wondering if you were planning on adding more girlfriends in the future... Well, not I. We*. It became a topic with the girls, you know."*

"Hmm! What a mess! Our wayward womanizer hath been backed into a corner! Consider it karma for all thou hast done to me!"

"Now, how will Cain respond?"

"Well, Liz does need to be added to the fiancée count eventually. Umm, er, I mean, after she regains her power and memories..."

Their excitement was peaking. They were getting so fired up one might think they were watching a sports match, the drinks flowing freely as they listened in on the conversation.

"And so, I know this might not be the manliest thing to say, but I

can't guarantee I won't have more fiancées in the future. That's my conclusion."

"If you weren't the hero, that would be a statement deserving of a slap."

"No doubt about that."

"Is that truly something to scoff at?!"

"He really is an enemy of all women! Sylphie, your thoughts?!"

"Well, we are well aware of his circumstances. At most, I'd appreciate it if he could avoid any unfaithful deeds that might sow discord among us."

"Aaargh! You're all way too soft on Cain!"

"Liz! Strike that man! Now! This very instant! In the bath! Smite him with all thy might!"

Naturally, their voices couldn't reach the duo. The device was one-way and did not facilitate a two-sided conversation.

"Hey, Liz..."

"Yes, Cain?"

"Say I go out and proclaim I plan to get more girlfriends..."

"Y-Yes?"

"Would you...consider putting yourself forward? Or would you not?"

"Huh? Huuuuuuuuuh?!"

"What's this?! He's turned it around! Cain's going for the throat!"

"Wa ha ha! How exciting indeed!"

"There must be some underlying meaning to this question! Your thoughts, Melvy?"

"Umm, er... I'm no expert, but this seems more like playful teasing. In my opinion. I don't think he's serious."

"Yes, I can hear that nasty laugh of his."

Cain was indeed joking—or at least half joking. His main goal, however, had been to test Liz's reaction and gauge how she felt about him. If her current feelings mirrored those she had before losing her memories, he thought they might serve as a trigger for their return.

Even if her powers didn't come back, at least the memories would. That was Cain's hope—or at least, a possibility he was willing to test. And even if it did happen, there was nothing to be lost. For a man who desperately wanted the old Liz back, it would be a significant breakthrough. That was how Cain saw it.

"I-I..."

“Yeah?”

“I don’t think I would.”

“Ah! Liz backed off!”

“Whaddaya think you’re doing, Liz?! What happened to that sharp offense of yours?!”

“Attack! Crush him! Else, where be the thrill?!”

These jeers would never reach the girl in question.

“I am not worthy of someone like you, Cain.”

“Not worthy?”

“Not worthy.”

“Heeey! Don’t retreat! You have to go for it, Liz!”

“Attack, I say! Else, victory shall slip from thy grasp! Jab, hook, straight, uppercut—straight into Cain’s heart!”

“Hey, come to think of it, didn’t she say something similar the last time we got together?”

“Umm, er, yes. That’s right, Altina. She said that she and Cain were a complete mismatch.”

It had been Liz’s resignation that had troubled the girls enough to set up this meddlesome date. And yet, it didn’t seem that Liz’s feelings had changed at all.

“What folly is this?! Love is not weighed by *worthiness*! Nay! It is born of passion! Of following the heart, the soul! To be a fool, and leap in headfirst! That is love!”

“Exactly! Well said, Kuon!”

“It seems…we may need to consider our final strategy. Though it frustrates me how similar it is to something Liz herself would have done.”

The girls had a last resort. It was a simple plan: the “slip the couple aphrodisiacs and send them for a grand adventure on the double bed” plan. Just as the name implied, they’d slip them some drugs, and set it up so that they’d be forced to sleep in the same bed together. And then, Liz would be pushed beyond the point of caring about silly things, like whether she was a mismatch or if she was worthy.

They’d already prepared the aphrodisiacs. All they had to do was mix them in some alcohol and have the doorman send it over as room service. The rest would work itself out. The plan mirrored Liz’s horrible antics before she lost her memories, but they figured it was only fair for her to taste her own medicine. What goes around comes around, as they say.

“Still, a room with an open-air bath was the right choice! To

think we'd hear such fun—ahem, such deep insights into Liz's heart!"

"Indeed! Such amusing...—ahem, *open* talks can only transpire in leisure, whilst bathing and baring oneself. We must capitalize on this knowledge to set things in motion."

"Yeah, the bath is one thing I'll thank you for. I enjoyed it to the fullest."

"You got that right! We'll have to get Liz and Cain to lower their heads and say their thanks... Huh?"

It was then that it happened.

"Well, Rachel? You wanted my gratitude. And here I am. Came to return the favor, in my own way."

The voice that echoed through the room belonged to someone who shouldn't have been there.

The group—who'd all been so focused on the receiver—broke into a cold sweat as they slowly turned their heads in unison. There, standing with squared shoulders and an unmistakable aura of menace, was someone who was supposed to be on the other side.

It was Cain.

With nothing but a towel wrapped around the waist, he stood, arms folded, still dripping wet. There was a vein bulging on his forehead, a powerful pressure radiating from his body.

"A-Ah ha ha... W-Well look who it is... What a coincidence meeting you here, Cain."

"*Coincidence*? A coincidence, huh? Really? You really wanna add one more thing for me to get mad about?"

Sweat trickled down Rachel's—no, everyone's foreheads.

Cain's presence could only mean one thing—Liz's spatial distortion magic. The magic receiver and listening device naturally shared a link with one another. Once that was detected, tracing the connection to their exact location was simple enough.

The hero's party had made a mistake. A critical mistake—they'd been so focused on the romance that they'd given away a lead.

Cain had noticed the listening device while soaking in the bath. Without breaking the flow of his conversation with Liz, he'd used subtle hand signals to communicate the plan. The brief glances they'd stolen at each other's hands had been to coordinate their counterattack.

Thanks to this, Cain and Liz had successfully outmaneuvered their eavesdroppers without arousing suspicion.

“I’m fine with the fact that you got us a room alone together. You even booked us a pretty nice place. That’s all well and good.”

“Ha ha, then…”

“But eavesdropping? That’s a no-no.”

Cain clenched his fist, letting out a slow and deliberate breath.

“For now, line up. All of you.”

Resistance was futile.

And soon, naturally, the room was soon filled with cries of pain. The shiny lumps on their heads were proof of Cain’s “gratitude.”

Chapter 63: Now—Chaos Snake from the Dark Sea

“Wah! Wah! Wah!”

“Not yet! Let’s pick up the pace!”

“Eeeeeep!”

A satisfying, rhythmic click-clacking filled the air as a light ping-pong ball zipped back and forth across the table. We continued to strike it with our paddles, sending the ball careening from one side to the other. It was a lively game of hot springs ping-pong.

After that eavesdropping incident came to light, the other members of the hero’s party (and Kuon) had received a thorough grilling from Cain. But following that, we regrouped like nothing had happened, and despite the visible lumps on their heads, we all began enjoying the entertainment facilities the hotel had to offer.

My one-on-one time with Cain had ended, but I was genuinely happy to spend time with everyone... Besides, I’d already had a hunch that they were lurking somewhere.

Right now, my opponent was Rachel. We continued batting the ping-pong ball back and forth, both clad in yukata provided by the hotel.

“I’m not even *close* to done! This isn’t nearly my full power!”

“Wah! Waaaaaaaaah?!”

This game was not a contest of skill. We were both complete beginners, and our paddles were worn and tattered. Neither one of us could do anything as advanced as putting a calculated spin on the ball. All I could do was return it when it came toward me.

But it was fast—the ball was moving *way* too fast.

Her brute strength and reflexes—honed to smash through the demon army—had pushed the limits of what the ball could handle. This was a hot spring ping-pong match beyond the realm of mankind. I was just barely fending off her vicious assault, while she still had energy to spare.

The ping-pong ball itself had been magically reinforced. Otherwise, the sheer force of our hits would have shattered it

into dust. It moved so fast, it was like there were multiple balls in play at once. I would lose track of it if I lost focus for even an instant. My brain felt like it was frying from the sheer concentration and intuition required to pinpoint the ball's location, while my muscles screamed out in pain as I moved at inhuman speeds and swung the racket.

*What is this? Is this training? Rather than ping-pong, it's become a completely different sport… No, not even a sport at this point…just…*something*…*

"Guh…ah!"

Finally, I misjudged one of Rachel's blazing shots, lobbing the ball high into the air.

"This is my chance!"

Just like the ball, she too shot up high, aligning herself perfectly before unleashing a devastating smash. With the resulting boom, I could have sworn an explosion spell had gone off. The ball ricocheted off my side of the field, then shot forward and hit me square in the jaw before I could react.

"Gwaaaaaaaaah!"

My body was sent flying through the air. A mere three-gram ball had delivered an impossibly heavy impact.

And there I lay, collapsed on the floor, jaw throbbing, mind hazy, vision spinning. My body refused to listen to me, and it didn't seem like I'd be getting up anytime soon.

"That's the match! Liz is down for the count! The victor is Rachel!"

"Heh heh! Victory is mine!"

I'd lost by knockout. *Wait, was ping-pong always this sort of game?* The table and the entire room had been reinforced with shock absorption and soundproofing magic. The missed shots alone would have obliterated the walls without it. *Did ping-pong always require* this *level of preparation?*

Thus, I was defeated by Rachel. I was carried off on a stretcher and deposited on a nearby bench… *Since when did ping-pong need* stretchers*?*

"It's our turn now. Dame Altina, are you ready?"

"Of course. On your mark."

The next matchup was Sylphie versus Altina. Just like us, they wore hotel yukatas as they stood on opposing sides of the table.

"Heh heh, how about we see just how good our new recruit is?"

“Get ready for an upset!”

The air between them was electric with tension. It was as if invisible flames roared around them.

“Here I come!”

“I won’t lose!”

Thus began their battle. Yes, a battle. This was no mere game or competition—it was a full-blown war.

Each and every shot they exchanged carried an extraordinary amount of force—enough that any ordinary monster would have been obliterated just from the air pressure surrounding the ball.

There was no doubt in my mind that they were both going for the kill. No ordinary person could be allowed to set foot in the room. That was simply how dangerous it was.

The speed of the ball and the movements of both players were far faster than what I’d experienced in my match. Rather, it was so fast that the ball seemed to disappear entirely. Their rally had reached a godlike speed far beyond the limits of my kinetic vision.

I couldn’t even pick up the sounds of each strike, as the hits blurred together into a constant din that made it impossible to distinguish one from the next.

“Heh heh! Not bad, Altina! I didn’t expect you to go for that!”

“Don’t underestimate me just because I’m new around here! I’m a hero too! Don’t you forget it!”

They maintained serious faces as they continued swinging, never ceasing this war they called ping-pong. They both could see everything, every bounce, every play; this match was at a far higher level than mine had been—an incomprehensible battle between titans.

I sat on the edge of the bench, sipping coffee-flavored milk as I watched it unfold.

“Those two are really going at it! Winner faces me next! Okay?”

Rachel was next to me, taking it easy with her own cup of coffee milk.

“Hey, Rachel. Can you actually follow that ball?”

“Huh? Of course I can,” she answered, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

I stared fixedly at the seemingly empty ping-pong table. But nothing changed. The ball didn’t magically become visible, nor did I suddenly awaken to some hidden ability that allowed me to

grasp this level of play.

Resigning myself, I took a few sparing sips of my drink. “I can’t…” I muttered. “I just can’t see it…”

The battle between Sylphie and Altina continued, perfectly even. Their abilities were so well-matched that this long exchange seemed far from over.

But then, the match took an unexpected turn—a mishap, so to speak. All of a sudden, something entirely unanticipated transpired.

“Mnn…?”

“Huh? Nya-Nyaaaaaaaaa-aaaaaaaaah?!”

They both had been wearing the yukatas provided by the inn—simple robes fastened by little more than a sash around the waist. No buttons. No zippers. Easy to wear, easy to doff, easy to relax in…and just as easy to come undone.

And the game they played was superdimensional ping-pong, an extreme display of athleticism, making full use of their highly trained physical abilities.

To put it bluntly…

“Breasts…”

…were now in full view.

“Nyah! Hey! Don’t look at me!”

Altina’s face burned red as she clutched the front of her yukata with both hands to hide herself, bashfully curling up.

“An opening!”

“Huh?”

But Sylphie seized the moment. She was in practically the same state as Altina with her chest spilling out of her robe, and yet, she wasn’t the slightest bit perturbed. Her magnificent breasticles swayed as she delivered a thunderous smash straight into Altina’s court.



“Heh heh, you still have a long way to go, Altina.”

“N-No, no, no! That’s not the point! This isn’t the time for that! Hurry and cover yourself up, Sylphie!”

Altina couldn’t conceal her embarrassment—her unrest. But Sylphie remained completely unfazed, standing undaunted, her chest bold and bare.

“Breasts! Breasts! Breasts, breasts, breasts!”

“Hey, can’t you look away a bit?! Aren’t you supposed to be a lady, Liz?!”

Oh, she’s got me there. I didn’t realize I’d be so entranced by the boobs. But, as a noble lady, I must show some self-discipline. With that said, the two of them do have some magnificent *proportions!*

“Allow me to offer some advice for our new recruit,” Sylphie said. “This is a difference in experience.”

“E-Experience?”

The princess knight went on, “Yes, once you’ve been part of the hero’s party for long enough, a little incident like this—a measly bit of exposed chest—won’t faze you at all! In fact, you’ll experience plenty of situations far more embarrassing than this! After a while, something like this will become a trivial matter you won’t stop to think about!”

“What’s that supposed to—”

Altina was stunned. “Wh-What kind of messed up stuff are you going to make me do?! Y-You’re scaring me!”

“Don’t worry. It’s only scary at first...”

“Noooooooooo!”

Altina trembled in fear. Nearby, Rachel and Melvy were both readily nodding at Sylphie’s words... Seriously, what was up with this party? As a fellow new recruit, I was terrified myself.

What followed was a string of missed swings from Altina, whose tail was stuck between her legs in her unrest. There were a few more wardrobe malfunctions along the way, but Sylphie stood firm throughout.

The glory of victory was all Sylphie’s.

“Altina, this is your initiation.”

“I won’t accept it!” Altina cried out, red from ear to ear. “Not one bit!”

Her scream echoed out as she pictured an uncertain, yet certainly absurd future that lay ahead.

Now, we were on the darkened beach. Under the glow of

moonlight, we relished in one of summer's quintessential pleasures.

"Behold! Dual-wielding sparkling spin attack!"

"Wow! It's so colorful and beautiful!"

"Having fun is good and all, but the fire's hot. Be careful, Rachel."

"Not a single person here's weak enough for some measly sparkler to injure them!"

We were having fun with handheld fireworks near the waves. These were wand-like tools imbued with magic enchantments, allowing anyone to enjoy fireworks simply by lighting the tip. They didn't have the grandeur of the large ones launched into the air at festivals, but they were very accessible and could give off all sorts of colors depending on the spells used.

"Feast your eyes upon me! Lo and behold, 'tis the poop firework! Gya ha ha ha hah!"

"What are you, an elementary school brat?"

Kuon lit a firework that spouted a long and thin trail of black ash—commonly called a poop firework. Yes, no matter how many times I witnessed it, it had an unmistakable vulgarness to it. But as long as Kuon was enjoying herself, I had no room to complain.

"All right, I'm lighting up the rat fireworks!"

These ones were made by crafting rings from thin paper tubes filled with gunpowder, with a slight enchantment to complete them. Known as rat fireworks, they would spin around and scatter sparks when ignited, darting across the ground like a scampering rat.

We'd prepared numerous colorful rat fireworks this time, and lighting several at once created a dazzling, prismatic display.

"What's the matter, Altina? Do you feel like chasing the rats? Are your natural hunting instincts kicking in?"

"D-Don't take me for a fool! I'm not a child!" Altina insisted. But despite that, her cat ears and tail twitched in response to the fireworks. She simply couldn't help but react when she saw movement—the bittersweet reality of her species' ingrained feline nature.

We enjoyed various fireworks together, listening to the waves of a pitch-black sea, with only the moon in the sky and the sparks of the fireworks to give us light. It was lively and fun, and fantastical too. It was a beautiful sight to behold.

These handheld fireworks were simple magical tools that anyone could use. However, advanced users could add their own creative touches. They could boost the mana supply, change the formulas, and craft their own displays of shape and color.

"Wa ha ha hah! Come forth! Chaos Snake from the Dark Sea!"

Kuon conjured a sinister, black serpent-shaped firework and swung it around as gleefully as a child. The massive, ten-meter-long snake thrashed around wildly.

"Whoa?! Watch out!"

"Hup!"

We all nimbly dodged its dark, ominous glow.

"I see, I see. This calls for countermeasures. Then, if I may!" Melvy proclaimed before going on to create a white firework in the shape of a sacred dragon. The white dragon firework bit into Kuon's black serpent, sealing its movements.

"Wa ha ha ha hah! A laudable effort, Melvy!"

"Umm, er, thank you!"

"Now, pray tell, what be the name of thy dragon?"

"Huh? It doesn't really have a—"

"Then what a waste that would be! Names are important, you know! Hmm, yes... Let's see... Eureka! Thine dragon shall be called 'Saint Shine Hell Dragon from the Dark'!"

"It's a hell dragon?!"

Melvy's white dragon, radiating blinding divine light, had its origins abruptly rewritten by Kuon.

Chaos Snake from the Dark Sea and Saint Shine Hell Dragon from the Dark entangled, sparking and clashing in an even battle.

"Ha ha, how entertaining. I'm joining the fray. Ice-Fire Phoenix!"

"Then I'll lend a hand on Kuon's side. Do I really have to give it a name?"

"You must!"

"How troublesome... Umm, then... Right. Twilight Dark Tiger!"

Sylphie formed a phoenix of scattering blue sparks, while Wolfe produced a ferocious feline shrouded in dark flames. And then both entered the battle.

Each creature was nearly ten meters in length, burning and sparking as they clashed. So flashy, fierce, and boisterous, they had turned what began as simple handheld fireworks into a grand monster showdown.

“Now, who’s going to win? Shall we take bets?”

“Yes, me! I’m betting three juices that Team Melvy will win! How about you, Mitter?”

“Huh? Me? Hmm… Then I’ll go with Team Kuon. Three juices.”

The spectators began wagering among themselves.

This wasn’t the sort of entertainment I expected from handheld fireworks. We took in the air of a peculiar summer night as we etched a new page into the book of youth.

The massive monster melee eventually reached a pause. But the fight had no resolution. After all, no one was about to run out of mana over something as minor as keeping a firework alive. Once it was clear that there was no end in sight, Kuon was the first to grow bored and start complaining.

With the victor uncertain, we all got back to enjoying some relatively quieter fireworks. This time, it was the simple, traditional experience.

I crouched down, staring at the faint glow of a sparkler.

“Hey, Liz. Pass me a light.”

“Oh, of course, Cain.”

That was when Cain approached me.

Though he could easily light his firework himself with fire magic, sharing the flame was part of the charm of handheld fireworks. I brought the flame of my sparkler to his; one spark became two. It was such a simple, inconsequential act, but I didn’t hate the process. Two sparkling beads glistened, hanging on two threads between us.

“Today was fun.”

“It was!” I exclaimed. “This trip has been so much fun!”

It was already late at night. We shared our closing thoughts.

“I enjoyed spending time with just the two of us, but being with everyone really is the best.”

“You’ve really become a part of this party, Liz.”

“I was nervous at first, but…Sylphie, Melvy, Rachel… They’ve all become close friends now.”

“That’s good to know,” Cain said softly.

He didn’t say much. But I could tell from his tone just how much he had hoped for this. He was truly glad that I was fitting in with his comrades. He desired it from the bottom of his heart, and I could practically hear the weight lifting off his chest.

Hearing his words stirred something strange within me.

I was happy to have become such close friends with everyone. They were all so kind, so cheerful, such truly good people. Joining their circle was truly a joy for me.

But why did this all feel so natural, as if it was all meant to be? Anything else seemed utterly impossible... The mere thought of not becoming friends brought a dull aching pain to my heart. Why did it feel like a sense of loss—like I was losing something that had always been there? It was the sadness of something slipping away, of dropping and losing something precious.

Had I...once felt this way before? Wasn't I...friends with them from the start? Hadn't I always possessed what I now had?

"Beautiful."

"Ah!"

Cain's quiet whisper brought me back to my senses. My mind was dragged back to reality.

"Y-Yes... It is. The fireworks are very beautiful."

"I was talking about you."

"Huh?"

In the depths of the darkness, the soft light of the sparklers faintly illuminated Cain's face. He looked just a little different from how he did under the bright light of the sun—the colors, the mood.

The two sparklers let off a slight crackling sound between us, two feeble lights both seemingly ready to dissolve into the night at any moment. And the face they lit up seemed just as fleeting.

This was a face of his I'd never seen before. It was just a trick of the light. That was all it was. And yet...I couldn't take my eyes off his faintly illuminated figure.

"..."

And it stood to reason that the sparklers were illuminating me too. Cain and I crouched together, sharing the same space, the same moment, the same light. Had he seen something in me, just as I had in him?

Cain let out a deep and long breath. "Yep, this just won't do. Traveling does strange things to you—it loosens the tongue."

"I-Is that so?!"

"Forget what I just said."

"O-Okay."

Silence seeped in from the night. Only the faint crackling of sparklers filled the stillness. I could feel the heat rising in my cheeks...no, my entire body.

This heat is from the sparklers. The fire is what's warming my body, I tried to convince myself. But how many times had my cheeks burned bright today? I'd burned up when I saw him in his swimsuit; my chest tightened when we played together in the sea; when he fended off those playboys, my heart had been pounding away.

We'd ended up in the open-air bath together. I'd felt the warmth of his back against mine.

Now, we had lit sparklers together, the sight of his fleeting figure causing my heart to skip a beat.

Oh, how could this be? It was no use. It was more than I could play off…more than I could hold in. My feelings were rising. Soon, I wouldn't be able to conceal them any longer.

This thundering heartbeat… No matter how long I waited, I doubted it would ever settle down.

Chapter 64: Now—Lost and Forgotten

The night drew on. Even more than it had before.

After thoroughly enjoying their time by the seaside, the group finally ran out of things to do. Though their boundless energy could have kept them going, the fireworks did eventually have to run out, and that felt like a natural way to end things off. They decided it was finally time to rest.

“We never ended up using the double bed, huh?”

“Right.”

Liz and Cain muttered to one another as they stared at the double bed that had been booked for them with impure intentions. Ultimately, they’d opted to sleep in the same large room as Sylphie and the others. The spacious room could have easily accommodated more than ten people, so there was no issue with the two of them joining the mix.

Despite the others’ attempts to stay hidden and spy in secret, their location had been discovered. The plan was a failure, leaving no further reason for them to operate separately.

The two of them began packing their things to change rooms. As they shoved their belongings into their bags and prepared to leave this contrived two-person setup, Cain took a seat on the edge of the ill-begotten double bed.

He felt a sense of relief. Managing the distance between himself and Liz—while her memories were gone—was no easy task for him.

Deep down, he loved her so much that he wanted to embrace her this instant. That was how strong their bond had grown. But with her current state of amnesia, Cain knew he had to keep these feelings suppressed. He continued to hide his emotions, taking care to avoid any actions that might damage their fragile relationship.

And so, leaving the double bed unused felt like a weight off his shoulders.

“He he, I’m all tuckered out from playing all day. What about you, Sir Cain?”

“Hmm? Oh… Yeah, I enjoyed it.”

Liz called out to him, and he responded a beat late, having

been caught up in his own thoughts.

“I’ve gained so much stamina since I started training with everyone, but exhaustion from playing like that feels a little different from normal exhaustion.”

“Sure enough. It’s like a relaxed, unguarded kinda fatigue… A sense of fulfillment, I guess.”

“He he he, precisely.”

As the day drew to a close, they shared a casual conversation.

“Sir Cain… Umm, how did you find today’s…date?”

“Date?”

“W-Well, we spent the latter part with everyone, but…it was just us for the first half, so…I-I thought that this may have been a date…”

Cain turned to her and saw that Liz was fidgeting, her face flush.

“It was fun, of course. The best.”

“Heh heh.”

“I got to see your cute swimsuit, and the sea was nice too. I even got to taste a bit of luxury in the open-air bath.”

“We’ll have to thank everyone for arranging it for us.”

“Though you could also say we got set up.”

“Ha ha ha, I guess so.”

They shared a laugh.

“It was fun for me too.”

A warm smile spread across Liz’s face.

“The sea was wonderful, the bath was soothing, and it was great to laugh and play with everyone during the fireworks. And then…sharing sparklers with you…”

“Yeah, every bit of it was fun.”

“Oh, and I really was happy when you protected me from those delinquents. It felt like something straight out of a novel—my heart was pounding.”

“I keep telling you, you could’ve handled those lowlifes by yourself.”

“Even so…my heart has been racing all day. It won’t stop, it just keeps going and going.”

Liz placed a hand over her chest.

“On, and on… It just won’t stop.”

“I-I see…”

And suddenly, the conversation trailed off into silence. As Liz stopped speaking, a peculiar stillness settled between them.

A pleasant chat had quickly turned to a rather awkward quiet. Cain started to feel a tad uneasy. *Does Liz not want to continue the conversation?* he wondered.

"It's about time we headed to the other room," he finally said. "Everyone's waiting for us."

And with that, he tried to stand from the bed. Naturally, he assumed Liz would go along with that proposal.

But then...

"Please wait."

Liz leaned against his back. She gripped the fabric of his yukata tightly with both hands, holding him still. Cain was unable to stand from the bed as she muttered to him, "Please...wait."

"Liz?"

"Just for a little...please."

He could hear the sound of her taking a deep breath. Her heart was pounding with painful intensity. He could feel just how nervous she was through his back.

Voice quavering, she spoke up. "If...if I said I *wanted* to spend the night here...just the two of us... What would you do, Cain?" Still clutching his yukata, Liz whispered in a faint, fragile voice. A thin voice that made it sound like she was mustering all her courage just to barely wring it out.

"What...?"

A bead of sweat trickled down Cain's temple. Just the two of them...in this room... Did she mean what he thought she did? Though Liz did not have any of her memories, it wasn't as if she were ignorant of the implications of her request. If he nodded, their relationship would irreversibly change. His options—to move forward, or pull back.

What was the right answer? What should he say? This wasn't just a simple confession. With Liz's amnesia in the mix, there was no clear path, no right answer. No easy resolution. Cain found himself at a loss.

"I..."

Liz shut her eyes tightly, bracing herself for his response.

"I'm... fine with that. If that's what you want, I'll accept you. If you're the one who wants it, Liz, then maybe it's time to move forward. Maybe it's better that way... No, it's not about it being better or worse. I want to accept you."

"Cain..."

He resolved himself, determined to accept her confession.

“You might not fully realize it yet, but I’ve already accepted you. I always have. From the very start, I…”

“Huh?”

“So…”

Cain began to turn toward her; these weren’t words to be said while speaking across his back. And yet…

“No!” Liz stopped him, panic in her voice. “Don’t turn around! Don’t look at me!”

“Liz?”

The rejection came from Liz, the very person who’d confessed to him.

“You can’t… You’re not supposed to accept me!”

“What?”

“I mean…I don’t have the right to face you head-on.”

“Liz? What are you talking about?”

Her grip on his yukata tightened. She didn’t want him to turn—and she showed it not just in words, but in actions as well. Cain could feel her trembling against his back.

“I know. I know all too well. I’m not worthy of you at all, Cain.”

“Not worthy?”

“You’re the hero, the hope of the world. And I’m just a student. A trainee. Anyone would see it that way. We’re a complete mismatch.”

“You… Now look here.” Cain let out a weary sigh.

But her body wouldn’t stop shaking. A difference in status? Whether someone was worthy or not? To Cain, it didn’t matter in the slightest. Yet for Liz, these were insurmountable walls that loomed large in her heart.

“Don’t worry about what the world thinks. Just ignore that nonsense—ignore it. If you’re willing to accept me, then I’m ready to accept your feelings, anytime. That’s why…”

“No, that’s not it!”

Yet again, Cain was halted by Liz’s sharp tone. He felt overpowered.

What was it? Something was off. He could feel it instinctively, an uneasy sweat breaking out on his brow.

“I’m…I’m the one who feels unworthy! It’s not because of anyone else! I’ve seen everyone’s strength! I’ve felt Sir Wolfe’s power! I’ve experienced Lady Altina’s might firsthand! In training…I’m the only one who’s in tatters by the end. I’m not even…at their ankles… I’m far, far below that.”

Traveling with the hero's party had taught her one thing above all: they were overwhelmingly strong. Wolfe had intercepted the strongest attack of the kingdom's mightiest warrior with nothing but the skin of his neck. Altina had managed to take her hostage in the blink of an eye, and there was nothing she'd been able to do about it.

And as for Liz... She felt like she was doing nothing but dragging them down. Dragging down the group she considered her friends.

"I can't do anything for anyone. I'm just holding everyone back."

"That's not—" Cain started to say.

But Liz cut him off. "I couldn't even follow the ball in a casual game of ping-pong. It's laughable."

Normal people couldn't even begin to comprehend the strength of the hero's party. This much was evident with the rumors that Brian, captain of the royal guard and strongest in the Kingdom of Bahelgarn, was said to rival them—a delusion Wolfe had dismissed with ease. The hero's party stood at such a height it defied understanding.

But Liz was different. Over the past few months, she'd been closer to them than anyone else. The more time she spent with them, the stronger she grew, the more acutely she understood their power.

It was precisely because she'd grown so close that Liz had come to comprehend—with painful clarity—that they lived in a completely different world.

She couldn't for even a moment convince herself that she was their equal—let alone Cain's equal.

"I'm the only one who's so hopelessly weak." *Weak and pathetic.* "Pitiful, feckless..."

Large, heavy tears fell from her eyes. The more she spoke, the more she put her feelings to words, the more the emptiness, frustration, and pain surged within her. Once they'd started, there was no stopping the tears. They dribbled onto Cain's yukata and seeped into the fabric.

"Don't... Don't be hasty, Liz. With proper training, you'll be just as strong as us in no time."

Liz was speechless.

"You might not realize it yet, but you have talent. Incredible talent. More than anyone could ask for... That power is just

sleeping right now…" Though Cain tried to calm her, the tension he felt from her trembling body didn't fade. "I-It's okay, you don't have to worry about anything. You're already on the right track. Rest up, train steady… And someday, you'll—"

"Someday isn't good enough!"

Yet again, Liz raised her voice. She screamed with the most raw emotion she'd mustered that day.

"I don't want 'someday!' Right now—this instant—I want to stand tall beside everyone…beside you! I want to puff out my chest and stand shoulder to shoulder with everyone else!"

"Why? Why now?"

"Because this feeling! Right now! It's swollen so large that it feels like I'm going to burst!"

Today's date had been perfect. She'd enjoyed every last second of it, so thrilled to be by his side, her heart skipping beat after beat, again and again.

And because of that, her affection had only grown stronger. The emotions welling within her were so powerful that she could no longer bear them a second longer. Ironically, their time together had been so successful that it had only made it harder for her to hold herself back.

"It won't stop… I can't hide it…"

She wept as she spoke. Even though she had confessed to how unworthy she felt, she still wanted to stand beside him. Even though she knew it was impossible, she wanted to be his equal now—*right* now.

It was a contradiction, a distortion within her. Something she herself could do nothing about.

"I love you… I *love* you… Cain… I love you so much…"

For the first time since she'd lost her memories, for the first time since they'd reunited, Liz had clearly voiced her feelings.

"I want to stand beside you, even though I know I'm not strong enough. I can't stop these feelings."

"Liz…"

"I-I love you. I'm so in love with you I can't contain myself."

At that moment, Liz felt like the most miserable being in existence. Her face was messed up with tears, her emotions were laid bare, and there was nothing she could do about it. Even though she'd told the person she loved how she felt, she couldn't accept his response. It was this and that and everything else—all because they lived in completely different worlds.

Because he was on a higher plane of existence. The wonderful memories of the day now felt empty.

It was a cruel reminder that she was the only one who didn't belong.

"I want...to be stronger."

"Liz..."

"I want *you*," she choked.

He was a treasure out of her reach. No matter how she struggled, she could never reach such insurmountable heights. As these emotions filled her, all she could do was weep.

"I want the right to stand beside you...to stand beside all of you with pride. I want the strength to be with everyone forever."

"Liz, have you been struggling with this all this time?"

"I...I want you!"

For a moment, there was silence.

Cain was overwhelmed by her intensity, unable to form a response. He didn't know what to say. The struggle with weakness was something he had abandoned long ago.

Liz fell silent too, tears streaming down her face, her body trembling, yet no words would come out. No, her misery had simply grown so large she could no longer express it in words.

Moonlight streamed in through the window, seeping in alongside the peaceful stillness of the night. Physically, there was no distance between them—not a single material barrier. But the unbridgeable gap between their hearts left Liz paralyzed.

"I held it once... My power... It must have been there, somewhere..."

Cain felt it then—something cold, something foreboding in Liz's voice.

"How...why? Why is it gone? Where did I drop it? Where did I...lose it...?"

"Liz! Settle down! Get a hold of yourself!"

"If only... If only I had it. Then, I could stand shoulder to shoulder with everyone."

Cain could feel the sanity draining from her voice. He forcibly shook her hands from his yukata and grabbed her by the shoulders.

"Why? *Where*? If only I *had* that power..."

"Liz!"

The light had vanished from her eyes, replaced by a bottomless pit of darkness. Cain shook her, but her gaze

remained vacant.

Liz's unconscious mind was grappling with buried turmoil. The power she'd lost in battle and the friends she held dear had vanished along with her memories, leaving her with nothing. Over the past year, she'd lived a peaceful life at the academy, rebuilding herself anew. Yet deep down, she had continued searching for what was lost. Unaware of it, her heart had yearned endlessly for the missing pieces.

What was lost, what was forgotten... Working with her old comrades these past few months, she had begun to get a feel for what that was.

And then, the trip happened. The remnants of the love and happiness she once knew had been stirred up, and without realizing it, she had unconsciously reached out for them.

"I need strength...confidence...*power*..."

"Liz! *Liz*! Listen to me! Can you hear my voice?!"

"Where is it? Where? I need power...power... *My* power..."

Liz wouldn't respond no matter how desperately he called out to her. All that came from her lips was an incoherent monologue. Her sanity was clearly slipping further away.

"My...my poweeeeeeeeer!!!"

"Liz! Liz! Get a hold of yourself!"

"Raaaaaaaaah!!!"

She couldn't remember the precious things she had lost. She couldn't find the strength she needed or the power she once possessed.

The emotional strain of it all, compounded by the swelling feelings of love in her chest, had built up little by little and was now on the verge of exploding.

"Power... Poweeeeeeeeer!!!"

"Liz!"

At that moment, a pair of massive, ominous black wings burst forth. They erupted the moment her mind had completely left her. Cain was stunned—he had never seen her in this form before.

Liz was unconscious by then.

Trapped in the chaos of unconscious conflict, she had lost her sanity entirely. Her eyes rolled back as she loomed over him with unfamiliar wings—wings that, despite the extraordinary pressure they exuded, gave off a strange sense of divinity.

"Aaaaaaaaah!!!"

“L-Liz! Wait!”

Liz wrenched herself free of Cain’s hand, bursting through the window before taking flight into the night sky. Her black wings beat furiously as she ascended into the darkness.

“Liiiiiiiiiz!” Cain called out to her, but she didn’t turn back. Without hesitation, he leaped from the window to pursue her.

Distortion of memory, emotional conflict, a subconscious dilemma…

All these factors came together to culminate in Liz’s rampage.

Chapter 65: Now—Rampage

Above a dark ocean illuminated faintly in moonlight floated a lone girl.

She was held aloft by the rhythmic motion of the large, black wings sprouting from her back. And yet, the girl was unconscious. Her eyes had rolled back in her head and her body was limp, but her wings alone continued to flap relentlessly.

There she remained, high above the sea. There, *Liz* floated, unconscious, her mind lost.

“Liz! Can you hear me?! Come back! Snap out of it!” Cain desperately called out from the shore.

He raised his voice as loud as he could, calling her name again and again. But there was no response.

“What’s going on here, Cain?!”

“Is that…Liz?!”

“You’re here!”

It was at that point that his comrades—who’d sensed the disturbance—rushed to the scene. The ominous mana and Cain’s frantic cries made it hard to ignore the situation.

“Liz with…black wings? What’s happened to her?”

“Cain, do you have any idea what put her into that state?”

“Yeah, I do. This is the first time I’m seeing those wings, but—”

Cain began to explain the situation to his comrades, only to be cut off.

“Aaaaaaah!!!”

“Huh?”

A piercing, shrill scream erupted from Liz, and in that instant, her mana discharged violently.

“Aaaaaaah!!!”

“Wha—?!”

Her outburst caused ten-odd pillars of pure magical energy to manifest around her. Each pillar was thick and powerful, striking the waters around her with tremendous force, sending waves and ocean spray shooting into the air. Simultaneously, they stretched high, high into the sky, threatening to pierce the heavens above.

The pillars were colored in black-and-white, these two colors

dominating the space above the sea. The sheer power contained within them was staggering.

"Wh-What is this?!"

"Cain! What is this magic?!"

"Don't ask me! I've never seen it before either!"

The shock waves emanating from the pillars reverberated powerfully across the sands.

"*Aaaaaaaaaah!!!*"

"Guh! Again?!"

As she roared again, more and more of those white and black pillars materialized, each several meters thick. They rose to unimaginable heights and slammed into the ocean below.

Fortunately, Liz was over the sea. The town was untouched, and there were no casualties to be seen. But just thinking of what could have been if such destructive magic had been unleashed over an urban area sent chills down everyone's spine. Beads of cold sweat formed as they imagined the devastation.

"Wh-What the hell is this power?!"

"Where is she getting this much strength from?!"

Even the comrades who'd traveled alongside her for so long were at a loss. They'd never seen her in this state, nor had they known she was capable of such magic.

"Is this the strength of her ancestors? No, it's even stronger than that!"

"More importantly, umm, er... That magic...there's something wrong with it!" Melvy cried out, a desperation to her voice.

The massive mana pillars Liz was creating were split into two distinct types.

The first shone with brilliant, divine white light—beams that sliced straight through the darkness of the night, making it almost as bright as day. Just looking at them seemed to cleanse all negative emotions.

Yet the other type was the complete opposite—a deep, impenetrable black. Their bottomless darkness was suffocating, stirring a primal fear in anyone who looked upon them.

Melvy's attention, however, was focused on the white pillars.

"That pure glimmer... It's most likely holy magic!"

"What?!"

Holy magic was said to be magic derived from the power of the gods, thought impossible for humans to wield under normal circumstances. Only a rare few hailed as Saints—like Melvy—or

those bearing sacred relics like Altina's holy sword could use it.

Yet somehow, Liz was wielding this power of gods.

"I've never seen Liz use holy magic before!"

Sweat dripped down everyone's brows. This was a side of Liz they'd never known, even having been so long acquainted. Something extraordinary was happening.

And this was certainly not a sign of anything good to come. They knew that instinctually.

"If the white ones be holy magic, then..."

"Kuon?"

Thoughtfully stroking her chin, Kuon spoke. "Then the black pillars might well be hell magic."

"*Hell* magic?"

Cain and the others cocked their heads, unfamiliar with the term.

"'Tis but a legend, even in demonland. Thus, I cannot say anything with certainty. But I have heard tell of such magic."

"So what's this hell magic supposed to be?"

"Some two thousand years past, in the War of Heaven and Earth—a great battle between gods and devils—it is said that the gods' hosts wielded the power of holy magics, whilst the legions of the devils did call upon the might of hell magic."

There was a murmur of shock.

The War of Heaven and Earth was something Altina had recently researched in-depth. It was a great war between gods and devils. During that time, the gods created the holy sword, Ikryl for humanity, entrusting its wielder with holy magic to protect the world of humans.

Conversely, there stood the enemies of these gods—the devils. Apparently, the magic that these beings and their ilk had possessed was hell magic.

"It is wielded by the fearsome creatures of hell, hence the name. Simple, yes, yet to us demons, 'tis much as thou dost regard thy gods."

"Why can Liz use something like that?"

"I know not. As I said, I can claim naught with certainty. There is no sure proof to say that what she useth be hell magic at all"

Even so, Cain and his comrades were already convinced by Kuon's words. They could feel something incredibly sinister from the mana that radiated from those black pillars. Deeper, darker, more sinister than any dark magic they had encountered before.

“*Aaaaaaaaaah!!!*”

As Liz let out another anguished scream, the white and black pillars erupted with force once again. The white ones shone as brightly as the midday sun, illuminating the world, while the black ones remained darker than night, exuding an eerie, sinister aura that swallowed up all the light around them.

“Wh-What is that?”

“An angel? Or a demon?”

The power and malevolent aura were so intense that those around couldn’t help but notice. Guests at the hotel began peeking out from their windows to watch the scene unfold.

Her spells continued to pierce the sea. There were—as of yet—no casualties. But there was no telling how things would pan out going forward. If a maddened Liz were to even move so slightly from where she was, the consequences could be catastrophic. Thousands would die. The town—no, in the worst case, an entire nation—could fall apart. That was how overwhelmingly powerful the magic Liz wielded had become.

Cain and his comrades held their breaths. Presumably, her body wouldn’t be able to bear the continuous use of such immense power. For the sake of all the people nearby, and more importantly, for the sake of their precious comrade, they resolved themselves. They needed to prepare for battle.

They would weave through the storm of divine magic, doing whatever they could to reach her.

For the first time in a long while, their bodies trembled with excitement.

Meanwhile, elsewhere…

An army marched unnoticed along the nearby seabed. They were a unit of bipedal fishmen from the demon army. Thousands of soldiers formed ranks as they made their way toward a certain seaside resort.

Armed with a weapon in each hand, they marched along the ocean floor. Their bodies were covered in scales, appearing human- and fishlike in nature. That was what it meant to be a fishman.

This elite demon unit was composed of only the toughest of fishmen warriors. They now soundlessly approached a town inhabited by humans.

Having set off from the poisoned seas of demonland, they

had walked along the ocean floor for several weeks. For the humans who could only live on dry land, it was impossible to even detect the presence of such an army. Now, the fishman unit was on the verge of launching the perfect surprise attack.

“Captain, the clock has struck midnight. We have reached the coast right on schedule.”

“Good.”

The captain of this unit was a high-ranking demon. With a massive, imposing figure, his mere presence was overwhelming.

“Listen up, men!” His subordinates straightened up at their superior’s command. “Henceforth, the elite fishman unit of the demon army will commence its invasion of human territory! We have been pushed back since the appearance of this so-called *hero*, but now we will secure a glorious victory. This battle will be the turning point of our war!”

The executive fishman bellowed out to rally the troops. Even though his voice was audible to all his men, it would not reach the world above, not with the sea and the sound of waves in the way.

“Kill them! Slaughter those detestable humans until this blue sea is stained red with their blood. Spill it until not a drop remains!”

“Hraaaaaah!!!”

The soldiers roared, their morale surging. The demon army’s surprise attack was about to begin. The long march was over, their long-awaited moment of carnage was finally upon them.

Or so they thought.

“Gyah?!”

“Hmm?”

What seemed to be pillars of mana suddenly rained down from above the ocean. They swallowed countless soldiers, utterly obliterating them before they had the chance to scream.

“What?! What just happened?!”

“I-I don’t know!!!”

Enormous black-and-white pillars of mana from god-knows-where pierced the ocean, reaching all the way to the seabed where they stirred up the sand.

A unit that had been convinced that *they* were the ones holding the element of surprise now found itself under attack by mysterious forces. That alone was enough to cause chaos, and this was only worsened by the swirling sand that robbed them of

their vision.

“W-We’re under attack from the surface! Scouts! Investigate at once!”

“R-Roger tha— Gwah?!”

Though the officer issued a swift command, the soldiers who surfaced to investigate were quickly and mercilessly swallowed by more pillars of black-and-white, their bodies erased without a trace.

“Wh-What?! What in the world is going on?!”

“The shield unit’s just set up a defensive line! We don’t know who’s attacking, but we’ve repaired our formation!”

“Well done, strategist!”

“You’re too kind, Cap— Gyah?!”

“Strategiiiiiist?!”

The mysterious pillars of energy completely disregarded their magical defenses, effortlessly piercing through and erasing the army’s strategist in an instant.

Even the barrier formed by the collective magical might of the entire unit was powerless against this unknown force. None present could even begin to comprehend the overwhelming might of the attack.

“Wh-What’s— Gyah?!”

“The sand’s clouding my— Waaah?!”

“H-How did it come to this?! Today was supposed to be our day of glory— Gyah?!”

A majestic demon army force had quickly fallen into chaos. The pillars of mana covered a vast area with countless strikes coming down repeatedly with each volley.

There was no way to block it, no way to escape. Without even understanding the nature of the attack, soldiers were being erased one after another.

“Is this…a nightmare?”

The demon general’s eyes drifted upward, as though he was seeking answers from the heavens. But above, he found nothing but the dark sea of night. He couldn’t see what was happening on the surface, and there was nothing he could do regardless.

It wasn’t long before a white pillar of mana descended upon him as well. It happened so quickly, that the general couldn’t offer a single word.

Yet perhaps, in a way, this was his salvation.

It was the only escape from what seemed like an endless

nightmare. Being consumed by the divine light was his only release from this horrifying reality.

Thus...unbeknownst to anyone, a demon army invasion ended in failure.

No one would ever tell the tale of this battle. Not even the one responsible for obliterating the unit was aware of what they'd done. On that day, a seaside town—one whose residents were supposed to have been slaughtered—was coincidently and miraculously saved by the rampage of a single girl.

The demon army's fishman unit was completely annihilated, leaving not even a scrap of flesh behind. Ironically, the sea—which was meant to be dyed red with human blood—remained pure blue. Not even their own blood would sully it.

Liz had unknowingly repelled the demon forces.

"Hmm?"

On the beach, Cain cocked his head. Something felt off.

"Just now...did any of you feel a strange presence coming from the bottom of the ocean?"

"Huh? The ocean?"

"I didn't feel anything."

But his comrades shook their heads. There wasn't anything logical about it—Cain's animalistic instincts alone had picked up on something.

"If it bothers you, should I use some detection magic to check?"

"Mm... Yeah, I'd appreciate it, Lalo."

Lalo used his magic to examine the ocean floor. His spell searched for any signs of activity down there—be it life, spells, or traps. That was the essence of detection magic. Now, Lalo was a very seasoned magician; in an instant, his magic could cover a vast area several times larger than what an ordinary magician could detect.

"No, there's nothing."

"I see. Guess it was my mistake. Sorry."

"We have been saved by your intuition time and again. Don't hesitate to speak up if you notice anything, no matter how small."

There was nothing on the ocean floor. Or rather, nothing left.

"A'ight, then for now, we need to focus on..."

Cain lifted his gaze to a sky where the moon shone large and bright. Liz was still hovering there, her black wings keeping her airborne.

“We have to do something about *her*.”

“Why is Liz in that berserk state anyway? Do you have any idea, Cain?”

“Yeah. I was there when it started.”

There wasn’t much time to discuss, but Cain offered a brief explanation of what had transpired.

“It’s my fault. Without realizing it, I’d made her keep suppressing herself all this time.”

“Cain…”

Cain clenched his fist hard enough to hurt himself.

“Even without her memory, Liz must’ve been subconsciously seeking a connection with us, her party. Even if she didn’t realize it with her strength gone, that void continued festering deep inside her, turning into stress. And…I never noticed.”

Back in the room, Liz had recognized the absence of her lost powers while she was losing her mind. It was a power she couldn’t perceive in her normal state. But her subconscious had been able to feel the void left by what was lost—her strength, her bonds, her love. Those lingering memories weighed on her, causing her pain without her realizing it.

Seeking those precious things she couldn’t remember, Liz had spiraled into a rampage.

“Regardless! We can figure out the exact reason later! Right now, we need to stop her!”

“Yes, yes! If she continues releasing power like that, then the worst-case scenario… No, this isn’t a hypothetical! Her life will *definitely* be in danger!”

“Yeah, you’re right. That’s the priority.”

A brief scolding from Rachel and Melvy snapped Cain back to focus. Now wasn’t time for reflection—it was time to act. To do whatever it took, even if it meant smacking some sense into her.

“I’m going on the offensive. Everyone, support me.”

“Got it!”

The party members assumed battle formations, each of them sensing a grueling battle ahead.

“Let’s go!”

Cain, the hero, took the lead. He leaped toward Liz, who hovered with her black wings spread wide. With mana, he

created footholds in the air, jumping higher and higher.

His comrades weren't far behind him. Although they had no wings, turning mana into sturdy platforms allowed them to swiftly move however they pleased.

"Aaaaaaaaaah!!!"

Whether or not she'd registered their approach, Liz unleashed another scream. And yet again, those black-and-white pillars of mana rained down relentlessly.

"Holy Shield!"

"Urgh!"

Melvy created a sturdy shield with her own holy magic, but this only managed to deflect a portion of a white pillar before it burst.

"Gwaaah!"

The bulk of a barely dampened pillar of white light struck Cain. He used some defensive magic of his own, but couldn't fully block it and was blasted downward, falling into the sea.

"Cain!"

"Are you okay?!"

The team cried out in concern for their leader. Cain quickly surfaced, standing on the water as though it were solid ground.

"Cain! I'm so sorry! My shield wasn't strong enough!"

"Don't worry about it, Melvy. If you couldn't block it, then no one could!"

Even someone incredibly powerful would have been reduced to complete nothingness had they taken on that attack. Yet Cain had only sustained damage and had otherwise remained intact.

"Now...!"

And as Cain had taken the blow, someone else had closed the distance to Liz in an instant.

It was Altina. Using the power of holy sword Ikryl to strengthen her body, she darted through the air faster than could be perceived. Being a half-beast of feline descent made her one of the fastest members of the hero's party.

"Ngh!"

A pillar of mana assailed her—a black one this time. According to Kuon, it was a pillar of what was potentially hell magic.

"Holy sword Ikryl! Unleash your might!"

Altina's holy sword let off a powerful light, the light coalescing into the form of a massive blade. She swung it to sever the pillar that was coming down on her from above.

“Hraaaaaaaaah!”

With a mighty roar, Altina intercepted the black pillar with a swing of her blade. However, she only managed to destroy a small portion of it.

“Erk?!”

“Not good!”

“Everyone! Deploy a shield in front of Altina!”

“On it!”

Everyone’s mana shot forth as layer upon layer of shield magic overlapped in front of Altina. Typically, shield spells like these were deployed directly in front of the user, and projecting them any further drastically reduced their strength.

This was an emergency measure—better than nothing. But it could still spell the difference between life-and-death.

“Gwah! Nyaaaaaah?!”

“Altina!”

Despite the impromptu shields, Altina and the layered defenses were swallowed by the black pillar. Altina took heavy damage as she was hurled into the sea like Cain had been before her.

She, however, didn’t resurface. Altina had sustained such significant damage that her body could no longer move as she willed it.

“Melvy, retrieve Altina and cast healing magic!”

“Y-Yes! Understood!”

At Cain’s command, Melvy quickly moved to where Altina had fallen, dived into the sea, and pulled her to the surface.

“Pwah! Hah… Ha ha…”

“Are you okay, Altina?”

“S-Sorry… That one was…pretty bad…”

Melvy channeled holy magic into her recovery spell—an incredibly powerful spell that could instantly mend any injury no matter how severe. And yet, Altina’s wounds were only reverting gradually. The hell magic she’d taken was hindering the healing process.

“Gwah!”

“Grr… Gwaaaaaah!”

“Mitter! Lalo!”

Elsewhere, more casualties were emerging. Lalo had provided powerful defensive magic support to Mitter, who had been trying to approach Liz using his shield.

Mitter, an expert in shield techniques, was essentially the tank of the hero's party. His defensive might was second to none. Then there was Lalo, a seasoned magician, who had augmented his defenses even further. The number of foes they'd encountered capable of breaching this near-impenetrable wall could be counted on one hand. But both were overwhelmed, their defenses shattered by a pillar of white light as a torrent of mana engulfed them.

"Pwah! Lalo, are you okay?!"

"U-Urgh... B-But a scratch..."

Both were smacked into the sea, and Mitter surfaced with Lalo in his arms. Though Mitter seemed relatively unharmed, Lalo had suffered severe injuries.

"Melvy, Mitter! Get Altina and Lalo to the shore and off the battlefield! Melvy, you stay with them and continue healing!"

"Umm, er, understood!"

"W-Wait... I can still...fight..."

"I-I as well... Don't underestimate...your elders..."

Altina and Lalo both voiced their discontent at the order, but the severity of their injuries was plain for all to see.

"Shut up and do as I say! I won't let Liz kill any of our comrades! Especially not you, Lalo! You're not fully recovered yet, so don't push yourself!"

That was the whole reason the hero's party had taken up a stay in Academy Town. Some of their members needed extended recovery after their many battles with the demon army. Lalo, the eldest member by far, had yet to recover fully, and it was for this reason that Cain decided to pull him out of the battle.

"Support us from there with body-strengthening magic! If anyone else comes out injured, I'll send them your way, so prepare for some recovery too."

"Ngh... F-Fine..."

The two of them began to cast long-range strengthening magic. It was more effective than the shield spells at a distance, though its effects were still little more than consolation. Even so, that was all Altina and Lalo could do for now.

"Hm... Something is clearly off."

"Sylphie?"

"We all know Liz's abilities very well, right? Even for her, taking on so many people at once should have been impossible."

Within the hero's party, Liz's abilities ranked second only to

Cain. It was undeniable that she was one of the strongest members of the team, but that didn't mean she was strong enough to take on the rest of the party by herself and win.

Yet that was precisely what she was doing now. Without any strategy, while completely unconscious, and by doing nothing but unleashing bursts of magic at random, she was overpowering all of them.

"She's clearly wielding power beyond her blood. Was she hiding this power deep within her all along?"

"A side of her we don't know about... She may be an atavist, but she's just your average, everyday succubus, right?"

"That's what I thought...but..."

Before their eyes, Liz was using holy magic—said to be the power of gods—as well as what seemed to be hell magic—the power of devils.

How could Liz use such magic? How could she demonstrate such overwhelming power? There were countless things they didn't understand.

"But we don't have the luxury to think about that right now! We have to hurry and stop Liz!"

"Yes... Rachel's right."

"Of course, that's what I'm trying to do."

Rachel had approached Cain and Sylphie. In the end, they needed to stop Liz's rampage. They wouldn't learn anything if they didn't. However, breaking through these towering pillars of black-and-white was proving to be quite a difficult task.

"Aah... Aaah... S-S...Sir Cain..."

"Liz?"

At that moment, something changed in Liz. Until that point, she'd only been groaning incoherently while writhing in pain, but finally, she had managed to form words. And what she finally said was Cain's name.

"Liz! It's me, Cain! Can you hear me?!"

"Aaaaaaah... C-Cain... Sir Cain..."

"Liz! Snap out of it! I'm right here!"

Cain desperately called out to her. He trusted that his words would reach—trusted that she would regain her sanity as he continued to call out.

"Oh, ah... C-Cain... Aaaaaaah... Cain..."

"Liz! Can you hear me?! We've been traveling together all this time, haven't we?! Don't let your power control you! Don't let it

win! Come back to your senses, Liz!”

As if responding to Cain’s heartfelt cry, Liz’s voice rose as well.

“Sir Cain! *Give me your underpants!*”

“Dammit! She’s just sleep-talking!”

Cain immediately abandoned his plan to bring her back with words. Her consciousness was still clearly gone.

“So, what do we do? Do we actually hand over Cain’s underpants?”

“Bad idea. That’ll send her into an even bigger frenzy.”

“Point taken. Then I’m against it too.”

“Either way, it’s not gonna end well.”

Though it sounded like nonsense, they were seriously discussing the matter out of concern for Liz.

And then…it happened. A menacing rumble filled the air.

“Hm?”

“What? It sounds like something huge is approaching.”

The loud sound of mana being expelled echoed across the beach. Whatever it was, it seemed to be flying through the air, approaching rapidly from a distant sky.

“Oh! Is that—”

“D-Don’t tell me…”

Soon enough, this newcomer was close enough for everyone to make it out. It was a massive, cylindrical object several dozen meters long. It was covered in countless writhing tentacles, its sturdy body made of magic ore…

It was the supreme toy Liz had developed once upon a time. Two years ago, it had engaged in a fierce battle against the demon general, Squid Emperor Homo Squidiens, and had heroically perished.

Now, an upgraded version of that valiant warrior had sensed its master’s peril and arrived on the scene…

“No way! You’ve come, Girl Time (in Darkness) Mk. III!”

“Whoooaaah!”

The members of the hero’s party (save for Cain) erupted in excitement. The valiant figure of this creation fighting toe to toe with Tentacle Emperor Homo Squidiens had been burned into their memories.

“Wh-Wh-Wha… What the nyan is that?!”

“What’s with that insane contraption?”

“Thine wriggling tentacles maketh me sick!”

However, the three newcomers who didn’t know of the brave

warrior’s heroic past were utterly bewildered. To them, it was just some unsettling object flying through the air.

“Master…” echoed a mechanical voice from its metallic body, “I will save you!”

Girl Time (in Darkness) Mk. III had been further enhanced by Liz. It now came with voice functions to allow its users to experience the joys of “verbal torment play.” For this was no ordinary toy, it was the upgraded version of the ultimate *adult* toy that Liz had crafted before losing her memory.

“Girl Time (in Darkness) Mk. III is charging straight at Liz!”

The machine was converting its supply of mana into propulsion to fly through the air. It maintained a break-neck speed as it launched an attack to rescue its master.

“Aaaaaaaaaah!”

“Graaaaaaaaah!”

But, how *merciless*! The black-and-white pillars Liz emitted pierced through Girl Time (in Darkness) Mk. III’s body. Even a magic-ore exterior designed to be sturdy enough to withstand attacks from the demon army was helpless against Liz’s current magical might.

“M-Master… Please…return to your…senses…”

“Girl Time (in Darkness) Mk. III!”

Bits and pieces of the toy’s massive body were shaved away, causing it to lose its propulsion and plummet. Even as it fell, the mana pillars continued to assail it relentlessly, until not a shred of dust remained of the kindhearted warrior.

Before it hit the sea, the machine had disintegrated completely.

“Girl Time (in Darkness) Mk. III!!!”

A cry of anguish rose from the hero’s party. The proud warrior had sacrificed itself a second time. And once again, its bravery had led to a new sense of loss.

The heroes couldn’t hold their tears back at this tragic series of events.

“What even *was* that?”

“Don’t worry; it was just a farce.”

“Cain! Have you no heart?!”

The newcomers were perplexed, while Cain seemed thoroughly fed up with the situation.

“Oh! Everyone! Look at Liz!”

“Huh?”

And then…a tear fell. Liz seemed to be completely out of control, her eyes rolled back into her head, her mind gone. But suddenly, there were tears trickling down her face.

“Liz is mourning the death of Girl Time (in Darkness) Mk. III!”

“Even in that state, some part of her human heart remains!”

“Look! Is it just me, or are the pillars small and less intense than before?!”

Despite her frenzied state, Liz seemed shaken by the loss of her beloved toy. The tears wouldn’t stop flowing, and the amount of mana she was emitting seemed to decrease.

“Cain! Now might be our chance to reach Liz!”

“Umm, er, let’s do this, Cain! We can’t let Girl Time (in Darkness) Mk. III’s sacrifice be in vain!”

His comrades were brimming with motivation—to save a precious friend, and to ensure the sacrifice of a valiant warrior wouldn’t be for nothing. Their morale surged.

“Even though she didn’t react to *my* words…” Cain pouted. There was a hazy feeling hanging over him that he just couldn’t shake.

“All right, listen up!” But he quickly changed gears. This was their chance—there was no doubt about that. “Everyone stack your body-strengthening magic on me! I’m charging in!”

“Wha?!”

“It won’t work if our strength is divided! Focus it all on me!”

Cain’s reasoning was sound enough. Their attacks were well coordinated—to be sure—but even their combined efforts had failed to destroy a single one of those pillars. Their best bet would be to combine all their might into a single force strong enough to pierce through.

“But Cain! Do that and even *your* body won’t last!” Mitter protested—and rightly so. Body-strengthening magic, while a commonly used spell, could become toxic if concentrated in excess. This was basic knowledge. Enhancements that were too strong would place a heavy strain on one’s muscles and cardiovascular system, leading to catastrophic bodily failure—muscles would be torn to shreds, and blood vessels would rupture under the accelerated blood flow brought about by the enhancements.

Yet Cain’s resolve was unshaken.

“It’s what we have to do! Half-hearted enhancements won’t cut it! Someone has to do it, or we’ll never stop her!”

There was a moment of stunned silence.

"I…I'd risk my life a million times for her sake."

Cain grinned. He wanted to save her—and his desire was shared by everyone present. But no one felt it more deeply than Cain, her lover.

After a pause, Sylphie conceded, "Got it. You'd better hang in there, no matter what it takes."

"Umm, umm, please stop right away if you think it's too much!"

"Yeah. Thanks."

They all bent to his firm convictions.

And so, it began.

"Gah!" Cain's body jerked violently the instant the combined strengthening magic of eight superhumans surged through him. Blood seeped from his mouth and eyes. "Gaaaaaaah…!"

The immense power was wreaking havoc within his body. His muscles swelled grotesquely, his frame noticeably expanding. His accelerated blood flow tore at various organs from within.

It was a level of enhancement that would have ordinarily resulted in death. Yet, Cain endured it. His body had been honed to an extraordinary degree over the course of his journey. He was a superhuman who'd survived thousands—tens of thousands of battles before.

"Ha ha… This might just be stronger than Holy Sword Andros's buffs…" Cain muttered, blood dripping from his lips.

The holy sword's ultimate technique was an extreme body-strengthening spell with a severe kickback. But the combined might of his party members had managed to surpass that.

Looking at it the other way, Holy Sword Andros alone possessed a strength nearly comparable to the combined strengthening of eight superhumans. Moreover, despite its recoil, it caused very little strain on the body while active. In that sense, Cain's holy sword was quite formidable indeed.

"A shame… There's no way I can stack it on top of this…"

His body was barely holding itself together. Even for Cain, going any further would be impossible. He took a deep breath. Blood trickled from his lips as he channeled strength into his legs. The muscles in his calves bulged, the pain shooting through them so severe he thought they might just explode on him.

"A'ight… Here I go!"

And with that, Cain launched his assault. Kicking off platforms made with mana, he shot across the sky with extraordinary speed. He was like a cannonball in motion. Each time he kicked off, violent shock waves rippled outward from his impromptu footholds, creating thunderous booms that echoed across the beach.

“Wah!”

“Eep!”

Even the veterans of the hero’s party found themselves instinctively ducking and bracing against the sheer force of the aftershock. The power of just the residual force was overwhelming.

“Aaaaaaaaah...!”

As if to protect herself, Liz conjured up another barrage of pillars. Up to that point, that had been enough to prevent anyone from approaching her.

“Pierce through!”

Charging at speeds surpassing human limits, Cain thrust Andros forward, pouring mana into the blade. It pierced through one of Liz’s black pillars, leaving a gaping hole in its structure. For the first time, the hero’s party had successfully broken through Liz’s frenzied magic.

“Whoa!”

“This might work!”

Everyone clenched their sweaty fists, their eyes glued to the scene. Yet again, Cain produced a foothold. Yet again, he mustered the strength of his legs.

“Again!”

He launched himself like a projectile again, smashing through a second pillar of white mana and advancing further.

“I just gotta keep this up!”

And once more, he burst forth. His legs bore the brunt of the immense force, torn and bloodied with each motion. Still, he couldn’t stop. He had no intention to.

The gap between him and Liz was closing rapidly.

“I can make it!”

“Aaaaahhh...!”

That was when Liz let out a ferocious roar, the shape of her magic shifting.

“Huh?”

The pillars of black-and-white intertwined and merged,

stretching long and wide. It was no longer a series of pillars, but a massive barrier shielding her. An uncanny wall—a chaotic mix of black-and-white—was blocking his path.

“Gah!”

Cain ran straight into it. Even with his vastly enhanced capabilities, he unfortunately failed to break through the wall Liz had created. His high speeds turned the impact into devastating damage, his own momentum coming back to bite him.

His advance came to an abrupt halt. Losing velocity, his body succumbed to gravity, falling toward the sea below. And so, he plunged into the water with a great splash.

“Cain!”

“I’ve got him!”

Sylphie extended her mana like a whip, skillfully weaving it past the towering pillars and sending it into the water after Cain. The tendril of magical energy coiled around his body and pulled him up.

“Hff… Hff… Thanks for that…”

“For now, let’s get back to Melvy. You need her healing magic.”

Carrying Cain, Sylphie leaped through the air, retreating to the beach where Melvy, Altina, and Lalo awaited them. Immediately, Melvy rushed to him and began channeling healing magic into his battered body.

“Are you all right, Cain?!”

“Ha ha ha… I might’a overdone it, but this? It’s nothing… Ghah, *cough, cough*… Ugh!” his bravado was interrupted by a splattering of blood from his mouth. “Thanks for the save, Sylphie. Mind putting me down already…guh.”

“Of course… I’m glad you’re still in one piece.”

“Sorry about this, Melvy. Keep up the healing magic if you can.”

“Yes, yes! Leave it to me!”

Cain parted from Sylphie’s grip, sitting down on the spot. “Phew…” He caught his breath and lifted his face. His eyes, of course, drifted to Liz. “It wasn’t all for nothing… I forced her to reveal another card up her sleeve.”

The black-and-white barrier that had stopped his charge was still there. Now, how were they going to get past it? He worked his brain over this new challenge, all while Melvy continued healing him.

“What about ignoring the wall and circling around from the

outside?”

“She could just make a new wall, and we’d end up in the same situation. We can’t let her surround herself on all sides—front, back, sides, up, and down—otherwise, she’ll be impenetrable.”

Rachel and Mitter returned from their positions in the air.

“The only reason she’s not doing that right now is because she’s lost her mind,” Mitter reasoned. “But her instincts are still sharp. The moment someone gets close, her defensive reflexes kick in, and she creates a barrier to keep them away.”

“In the end, we must break through that wall.” Kuon sighed. “What a pain.” She and Wolfe had joined them as well. It was time to reassess their strategy.

“Now, what to do?”

Cain put a hand to his chin in thought. But nothing was coming to mind. The others were similarly stumped, tilting their heads and racking their brains, but no miraculous solution came to mind. The only silver lining was that they’d been given the luxury of time to think. On a typical battlefield, there was rarely time to sit around and deliberate. If they recoiled at every disadvantage, their foes would seize on the opportunity to overwhelm them.

But their current foe was Liz, and she was not acting rationally. She simply floated there, motionless, expelling torrents of mana without rhyme or reason. Though her magic formed an impenetrable barrier, she was practically harmless outside of range.

“Seriously, what do we do about this?”

That didn’t mean they could afford to waste time.

Liz’s mana was the main issue. The sheer magnitude of the power she was releasing couldn’t last forever. Eventually, it would push her past her limit—and what lay beyond that was presumably her death. This was merely speculation, but every member of the party seemed to share that same fear. How much longer could she hold out? When was the breaking point? No one knew for certain.

That was the worst part. It all remained a mystery, and yet no one could think of a way to breach the wall. Even if they managed to break through it, there was a possibility Liz had even more tricks up her sleeve.

There was silence.

More silence.

Thinking took time. But time only brought her closer and closer to death. For all they knew, they'd already gone long past the time limit, and she was going to drop dead the next second.

It was possible enough, and that concern ate at them.

Just then…

Fweeeeeeeeet!

"Hm?"

The sound of a whistle cut through the tension. It was a casual sound, so unfit for the tense battlefield that it took them all by surprise. Startled, the members of the party all turned toward the source of the noise.

Standing there was a woman in uniform.

"That woman…"

She was the female angel who'd been watching over the beach during the day. Cain remembered her vividly. The sight of the black wings on her back had stuck with him—and so too had her long hair. It was pure white at its roots, gradually darkening to black at the tips—a mesmerizing gradient that left quite the impression.



The way she'd saved a drowning child had also been quite memorable so, even when she wasn't in her swimsuit, Cain immediately knew who she was.

"Umm... Aren't you that lifeguard from the beach?"

"Er, umm, what are you doing here?"

"And with the police, no less..."

Just as Mitter had pointed out, there were about a dozen or so angels in their standard police uniforms behind her, each sporting white wings.

"Urgh... The police." Wolfe winced. Princess Remiphinia's relentless advances had painted him as quite the criminal, and he'd endured multiple unpleasant encounters with law enforcement. He'd developed quite a negative view of them, whether he liked it or not.

"Er... This area is a lot more dangerous than it looks. Please stay back for your own—"

Fweeeeeet!

"Wah?!"

Cain tried to address the angels with his public, polite way of speaking, but the lifeguard woman cut him off with her whistle. Her eyes were fixed on Liz, who continued floating in the sky.

The hero's party was quite baffled by this unexpected intervention.

"Ahem..." The lifeguard took in a deep breath before raising her voice. "You are in violation of Celestial Laaaw, Article 72!"

"Hm?!"

"Regarding the interference and havoc of fallen angels in the human realm! Detain the suspect at once!"

"Roger that!"

At the lifeguard's command, the angel coppers behind her spread their white wings in unison and launched toward Liz.

"Wh-What?!"

The hero party stared wide-eyed.

The police were intervening? They couldn't hide their shock at this unforeseen turn of events.

"Wait—no!" After a beat, Cain tried cautioning them again. "Everyone, stop! Liz is seriously dangerous right now!"

The magic Liz was releasing was more than strong—it was apocalyptic. Normal humans would be obliterated without a trace.

"Holy shield!"

“Holy shield!”

“Holy shield!”

“Huh?”

Yet contrary to his expectations, the angel officers managed to deflect a portion of her magic. With the combined might of three shields, they had successfully fended off one of her devastating attacks. What was more…

“H-Hey… Melvy, isn’t that…”

“Y-Yes! Umm, er… That is, without a doubt, holy magic!”

Holy magic was said to be rooted in the power of God. Yet here were normal police officers wielding it effortlessly.

“Move in, everyooone! Gently subdue our little fallen angel!”

“Roger that!”

The lifeguard on the beach issued orders in a lazy, laid-back tone. Ten-odd angel officers circled around Liz, and not one of them had faced annihilation yet. They were barely managing to block and dodge her blows.

Cain and his comrades watched in stunned silence, mouths agape at the sheer competence of the officers. On top of the rampaging Liz, they now faced this unexpected intervention.

The situation was spiraling in a peculiar direction.

Chapter 66: Now—Fallen Angel

Cain and the rest of his party members watched the sky, silent and wide-eyed. Above them, Liz danced through the air with ten-odd angel officers, who were managing to fend off her relentless attacks.

Liz's hyperboosted magic was so powerful it would annihilate an ordinary human before they could even think to defend themselves. Yet though their defenses weren't exactly perfect, the angel officers were managing to shield and evade her attacks, just barely.

The heroes couldn't hide their shock that the officers—always a familiar presence, keeping the peace on the streets—possessed such power.

"B-But... It doesn't seem like they're stronger than us."

"N-No, it doesn't."

Though she was visibly shaken, Rachel was right.

The angel officers were certainly putting up a good fight, but they couldn't get close to Liz. Their focus was entirely on protecting themselves, leaving them with no way to subdue her.

Even the surprising fact that all ten officers were using holy magic didn't change the overall situation—it wasn't much different from when Cain's party had fought her only moments before. Rather, the fact Cain had forced her to deploy a defensive wall made it seem like he had fared better.

"But still..."

"Yeah..."

The members all nodded with solemn looks on their faces.

Before was a group of fighters composed of members whose strength fell only slightly short of the world-renowned heroes. That alone was enough of a surprise.

"Sylphie, what's your assessment of their strength?"

"Let's see... Based on what I can observe at this distance, I'd say I could probably handle two, maybe three of those officers at the same time. I'd say that is about the extent of their abilities."

"Same here. That's my estimate too."

Everyone swallowed their breath at these words. It was info that warranted shock.

Angel officers were everywhere, casually walking among the people. They were always smiling, gentle, and kind, diligently maintaining public order. They worked all across humanland, and they were far from few in number.

If the hero's party could recruit even a hundred of these angel officers, the war against the demon lord would be over in an instant. It wouldn't even be a fight—humanity would secure an overwhelming, one-sided victory, and that would be the end of it.

A bead of sweat trailed down Cain's brow as he gazed upon the surreal scene before him. Between the startling strength of the angels, and the power concealed within Liz, the clash unfolding over the sea had turned into something beyond their comprehension.

"Heeey! C'mon, people! Hurry up and catch that fallen angeeel! You're just making this harder for her!"

And there was one angel who seemed to stand out from the rest. It was the female lifeguard angel. Unlike the others, she didn't participate in the fighting, instead shouting instructions from the shore.

Her wings, unlike the white ones of the other angel officers, were black. Yet, it was easy to surmise from her demeanor that she ranked higher than the officers engaged in combat.

"Who... No, *what* are you people?" Cain asked the lifeguard angel.

"Hmmm?"

With light, bouncing steps, the woman approached them. It was almost like she was skipping across the sand.

"Are you the heroes I've been hearing all about? We're angels from Celestia. Well, no, not me. I'm fallen, but everyone else is. It's a pleasure to meet you."

Her greeting was casual enough, but a certain, unfamiliar word caught them off guard.

"C-Celestia...?" Cain parroted, his eyes widening.

"Hmmmmmm? Even a hero like you doesn't know about us? Well, I guess I can't blame you. It's been, what, nineteen years since you were born? That's nothing in the grand scheme of things."

Her tone was gentle, almost like she was speaking to a small child.

"Celestia, yes. How should I explain Celestia to you..."

The lifeguard tapped a finger to her cheek, her tone long and

drawn out as she took her time pondering the question. Though she seemed a bit out of sorts, Cain and his comrades could sense she was about to reveal something that would shake their very understanding of the world.

"Haven't you ever heard of it? You know, that War of Heaven and Earth from 2,120 years ago? I'm pretty sure we interfered quite a bit with humanland and demonland back then. Maybe there are some legends or records left behind?"

"Oh!"

The War of Heaven and Earth was something he'd been hearing about a lot lately. It was connected to the legend of Altina's holy sword, and Kuon had brought it up too.

"We angels were on the *heaven* side of things. We ended up signing a peace treaty during the war, you see. Since then, Celestia's been watching over humanland, and Hell's been watching over demonland, agreeing not to do any excessive interference."

The lifeguard angel spoke of these monumental truths as if she were just sharing a bit of idle, everyday gossip.

"Then...what about the angel officers we see all over town?"

"They're sent from Celestia to watch over the humans. And to step in and resolve small-scale trouble while they're at it."

Cain and his comrades were left dumbfounded.

The angel officers were a familiar presence to everyone who lived in human lands. They were reliable members of society who helped keep order in society. To think they were secretly performing such a crucial role...

"I've never questioned the existence of angel coppers before..."

"Me neither... I just assumed angels were a race that did that sort of thing."

Sylphie and Rachel spoke in a daze.

The lifeguard giggled and nonchalantly replied, "Mmm, I can't really blame you. Spend over two thousand years keeping the peace, and it pretty much becomes common sense to have you around doing your thing."

"Graaaaaah!"

"Urgh! This fallen angel is too strong!"

While Cain and the others listened to the lifeguard's tale, the angel officers were struggling to contain Liz's rampage. Even with ten of them circling her, the black-and-white columns of

mana kept repelling any advances.

“Heeey! What are you doing?! Get it together, people! You’re embarrassing me!”

“Easier said than done, Lady Lilith!”

“We can just about manage against her holy magic, but the hell magic is proving troublesome…”

One of the angel officers had referred to the lifeguard as Lilith. That seemed to be her name.

“Lilith?”

And Kuon was the only one who reacted to it.

“Can’t you do something about it, Lady Lilth? I mean, you’re both fallen angels.”

“I’d looove to, believe me. But no can do. My powers are so strong that they’re considered *excessive interference*,” the lifeguard angel—Lilith—muttered as she lazily swayed her black wings back and forth. It seemed Celestia had its own rules.

“Then use *our* strength.”

“Hmm? What’s that, hero boy?”

Cain and his comrades looked at her with eyes full of determination.

“Liz is one of us. We want to save her.”

“I…seeeeee.”

His comrades all nodded at his words. Lilith placed a hand on her chin, her eyes scrutinizing them from head to toe.

“Oh?!” Suddenly, she realized something. “You! That sword on your hip!”

“U-Umm… Me?”

Lilith’s attention was on the sword hanging at Altina’s side. At her insistence, Altina drew the blade from its scabbard.

“I knew it! It’s the holy sword, Ikryl! Oh, how nostalgic! It’s finally been unearthed, I see!”

Lilith’s face lit up as she took Ikryl in hand.

Ikryl was said to have been bestowed upon humanity by the gods. Considering everything they’d learned so far, it wasn’t much of a surprise to find out it was connected to the angels.

“This! This sword right here! My friend was the one who made it! It’s pretty useful, right?!”

“Y-Yes… According to legend, it has saved the lands of humans countless times!” Altina nervously replied.

“With this sword, let’s see… Hyah!”

Lilith wrapped the holy sword in divine power. Sacred energy

radiated from it alongside a blinding light.

“There we go! I’ve temporarily enhanced the sword. That’s probably the most I’m allowed to do.”

“Th-Th-Thank you so much!”

Lilith returned the holy sword to Altina, whose body trembled the moment she had a hand on the hilt. She could feel the overwhelming holy power surging from it. The sword was already powerful enough, and in that brief instant, it had been boosted to an unfathomable level. Altina knew it instinctively—this black-winged woman was no ordinary being.

“Altina, I have a request,” Cain said, turning to her.

“Cain?”

“Could you lend me that holy sword?”

“Huh?”

“I’m the reason Liz ended up like that. I want to fix this with my own hands.”

The cause of Liz’s rampage was the inner turmoil of her heart—a love for Cain she believed could never be—compounded by the stress of losing her memory. Unconsciously, she had been searching for the bonds, the power, and the lover she once had.

Cain had traveled with Liz for a long time, and he wanted to be the one to save her from her suffering. He knew both the Liz before the memory loss and the Liz after. He knew both and loved both. And that was why he felt like it had to be him.

“I know it’s a selfish request, but please. I’m begging you…”

“Fine. Make sure you save her, okay?!”

Understanding Cain’s sentiment, Altina handed him the holy sword.

“Thanks, Altina.”

Cain had spent more time with Liz than anyone else, and his desire to save her was far stronger than her own. That much was easy to see. And so, one hero handed their sword to another.

“Lady Lilith, was it?” Cain turned to the fallen angel Lilith.

“Yeeesss?”

“I have a favor to ask. The sword I have—Andros—is also a holy sword. Can you strengthen it too?”

“Hmmm?”

Cain drew Holy Sword Andros, and Lilith inspected it closely.

“Mmm… No. This isn’t one of ours. It doesn’t seem like it was made by an angel or god.”

“I see. Thanks for checking.”

Cain stared at his own Holy Sword Andros. What exactly was it? Altina had always described it as a shady sword of unknown origin, and now he was beginning to feel she was right about that.

“Well, whatever. Right now, it’s about Liz.”

His preparations complete, Cain angled himself back toward Liz.

She was still releasing an overwhelming amount of mana, keeping the angel officers flying around her at bay. Her complexion, however, had taken a turn for the worse, and her body had begun to give off a sense of fatigue. He couldn’t wait for her to weaken naturally. If she continued releasing that much power, she’d lose her life. He could sense it.

He had to stop her.

“Cain… Please be careful,” Melvy said anxiously, “Your body isn’t fully healed yet.”

She had continued casting healing magic on Cain all the while. However, the strain of the strengthening spells of eight superhumans had ravaged his body in every place imaginable. The damage he’d suffered from crashing into Liz’s solid barrier was also significant. Not even Melvy’s exceptional skills could fully heal such extensive damage in such a short time.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll get that idiot back in no time.”

“All right…”

Cain gently patted Melvy on the head, causing her cheeks to flush faintly.

“Let’s go! I’ll lead the charge! Everyone else, cover me!”

“Got it!”

With Holy Sword Ikryl in hand, Cain dashed forth. The final confrontation had begun.

“Aaaaaaaaaah!”

How many times had it been? Once again, Liz manifested countless towering pillars of holy magic and hell magic one after the next. And of all of them, a single black pillar of hell magic came down upon Cain with tremendous force.

“Holy Sword Ikryl!”

But this time was different. The strengthened Holy Sword Ikryl let off a powerful light.

“Take this!”

Cain mustered every ounce of strength in his body to swing. Blinding, divine light erupted from the blade as it sliced clean

through the massive pillar.

“Oh!”

“He did it!”

By then, they’d managed to deflect or block Liz’s attacks a handful of times. But that had only been through the combined might of several party members. Even if it was thanks to an empowered Ikryl, Cain had managed to completely sever one of the mana pillars on his own. That by itself was a major breakthrough.

“Cain! Look out!” cried Sylphie.

“Khh…!”

However, their hardships continued. It wasn’t an instant before another mana pillar was coming straight at Cain. This time, a white one—an exercise in holy magic. Cain had just finished swinging with all his might, and couldn’t immediately react to another attack.

“Holy shield!”

“Holy shield!”

“Holy shield!”

But help came just in time. It was the angel officers, their six-layered shield blocking Liz’s pillar of white.

“Hero! We will handle the holy magic!”

“It is the magic we holy beings are best at! It is somewhat easier for us to neutralize!”

The angel officers approached Cain to convey their plan of action.

“Umm, er, I can use holy magic too! Please let me help!”

“Me too! I don’t have my holy sword right now, but I can use a bit of holy magic! It might be useful!”

“Much appreciated. Then please try to make your shields overlap with ours.”

“All right!”

Melvy and Altina volunteered to help the angel officers. Holy magic would be offset with more holy magic.

“Thanks. I couldn’t ask for more.”

“But the hell magic is quite troublesome.”

“Since it is the complete opposite attribute of our magic, it is difficult to defend against it.”

The angel officers wore conflicted expressions. Holy magic and hell magic were opposites. Celestia and Hell were opposing worlds, and the magic each realm excelled at also had

completely opposite attributes.

“Got it. I’ll handle the hell magic somehow or another.”

“Hey, Cain! You can’t just say it like it’s nothing! Do you have a plan?!” Rachel sharply retorted.

“I’ll…keep slicing until something happens.”

“So, no plan, then! Will that really work?!”

Her critique was valid. In all actuality, there was no effective countermeasure to hell magic. They could only slash through it as they had before.

“There’s no time to hesitate right now! I need you to cover me somehow!”

“Oh, for crying out loud! Why are you always this haphazard?!”

Cain pressed on. He knew more difficulties awaited him ahead, but for now, he could only move forward.

“Hmm…”

It was at that point that Kuon cocked her head with a groan.

“What’s wrong, Kuon?” asked Wolfe, who happened to be nearby.

“Well, thou seest… The angel did say that Celestia watcheth over humanland, while Hell keepeth watch over demonland, did she not?”

“She did say that.”

“With that in mind, ‘twould not be strange to find some traces of hell magic within demon territory…”

Just as Celestia intervened in humanland by sending angel officers, there was a high chance that demonland was also being influenced in some way by Hell.

Kuon, therefore, suspected she could find a trace of hell magic.

“For now… I shall bring it forth.”

“Bring out what?”

“A legendary weapon handed down through the line of the demon lord. A supreme treasure born of darkness forged into yet deeper darkness… My mightiest weapon. Come forth! My Darkest King!”

As Kuon raised her palm high to the sky, a massive surge of dark power began to gather in her hand. The immense power was palpable to everyone around them. The overwhelming dark magic gathered, coalesced and took shape.

It was the demon lord’s strongest weapon, the same one that had tormented the hero’s party once before.

The squeaky hammer had revealed itself once more.

“Oy, Kuon, put that away! How am I supposed to focus with that thing on the battlefield?!”

“Thou jest, Cain! Dost thou protest the ultimate treasure passed down through the Demon Lord’s lineage?!”

Regardless of all the bickering, Kuon took a powerful swing with her black, squeaky hammer.

“Go forth! Dark King’s Grand Star!”

She swung with all her might, and from her hammer shot swathes of star-shaped masses of mana. The stars collided with one of Liz’s hell magic pillars, chipping away until they had eventually bore a hole through.

“Whoa! How is that thing so effective?!”

“I knew it! It seems the Darkest King of my family truly beareth the blessing of hell magic! This treasure must surely be a gift from Hell!”

Kuon’s weapon contained a slight vestige of hell magic. She had begun to feel a sense of déjà vu as she watched Liz conjure up hell magic again and again. And, after hearing Lilith’s story, it dawned on her: Wasn’t this the same feeling she got from the weapon passed down through her own family? Didn’t she herself have the blessing of hell magic?

It seemed her intuition was correct. The powers of similar nature collided and she had managed to severely damage one of Liz’s dark pillars.

“We march on! Wolfe! Enhance me with thy power of darkness!”

“Y-Yeah… On it.”

Wolfe cast a dark enhancement spell on Kuon, increasing the might of her squeaky hammer even further.

“Dammit, I never thought I’d live to see the day I’d be thanking that ridiculous squeaky toy…”

“Hey, Cain! I can hear thee! If thou dost not like it, I will happily cease!”

“You have my heartfelt gratitude, Lady Kuon, Demon Lord of Demon Lords!” Cain raised his voice in resigned desperation. “Everyone, listen up! Melvy, Altina, and the angels will handle the holy magic pillars! Everyone else, support Kuon! Destroy that hell magic!”

“U-Understood!”

“Ho ho ho. I never thought I would be aiding the demon lord’s

dark magic one day. I guess a long life does come with its surprises."

Wolfe and Lalo got to work boosting Kuon with dark enhancing spells while Sylphie, Rachel, and Mitter timed their attacks precisely to strike at the same moment as Kuon.

Their coordination was perfect, and their attacks created a large hole through the hell magic pillar blocking Cain's path.

Thus, Cain pressed on, farther and farther, as his team members sliced open a path to Liz. The pillars that had obstructed them time and again were now being conquered one by one.

"We can do it! Almost there!"

"No, don't let your guard down just yet! Cain's about to hit the big one!"

Mitter was right—Cain was now face-to-face with a massive wall—literally, *the* massive wall. He had reached the point where black-and-white melded together into the vast barrier Liz had created to thwart his last attempt. If they ever wanted to reach her, they would have to breach this boundary, where hell and holy magic collided.

But Cain's advance didn't falter. Without slowing, he leaped into the air with Holy Sword Ikryl at the ready; from the moment he'd launched himself forward, he had begun to channel powerful mana into the blade.

"Everyone! Max output! Strike where I strike with your strongest attack!"

"R-Roger!"

Cain's strategy was a straightforward frontal assault. No tricks, no schemes—everyone would combine their strength to hit the wall simultaneously and bust it down.

"Here I go! Holy Sword Ikryl...!"

The holy blade in Cain's hands let off a blinding light.

"Magic Sword! Max output!"

"Strike of my hammer! Cross the sky, and shatter the wall!"

Sylphie and Rachel unleashed their strongest ranged attacks.

"All hands! Holy lance! Fire!"

The angel officers, in perfect unison, unleashed flying lances of holy magic. Hurriedly, Melvy and Altina followed suit, resulting in twelve total bolts of divine light flying toward a single point.

"And another! Dark King's Grand Star!"

"Release! Black Lance!"

Kuon repeated the same technique she'd used before, while Wolfe threw his lance cloaked in dark energy.

"My ultimate magic! Ancient Nova!"

And finally, Lalo cast the most powerful spell in his repertoire.

"HRAAAAAAAAAH!"

Cain slammed Ikryl into the black-and-white barrier at the exact moment everyone's strongest attacks struck it. The wall began to crack. The hardest and most resilient defense they had ever faced in any battle thus far let out a great shattering sound as it began to crumble away.

"Make it!"

With one final push, Cain poured even more power into Ikryl. Liz's repelling wall collapsed.

"*Liz*!"

She was right before his eyes now. The distance between them had shrunk to a mere five meters. But to Cain, in his current condition, these five meters felt so terribly, impossibly far.

"Aah... Aaaaaaaaaah!!!"

"Huh?!"

At that moment, Liz's behavior changed. Her eyes had been rolled back and vacant, her gaze wandering aimlessly. But now, they were locked onto Cain and Cain alone.

"Stay...away..."

"Liz!"

Finally she had spoken her first clear words—words of rejection. She held her hand out in front of her, dark hell magic gathering in her palm.

"Oh, snap!"

"Cain!"

Until that point, Liz had been releasing magic at random with no clear intent. The only purposeful spell she'd cast had been the defensive wall, and everything else had been little more than meaningless magic leaking out unconsciously. Yet even her unintentional magic had been a herculean task to deal with. Now, her palm was aimed straight at Cain.

It was the first attack spell she had used since she had entered her berserk state. Just the sight of the buildup sent shivers down the spines of even those watching from afar.

"Guh!"

Cain had just launched a full-power attack. His posture was

off-balance, and he wasn't ready to counter or dodge. Yet without mercy, Liz was preparing to launch her first attack.

"Sir Cain!"

"Cain!"

"Dammit!"

But then... "What were you thinking?" Someone stepped out in front of Cain.

"You're our leader, but here you are out at the front like this... It's *my* job to step out and protect everyone, isn't it?"

"Mitter?!"

The one who had appeared was none other than Mitter, holding his shield high. He was the party's shield bearer, the tank of the group. He had always taken to the front line, skillfully using his shield to block enemies and deflect attacks away from his allies. Just as he said, he was always at the forefront, swinging both sword and shield.

This time, Mitter didn't join in the attack to break through Liz's defense. Instead, he took his place where he could do his best work—secretly shadowing Cain so he could protect him at a moment's notice.

And that moment had come. He had to protect Cain from the worst disaster yet—Liz's frenzied attack magic.

"Protect my comrades from harm! Grand Shield!"

He cast his most powerful defensive magic on his shield.

"Urgh! Protect Mitter! Maximum Barrier!"

"Aaaaaaaaaah!"

Cain immediately cast a defensive spell on Mitter to support him from behind. It was at that same moment that a beam of hell magic erupted from Liz's hand.

"Grr!"

Mitter's shield deflected the attack for a brief moment—but that moment was the most he could provide. The shield cracked and shattered, and his body was engulfed by the darkness.

It was a complete loss. That was the undeniable reality of this exchange.

"*Mitterrrrr!*" his lover, Rachel, cried out in horror.

Mitter's body was thrown back by the impact, sending him crashing down on the distant beach. He lay there in tatters. He'd been gravely injured in just one hit. Were he a normal human, he would have never stood again.

But despite the damage, he was smiling.

“Cain! You can do this!”

A shadow moved toward Liz following her attack.

It was Cain. He had remained behind, and now he was right next to her. Mitter had only managed to block Liz’s attack for a fraction of a second. But even that brief moment had been enough for Cain to escape. With the beam weakened, he had sliced through it from within before circling around to approach from the side.

No one—not even Mitter—would have survived if they’d taken on that blast. Yet Mitter had managed to shield Cain just long enough to provide the best assist he could while preserving his own life. He’d most certainly lost that exchange, but he had created the best possible outcome.

“I made it, Liz!”

“Aaaaaaaaaah!”

Cain was now face-to-face with her. The five-meter gap that had once seemed so far was finally closed. After a long, grueling battle, he had reached her.

“Aaaaaaah!!!” Liz let out the loudest and shrillest scream yet.

And then, she began to weave a magic even more sinister than her last spell. She gathered holy magic in her right hand and hell magic in her left. The two opposing forces converged and mixed, forming a single sphere.

“Eep?!”

“Th-That’s…”

It was the worst possible magic, a melding of white and black. Every person in the vicinity save for Lilith shuddered in terror. The surrounding townsfolk—who had been watching with bated breath—fell unconscious just from the presence of the spell.

Anyone who came into contact with it would have their body completely disintegrated, leaving not a speck of dust behind. If it exploded here, then it wouldn’t just be the beach resort—an area far larger than that would be completely wiped off the map.

The greatest combatants in the world could tell just by looking at the sphere of magic, and they also instinctively understood there was nothing they could do to stop it.

But Cain did not falter.

“Give me strength, Holy Sword Andros!”

Cain drew the other holy sword from its scabbard and took a firm stance—Holy Sword Ikryl in his right hand, and Holy Sword Andros in his left.

“Maximum release!”

Cain’s body was instantly coated in shades of black and red.

The hidden trump card of Holy Sword Andros was a limited-time hyper physical enhancement with a powerful recoil. The moment its effect wore off, the user would be wracked with excruciating pain and would be unable to move at all, but for a brief time, they would possess physical abilities beyond the limits of any human.

Due to its painful nature, Cain rarely used the technique. If he did, he would dampen it, doing whatever he could to lessen its agonizing kickback.

Now, he used it to its absolute limit. This was his declaration of resolve.

In his right hand was the super-enhanced Ikryl, and in his left was a fully unleashed Andros. At that very moment, Cain had become the strongest being on the face of the planet, surpassing all other life-forms—even the raging Liz before him.

“It’s over!” he roared as he swung the two holy blades. The magic sphere Liz had been forming broke into four pieces and dispersed into dust.

“Aah…”

He could feel a hint of surprise from her expressionless face. Cain had performed a miracle, something that should have been impossible.

“Don’t look so worried.” He spoke softly to Liz, who was still lost in her frenzy. “I’ll keep waiting…no matter how long it takes.”

He then leaped over her head, swiftly moving behind her. As per usual, he had formed a foothold with mana. His two swords ready for another swing; he’d already decided on the target.

“Hraaaaaaaaaaah!”

With all his might, he swung the swords down, severing the black wings that had sprouted from her back—the wings of a fallen angel—from the root.

“Aah…”

A soft, fleeting sound escaped from Liz as the mana emanating from her faded away. The towering pillars of white and black disappeared, the remnants of her wall vanishing alongside them. Gradually, the calm began to return to the sea. The twisted look on her face softened, and the bizarre pressure radiating from her vanished entirely.

There was silence. Liz, seemingly unconscious, collapsed like a

puppet that had lost its master. And she began to fall. Cain approached and gently embraced her, holding her tightly as they both descended from high in the sky.

“I’ll always…love you…” he whispered into her ear.

Eventually, their bodies reached the water. It was with that large splash that the battle had reached its end.

Chapter 67: Then—Lilith

Once upon a time, roughly two thousand years ago, there was a great conflict known as the War of Heaven and Earth.

This monumental battle was waged between the gods and angels of Celestia and the devils and hellspawn of Hell. As higher beings who stood head and shoulders above humans and average demons, they exhibited incredible powers, consuming entire regions in the flames of war until they were utterly obliterated.

So long as the battlegrounds remained confined to Celestia and Hell, the damage could be somewhat contained. But when the war spilled into humanland and demonland, the devastation was catastrophic. An angel or hellspawn would only have to exert a slight bit of strength, and all other living beings in the area would be disintegrated with no chance to resist. It was like they were children playing in a park, inadvertently crushing ants beneath their feet—there was no malice, but the damage spread regardless. Many human and demon lives were lost, swept up in the vortex of war.

Saddened by such widespread destruction, the angels and devils decided to grant power to humans and demons alike. To humanity, they bestowed Holy Sword Ikryl, and to demonkind, they granted Devil Sword Bellum.

Wielding these swords granted to them by higher beings, humans and demons fought to protect their respective races. In time, those who wielded Holy Sword Ikryl came to be known as heroes, while those who wielded Devil Sword Bellum were honored as archfiends.

But from the perspective of Celestia and Hell, these measures were little more than stopgaps. There was little a single sword or a lone human or demon could accomplish, and the casualties of war continued to mount. Gods and angels from Celestia, devils and hellspawn from Hell, as well as humans and demons—all fell one after another. A never-ending war continued to exhaust all the realms.

It was a single female angel who brought the war to an end. The way she did it was: love.

Her love was vast, profound, and powerful. She loved gods and angels, devils and hellspawn equally. For she embodied the ultimate form of benevolence. To the warriors, the schemers, the commanders, and the rulers—she extended her love to all and received love from all in return. She forged bonds of trust through shared love with countless beings. She devoted many years to love and gave birth to numerous children.

In time, her name became known throughout Celestia and Hell, and she became a bridge between the two worlds.

Thus, the treaty to end the War of Heaven and Earth was signed. For that was what she wanted...and both sides were happy to oblige.

And so, she became a key figure in ending the war. However, by then, her once pure-white wings had turned entirely black. She had become a fallen angel.

Many, many years passed, and her story was passed down like a myth in the lands of demons.

She became known as Archdevil Lilith, the progenitor of the succubi: a being regarded as the first and most powerful of her kind.

And her blood still held strong, even to this day.

Chapter 68: Now—Usurper

“C-Could it be?! Art thou the renowned, legendary Archdevil Lilith herself?!”

It was late at night. Battered and exhausted after halting Liz’s rampage, Cain and his comrades had returned to their spacious room at the hotel to tend to their wounds.

It was Kuon’s voice that echoed throughout the room. She was unable to hide her shock as she heard the tale of the War of Heaven and Earth from the lifeguard angel—the fallen angel, Lilith.

Back when she’d first confronted the hero’s party, Kuon had tried to lay claim to the powers of the legendary Archdevil Lilith that lay dormant within Liz. And now, that legendary figure herself was standing right before her.

“Yeeeeeesss, that’s me! I guess they passed down some rumors about me as an archdevil in demonland? Celestia, humanland, hell, demonland... They all had their own nicknames for me, you see. It’s so hard to keep track. But that’s probably me.”

Lilith responded casually, as though it was nothing.

“L-L-L-Lady Lilith, thy blood hath flowed unbroken through my demon lord lineage for generations. W-We have never forgotten to honor our noble ancestor and remain ever grateful for the great debt we owe thee!”

“Ohhh, I see. So you’re one of my descendants, Kuon? Well, well, good girl, good girl. ♪”

“Th-The honor is too great for me!”

While Lilith remained perfectly relaxed, Kuon was struggling to keep her composure.

“Give me a second... Oh, since you’re a descendant of the demon lord during the War of Heaven and Earth, you must be the descendant of Gailly’s kid! How’s Gailly doing these days?”

“Oh, er... Dost thou speak of the Eleventh Demon Lord, Gailzekuon? Y-Yes, well... Even though the demon lord’s kin hath long lifespans, living two thousand years is still a bit much...”

“Awww, I see. He’s passed on, then. But that’s just the naaatural order of things. Old Gailly must be watching over you

from above.”

“Y-Yes, of course.”

Lilith’s ever-cheerful smile was a stark contrast to Kuon’s overwhelmed expression.

“Oh, come to think of it. Kuon. Back when we first fought, didn’t you say something about wanting to take the power of Archdevil Lilith from Liz?”

“I-Indeed. The legends passed down within the demon lord’s house tell of Archdevil Lilith, the first and most mighty succubus. Though her blood hath flowed through our line, it hath grown thin over the span of two millennia. My attack was driven by the desire to claim the strength of a succubus who inherited her powers more strongly.”

Kuon glanced at Liz, who was asleep on the bed. Though she seemed to experience the occasional moment of pain, she was otherwise stable and soundly asleep. She didn’t show signs of waking despite the fact that Kuon was practically screaming.

When they had first fought, Kuon had aimed to steal the primordial succubus’s power. However, Liz’s dormant strength had far exceeded anything she had imagined.

“It’s always so funny whenever I hear people calling me the primordial succubus. I ended up creating an entiiire race, huh? Well, it makes sense. I did have a looooooot of fun with a looooooot of people back then. I gave birth to a ton of children too.”

“Wait, a ton? How many are we talking here?”

“Umm, I didn’t exactly keep count, but probably around two thousand, give or take?”

“Tw-Two—?!”

Everyone in the room who wasn’t an angel shared a collective gasp.

“Hold on, that doesn’t add up! Pregnancy and childbirth takes around ten months, right?! It would take over fifteen hundred years just to have that many kids! Didn’t the War of Heaven and Earth happen two thousand years ago?!”

“Ohhh, no, no, that’s not how it works. Angel pregnancies and human pregnancies are completely different, biologically speaking,” Lilith waved her hand dismissively, her black wings swaying lightly. “When angels like us get pregnant, you see... It’s more like... *Pop!* Then the baby’s out of the tummy just like that. They grow up real quickly too.”

“P-Pop…?”

The onomatopoeia wasn’t really doing much to clarify anything.

“So, er… What’s the gestation period, then?”

“Two days. Give or take.”

“…”

Cain and his comrades were once again reminded that the being before them was far removed from anything human.

“Hey, Melvy. Are there any legends about Lilith in the human territories?”

Cain turned to Melvy. He was sitting up in bed, still recovering from the aftermath of unleashing the ultimate power of Holy Sword Andros. Soon, an unbearable wave of pain would render him completely immobile. But since the release had only been for a brief instant, he still had some time before the recoil hit him. During his brief respite, Melvy was casting as much healing magic as she could. Her recovery and pain relief spells would help mitigate some of the symptoms.

“Well, er, umm… Yes, there are stories, but…” Melvy seemed to struggle with the question. “Legends about Lady Lilith vary greatly from religion to religion. In our Russel-Bell faith, Lady Lilith is considered to be one of the wives of the Greater God, but in other traditions, she is depicted as a treacherous goddess who sold herself to devils, or as a cunning devil who sought to deceive the gods…”

“Mhm, mhm, that’s fair. When you look at it from different perspectives, none of them are entirely wrong. But I’m not a god, but an angel, and a fallen one, so you can say they’re all wrong too… Back then, I just loved to get it on with eeeveryone. Gods, angels, demons, hellspawn, humans, demons—oh, I loved them all and had so much fun with all of them! ♡”

Melvy felt incredibly awkward standing before her, but Lilith seemed completely unfazed, nodding along enthusiastically with her own tale.

The rest of the group seemed completely dumbfounded.

“So… Why is someone as incredible as you working as a lifeguard?”

Though he felt it didn’t really matter in the grand scheme of things, a doubt did cross Cain’s mind, so he asked for what it was worth. It was just an innocent question.

A nearby angel officer let out a heavy sigh. “Normally, Lady

Lilith would not be involved in mundane duties meant for low-ranking personnel like us…”

“But hear me out! Being a beach lifeguard is the best! I get to look at gorgeous women in swimsuits all day, and I can ogle the muscles of men as much as I want without anyone getting mad!”

The group was left speechless at Lilith’s gleeful, almost ecstatic response. It suddenly clicked. It all made sense. She really *was* Liz’s ancestor.

“Well then, how about we get on to this girl’s problems?” Lilith said, approaching Liz where she lay. “Sanctuary Heal.”

Brandishing her right hand, Lilith covered Liz’s body in a holy light. Healing magic, perhaps. The slight grimace on Liz’s face eased into a peaceful expression, her breathing now soft and steady.

“W-Wow… What kind of magic is that?” Saint Melvy gasped.

“Incredible,” the seasoned sorcerer Lalo muttered.

“Is it that amazing?” Cain asked.

“Umm, how should I put this? It felt like magic only a god would be able to pull off.”

“If I were to explain it, I would say it’s magic beyond anything I can fathom. Even if my lifespan were extended by a thousand years and I devoted every moment of it to researching magic, I wouldn’t even come close to matching it.”

“Eh he he! ♪ Thanks for all the compliments! But remember, I’m a fallen angel—not a god.”

They had no choice but to accept the reality: Lilith was a being of an entirely different dimension.

“Now about this girl… Liz, was it? Let’s hear her story.”

“Right. What’s a good place to start?”

Cain and his comrades recounted everything they knew about Liz. They spoke of their first encounter with her, her origins, and how, despite being human, she inherited succubus powers through atavism. They shared the adventures they had together as part of team hero and the many battles they’d fought side by side.

And of how Liz had nearly been killed by the demon lord.

Back then, Liz had converted all she had—her magic, her strength as a demon, her very memories—into healing power just to barely cling onto life. The sacrifice left her as an amnesiac, devoid of all the abilities she’d honed and unaware of her succubus nature.

“Not the demon lord! He is but the leader of the Revolutionary Army!” Kuon angrily interjected at one point. “The demon lord is me! I shall not acknowledge that pretender!”

But getting back on track.

Liz had lost her memories and powers, but over the past few months, she had begun to show signs of recovery. Occasionally, her memories and abilities would make a brief return, only to fade away again soon after. However, this partial resurgence seemed to have triggered the recent rampage—the first of its kind.

That was everything they knew.

“I see, I see,” Lilith nodded once they were done. “First off, there’s no doubt about it. This girl is a very distant descendant of mine.” Lilith sat on the edge of Liz’s bed and began stroking her head gently as she explained. “A child I had with demonkind for some reason decided to mingle with humans. My blood has mostly been thinned out with human blood over all the countless generations, but Liz here is a rare case of atavism. She strongly inherited my fallen angel powers.”

“I see…”

Everyone—and even Liz herself—had assumed Liz’s succubus powers were a result of atavism. In a sense, they weren’t incorrect, but they hadn’t realized she had inherited the very essence of the primordial succubus, Lilith herself. Even Demon Lord Kuon, though she had sensed something unique about it, ultimately concluded it was simply a very strong succubus factor. She had never even imagined that Archdevil Lilith’s powers would be holy in nature.

“Now that you mention it, Liz did wield abilities stronger than any other succubus we met.”

“In all our journeys through demonland, we encountered and fought a number of succubi, but I’ve never seen a succubus stronger than Liz.”

Rachel and Sylphie thought back on the journey. If Liz had been just another atavistic succubus, she wouldn’t have possessed strength rivaling that of the hero’s party. It was only because she carried the latent power of Lilith herself that she had such immense potential.

“Wait, doesn’t that mean that all succubi carry a fragment of your power, Lady Lilith?”

“Oh, no need to be so formal, hero-boy. Just call me Lily!”

“R-Right…”

Cain tried to change his tone, given the status of the person he was talking to. But the woman herself couldn’t have been any more relaxed.

“As for your question… The answer is a big nope! Even if they’re technically my descendants, the blood has probably thinned out a looot over the past two thousand years. The succubi you see nowadays still come from me, but they can only use normal succubus powers.”

“I see…”

“That’s why Lizzy here is so special. Manifesting my powers after two thousand years? That’s quite something! Not that she asked for it, of course.”

Lilith gazed at a sleeping Liz with eyes filled with compassion. Liz’s succubus powers had brought her great hardship. They disrupted her life as a noble, making it difficult for her to control her emotions and desires, which had once led her to harm others. She had suffered deeply because of them.

But Lilith’s loving gaze, directed at her slumbering descendant, seemed to understand and encompass all those struggles. Her expression radiated the warmth and care of a savior who had once saved the world through love and compassion.

“You get the picture? The reason Lizzy was able to use both holy magic and hell magic wasn’t because of your average, everyday succubus powers. She did a lot of digging and got herself all the way to the root—the powers of a fallen angel.”

Why had she managed to conjure up two powers they’d never seen her use before? They now had their answer. But her comrades who’d traveled alongside her for so long looked conflicted.

“To think that Liz had such incredible power hidden within her…” muttered Rachel.

“She was already the second strongest in our party,” added Sylphie.

“Umm, er, if she regains her memories and learns to fully control both holy magic and hell magic, how strong will Liz be, exactly?” Melvy asked.

“It’d be like having an actual angel—or rather, fallen angel—on the team. She’d be the strongest in the party,” Rachel concluded.

Before losing her memories, Liz had been second only to Cain in strength. And that had been without utilizing her fallen angel powers. If those powers were to awaken completely, it was difficult to fathom the extent of her potential. Though it was a promising thought, it was also one that came with a hint of unease.

"Oh, speaking of fallen angel powers." Cain suddenly changed the topic a bit as a thought occurred to him. "Lady—er, Ms. Lilith, or any of the angel officers here. Would you consider joining my party and lending us your strength?"

"Hmm..."

"Hmmmmmm?"

Cain extended an invitation to all the angels in the room including Lilith. He had no complaints with their strength, and the angel officers were many in number. Even if only ten or twenty of them joined, it could turn the tide of battle against the demon army and ensure humanity's victory.

"Your mission to protect humanland would be much easier if you lent us your aid. Would you help us in the fight to safeguard humanity from the demon lord's army?"

"Revolutionary army."

"Yeah, that."

He got another retort from Kuon.

If all went as he'd hoped, his party would be able to gain tremendous ground in the war. Undoubtedly so. Unfortunately...

"Regrettably, we cannot," one of the officers replied in a calm, measured tone. "In Celestia, there are strict rules that govern our interactions with the human world."

"Rules?"

"That's right. As Lady Lilith mentioned earlier, our doctrine—our guiding principle, you could call it—is to avoid excessive interference with humans and to remain as observers."

"So you just *watch*?"

Cain and his comrades cocked their heads.

"Celestia could, if we wished, shape the human world entirely to our will. Our fundamental strength as living beings is simply that far above yours. The same is true when comparing hell to the land of demons."

There was a pause.

"But that is where the problem arose."

"The war of Heaven and Earth. Hell began interfering

excessively with demonland, attempting to extend its domain into humanland as well."

"Naturally, Celestia intervened to protect the humans, as it was evident that Hell intended to conquer humanity as the first step to launching an assault on Celestia."

The angel officers spoke up one by one, explaining the histories and circumstances behind it.

"And the one who brought an end to the War of Heaven and Earth was none other than Lady Lilith here."

"That was when a treaty was established between Celestia and Hell. It stipulated that both sides would refrain from excessive interference in the lower realms and would limit themselves to lose oversight."

The heroes had gradually begun to grasp the angels' position in the grand scheme of things.

"By excessive interference…how much do you mean, exactly?" Cain asked, just to be sure.

"Exactly as you imagine, Cain. Direct involvement in war is strictly prohibited. Be it wars between nations, large-scale skirmishes, or battles involving individuals of significant influence within humanland. We cannot interfere in any events that could alter the course of human history. As such, the scope of our work as enforcers is limited to crime prevention. Theft, assault, fraud—minor offenses. Maintaining basic law and order in humanland is the extent of what we can do. As a general guideline, we cannot intervene in any conflict that involves more than fifty individuals."

The dispassionate words of the officers had the humans furrowing their brows. While they appreciated the angels' role in maintaining order, the extent of their intervention seemed way too arbitrary—decided solely by Celestia's discretion. The unsettling realization that their society was in a sense bound to the whims of higher beings left a sour taste in their mouths.

"So…in our war against the demons…"

"It is out of the question. We absolutely cannot interfere."

"The only way we can interfere is through the Holy Sword Ikryl, granted to humanity by Celestia, and through Devil Sword Bellum, granted to demonkind by Hell. Those are the sole forms of intervention allowed under the treaty."

"Even on the off chance that the demons completely annihilated humanity, we would consider it a part of human

history and offer no assistance. Please be prepared for that reality."

"Fine. I understand," Cain replied, though the furrow of his brow said otherwise.

Standing before him were higher beings of overwhelming superiority. It was clear they viewed humans as beneath them. Their efforts to maintain order in human territories was appreciated, but there was a large, insurmountable gap separating humans and angels.

"That's just how it is. Sorry about that. We've got our own circumstances, you see?" Lilith pressed her hands together while offering an awkward, apologetic smile.

"No, it's fine. I was the one making an unreasonable request. Let me guess—if the angels joined our side, then the devils and hellspawn would join the other side. Then we'd have another War of Heaven and Earth on our hands."

"That's right. That's what both Celestia and Hell are afraid of. So I'm sooo sorry. We can't really help."

Cain's deduction was spot on. War with the demons was already devastating enough, and that would only worsen if Celestia and Hell were to join in. Every land would likely be reduced to ash.

That was far from what he wanted. Ultimately, it was in everyone's best interest that the angels not join in their war.

"And with that said, let's stop talking about all that complicated stuff and get back to poor Liz. We need to talk about her future."

"Right, there's something I wanted to ask you about that."

He'd steered the conversation away from it earlier, but there was still an important issue regarding Liz that Cain needed to address.

"Is there a chance of Liz losing control again? Could something like what happened today happen again?"

"Yes! That's it! That's the super important thing I wanted to talk about!" Lilith declared, firmly pointing her finger.

It was a critical issue that would determine everything in Liz's life going forward.

"To be completely honest, the reason old Lizzy lost control this time was because of an unstable mental state, right? That's something we can't really do anything about, so to be blunt I'd say it's up to you guys to fix it."

“Urgh…”

Lilith’s words struck a nerve with Cain and his comrades. It was far too brazen of them to expect an outsider to handle their friend’s emotional well-being. But Liz’s struggles ran deep. They weren’t something that could be resolved in a day.

It all stemmed from her love for Cain—a perfectly normal concern by most accounts—but this was complicated by her amnesia and the underlying issues buried in her subconscious.

Her memories and powers would have to be fully restored if they wanted to truly resolve the issue. But how soon would that happen, and what would they need to do to achieve that? They still had yet to reach a clear answer. Their life at the Academy would have to continue for a bit longer.

“Hmmm…”

Though they’d initially been the ones asking questions, they’d quickly transitioned to seeking answers within themselves. The members of the party all folded their arms with strained looks on their faces.

But Lilith wasn’t finished just yet.

“Oh, wait, though. While the root cause might be psychological, her outburst itself manifested as an uncontrolled frenzy of holy magic and hell magic, riiight? So, if Liz learns to control those powers to some extent, she might not be overwhelmed by them next time, and she probably won’t lose consciousness.”

“Huh…?”

“S-So you’re saying…”

This unexpected bit of insight drew some hopeful stares from the party. Their eyes were all square on Lilith.

“If Lizzy learns to control holy magic and hell magic properly, she’ll stop losing control!”

“Ooh!”

“Sounds like a plan!”

Liz wouldn’t be overwhelmed by her powers again.

Just knowing this fact made the party let out a collective sigh of relief. Her rampage had been painful to witness and had put her own life in danger. And so, this revelation from Lilith made it feel like a heavy weight had been lifted from their chests.

“But how are we going to do that?! I mean, it’s easier said than done. Maybe Melvy can teach her holy magic, but what about the hell magic?! No one knows how to use it!”

“Erk…”

Rachel was right about that.

She just had to learn how to handle holy magic and hell magic. It all sounded nice and simple, but both were powers of godlike magnitude; they weren’t the sort of thing she could pick up just like that.

To make matters worse, there wasn’t a single user of hell magic in the hero’s party.

But…

“Why don’t you leave that to meee? We’re both fallen angels here. I could at least teach her how to use her powers.”

“Huh? Are you sure about that, Lilith?”

A solution popped up surprisingly easily. Lilith, an authority of Celestia, willingly volunteered to take up the role.

“Of cooourse! She’s my adorable descendant, after all! I’m more than happy to lend a hand—or even a little more than that!”

“Umm, wouldn’t this count as excessive interference in the human world?”

“Lady Lilith. I share the hero’s concern. In the first place, it is unbefitting for someone of your noble status to personally mentor a single human, no matter who they may be.”

Though Lilith puffed out her chest, brimming with motivation, it seemed one of the angels wasn’t entirely on board.

“But, come oooon. Leaving a fallen angel who might go on a rampage unchecked is a bigger problem in my books. If those fallen angel powers continue to ravage the human world, then hell might start raising some complaints.”

“Th-That’s true, but…” The concerned angel faltered under the weight of her logic.

“That settles it, then! I will personally look after my darling descendant! Just tell the higher-ups it’s fallen angel crisis management, and it’ll probably stick. In fact, it will… I’ll make sure of it!”

“How…reassuring.”

Cain could feel a resolute will from her smile.

“But you know…before that. There is ooone little thing that’s been bothering me.”

“Hmm?”

Lilith’s cheery tone shifted, taking on a slightly darker hint. Her face turned serious to match.

“Liz’s temporary ‘recovery’ periods. They’re very curious.”

“Oh, that. They don’t last long. She snaps out of it quickly enough. Is it that strange?”

Lilith put a hand to her chin in thought. Liz would occasionally regain her strength and memory for brief stints. It had first happened back when a demon general had attacked the Academy, and again during the fight with Kuon. Each time, she temporarily accessed her full power and memories and used her succubus abilities to subdue her enemies before returning to her usual self.

“She described herself as being like a balloon with a hole poked through it. No matter how much air you pump in, it’s just gonna blow out so long as the balloon itself is damaged.”

“A balloon with a hole… That might be more accurate than you know.” Lilith ran a gentle hand through Liz’s hair, observing the girl closely. “It’s not that strange for her power and memories to return, you know. She’s probably had plenty of rest time over the past year or so. And with the powers of a fallen angel, her recovery speed must have been extraordinary.”

“Really?”

“But losing her strength again right after that is very strange indeed. It’s not something I can ignore. We should assume there’s a severe defect in her body.”

The heroes weren’t too knowledgeable about fallen angels. While they’d been aware of the existence of angels, they’d only just learned that those angels were beings far superior to humans. Knowing what was normal or abnormal for a fallen angel, that was still beyond them.

But Lilith, someone who presumably possessed overwhelming power even among the angels, claimed that something was off. The heroes gulped.

“I’m going to do a little bit of examining on poor Lizzy’s body.”

“Ah, sure.”

“Scanning Search…”

Lilith’s right hand let off light as she invoked a spell. She moved it over Liz’s body, starting with her head, tracing down her neck, across her torso, and finally her lower body too. She meticulously scanned from top to bottom.

And, once she’d finished, she retraced her steps, her right hand stopping in the center of Liz’s chest.

“As I suspected. It’s here.”

“Her chest?”

“Angels, you see,” Lilith began her explanation, “have a special organ called the angel’s heart. It’s the core of an angel’s strength, and it’s where an angel’s power is continuously generated. Well, for Lizzy here, and for me, it’d be more accurate to call it a fallen angel’s heart. Same difference.”

“Huh?! B-But, but, er, umm, Liz doesn’t have any special organs like that in her body! I’ve healed and examined everyone in our group countless times!” Melvy refuted.

She was the party’s healer and medical expert. If one of her comrades was housing any nonhuman components within their bodies, she would have realized it at once. Especially when it came to Liz—she’d been conducting medical exams on her periodically over the last few months.

With a wry smile, Lilith replied, “Oh, you have it all wrong. It’s not a visible organ like a human heart. The angel’s heart is an organ formed from pure power; it can’t be seen with the eye.”

“An invisible...organ of power?”

“Actually, you have one too, Melvy. A tiny angel’s heart. That’s what makes humans like you able to use holy magic.”

“Wh-What?! I-I do?!” Melvy exclaimed, startled.

She instinctively pressed a hand to her chest. But no matter how much she searched, she couldn’t sense anything. The human understanding of magic wasn’t advanced enough to detect the angel’s heart.

“Let’s get back on track, okay? This is important for Liz.”

Leaving Melvy to her fluster, Lilith went on.

“The fallen angel’s heart inside Lizzy is currently...half-missing.”

“Pardon?”

“Half-missing?”

“That’s what’s making her powers so unstable. She’s missing half a heart, after all. It’s no wonder her powers disappear within a day or go out of control.”

Her comrades’ faces were all colored with concern.

“Missing half a heart... Does that mean her life is in danger?”

“It would be dangerous for a normal angel. But Lizzy is still fundamentally human, so it’s not directly tied to her survival. But if she loses control again like today, and burns through too much power, she might end up exhausting herself to death.”

Her comrades didn’t know whether to feel relieved or to feel a

greater sense of crisis at this revelation. Amid their unease, Lilith's eyes turned to Cain. It was a stern, piercing look.

"Has this girl ever suffered an injury that left a large hole in this general area?"

"She has," Cain immediately replied.

He could never forget it—the memory of that accursed day. Just thinking about it stirred a wave of anger from deep in his core.



“Who did it?”

“The demon lord.”

Indeed, Cain and his comrades had clashed with the demon lord once before.

The demon lord had plunged his devil sword deep into her chest, leaving a large, gaping wound. It was an injury that should have been fatal. Yet Liz managed to retaliate, inflicting a grievous wound on the demon lord in turn. It was the damage to her chest that had caused her to lose everything.

Since then, the demon lord had retreated to his castle to recover from the injuries Liz had inflicted. The protective barrier surrounding the castle prevented Cain and his party from launching any further attacks against him.

“Nay. The ‘revolutionary leader.’ How many times must I repeat?”

“Yeah, what Kuon said. He’s the revolutionary army’s leader.”

Kuon pinched Cain’s cheek, but Cain didn’t have the energy to deal with her. His attention remained solely on Lilith’s words.

“That settles it. The usurper is the leader of the revolutionary army.”

“Usurper?”

“That’s right. The culprit who made off with half of Lizzy’s fallen angel’s heart. There’s no doubt—it was the leader of the revolutionary army,” Lilith proclaimed as she rose from the bed. “Take it back. Retrieve the missing piece of her heart from the usurper. Do so, and her memory and strength will return.”

Tension filled the air. There was an intensity to Lilith’s sonorous voice. But this intensity was dwarfed by the fierce flame of emotion that burned strong in every member of the hero’s party.

For the first time, they had a clear goal—a clear direction on how to restore Liz to her former self. How to help her recover what she’d lost and get her back to full health… Until now, they’d had no leads at all.

But now, for the first time, they had a definitive answer.

“Kuon.”

“Speak.”

“The revolutionary bastard. What’s his name?” Cain’s low voice resounded coldly through the room. Everyone had always propped up the bastard as the demon lord. But he had never heard the man’s true name.

“Barnghiner.”

“Barnghiner,” Cain repeated, the name rolling off his tongue like a curse.

More and more bloodlust began to seep into the hero’s previously subdued aura. No matter how much he tried to suppress it, it was spilling out of him uncontrollably. The accursed demon had always been his destined foe, but there was more to it now. Cain’s hostility was more targeted than it had ever been.

He was the usurper of Liz’s heart—the one who had driven her into this state.

“Barnghiner…” He repeated the name again, the room quivering under his killing intent. “I’ll chase you down and kill you, no matter what it takes, Barnghiner!”

His heart burned with resolve and with malice.

Epilogue

“Mm… Mmm…”

My head gently rocked to and fro, suspended in a dreamy fog. My eyelids felt heavy, but when I forced them open, the first thing I saw was a white ceiling lit by a soft light.

My mind was still hazy, my entire body unbearably sluggish.

That’s right… I was asleep. No, I remember just a little bit. It wasn’t that I fell asleep, I fell unconscious.

“You’re awake, Liz,” a voice called out beside me—a familiar voice. I turned my head toward it.

“Sir Cain…”

“You feeling all right? Is your head clear?”

“Yes…”

As soon as I woke up, Sir Cain was right beside me. He was seated in a chair by the bed, watching over me.

“Ah, don’t force yourself up. You’re not exactly in perfect health.”

“I… I’m sorry.”

I tried to sit up only to find that my body was terribly, terribly heavy. Cain had stopped me before I could struggle further. I could feel his worry for me.

So, I laid back down, and he pulled the blanket over me again.

“There’s a bunch of stuff we need to talk about, but let’s start with the basics. We’re in a hospital in Academy Town. You’ve been out cold for three whole days.”

“Three…”

“Do you remember what happened to you?”

“Not much…”

My mind was still murky. Evidently, we’d returned from our holiday at the seaside resort. I couldn’t quite remember what had happened to me. What I did recall was vague; it was like I was trying to remember a distant dream. But there was one thing I knew for certain:

“I remember…causing trouble for everyone. That’s about it.”

“It doesn’t count as trouble. Don’t worry about it. We’re just glad you’re safe.”

Even though Cain dismissed it as nothing, I had faint

memories of a fierce battle. Faint, yet persistent, like a stain on the edge of my mind.

I had unleashed unimaginable magic, putting everyone through so much strife. I could see blurry visions of them all so desperate to save me. Faint as they were, the memories wouldn't leave me, wouldn't stop clawing at my heart.

What right did I have to feel this pain, when I was the one who had hurt everyone?

"A lot has happened since then... Argh, where do I even start? There's way too much to explain."

From there, Cain began recounting everything that had come to pass. It was an incredibly long story. That angel lifeguard turned out to be a very important person. Fallen Angel Lilith herself had joined the fight, alongside a squad of angel officers.

Then came the big reveal: I was a descendant of Lilith. That alone didn't make me too special—in fact, demonland was practically teeming with her succubi descendants. But while most of her children had inherited succubi powers, I had reawakened a deeper connection to the fallen angel powers. Thus, as I lost control, I began to use holy magic and hell magic.

Cain told me about Celestia and Hell. The truth of the War of Heaven and Earth. I could hardly contain my surprise when I learned of the higher realms that were subtly governing our entire world.

Finally, there was the matter of controlling my powers. Lilith herself had offered to train me personally...

Now and then, Cain would hesitate. He would stumble over his words or abruptly change the topic. There was something he wasn't telling me. Perhaps it was something he thought I shouldn't know or something he wasn't ready to share.

Still, the sheer volume of information overwhelmed me, and I could hardly keep up with it all. It felt like my brain was going to burst.

"Umm, er, umm... Th-Things are getting quite out of hand, aren't they?"

"You can say that again. We're still trying to process it ourselves. Celestia and Hell... I don't think they're hostile to us, but...we need to stay on guard."

"The world would descend into chaos if this got out."

"Yep. So don't go blabbing. Right now, Sylphie's checking with heaven to see if she can even report this to her kingdom. She's

panicking, big time."

"It must be tough, being a princess."

"No kidding."

We both let out a weary sigh.

"A fallen angel's powers... That's certainly a surprise, but I'm glad I inherited that and not any of the succubus traits. Just imagine how disastrous that would be."

Lilith's descendants remained in the world as the succubus race. Though it seemed I was also one of her descendants, my human lineage was dominant, so I hadn't exhibited anything from the succubus side of things. Only the fallen angel powers had manifested that night, by the sea.

If I'd started displaying succubus traits too... I shuddered to think of the embarrassing, unwomanly impulses I might have been consumed by.

Phew. Thank goodness that didn't happen. Honestly, I was in some real danger there. But I'm safe—I could never *be a succubus!*

Cain was staring at me.

"Huh? Cain? Why do you look so discontent?"

"Well..."

He was staring at me with a dry, unimpressed look. It was almost like he thought my words were entirely off-base—like he had endured countless headaches because of my succubus powers or something. Even when that had never happened. Even when I was such a refined and elegant noblewoman, pure and virtuous in every way!

"Well...that about wraps it up. I think I covered just about everything, though honestly, I'm not sure I remember everything from that night. Just believe me when I say it was a lot."

"If you remember anything else, please let me know. We have plenty of time, after all."

"Yeah. I'll tell you if anything comes to mind."

"Thank you."

And that was the end of that.

"Still...even though it's over now, I can't even begin to imagine how I can atone for what I've done. I've caused everyone so much trouble."

"Liz..."

The story was over, but I could feel my feelings take a downward turn as I thought back to that night.

I had done something unforgivable. I'd lost control, hurt my

comrades, and even endangered their lives. And from what I'd heard, I'd unleashed magic that defied human understanding.

Fragments of that night still lingered in my memory. I could remember how everyone had desperately tried to stop me, and I could remember how I'd cruelly fought them off. I could see the injuries I'd inflicted one after another.

All this time, I'd wanted to help them, to be of some use. But not only had I been a burden this time, I'd been an active menace.

"Hey, Liz."

Cain's voice snapped me out of my thoughts. I raised my head to look at him.

"Don't corner yourself like that. Don't make that gloomy face. You lost control because your mental balance was thrown off. You need to focus on staying calm... C'mon, smile! Laugh! Turn the whole thing into some ridiculous story we can get together and laugh about later."

"But...I can't just brush it off like that! I mean, I hurt everyone! I could have killed them! And, and...that last spell... If that had gone off, everyone in town would have died!"

I remembered it faintly. When Cain was right in front of me, I'd melded holy and hell magic together into a deadly sphere. It was a catastrophic spell. Thanks to Cain slashing through it, everyone was safe in the end, but if it had burst, the whole town would have been wiped off the map. Our comrades might even have died.

The more I thought back on what I'd done, the more wretched I felt. I couldn't raise my head anymore. I was so pitiful, so pathetic, so useless, so destructive... I'd nearly caused a calamity with my own hands. And now, I could barely keep the tears from spilling out of my eyes.

"Hey...Liz."

"Yes?"

And then.

Cain grabbed my head with both hands and forcefully lifted it, pulling and pinching at my cheeks.

"Shir... Shir Kwayn...?"

"Don't underestimate us."

He stared at me straight-on, his sharp eyes drilling into me. I couldn't look away; not with the firm hold he had on my cheeks.

"You think you could've killed us? Don't give me that crap.

We're not gonna die. No matter how much godly power you wield, you can't take us down. We're the goddamn hero's party."

"Shir Kwayn..."

"Just try it. We'll stop you every time you lose control. And that magic sphere of yours? It's nothing. I'll slice it apart as many times as it takes. Don't you dare look down on us by worrying so much, dummy."

Cain tugged at my cheeks, pulling them this way and that. Up and down, twisting, and kneading them like dough. He was strong. My cheeks hurt. But not in a way I disliked. My cheeks were probably red from all the stretching, but not once did the thought of escaping from his grasp cross my mind.

"And that's why!" Cain brought his face up to mine. "You just need to relax. We're the strongest. We're not gonna die, and we'll protect you. No matter what."

He grinned, a foul, roguish grin. Seeing that smile caused my chest to grow hot. My cheeks too were burning for reasons unrelated to all the tugging.

Ah...I knew it. I really do *love him. Hopelessly, irrevocably—I love him.*

How could I dare speak of love when I couldn't bring myself to trust his words? The fears swirling around my heart slowly began to fade, dissolving like mist in the morning sun.

"Besides... Yeah, besides..."

Cain finally released my cheeks, which snapped back to their original shape.

"Your best trait is that you're an idiot—an idiotic idiot who's so bright and cheerful you light up everyone around you like the idiot you are. So quit mulling about it. Just keep being our idiot, lifting everyone's spirits like you always do."

"Wha?!"

I was stunned. No one had ever said that to me before. *I'm an idiot? Me? Smart, diligent, and virtuous me? The same Lisalinde that everyone calls the most honor-y honor student at the Academy?!*

"That's not true! I am not an idiot! I am a refined, elegant, exemplary student—I'd even go as far as to say I am the very model of a modern honor student!"

"Yeah, yeah."

"Nggghhh..."

My cheeks puffed out, even redder than before.

I am a calm and graceful lady!

“Anyway, you’ve only just begun. There’s a long road ahead.”

“That’s true…”

“If you don’t want to cause trouble with your outbursts, you’ll have to do your best in training. I’m sure it’ll be tough. I doubt a single human in history’s ever managed to pull off both holy magic and hell magic. It’s going to be some brutal training.”

“Erk…my training with you is already too much for me.”

My muscles are already aching every day from the merciless regiment of the Anyone Can Do It! Hero-Style Boot Camp…

“Then you’ll need to resolve yourself even more. You’re about to learn the arts of higher beings, for crying out loud. No way that’s gonna be easy.”

“Urgh…”

I could feel myself cringing.

“Why is this happening to me? I was supposed to be an ordinary, unremarkable student…”

This was more than I could have imagined. Who would’ve thought I’d be treading into uncharted territory for humankind?

But I had to endure it. If I could learn to control both holy and hell magic, I’d be able to greatly reduce the chances of my fallen angel power spiraling out of control.

My heart shuddered in fear. But I couldn’t back down now. If I truly didn’t want to be a burden to my comrades, I had to stop simply *wishing* for change; I had to muster my courage and make a stand.

“But hey.” Cain lightly patted me on the head, “Knowing you, you’ll manage somehow or another.”

A confident grin spread across his face. Just seeing it made me feel as if I really could do anything—it was almost magical.

“R-Really? You don’t have any proof, do you?”

“Is my endorsement not good enough?”

My cheeks grew warm again.

“The fact that something so shoddy is actually making me feel a little motivated… I hate how simpleminded I am.”

“There you go. That’s the spirit.”

He began to ruffle my hair with the hand that was still on my head. It was already messy enough from three days’ worth of bedhead, and he was making it even worse.

“For now, just take it easy. Proper rest is important. You’re still pretty much a sick patient, you know.”

“Y-Yes… I understand. I’ll focus on recovery.”

“I’ll throw together a get-well package later. Well, until then.”

With that, Cain stood from his chair and opened the hospital room door. As he left, he waved, and I waved back at him. We shared a smile as the door shut between us.

The room fell silent. I could hear his footsteps fading into the distance. Eventually, they too were gone, and I was left in complete stillness. I was completely and perfectly alone.

“He is gone…right?”

I spoke aloud, even though no one was there to hear it. Just talking to myself—a brief check to give me some peace of mind. Another five seconds. Ten. Thirty. I waited. There were no signs of anyone approaching the room.

Just in case, just to be sure… I waited until I was completely certain I was truly alone.

“Wah… Waaaaaaaaah?!”

My face was burning red—no, perhaps my entire body was flushed by then. My heart was pounding away in my chest, and I could almost feel steam shooting out of my head. I’d managed to hold it together while Cain was there. But now that I was alone, I couldn’t keep it bottled up any longer.

“Waaaaaaaaah… Aaaaaaaaaah!!!”

Wrapping myself in the covers, I flailed and rolled. My heart continued hammering away so strongly, so loudly I feared it would echo all the way out into the hall. I knew I wasn’t going to calm down anytime soon.

I’d told a lie.

“I remember…causing trouble for everyone. That’s about it…”

That was what I’d told him. But the truth was, I’d remembered a bit more than that: the words that came right after Cain had sliced through the final spell. The words he spoke after he’d severed my angel wings.

“I’ll keep waiting… No matter how long it takes…”

“I’ll always…love you…”

The words had been etched into my memory.

“Mgooooooooh!!!”

My joy and embarrassment had me rampaging across the bed. *I’m burning! My whole body is burning up!* I screamed in my head. How on earth had I managed to hide these feelings and maintain my composure in front of Cain? I had to give myself a pat on the back for that one.

I didn’t understand why he’d said such things to me. We’d only

known each other for a few months. I didn’t know why he cared so deeply for me. And yet, Cain had properly given me an answer to the confession I’d made before losing control.

“Ngaaaaaaaaah!”

I slammed my head into the pillow over and over. I was losing it; but if I didn’t do something, I wouldn’t be able to maintain my sanity. No wait, who was I kidding? I wasn’t *losing* it, I’d already *lost* it…

“Fshhhwaaaaaah…!”

I clutched the pillow tight as steam erupted from my head.



Cain had made his feelings clear. But as I was now, I couldn't respond to those feelings. I didn't have the power or qualifications to stand beside him—not yet. But someday…surely…even if I had to use these fallen angel powers as my foothold…

Cain said he would wait, no matter how long it took.

"Fine, let's do this thing! I—even I—can do it!" I cried out.

I couldn't just look up to him. Nor could I simply fall into despair at the height of the wall that stood between us. Someday, for sure, I was going to become a being who could stand shoulder to shoulder with that man. I would never be satisfied—I would never live it down if it all ended in empty laments. Someday, I would boldly stick out my chest, confident I was a true comrade…

I'm going to become strong.

"I—even I…can become a magnificent warrioooooor!"

My face was bright red as I reaffirmed my determination. In order to accept those words from Cain without shame.

There was motivation surging from deep within me.

Of course, I felt rather ashamed later when the doctor stepped in and told me to keep it down.



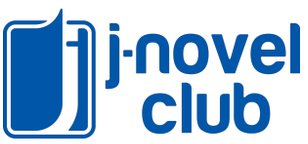












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