Volume 7

Author
Nora Kohigashi

Illustrator
Wasabi



I Could Never Be a Succubus!

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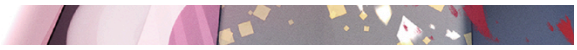

I Could Never Be a Succubus!
Volume 7
"Let's enjoy a moment of dizzying pleasure together."
The girl mounting Cain was, in fact, a transformed Liz.
Author
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“Holy Hell...”
Liz intertwined the pillars of white and black, merging and mixing and spreading them wide.
“Defensive Wall!”



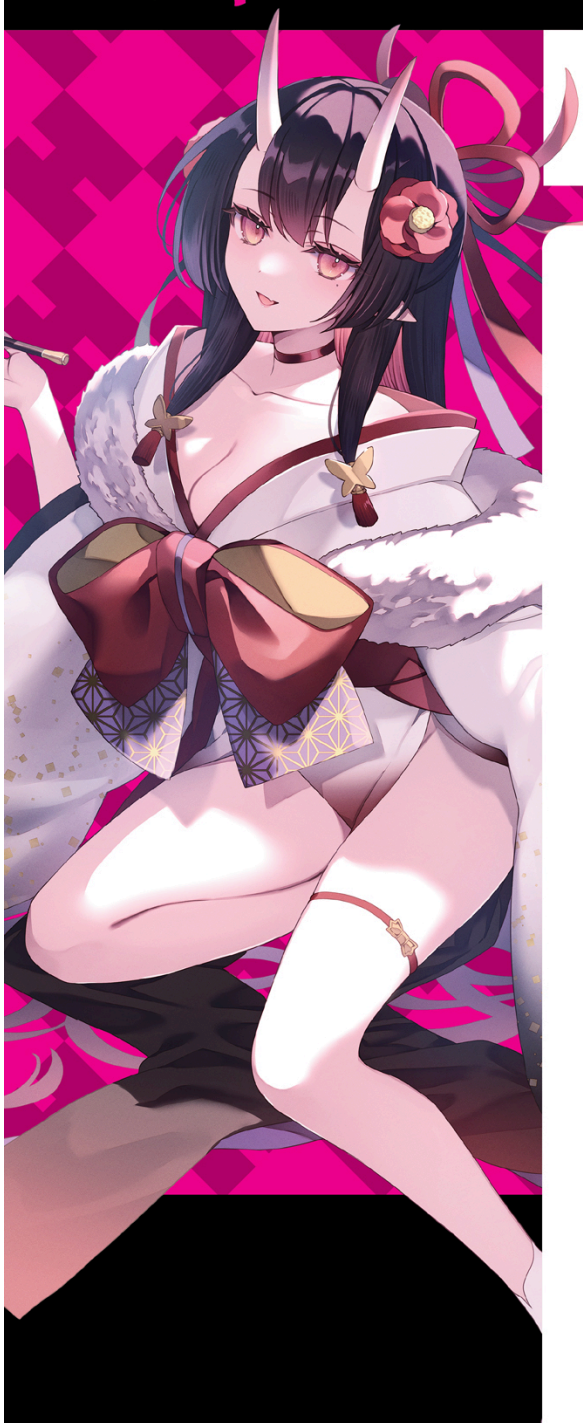

“Aww, now what’s wrong?”
Her name was Tsubaki, apparently.


"The Corrosive Attack that Conveniently Only Melts Clothing!"
The sight of Liz, Altina, and Melvy standing there half-naked had clearly had a positive effect on the crowd.


"This is a secret technique devised by yours truly!"
Liz proudly began explaining.
"You shameless women...!"
Cain let out a pained cry.
"Oh nooo! My swimsuit was swept away by the water!"
Sylphie untied her own strings and embraced Cain just as Liz had.

Introduction



Training and Hell

Liz's battle to control her fallen angel powers rages on in a training gauntlet that would vex even humanity's strongest, with her master Lilith asking the impossible of her as she forcibly sends Liz into a berserk frenzy.

And as Liz grows, the training only grows more intense.

"All righty, then! Let's move on to some reeeaaal combat!"

With nothing more than a quip, Lilith sentences Liz to an ultra-high-difficulty SSS+ ranked dungeon. There Liz continues her frightful training, cursing her master with each breath as she clings to life, threatened by powerful foes and her own rampaging powers.

But in the midst of it, something happens that no one could have expected. When Liz and her comrades make it to the depths of the SSS+ Dungeon, a completely different world awaits them.

"Welcome, welcome—to the land of devils and hellspawn!"

For some strange reason, the dungeon is connected to the higher realm known as Hell—the realm that once stood opposed to Celestia.

Under the guidance of the beautiful, horned hellspawn known as Tsubaki, Liz and Cain must challenge the Trials of Hell!

[redacted]

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Prologue

The seasons were turning, gradually transitioning now into fall. A harsh heat still lingered in the air as the early morning sun bathed the spacious grounds in light. Though we'd left the height of summer behind us, what remained was still enough to keep me drenched in sweat.

We were on the academy's vast training grounds, which had been lent out specially to the hero's party. A barrier had been deployed around the grounds for the heroes' protection, set up in a way that made it impossible to see into from the outside.

This was one of those so-called spy countermeasures. There were many powers in the world keen on learning any secrets they could about the heroes, who held sway over the whole world, and that was one of the main reasons the academy had provided this heavily secured training area in the first place.

Not that Cain—or any of the members for that matter—seemed to care about their information being leaked. This was pretty much to be expected from the warriors who'd always kept up their training undeterred, regardless of whether they were in the depths of a volcano or in the heart of a dense jungle teeming with vicious beasts.

Of course, *I*, for one, couldn't have been more grateful for the barrier.

"Ubaaaaaaaaah! Bwooaaaaaaaaah!"

Those particular screams were coming from me—Liz.

My mind was in a frenzy as I rampaged across the training grounds. The black wings on my back propelled me through the air as I unleashed a relentless barrage of black-and-white pillars made of powerful holy and hell magic. I was practically in the same state I'd been in when I'd caused that mess at the beach resort.

"Obwaaaaaaaaah! Urrrrrrgh... Guhhh!"

"Hang in there, Liz. Don't lose to yourself."

"Y-You've got this, Liz! I know you can do it...probably."

Cain's comrades shouted out words of support.

The one thing that differed from that horrible summer night was that I now maintained a sliver of consciousness. I wasn't completely in a berserk state—in fact, that was the purpose of this training. I was supposed to do whatever I could to maintain my sanity in order to gain control over these rampaging powers.

"Arrrgh... Oooh... Obwooooooooo!"

"You can do it, Lizzy! Go, go, gooo!"

The fallen angel Lilith cheered me on. If it hadn't been for her, I wouldn't have been able to train to get my own fallen angel powers under control at all. She was something like my mentor.

But it was also her fault that I had to go through all this suffering in the first place.

Turning the clock back a few minutes...

"Oookay, I think you know already, but today's the day we start Lizzy's fallen angel training! ♪"

"Y-Yes! I am very much obliged, Lady Lilith!" I stammered as I nervously straightened my posture.

Lady Lilith was a fallen angel who hailed from Celestia, a higher realm than the human world we lived in. What's more, she boasted a high status even in Celestia. From what I'd been told, she was the great hero who had ended a massive conflict known as the War of Heaven and Earth around two thousand years ago.

Receiving instruction from someone of her high stature... Just how blessed could I be?

"Oh no, no, no. Don't be so stiff; I hate that sort of thing. Just treat me like a friend."

"E-Er, I can't exactly..."

"Jeez, you're so uptight. Aren't we all family here? Don't we share the same blood?"

"W-Well..."

Lady Lilith—er, Lilith—was a very laid-back person. She spoke in a languid tone and exuded an air of calm. "Fallen" or no, she was still

an angel. It was like she was kindness incarnate. Surely her training would be kind, gentle, and thorough.

"By the way, Lizzy, are you able to put out holy or hell magic in your current state?"

"No. Umm, I did make an attempt the other day, but it didn't work..."

I held out my palm and channeled mana into it. In my head, I pictured myself—the me from that summer night. I tried to remember the sensation of scooping that divine yet terrifying power from the depths of my being. A power so strong that I felt it would break me. I tried invoking it, just as I'd done once before.

But...nothing happened.

What gathered in my hand was nothing but normal mana. No matter how hard I tried thinking back to that night over the ocean, those logic-defying sensations wouldn't return to me. I couldn't even grasp a fragment of a fallen angel's strength, and I was left unable to use either holy or hell magic.

"That's too bad."

"I-I'm sorry..."

"Oh, it's fine, totally fine. That's how things are supposed to be—in fact, it's unnatural for humans to be using fallen angel powers in the first place."

"But...I need to learn how to control it."

I clenched my fist and made an oath to myself. *I'm never going to go berserk again. I'll master these fallen angel powers, and I swear that I'll never hurt my comrades again. And I'll become someone who can stand shoulder to shoulder with them, even if I have to make use of this mysterious power... I'll become a true ally to them.*

"Your self-preservation instinct is probably kicking in."

"Self-preservation instinct?"

"That's right," Lilith raised her index finger and explained, "A fallen angel's powers are so strong that a human would break if they used them. It's like a self-destruct button. You're probably subconsciously restraining yourself to keep that from happening. You're blocking your own powers."

That...made sense. Had the fight dragged on for too long, I would have very likely died from the strain of my own powers. I had some faint memories of it, and Cain and everyone else who'd been at the scene seemed to share that opinion.

A fallen angel's power was dangerous, so strong it would bring my body to ruin. It truly was a divine might that transcended the domain of mankind.

"So in short, we just have to dispel that self-imposed seal. Get rid of those instincts."

"Huh?"

Just as I was shuddering at the reality of my situation, Lilith spoke up, seemingly not a care in the world. And then, without warning, she thrust her outstretched index finger right toward my chest.

"What are you—"

"Just like *this*! ♪"

Physically, her finger had plunged straight into the center of my chest. This would normally have opened up a rather bloody hole, but it didn't feel like that at all.





It didn’t even hurt. It was hard to describe, but it felt like her finger had phased through my skin and she was directly fiddling with my internal organs. It was a very peculiar feeling, to say the least.

In that moment, I’d failed to realize just how dire my situation actually was. I should have known that this was no time for thoughtful reflection.

“Umm... Your fallen angel heart is...right here. Here we go... Boop! ♪”

“Huh? Huh... Huh—Aaah... Aaaaaaaaaaaah?! B-Bweeeeeeeeeh?!”

An overwhelming surge of power erupted from deep within me. *What is this?! It’s just like that summer night!*

Wings—black fallen-angel wings—unfurled from my back.

“Gwaaaaaaaaah?!”

“L-Liz?!”

“Hey?! Y-You okay?!”

By the time I realized that Lilith had forcibly unleashed my fallen angel powers, my sanity was already slipping away. A violent torrent of power threatened to overtake my mind in an instant. There didn’t seem to be any way to keep this overflowing power from spilling out. With one quick and casual motion from Lilith, I was sent on a full-on rampage.

“Errgh-eeeeeeeeeh!”

Columns of holy and hell magic burst forth from my body—exactly like that day at the sea.

“Wah?!”

“E-Everyone fall back! On your guard!”

Thanks to the distance they’d kept in advance, the hero party swiftly retreated beyond the range of my magic, readying their weapons as they did so.

“Right now, you see, Lizzy? I went and disabled your reflexes and self-imposed seals. Just a little poke at the fallen angel’s heart, and voila! You can use your powers again! ♪”

“I didn’t need you spelling it ooouuut! Bleeeeeeeeegh!”

Lilith explained everything with a carefree smile; I would have really appreciated getting that explanation beforehand! Shouldn’t I have the right to ready myself?! Steady my heart?! Couldn’t we have

given Cain and the others time to put more distance between us?! There were all sorts of things we could have done!

Incidentally, Lilith was still right beside me, having not backed off a single step. Even as she was bathed in my rampaging holy and hell magic, she didn't flinch, didn't defend, and emerged without a scratch.

I should have expected as much from a celestial powerhouse. Her strength is in an entirely different dimension than ours.

"Liz! Are you okay?! Can you hear me?!"

"Y-Yes, just barely... Angyaaaaaaaaah!"

Unlike that day by the sea, I'd managed to maintain a sliver of reason this time around. I couldn't control my fallen angel powers at all; I was teetering on the edge of total rampage, and if I let my guard down for even an instant, I knew that last shred of awareness would be utterly obliterated.

But that faint remnant of consciousness was the one thing I refused to let slip away. The moment it vanished, it would be nothing but a repeat of that night. That was something I could never let come to pass. *Never*. And so I clung desperately to the fragile lifeline of my remaining sanity.

"Okay, Lizzy! Now, let's work on controlling your power. Keep your mind steady, and we'll start with some simple techniques. We'll combine Holy Laser and Hell Laser into the combination spell, Twilight Laser!"

"Hey?! Now's not the... Gwooooooooh?!"

Even in my current state, I knew Lilith was throwing out an unreasonable demand. I was barely holding on to my mind as it was. A storm of power was raging within me, and she wanted me to, what...unleash a *Twilight Laser*?

There was just no way!

"St-Stop... C-Calm down. Pheeeeeew. Haaaaaaaaah... Heeeeeeeee..."

First, I needed to suppress the towering columns of holy and hell magic. We wouldn't get anywhere unless I could manage that. Still overwhelmed by my rampaging powers, I took a number of deep breaths in an attempt to regain some semblance of composure.

Only after I did that could I say I had taken my first step. Well, it was more like a half-step. I clenched my teeth hard as I fought to suppress the fallen angel's power.

"No, no, that's not it, Lizzy. You're not supposed to suppress it, you're supposed to *use* it."

"Huh?"

And with that, Lilith once again jabbed her pointer finger into my chest. I could feel an even greater power surging from my fallen angel's heart.

"Ubwaaaaaaaaa-aaaaaaaaah!"

"Liiiiiiiiiz!!!"

Lilith was a monster—a *devil*. No, really.

So, this was what it meant to be truly merciless. Just when I was finally starting to quell my power, just when I had already been pushed to my absolute limit, she'd gone and forcibly unleashed even more power from me.

Don't tell me she's just using training as a pretense to kill me? I mean, right now, I can feel this power shredding me from the inside. I'm inching closer and closer to death.

"Ubwaaaaaaaaah! Bwaaaaaaaaah!"

I thrashed around the training grounds, flailing about while columns of power shot from me. If not for the powerful barrier concealing everything that happened here, the entirety of Academy Town would have been thrown into chaos over my breakdown.

On that note, Lilith had actually reinforced the barrier herself. My holy and hell magic would have easily torn through the original one.

"Obwaaaaaaaaah! Urrrrrrgh... Guh!"

"D-Do your best, Liz. Don't lose to yourself."

"Y-You've got this, Liz! I know you can do it... Probably."

My comrades tried to lend me strength with their words, albeit with strained looks on their faces... To be honest, I didn't need any more strength at the moment. If anything, I wanted to get rid of it.

"Aaaaaarrrgh... Ooohhh... Gwooooooooo!"

"You can do it, Lizzy! Go, go, goooo!"

Lilith's encouragement reached me too, but at this point, her voice was doing nothing but infuriating me.

Which brings us back to the present moment.

Umm, what was it again? Twilight Laser? She said I had to combine a basic Holy Laser and Hell Laser...

"Urgh... Grrr... Agh ga ga ga ga ga ga ga ga!"

With my eyes half-rolled back, I desperately clung to my consciousness and tried to tackle the challenge presented to me. She called it a combination spell, so I probably needed to mix the white and black pillars together...

I tried pulling the rampaging pillars of holy and hell magic closer, attempting to merge the two. I pressed two pillars together, twisting and winding them, testing to see if there was any way to present two opposing forces as one.

But then, Lilith offered some guidance.

"Ohh... No, no, you're misunderstanding something, dear. Twilight Laser requires Holy Laser and Hell Laser. Those magical columns are just masses of mana leaking out of you. They aren't the spells we're looking for."

"Gah?!"

Hearing that, I fell into despair.

What? What's that supposed to mean? These magic pillars aren't Holy Laser or Hell Laser at all? Meaning...what? While I'm barely holding on to my consciousness, I'm supposed to spontaneously learn two spells I've never used or even seen before and combine them into something else?

"Augh..."

The sheer difficulty of the task hit me like a ton of bricks, leaving me momentarily dazed. And that daze was my downfall. The fragile thread of consciousness I'd been clinging to finally snapped, blown away by my lapse in focus.

I fell into a total rampage.

I couldn't remember the few seconds that transpired after I lost consciousness. The storm of power within me obliterated my sense of self. But the next thing I heard was Lilith's voice.

"Ah, that's a big no-no, Lizzy. You can't go losing consciousness like thaaat. Bad girl! You hear me? Bad girl!"

"Bwah?!"

Her voice was quickly followed by a sharp impact on my cheek. She had probably slapped me; the pain snapped me back to my senses. I'd most likely been out for only a few seconds at most. I'd come back thanks to Lilith... Or, well, 'come back' was a bit of an overstatement. I was still half-rampaging!

"Okay, now let's try that one more time! We'll start with a nice and simple Twilight Laser!"

"Gwooooooooo-ooooooooh! Monster! Devil!"

"Oh, so close. I'm a fallen angel! ♪" she replied, with a sweet, innocent smile. That smile was as pure as an angel's—so beautiful, it was almost blinding.

"Gwoooaaaaaaaaah!"

"What kind of devilish training is this?" Cain muttered.

I could see him and his comrades shuddering in the corner of my field of view. They themselves had imposed a ridiculous, devilish training on me—training that went by the name of "Anyone Can Do It! Hero-Style Boot Camp"—and even they were struggling to come to terms with what was happening in front of them.

Looking back, though, it made sense. My current training was dozens of times harder than the boot camp. The camp had been hellish, but at least it hadn't been life-threatening. This training, on the other hand, was actively trying to kill me. I had to complete an impossible task while my own overflowing power was eating away at me from the inside!

Brutal! Unbearable! Excruciating...!

"G-Good luck, Liz."

"Y-You can do it, Liz."

"Ungyaaaaaaaaa-aaaaaaaaa-aaaaaaaaah!"

Far, far in the distance, my comrades were all completely weirded out, aghast, their cheers devoid of any enthusiasm. It was painfully obvious that they were just relieved that they weren't the ones who had to do this.

"You've got this, Lizzy! Don't worry! We're still at the beginner's level, so this much should be a piece of cake for you!"

"I'LL REMEMBER THIS, YOU LITTLE—!"

I hurled curses at the great mentor to whom I owed so much.

And thus, the first day's training session concluded with absolutely no results.

And then, school began.

The light of a cheery morning sun streamed in through the window. Everyone was brimming with energy, eager to start a new day. A mundane, refreshing scene of an ordinary classroom spread out before me.

Amid all that was approximately one person face-down on her desk, completely dead to the world.

"Hey, hey, what's gotten into you? You're even more outta it than usual today."

Poking my back with her finger, her black side-ponytail swaying to and fro, was my classmate Adeline. Yes, the unmoving figure slumped over the desk, not moving a muscle, was in fact me, Liz. I was so deathly still that others were growing concerned.

"A-Are you truly all right? You look terribly unwell."

"Y-You want a cold compress or something?"

Luna and Satina also approached me with concern, but I couldn't respond to them properly. I couldn't raise my body, and even moving my mouth to speak felt so terribly draining.

"The... The angel...was a devil..."

"Huh?"

I used up my last scraps of energy to explain it to them.

"The fallen angel...was a devil, a monster, an absolute wretch, and...I...I'm going to die. The angel's going to kill me and make it look like an accident..."

"Yeah, I still don't get it."

"You... You stupid higher beings... Dammit."

Those were my last words. As I lay there, unable to move a single finger, the homeroom bell rang. The school day had begun.

Chapter 69: Now—Enter the Brat Researcher!

"All right, you are up next, Cain. Please lie down on this bed and put on this device. We'll measure the quality of your mana particles."

"Got it."

"And you, Altina, please lie on this bed. We will be examining the effect of holy sword usage on the human body."

"Okay."

We were in a dreary white room, devoid of any decorative ornaments or stylish furnishings. The only things present were the multiple beds for test subjects to lie on, and an array of large magical measuring devices made to scrutinize them down to the smallest detail.

This room was located in the research institute attached to the Academy Town university. As its name suggested, Academy Town was fully equipped with facilities to support all manner of academic pursuits. It housed elementary, middle, and high schools, as well as preschools and day care centers for early childhood education. Naturally, this included a university and graduate school as well, boasting cutting-edge facilities for advanced magical research. Well, perhaps putting it that way was a bit backward, as the university and its research facility had existed first, with Academy Town growing outward from them.

With that being the case, the oldest facility in Academy Town was actually this research institute.

Today, Cain and the others were assisting in one of the university's research projects—or rather, they were the ones who had requested the research.

"All right. Cain, Altina, thank you for your cooperation. Please rest while we prepare for the next measurements. Oh, would you care

for some coffee?”

“Sure, I’ll take some.”

“Me too, please.”

“Got it.”

The lab coat-wearing university researcher prepared for the next experiment while preparing coffee at the same time. The faint aroma of instant coffee spread through the room.

The researcher in charge of us today was a woman named Brigitta from the Faculty of Fundamental Mana Properties, Department of Generated Mana Particles. She wore glasses, and her long hair quite clearly hadn’t been tended to in quite some time. She seemed a bit worn out.

“Umm, Ms. Brigitta? I don’t mean to intrude, but...are you feeling all right? You don’t look very well.”

“Oh, Lisalinde. Thank you for your concern. I’m fine. It’s just that my average sleep time over the past five days has been only two hours. It’s no big deal...”

“Two?!”

She said it so casually, but two hours was far too little. It was no wonder she had those dark circles under her eyes.

“Aaah...coffee. Just what I needed.”

“Stop drinking caffeine and get some sleep!”

“Well, the research keeps me busy...”

Ignoring my advice, she quickly went back to preparing for the next test.

Is she really okay? I mean, I’m not in much of a position to talk, given that I’m lying half-dead on the sofa after my training with Lilith, but still.

“Research students are pretty much all like this. We’re slaves for the sake of human progress. The prison known as university is our forced labor camp. No pay, no labor laws. That is the reality of the research lab.”

“Eep...”

We shuddered. Complaining about high school exams seemed trivial compared to this. Would we also experience such hardships when we entered university someday? Even Cain and his comrades,

all of whom had faced some of the toughest battles in the world, were visibly shaken.

"Indeed," Lalo muttered. "Research is grueling. The more cutting-edge the research, the more it feels like wandering endlessly through an unknown labyrinth."

"Professor Lalo, you understand my struggles?"

As expected of the seasoned sorcerer who'd done research at the Great Laboratory, Lalo deeply understood the challenges of magic research.

"Brigitta, I took the liberty of reading your most recent publication. I could tell you put deep thought into the experimental data. Your analysis was excellent."

"Professor..."

"However, I noticed a stark lapse in knowledge regarding the experimental methodology in itself, most evident in section three. You should discuss the matter further with your advisor and resubmit it."

"Oh."

Brigitta's delighted expression instantly turned to despair. Lalo...was merciless. Brigitta's sleep time was now doomed to shrink even further.

"W-Well...let's set that aside for now."

Ah, she's losing her grip on reality.

"We still have some more tests to run... Before that, let me share the results we've obtained so far. First, Lisalinde and Melvy."

"Y-Yes!"

"Yes...urrrgh. I'm stuck."

Melvy shot to her feet the moment her name was called. I tried to stand too, but my body just wouldn't budge. I remained sprawled on the sofa.

"You can stay where you are."

"Sorry."

Brigitta showed a bit of tact. I felt like hiding in a hole.

"Regarding the research subject you requested: the angel's heart and the fallen angel's heart... To put it simply, we were unable to detect anything."

"I see..."

According to Lilith, I supposedly had an organ called a fallen angel's heart somewhere inside me, while Melvy possessed an angel's heart. These were the sources of an angel's power, and it was because these hearts existed within us that we humans were able to use the divine power known as holy magic. However, the institute had failed to identify any trace of said hearts.

"We used the latest measurement tools, but maybe we took the wrong approach? Should I consider a more specialized method, or perhaps develop a magic tool specifically designed to measure an angel's heart? Hm, that's outside my area of expertise."

"Oh, well...I think it's normal for it to be unmeasurable."

Even though I called it an organ, an angel's heart was special. According to Lilith, it was an organ of pure power, not visible to the eye. It was a special force that only higher beings like gods or angels could perceive; the reason humans couldn't clearly recognize it was likely the fact that we were inferior beings.

"Among humans, there are rare individuals born with the ability to use holy magic. The Russell-Bell Church recognizes such individuals as saints and treats them as living miracles," explained Melvy. "But for hundreds of years, no one has understood why people are born with that ability or what specifically sets them apart from everyone else so, er... Just discovering for certain that humans cannot perceive it at all is a major advancement for the church...and by extension, for humanity."

"I'm glad you think so."

Brigitta scratched the back of her head. In the end, the experiment had been a failure. However, since the client had accepted the results, her job was effectively complete.

"Now on to the other request—our findings on the two holy swords, Andros and Ikryl..."

She paused for a moment. We'd made another research request of the university. Just as Brigitte had spelled out, it was an investigation into the two holy swords.

Originally, Altina had been wary of Cain's Holy Sword Andros, claiming it to be a dubious sword of unknown origin. Then, Lilith had

added to that claim. While she recognized Holy Sword Ikryl as a weapon forged by a friend, she was completely unfamiliar with Holy Sword Andros. She insisted it hadn't been made in Celestia.

So what exactly was Holy Sword Andros? When had it been made? How, and by whom?

As our doubts had deepened, we'd decided to examine it using the most advanced measurement techniques available to humanity.

"So? What did you find? Is my Holy Sword Andros really a holy sword?"

"About that... I'll have my co-researcher explain..."

"Co-researcher?"

As soon as Brigitta said that, the door beside her creaked open and another woman appeared.

"The mana particles that constitute Holy Sword Ikryl are, for the most part, particles with properties unknown to humankind... As you'd expect of a sword made by a god, right?"

"Wha?!"

Our eyes widened in shock. It wasn't the content of her statement that surprised us—it was the unexpected nature of this woman's appearance. After all, the woman who had just entered the room was...

"Tiny!"

"Huh?! Who?! A middle schooler?!"

She was very...petite. Yes, no matter how I looked at her, she couldn't have been older than twelve or thirteen. I would have easily mistaken her as an elementary or middle schooler. At the very least, she certainly didn't look like a university student, let alone a high schooler.

Her facial features were youthful too. While there were certainly plenty of short adult women, the girl before us lacked even a hint of maturity. She simply looked like a child. We were in a cutting-edge research institution, a place completely unsuitable for such a young girl, yet she spoke as if she were exactly where she was meant to be.

"Oh? Is this that age discrimination thing? Do you think being young means being unintelligent? Now, isn't that a terrible prejudice

to have? Should the noble heroes who represent justice really be holding on to such biases? Oh, how you wound me! I'm going to cry."

"Hmm..."

The tiny girl in the oversized, baggy lab coat grinned mischievously as she taunted us. She claimed to be on the verge of tears, but I couldn't feel even a trace of that from her; the words she spoke were all contradicted by her impish, teasing expression.

"Milia!" Lalo cried out. "What are you doing here?"

"Hey, grandpa. Nothing much. Classes were boring, so I came over here to play. And I get an allowance if I help out with the research."

"Grandpa?!"

Her appearance was one thing, but the true surprise came from the word she threw in. The girl—who Lalo had called Milia—had just referred to him as "grandpa." *What? Is this kid really Mr. Lalo's granddaughter?!*

"Ahem... Let me introduce her." Brigitta cleared her throat, "This is Lamilia Volgandev. She is, indeed, Professor Lalo's granddaughter."

"Yup! I'm Lamilia! I'll still be nice to you even if you're full of age-based prejudice, so be grateful! ♪"

"Huh?"

Lamilia introduced herself with a belligerent smile. The vein on Cain's forehead was twitching with frustration.

In any case, Lalo had called her Milia, so perhaps that was her nickname.

"She's only twelve," Brigitta explained. "She's still in the middle school division, but she's so extraordinarily brilliant that we have her helping out with research... I guess you can say it runs in the blood."

"As expected of my granddaughter."

We were left speechless. It was already shocking enough that she was Lalo's granddaughter, but to hear she was just twelve years old and assisting in advanced university research? It was so absurd, it left us dumbfounded.

I guess...geniuses really do exist.

"Heh heh! ♪ I may be younger than you, but I'm definitely

smarter. Do you get it now, Mr. Hero?”

“What the hell is wrong with this kid?”

Lamilia seized at every opportunity to provoke Cain. All the while, her mischievous smirk never faded for a second.

“Well, whatever. Just explain the results of your tests on the swords already.”

“Aww, you’re no fun... Well, fine. I’ll explain it in a way even an idiot can understand. You should be really, really grateful.”

Cain didn’t take the bait. He simply urged her to explain the results. That wasn’t to say he wasn’t irritated, though—the corners of his lips were twitching in barely contained frustration.

“As I mentioned earlier, the holy sword Ikryl contains mana particles with unknown properties. It’s also got a large quantity of rare holy-element mana particles—those aren’t exactly unknown to us. They’re just rare, and we don’t get many samples.”

“Hm?”

“We can’t say for certain yet, but my working hypothesis is that these unknown particles serve as the ‘selection’ mechanism, taking on the role of choosing a worthy wielder. You know? It’s not like just anyone can wield a holy sword, right? But if my hypothesis is correct, it would be downright revolutionary. Don’t you see? It’s not a magic formula that determines the wielder; the sword’s very makeup—its fundamental particles themselves are making the selection. And they’re doing that without even being fixed to a specific attribute by any other magic formula. Truly a sword forged by the gods.”

“What?”

I could practically see the question marks hanging over our heads.

I hate to admit it, but I only understood a fraction of what she just said. What I did grasp was that Holy Sword Ikryl is, without a doubt, an incredibly powerful sword of the gods.

“Umm... So, in short...” Cain pressed a hand to his forehead as he got his thoughts in order. “Holy Sword Ikryl is full of these unknown...mana particles. I don’t really get it, but they’re so unknowable that you can’t pin them down, even with the latest

technology?”

There was a moment of silence. Hearing Cain’s vague summary, Lamilia’s smug grin grew ever wider.

“Whaaaaaat?! You’re kidding me! All that explanation, and you still don’t get it? Don’t tell me a high school student like you hasn’t heard of the Entanglement of Mana Particle Attribute Fixation and Uncertainty principle?!”

Silence.

“You don’t even know the basics of Magic Particle Dynamics?! Wow, that’s one trash brain you’ve got there! Oh, Mr. Hero! The greatest status, honor, and power in the world, and not a single brain cell to match! ♪”

She just kept fanning the flames. Tiny Lamilia stepped right up to Cain, staring up at him from a hair’s breadth away. Each teasing word was dripping in sadistic amusement, her light golden pigtails swaying in glee.

Cain’s expression grew increasingly stern, but he stood still, silently enduring it. Naturally, dealing with Lamilia would have been a trivial task with his strength. But obviously, he couldn’t just lash out at a little girl. And if he did, it would be the same as admitting that her words had gotten to him.

So all Cain could do was fume and endure.

“I see... So it’s the cheeky brat trait.”

“You know about it, Melvy?”

Melvy had suddenly spoken up. She began to explain in the tone of an expert.

“The ‘cheeky brat’ refers to a character trope in fiction—a small girl who uses a combination of arrogance and condescension to tease and provoke older men. Lately, there has been a rise in men who enjoy having their pride wounded and being degraded by such characters, as it stimulates their masochistic tendencies.”

“What? People actually enjoy getting insulted?”

“There are indeed masochists who derive pleasure from it. They enjoy being belittled and abused by a smaller girl who would otherwise be in an overwhelmingly weaker position than them. Masochism runs deep... There are other similar archetypes, such as

the precocious brat, li'l seductress, and little devil, though each has distinct traits and should be properly differentiated."

"The world is full of idiots, huh?" Cain shrugged.

He wasn't about to deny people their preferences, but he certainly had no intention of understanding them either.

But I had to admit... I kinda got it. Just imagining that tiny, adorable pigtailed girl looking down on me and calling me names... I felt a strange shiver run down my spine.

This is bad... Very bad. I feel like I'm standing in front of a door that should never be opened. I am a pure and virtuous lady! I won't judge others for their tastes, but I mustn't drown in that bog of depravity myself! As a noble, I must be a paragon of dignity and order!

"Hey, I know those kinds of characters exist in fiction, but this is just how I am. I'd appreciate it if you didn't lump me in with those manga and novel characters, okay?"

"Y-Yeah..."

Lamilia seemed to pout a bit at Melvy's in-depth explanation.

Well, I can see where she's coming from. There aren't many people who would be happy to be told, "Hey, you're a weirdo just like that character in this manga," when they're simply being themselves.

"Or what is it? Are you guys the kind of sad little people who can't even distinguish fiction from reality? Groooss! Trash minds with creep mindsets. I feel sorry that you're even alive. Oh, I wish I could lend you at least a thousandth of my intelligence!"

Cain crossed his arms and scowled.

"I see... I'm starting to feel an urge to yell, 'You little brat!' and punch her."

"I wouldn't recommend it, Cain," Sylphie calmly interjected. "In reality, that'd just be assaulting a child."

"Umm, er, exactly, Cain. A cheeky brat is a fictional trope, and if you say it in real life, it's just an insult. You shouldn't go around calling real women brats..."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it..." he raised his hands in surrender.

Getting all riled up over the words of a little girl would be childish,

and resorting to violence was out of the question. Besides, Lamilia was clearly an actual genius. Cain had no real way of fighting back.

"Pfffft, hee hee. The great hero, the world's hope, surrendering to a tiny little girl? What a wimp. Humanity's future is looking bleak."

Lamilia gleefully swung her pigtails back and forth as she continued to taunt Cain.

"Good grief... Why do I always get involved with the weirdos?" He heaved a deep sigh, his tone growing gruff. "We're getting off-topic. Tell me about the results of the analysis already?"

"Oh my, *sooo* impatient. The holy sword Ikryl is, well, exactly as I just explained. All we really learned is that there's a lot of stuff we don't understand. The real issue is with Andros..."

Our hero had never been known for having a particularly long fuse. He could restrain himself, but I could see his irritation in the twitching of his fingertips. Lamilia seemed to pick up on it too, judging by her bemused grin, but she was the sort who took her work seriously when called upon. She dropped the teasing and began to explain her findings.

"Holy Sword Andros did not contain a single particle of holy magic. Not a spec. In other words, the powers of the gods were not involved in its creation."

"Hmm... That's surprising, but at the same time, not completely unexpected. I mean, even after obtaining the sword, I wasn't able to use holy magic. But this sword's been protecting the world of humans for over eight hundred years, right? Is there nothing special about it?"

Andros could not channel holy magic or impart this divine skill to its wielder. We were already well aware of that. Even Lilith, a high-ranking figure from Celestia, didn't seem to know too much about it. The fact that it didn't contain any divine power was no great surprise.

There was a whole list of other questions we wanted answers to, however, such as: What exactly was this sword? Where did it get its tremendous power? What kind of magic technology allowed it to grant such incredible strength to its wielder? And so on. Even the smallest clue toward elucidating the sword's true nature would be

appreciated.

"The power within this sword comes from an incredibly advanced and complicated magical formula," Lamilia continued. "It's so powerful and intricate, it's hard to believe it was made by human hands. Frankly, it's so high level, we're struggling to make heads or tails of it."

"Huh... How complicated are we talking, exactly?"

"Right, well...if we continued studying and analyzing it using the tools in this lab for another fifty years, we *might* make some progress. But I couldn't even guarantee that."

"Fif—"

Cain's face stiffened. Academy Town's facilities were developed with the nation's dignity on the line. Naturally, the lab's analysis tools were on the cutting edge, the most advanced in the world. And even with that, it would take at least fifty years... It was a dizzying timescale.

"We...already know Andros's capabilities. It can fire off ranged slashes that I can control at will, and it's got a super physical enhancement with side effects. There are a few other minor abilities if you want me to list them off. Even knowing them all, it's still too much to analyze?"

"That means the sword must be hiding something else. With a magic formula this intricate and incomprehensible...there's no way that's all there is to it."

Silence spread over the room. There were still abilities within Andros that even *Cain* was unaware of... No, in fact the sword had been wielded by heroes across history for eight hundred years. Its legacy had been meticulously recorded and preserved. What this really meant was that for eight hundred years, not a single hero had managed to unlock all of its abilities.

"And lending your holy sword to our lab for fifty years is...not going to happen, right?"

"Of course not. You never know when a battle could break out. I need to keep it by my side."

Although the war with the demons had reached a stalemate, it could still erupt into full-scale conflict at any moment. Despite the

dubious nature of this sword, Cain had no choice but to continue using it.

"But you understand, right, mister?" Lamilia prodded Cain's chest with her index finger. "No matter how complicated it is, and even if it's hard to believe that it was made by humans...the formulas incorporated into Andros are still within the realm of human magic. They're just a little more advanced than what we currently know."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm saying that this 'holy' sword doesn't use holy magic, or the power of gods, or any other unknown mana particles that don't exist here. It was created entirely using the magic technology of this world. We haven't fully analyzed it yet, but that's the most likely conclusion. Do you get what I'm saying?" The edges of Lamilia's lips curled into a sly, almost sultry smile. "Just maybe, this holy sword of yours was made by humans."

Altina had searched through countless documents before concluding that the sword's origins were completely unknown. Lilith from Celestia had stated that neither gods nor angels had a hand in its creation.

There had to be something holy about it, right? It was a holy sword... That was what humanity had believed in for eight hundred years. But perhaps it had been made by humans—that's what the girl before our eyes was claiming.

A history of eight centuries was about to be turned on its head.

"Oh... There's one more thing we discovered about Holy Sword Andros," Lamilia continued as if the next part were merely an afterthought.

"What is it?"

"It's about that super physical enhancement we were talking about... I think its nature might be a little different from what you think."

"It's nature?"

"Hmm... As a scientist, I don't like making vague statements, so take this with a grain of salt. It's a subtle difference, but rather than a super physical enhancement... It's more like an extreme boost to a human's latent abilities."

"Hmm?"

Lamilia folded her arms while Cain cocked his head quizzically.

"What's so different about that? That sounds pretty much the same to me."

"Well, there's still a lot we don't know about the sword. I might be overthinking it. Just keep it in the back of your mind, okay?"

"Got it."

Though he didn't seem entirely convinced, Cain nodded. If there was anything we learned from the exchange, it was that we weren't doing any better off than the lab—we hardly understood anything about Andros either.

The room fell quiet once more. Lamilia had finished her report, with nothing to add. We waited, but neither she nor Brigitta spoke up again. Cain and the members of his party all let out deep sighs.

And that was when it happened.

"Pardon me... Wait, huh? Sis, and Liz?"

"Hmm?"

The door to the room opened again, and a new visitor was on the scene.

"Remphie?"

"Yes, a good day to you, Liz."

It was none other than Remphie, Sylphie's younger sister and the third princess of the country.

Strange... What's she doing in the university's research lab? I couldn't think of any reasons. Even her sister Sylphie seemed startled, her eyes widening slightly at this sudden visit.

"Remphie, what are you doing here?"

"Well, you see, sis... Ah, there she is! Milia!"

"Ah, Remphie. You came to play again," Lamilia called back.

"I heard you were doing some interesting research... Research about the heroes, I take it? In that case, you could have just asked me."

"Even if I did, there's nothing you could really do to help out."

There's something very casual about their conversation. Are they friends? Wait, I remember now! Remphie said it herself. She made a friend at school, and that friend turned out to be Lalo's grandchild...

That was right before she was kidnapped by Brian, Captain of the Royal Guard.

"Now that you mention it, you did say that you were friends with Mr. Lalo's granddaughter."

"Yes! We've been getting along very well!"

At the time, Remphie had also said that her friend was very straightforward, and always said whatever was on her mind. She said that she found it rather refreshing.

Lamilia certainly fit the bill. I'd never expected her to be quite this cheeky and sadistic, though.

"So...who's the girl behind you?"

Another girl had in fact entered the room with Remphie. She looked to be around the same age as Lamilia and Remphie, so it was easy to imagine her being a friend of theirs from the same middle school division. She was an unassuming girl; the most notable thing about her was her clear nervousness as she hid behind Remphie's back.

"Oh, let me introduce her. This is my other close friend, Pyore."

"Umm, er...uh, it's a p-p-pleasure to meet you. I am greatly honored to be in the presence of C-Cain the hero and his comrades... A-Also, thank you for looking out for my mother the other day..."

"Mother?"

The girl named Pyore offered a polite greeting, but we weren't quite sure what to make of what she was saying.

Mother? Have we met her mother somewhere before?

"Umm, yes. During the match between the hero and the new hero, my mother was commentating..."

"Oh! You're Ms. Fiore's daughter!"

When Cain and Altina had dueled with their holy swords on the line, it was Pyore's mother, Fiore, who had served as the announcer. Though she usually worked as a receptionist at the adventurers' guild, due to her many talents, she often took on various roles, such as coordinating and commentating on an assortment of events hosted by the guild.

I see. Even though Ms. Fiore looks young, I hear she's actually

thirty-seven. I didn't expect her to have a daughter this grown up.

"Of course, do send her my regards. My name is Lisalinde. I was working alongside your mother as an analyst for that match, for what it's worth."

"Ah, y-yes... I'm sure she'll be happy to hear it."

Pyore and I exchanged tense bows. What a small world—I'd run into someone I shared a strange connection with when I'd least expected it.

"Milia makes frequent visits to the university, so we've been coming along to study with her," Remphie explained. I finally understood how everyone in the room had come to be there.

"I believe you when you say you're studying, but you can't possibly understand university-level research, can you? Are you sure you're learning anything here?" asked Sylphie.

"Ah ha ha... You're right, sis. I can't understand the research at all. But visiting a university like this helps me get a clearer picture of my future. Plus, the research students here are very kind; they help me with the things I didn't understand in class, and with my homework!"

"Hmm, as long as you're learning something, I have no complaints," Sylphie said, placing a gentle hand on her sister's head.

"Yes! The people here are always so kind and— Ah?!"

"Hm?"

Remphie suddenly cut herself off with a gasp. It was like she had suddenly spotted something so startling that she couldn't contain herself. I followed her line of sight...

"Sir Wolfe! To think I'd run into you here!"

"Erk..."

The troubled look on Wolfe's face practically screamed, *Egads, I've been spotted!*

From the moment Remphie had appeared in the lab, he'd been slowly inching his way to an inconspicuous corner of the room, trying his best not to draw any attention. His efforts, however, were in vain. Beaming with excitement, she jogged over to her beloved.

"To think we'd meet by chance at a place like this... Truly, we must be bound by the red string of fate!"

"No, we're not. Definitely not. I refuse to accept it."

Wolfe was here because he could use the powerful dark magic he'd learned directly from the demons. He'd been invited to compare his abilities with mine—my hell magic against his dark magic.

Remphie's cheeks were flushed, her hands fidgeting. Meanwhile, Wolfe was sweating profusely, looking profoundly troubled. It was like I could see straight into his mind, which was occupied by a singular question: *Am I going to get arrested again?*

"A burly man being pursued by a middle schooler?"

"So the rumors about one of the hero's comrades being a pedo were true..."

"I hear he's trying to marry into money."

The university students in the lab were whispering among themselves. It seemed that news of Princess Remphie's love had finally gotten out to the general public. Once it was recognized—not just by the royal family, but by the populace as well—poor Wolfe would no longer have a leg to stand on. It wouldn't be long before he was dragged off to the graveyard of life known as marriage.

"Aaaaaarrrgh! I shouldn't have come here!" Wolf wailed.

"Hmmmmmm? So *you're* the one Remphie's always going *ooon* and *ooon* about?"

"Ick..."

Lamilia closed in on Wolfe, smirking as though she'd just found a fun new toy to play with. The man furrowed his brow—he'd been there to see the girl picking on Cain, and he knew nothing good was coming.

"Maaan, such a creep. Are you getting aroused, looking at me and little Pyore too? Wow, I ought to call the police! ♪"

"Anything but the cops. *I mean it*," Wolfe responded with complete seriousness.

"Umm, Milia? What did you say about me? He's aroused—what does that mean?"

"Oh, no, no, this isn't for your ears, Pyore. Could you back off a bit?"

"Huh? What?"

"I'll see that you learn all you need to in time, so please stay pure

for now."

Lamilia promptly pushed back Pyore, who'd approached the scene out of curiosity.

Wait, what does she plan on teaching her? I was suddenly anxious about little Pyore's future.

"The more I look at you, the more I see an uncouth boor of a man—a pile of muscles that reeks of potatoes. Just what part of you did Remphie fall for?" Lamilia turned back to Wolfe.

"I don't really get it either."

"Hmm. With how much Remphie's been singing your praises, I was always wondering what kind of man you were... And what a dreary man you turned out to be. A virgin who doesn't know the first thing about romance."

"Well, sorry for being a virgin."

"What?"

Wolfe had just dropped a bombshell.

Lamilia wasn't the only one whose eyes went wide. Even Cain and Altina were staring at him, their faces frozen in shock.

"No way! You really *are* a virgin?! Ah ha ha ha ha! I can't believe it! You're such a loser peon that I actually feel genuinely sorry for you!"

"Shut it."

As she cackled away, Cain gave his childhood friend a look of pity.

"Wolfe, you..."

"I've been living in demonland these past few years! You could cut me a little slack, couldn't you?!"

Wolfe was nineteen. It wasn't really strange for him to still be a virgin. Well, by the common standards of the country, perhaps he was a little on the late side? Not that I, a virgin myself, had any right to speak on the matter.

"Sir Wolfe is a virgin... Heh heh heh, his first time must absolutely be mine..."

Wolfe's hair stood on end, and his body shuddered as Remphie eyed him with the sharp glare of a predator locking onto its prey.

"Peon! ♪ Peon! ♪ Weak dick little loser! ♪ I can't stop cracking up at your pitiful widdle pee-pee! ♪ Billions upon billions of sperm gone

to waste! ♪ How sad! ♪”

“Shut it...”

The cheeky brat kept up her relentless taunting.

Wolfe had only come to help with some research, yet he’d exposed a painful truth and had become subject to the ridicule of a little girl. To top it all off, his escape routes were steadily being cut off. What a terrible day it was to be Wolfe.

“Police! Nobody move!”

“We sensed the presence of a wicked man making a little girl say obscene things... Wait, you again?!”

“Aaaaaargh, come on!”

And so, once again, Wolfe found himself at the mercy of the police. They were practically on a first-name basis at this point. He’d only been called to the lab for magical research...yet today had resulted in one misfortune after the next.

Thus, our day at the university came to an end.

And once again, the biggest victim of all was Wolfe... Was he simply born under an unlucky star?

Chapter 70: Then—Temptation! A Little Succubus Temptress!

"Don't worry about a thing, Sir Cain. I'm going to make sure you feel good, just leave it all to me."

"..."

"Don't think about a thing. You just have to leave your body to me. It will all be over by the time you've finished counting the stains on the ceiling. All while you get a taste of supreme bliss! ♪"

It was nighttime, and a lewd scene was unfolding in a room at an inn.

Cain lay on the bed, a girl around ten years old poised over his crotch, whispering sweet, devilish words to him. All appearances made it abundantly clear that she was but a little girl, yet she was trying to seduce the hero into committing a lewd act. Cain still had his trousers firmly pulled up, but it was only a matter of time before the girl stripped him down.

The girl was wearing very revealing clothing. She was dressed in black cloth that only barely covered her breasts and privates, with wings on her back and a tail sprouting from her behind.

An imp, a little devil—the words suited her perfectly.

"It'll be quite all right, Sir Cain. Let's enjoy a moment of dizzying pleasure together. ♪ I'll bring you bliss so sublime it will take you straight to heaven, and debauchery so destructive, you'll drop straight into hell! ♪"

"..."

"Sir Cain?"

By the nation's standards, Cain was over the age of adulthood, and he was being propositioned by a ten-year-old girl. Anything beyond this point would be a huge problem...and a crime.

But it wasn't.

“Hey. Liz.”

“Yes?”

“Can we, like, pause for a second?”

The ten-year-old girl mounting him was, in fact, a transformed Liz. This was a form of role-play, so to speak. Liz had transformed into a young girl to give her lover Cain a different kind of stimulation.

Like Cain, Liz was also of legal age. The use of transformation magic made it an immoral spectacle to be sure, but there were no legal problems. Her revealing little devil outfit was also just cosplay.

“Hmm, so today it’s the little temptress?”

“You know about it, Melvy?”

All of a sudden, the door swung open, and there was Melvy. Thus began an explanation from an expert who’d been thoroughly educated by the master (Liz).

“As the name implies, the little temptress refers to someone who’s both little and a temptress. In other words, it means a girl who, despite her youthful appearance, is sexually knowledgeable, and voracious about sex. Due to these contradictory elements, barely any of them actually exist in reality, and it is mostly used as a term to refer to fictional characters.”

“The hell?”

As per usual, it was a world he couldn’t keep up with. All Cain could do was offer a frown.

“Incidentally, there are similar archetypes, such as the cheeky brat, precocious brat, and the little devil, but there are clear distinctions between them, so please be careful about how you use the terms.”

“Huh? What? Cheeky...?”

“Umm, er, would you like a detailed explanation?”

“No, I’m good. I don’t think I’m ever gonna need that information.”

“Is that so? Then my job here is done.”

The expert stepped down. The lecture was over.

“You’ve grown, my student.”

“Umm... I don’t remember ever becoming your student...”

It was a beat late, but the embarrassment from having given such a heated explanation finally set in. Melvy flushed red and began to fidget.

"Oh, what about lolicon? Is that different?"

"Sir Cain. Lolicon refers to men who like loli characters. That's the man in the scenario. The terms Melvy laid out are used to describe the girls, so they are completely different."

"Ah, I see..."

Cain gave a slight nod, convinced.

"Well, it seems like I'm not a lolicon, then."

"Pardon?"

"Liz, your appearance right now isn't really doing it for me."

Regardless of the circumstances, a scantily clad woman was positioned right atop his crotch. What an envious situation it was, and yet Cain seemed perfectly composed.

"Huh? Is this a failure, then?"

The young Liz poked his rambunctious rod to confirm it. Unfortunately, his rod wasn't the least bit rambunctious and remained limp and dormant.

In other words, Cain wasn't the least bit excited by her appearance.

"I guess that means I've got a higher strike zone. Ideally, someone my age or older."

"Hmm..."

"And if I'm being greedy, a girl with a real *boing*, ya feel— Eep?!"

Cain had gotten a wee bit complacent. After being raked over the coals so many times by Liz's mischief, he felt proud that he'd managed to evade her so easily. He looked up at Liz—more so at the somewhat frustrated look on her face—as he calmly told her about his preferences...only to be hit by a strong pressure that sent chills down his spine.

"Wha?!"

"This killing intent!"

Cain and Liz both shuddered. Maintaining their postures, they stiffly shifted their heads to take in the source of the malice. They were the only ones in the room—them and one other.

Naturally, the tremendous burst of murderous intent had come from Melvy.

"Is that so... So Cain likes a woman with a real *boing*... He is completely uninterested in young-looking women..."

"W-Wait, Melvy. How about you take a deep breath?"

"Th-That's right, Lady Melvy. L-Let's take it easy."

Cain and Liz tried to reason with Melvy. However, the ominous, murky pressure leaking from her was unrelenting. The two of them broke into a sweat.

"So, in the end...it's all about tits? Is that it? Is the world made of tits? Oh, Lord, why? Why have you bestowed upon humanity such an absolute and unjust disparity as *breasts*?"

"That's not it! Get a hold of yourself, Melvy! It's true that I'm not a lolicon, but I do like you! I love you from the bottom of my heart!"

"But my chest...is flat...and I look like a child."

Melvy was fifteen, but she was short for her age, had a baby face, and appeared quite young overall. It would have been easy to classify her as a loli. But Cain tried his hardest to reason with her.

"You're wrong!" he cried out, "Sure, a ten-year-old kid doesn't do it for me, yeah! But you're not like that! You're small and slender and cute, and I love that about you! You're the expert! You should know the difference, right?!"

"He's right! Your petite cuteness is, strictly speaking, in a different genre from an overly loli-ish loli! You'll offend the professional lolicons if you get them mixed up!"

"The hell is a professional lolicon?"

Liz's words had Cain cocking his head.

"Though lolicon can be summed up in a single word, it's actually a very broad field. The exact origin of lolicon—a Lolita Complex—refers to adult males who have a sexual preference for girls who appear to be between the ages of thirteen to eighteen, while those who go for anything younger than that fall under the Alice Complex, and are classified as such."

"And, umm, er... There is also the medical term pedophilia, which is, strictly speaking, an attraction to prepubescent children—meaning under the age of thirteen in most cases."

“Why do you guys know so much about this?”

The masters were well-versed in lolicon.

“The general public lumps it all together, refusing to classify it so finely...but I must say that classifying the love of a ten-year-old girl and the love of a fifteen-year-old girl into the same category and making an issue of it is a mistake!”

“Don’t you feel embarrassed, yelling that so loudly?”

The little devil Liz puffed out her chest with pride as she gave her two cents. And though Cain felt relieved that his own view—or rather his excuse—had been validated, he couldn’t help but feel a bit conflicted.

“And you know how old I am, right, Melvy? I’m seventeen. You’re fifteen. What’s the world coming to if we call my love for a woman only two years younger than me lolicon?”

“Umm, er...you do have a point.”

“That’s right! Melvy! Cain is head over heels for you! Have some confidence!”

“Hmmm.”

Thanks to their desperate pleas, the sinister presence that had been emanating from Melvy gradually subsided. Her cheeks were still a tad puffed up, but that wasn’t too much of an issue. If anything, it was cute.

“Phew...”

Liz and Cain heaved deep sighs of relief. They’d managed to calm down the tyrannical fiend that detested all the big breasts in the world. It was a relief that Melvy had come back to her senses. The threat looming in the room had been removed before it exploded.

And then...

“Police!”

“Freeze! Freeze!”

“Eep...?!”

“Wah?! Wh-What?!”

A squadron of police officers burst onto the scene.

“I felt the presence of a bad man laying hands on a young girl! Put your hands where I can... Hm?”

All three of them were startled by the sudden intrusion of the

police. But for some reason, the officers stopped with doubtful looks on their faces. The scene was as bad as it could be. A man whom the country considered an adult was being mounted by a ten-year-old girl in revealing attire as both lay on a bed.

For all intents and purposes, they'd caught Cain red-handed. A bead of sweat dripped down the man's forehead as he realized he was about to become a criminal.

But it never happened.

"No...my apologies. The lady is simply using transformation magic. I apologize for the misunderstanding."

"Hmm?"

"Oh, no, pardon us."

The angel officers had managed to see straight through Liz's transformation magic.

Even though Liz had taken on a youthful appearance, she was a bona fide adult herself. She was just using transformation magic to play around, and no one there had done anything that could be considered a crime.

With that said, the heroes were a little surprised. To think that Liz's magic would be thwarted so easily.

"But a word of advice. It's not a good idea to play games that can be easily misunderstood. It's easy for us to get the wrong idea, and there's a chance your behavior might escalate and lead to an interest in real minors. Please have your fun in moderation."

"Er, thanks for the advice..."

"Sorry for the trouble."

"We'll leave you to it, then."

With that, the angel coppers were on their way.

Silence took over, and the three who remained were frozen in stunned disbelief.

"Those officers... They detected Liz's transformation magic at a glance?"

Liz's magic was highly advanced and incredibly powerful. It went beyond what an ordinary human would be able to figure out. Yet those officers had instantly seen through her disguise. They couldn't help but be shocked by this.

“Perhaps...angel officers are far more proficient in magic than we ever imagined.”

“Umm, it’s quite...surprising.”

This was back before they knew the truth about the angels.

And so, their minds raced; their eyes wandered aimlessly as they spaced out in a room, in a scene that reeked of debauchery.

Chapter 71: Now—The SSS+ Dungeon

"Agyahhh! Fungyahhh! Ogyahhh!"

"*HSSSHHH!*"

"Angyaaaaaaaaah!"

My wretched screams echoed endlessly through the dim, damp cave. It was a dreary landscape marred by jagged rock formations; a dungeon crawling with monsters.

Before me was a large, wasplike creature with razor-sharp scythes for arms. The fearsome creature was darting about at terrifying speeds as it came at me with nothing less than the desire to shred me to bits.

"Ugaaahhh! Oryaaaaaah!"

I intercepted my overpowered foe with holy magic.

It really was a life-or-death battle. A single moment of carelessness would spell certain doom. It was in the midst of such madness that the latest stage of my insane training was being carried out.

"You got this, Lizzy! Do your best! These measly monsters are no match for you!"

"Cuuuuuurse yooooooouuu, Li-liiiiiith!"

Of course, it was my master, Lilith, who had thrown me into this nightmare, and she seemed as divorced from sense and reason as ever. Perhaps a being like her could never have grasped a human's common sense in the first place, though. With the smile of an angel, she threw me straight into hell.

This training was meant to help me control my fallen angel powers and, unfortunately, it had been life or death from the very first lesson. My body was constantly left in tatters as a power too great for it was forcibly drawn out from within me. If I let my guard

down for even an instant, those fallen angel powers would mercilessly shave away at my psyche, sending me into an uncontrollable rampage. And so, I had to keep myself together through pure willpower, all while my body and mind were ripped to shreds.

In short, even in our perfectly normal training sessions, my life was constantly on the line.

Somehow, I'd managed to survive two weeks of Lilith's absolutely unreasonable demands. Every passing moment could have potentially been the death of me, and I wasn't given a second to relax, but I *had* started to grow just a little *wee* bit accustomed to my fallen angel powers.

I might just survive this! Maybe I can actually make this work! I thought. Of course, it wasn't that easy. It never was.

"All righty, then! Let's move on to some reeeaaal combat!" my vexing master proclaimed.

I resisted with everything I had. *No! No way! Absolutely not! It's definitely not happening! You're the worst, master!* I kicked and screamed and stamped my feet, but Lilith just dragged me along without a shred of mercy and tossed me straight into the dungeon.

"*HHHSSSSHHHH!*"

"Ugyaaaaaahhh! Ongyaaahhh! I'm going to die, I'm going to die, I'm going to *die*! These monsters are way too strong—I'm actually going to die!"

And it wasn't just any dungeon—it was the extra-dangerous ultimate SSS+ dungeon that Cain and his comrades were currently in the middle of challenging!

Normally, adventurers and dungeons were both measured on a scale of F to S. However, the world was a vast place, and there existed people and dungeons so absurdly powerful and fearsome that they defied standard measurement. Such people and places were akin to urban legends and playground rumors, and were placed in the SS Rank.

And the dungeon the heroes were in the midst of exploring—hidden beneath Academy Town—was an SSS+ dungeon. Legend had it that in its depths lay a relic capable of breaking the barrier around

the demon lord's castle, meaning the heroes had no choice but to try and conquer it.

A dungeon fit only for humanity's strongest warriors—brave men and women who had surpassed all mortal limits—that was the SSS+ dungeon.

And I...had been thrown into the very same place on an angel's whim!

"Waaaaaaaaah! Save me! Someone save me!"

"*Broooowwwwwwrrr!*"

"Wow..."

"This is some messed up stuff..."

A massive minotaur, easily over ten meters tall, raised an impossibly large axe and lowered it toward me. One hit from that thing and it wouldn't just turn me into mincemeat—there would hardly be a scrap of me left.

"*Urrrrrrgggggghhh...*"

That was why I backed away with tears in my eyes, blindly firing off Hell Lasers, Holy Lasers, and their combined form of Twilight Lasers again and again in a desperate bid to stay alive.

A fusion of holy magic and hell magic... Apparently, that branch of magic was also simply called twilight magic. I'd managed to learn it somehow or another, but using it in battle was another story. Every time I unleashed twilight magic, the fallen angel powers threatened to overtake my mind.

"Waaaaaaaaah! I'm at my limit! I can't take this anymore! Waaaaaaaaah!"

"Ha ha... Yeah, I kinda feel bad for her."

Cain and his party looked on aghast while Lilith continued watching with the same undying smile. I could never tell what was going on in her head.

But right now, that smile is pissing me off!

"Graaaaaaaaah! Like hell I'm going to die heeeeeeeeere!"

"*Broooooooowr!*"

While dodging the axe, I managed to get off a few dozen lasers. The minotaur's massive body came crashing down.

I had done it. I had won. I'd survived...!

"Hoo-rah! Wait. Noooooooooo!"

"*Fssshhh!*"

Just as I celebrated my victory over my fearsome foe, I was rudely interrupted by the pounce of a massive, tigerlike monster. This was a dungeon. There were more monsters than there were stars in the sky.

"I'm dying! I'm actually dying! Waaaaaaaaah!"

"Crap! Liz is about to lose it!"

Let me remind you—I had yet to master my fallen angel powers. I was doing a little better than when I had started out, but my powers still gnawed at my mind, pushing me closer and closer to losing control of myself. I was merely clinging to the thinnest thread of sanity in a maelstrom of madness.

And to expect me to maintain that? With all these monsters out for my blood?

Nope! It's impossible! There's no way I could stay sane in a situation like this! Nope, nope, nope, it's way too soon for real combat!

"I'm going to die! BWEEEEEEEEH!"

"Liz!"

The tiger monster was vaporized as power erupted from my body... At the same time, my consciousness faded away.

"Aaaah! There you go again, Lizzy! No, no, no! What do you think you're doing, going berserk like that?"

"Bffah!"

But just like in our usual training, Lilith's slap narrowly brought me back to my senses.

"You can't let your fallen angel powers run wild in a cave like this. You're going to bury everyone alive. Don't you want to become someone your friends can rely on, Lizzy?"

"That's... Y-Yes, that's right."

One wrong move and the monsters would kill me. One misstep in controlling my powers, and I could destroy the whole cave. Despite my harsh situation, Lilith's words reminded me of the purpose of all this training. I wanted to be acknowledged, to stand by the heroes—who'd all surpassed human limits—with my chest puffed out and my

head held high.

That's why I need to master these powers, no matter what it takes! I renewed my resolve.

Again, Lilith smiled. "Then you need to keep at it! You can do it! I know you can, Lizzy! Enemies like these are nothing for you!"

"Yes! Ah...hold on! At least... At least have a little mercy! If you could be so kind as to keep one or two of these tiger monsters occupied?!"

"*Fsssh!*"

"*Growwr!*"

Another seven or eight of the same tigerlike monsters burst toward me at breakneck speed from deep within the cave. They were a lot nimbler than I would have liked; unlike with the minotaur, a simple backstep wouldn't cut it.

"What do I do?! What *can* I do?!"

Even the time I spent mulling it over was time wasted. The monsters were rapidly closing in. If I dawdled, they'd surround me and tear me apart with their claws and fangs.

"Defense... Yeah, I need to defend! But I never practiced... Whatever! Defense! Defense!"

"*Fssh!*"

"Ah! *Defense!*"

That's when it hit me. My mind went back to that night at the sea, dredging up the vague memory of a defensive technique I'd used when I'd completely lost control. It was like my life was flashing before my eyes, the scenes crossing my brain as if I were personally experiencing them once again.

"Holy Hell..."

I intertwined the pillars of white and black, merging and mixing and spreading them wide. The swirling energies formed a sinister, spiraling barrier wide enough to block the cave path from end to end.

"Defensive Wall!"

"*Graugh?!*"

"*Grah?!*"

It was the same defensive magic I'd unknowingly conjured at the

beach—twilight magic fused from holy and hell magic. I'd created an incredibly durable barrier that even Cain and the other heroes had struggled to overcome.

I'd managed to reproduce it—not in a berserk frenzy, but of my own will!

The tiger monsters slammed straight into the unforeseen wall and came to an abrupt stop. Their high-speed charge had backfired on them, the impact alone seeming to do significant damage.

"Whoa! That's our Liz!"

"Not half-bad!"

Praise came from Team Hero behind me. It felt a bit strange to be complimented for a technique that had once given them so much trouble. But I could hardly blame them—what could be better than having that same power on their side?

"Holy Laser!"

"*Graugh?!*"

"Twilight Laser!"

"*Gyaoh!*"

I opened up small holes in the wall, just enough to pass my laser attacks through. My fallen angel powers were still tearing through me, but with my newfound defense, I had gained composure, enough to methodically overwhelm the tiger monsters.

"Wonderful! I never expected you to pull off such an advanced defensive technique so soon!"

"R-Really? Eh he he... I'm just glad I could defend myself."

Lilith enthusiastically clapped her hands and showered me with praise. It had been tough—truly—but progress and praise was a reward in itself.

"Yep, yep! That's why real combat is always the best training!"

"No! I don't want to do something like that ever again!"

"Aww."

I take it all back. I've had enough of this nightmarish training. Next time she tries to drag me here, I'm going to run with all my might. But...can I even escape from Lilith? Just how strong would I need to be for that? Maybe...getting down on my knees and begging is a safer bet.

As I wrestled with these thoughts, Cain called out to me.

"Hey now, you're really something, Liz."

"Huh? What do you mean by that, Cain?"

"We're almost at the fiftieth floor, you know."

"Huh?!"

The exploration of the SSS+ dungeon had thus far reached the forty-fifth floor. Thanks to teleportation magic, my training had started on the forty-fifth floor, but I'd been so caught up in fighting for my life that I hadn't even noticed I'd made it five floors since.

No wonder I felt like I was dying! This training is just unreasonable! I swear, I am never doing this again!

"Which means, er..."

"That's right. Up ahead is the boss monster guarding the fiftieth floor."

"Huh?!"

Tensions rose as the heroes gulped nervously. What awaited us, just down the path, was a powerful monster even they couldn't afford to let their guard down against. I could feel the heroes swelling with a heroic gusto.

"W-Wait Hold on! Give me a minute! That's not the kind of opponent you fight as part of training! Let me go hooome!"

But there was one person who put a damper on the moment: me, obviously. I'd barely survived against the regular monsters. There was no possible way I could take on an even stronger boss monster! My argument was perfectly reasonable!

"No. Can. Do! ♡ You're fighting the boss too, Lizzy! ♪"

"Noooooooooo!"

But my protest was swiftly dismissed as Lilith dragged me on.

This woman... Is she really an angel? Are we one hundred percent sure she's not actually the grim reaper?!

Currently, the party consisted of the usual Cain, Sylphie, Melvy, Rachel, Mitter, and Altina. (Lalo and Wolfe were on standby on the surface, just in case), with Kuon and Orc Emperor also present to represent Team Demon Lord.

Since conquering this dungeon directly tied into defeating the demon lord—the "revolutionary army leader" as Kuon would put it—

the former demon lord's army had formed a temporary alliance with the heroes. Our interests aligned.

But among such stalwart members, there was a single complete novice mixed in. Me. No matter how you looked at it, I was not someone who should be challenging the fiftieth-floor boss monster of an SSS+ dungeon!

"Well, I'm sure Liz will be just fine."

"Though she complaineth, she hath still made it this far..."

"I'll be counting on you in the boss fight, Liz!"

"I don't want this!"

Yet despite everything, they were all treating this far too casually. The trust of my comrades, which I had once yearned for so deeply, now felt suffocating. I didn't need this kind of blind faith! What I wanted was an evaluation that matched my actual abilities—along with some good old-fashioned common sense!

"All right! It's boss time! Everyone, on your guard!"

"Yeah!"

"Leeet gooo ooof meeee!"

My pleas fell on deaf ears as Cain pushed open the large doors leading to the fiftieth-floor boss.

We all stared, wide-eyed. What awaited us was quite the peculiar sight.

"Huh?"

For starters, there was no boss to be seen. But more than that, the scenery itself was bizarre, filled with things that none of us had ever seen before.

There were lines upon lines of buildings, each rising to terrifying heights. Just how many tens...no, how many hundreds of meters tall were they? Gigantic, rectangular structures loomed over us overwhelmingly. These gargantuan constructs stretched as far as the eye could see, each and every one of them taller than even our kingdom's grandest structure, the royal palace itself. It felt as though our nation's pride and dignity had been utterly torn to shreds.

And it wasn't just the buildings. Everything in sight was strange. Carriages of iron sped around at high speeds with no horses to pull

them, and the ground was covered in a material quite unlike stone pavement.

The sky was dark—almost like a starless night. And yet, the street lamps here were far, far brighter than the ones we had back home, illuminating the place with an almost unnatural brilliance.

It was...as if we'd stepped into an entirely different world.

"Where...are we?" someone muttered. I was so far out of sorts I couldn't even register who. But that was likely the thought that we all shared.

And the beings that populated this landscape...were nothing like humans. Some had horns, others had wings sprouting from their backs, and others stood over five meters tall with bodies covered in red or blue skin. It was almost like we were looking at...

"Devils... Hellspawn..."

That was the impression they gave. A good portion of them held small, rectangular objects to their ears, murmuring to themselves. What were they even doing?

"Oh? This place is..."

As we struggled to process what was going on, Lilith alone seemed to catch onto something. Did she know this place, perhaps?

There was no boss where we thought there would be. Instead, everything around us was filled with sights unlike anything we'd ever encountered.

"Oh my. You folks..." A woman approached us. "Did y'all come here through that there gate?"

"U-Umm... Yes, I suppose..."

"That means... Don't tell me! Y'all are Youmans?!"

She looked at us in shock, but we were just as startled by her. There were two long horns growing from her head. She wore a garment similar to the traditional garb of Eastern lands known as the kimono and held a long pipe in hand. Her jet-black hair cascaded all the way down to her knees, flawless and perfectly unruffled. Whoever she was, she carried a sort of allure that no human could possess.

A demon? No. Something greater.

Spreading her arms as if to welcome us, she delivered some

shocking words. “Well now! Y’all’ve come a long way! This here is the back entrance to Hell. Welcome, welcome—to the land of devils and hellspawn!”

“Wha?!”

“Hell?!”

An ultra dangerous, ultra difficult SSS+ dungeon lay beneath Academy Town. And deep within its depths was a connection to the higher realm that stood in contrast to Celestia—Hell itself.

Faced with these shocking revelations, even the members of the hero’s party could do nothing but gape in stunned silence.

Chapter 72: Now—Hell

Silence.

More silence.

"Aww, now what's wrong? What's gotten ya so tense?" asked the woman—the first we'd met since coming to this world.

Her name was Tsubaki, apparently. She was a beautiful woman sporting a fine pair of horns and wearing elegant Eastern clothing. But no matter what she said to us, none of us could muster a proper reply. After all, she was a higher form of life, both for humans and for demons. A bona fide hellspawn from Hell. Her existence was the opposite of gods and angels, and for demons, she was something akin to a god.

On a side note, the main factor that separated devils and hellspawn seemed to be their wings and horns. All the devils we saw boasted large, bat-like wings, which the hellspawn lacked. Meanwhile, the hellspawn generally had stubby horns growing from their foreheads.

Never in our wildest dreams had we imagined that the SSS+ dungeon was connected to a higher plane of existence. When suddenly presented with Hell itself, we were all too shocked, confused, and overwhelmed to maintain our composure.

And there was one more reason for our nervousness...

"Wh-Wh... What the hell is this vehicle?!"

The iron horseless carriages we'd seen earlier—we were currently aboard one of those incomprehensible crafts.

Tsubaki had announced that she would guide us through Hell, and before we could even grasp what was happening, we'd been ushered into this strange vehicle and were now hurtling toward an unknown destination.

"There are no horses pulling it or humans carrying it... So how is it moving?"

"And, er, it's also moving unbelievably fast! It's going at least four or five times the speed of a carriage! I can't believe it!"

On top of that, the ride was incredibly smooth. Normally, a carriage ride meant endless jolts and shakes, enough to make one fear their behind would be reduced to mince by the end of a day's ride. By contrast, this vehicle barely shook at all.

The seats were ridiculously comfortable—although the things she called *seat belts* felt a little restrictive, it was nothing compared to the discomfort of the carriages we knew.

What is this thing?! How does it even work?!

"Ah ha ha! I never get tired of seein' human folks reactin' to cars for the first time. Just tickles me every time."

"Well, you can't blame them, Tsubaki. Compared to the human and demon realms, the technologies of our worlds are ceeenturies ahead."

"Still, it's been way too long, Lilith. Didn't reckon I'd be runnin' into you there."

"Me neither. Who would've thought there'd be a passage from a human dungeon to hell? I guess there's still so much about hell that I don't know."

Tsubaki, the hellspawn, and Lilith, the fallen angel, were chatting away like old friends. They were acquainted, it seemed. But given how well-connected she was, I didn't actually find it too surprising that Lilith had ties to Hell.

"Can I ask you something?"

"What's the matter, Mr. Hero?"

With his mind still a blur, Cain tried his best to make sense of the situation.

"This is...Hell. You're sure of it?"

"Ya, I'd say so."

"That alone is hard to believe. We were just clearing the dungeon in Academy Town. Why would there be a passage to Hell in there?"

"Why? Now that's a tough one to answer... If the passage is there, it's there. Most paths from the lower realms to this world run through demonland, but every now and then, you'll find one sittin' right in the human realm. The one y'all stumbled on? We call that

the Backdoor Dungeon. Far as humanity's concerned, it's a place crawlin' with all manner of fearsome monsters, ain't it?"

"You're right."

We'd been exploring the SSS+ dungeon only moments before. Just as Tsubaki said, it was one of—if not the most—difficult dungeons in all of humanland. If the dungeon had been connected to Hell this whole time, that would certainly explain why all those powerful monsters were there.

Perhaps the reason humanity had never learned of the dungeon's connection to hell was simply because no human had ever reached the fiftieth floor—or if they had, it would have been centuries ago.

"Then does the treasure that dispels the barrier on the demon lord's castle exist? That legend was the whole reason we went into the dungeon in the first place..."

"Oh, yep. It exists."

We gasped at Tsubaki's nonchalant confirmation. Until now, we'd never had any way of confirming if the legend was true; the SSS+ dungeon had been our only lead, and Cain and his comrades had had no choice but to see it through... They'd been prepared for the possibility of it being all for nothing.

But now, a resident of this world had just attested to the treasure's existence.

"The barrier 'round the demon lord's castle's got a little touch of hell's own tech, y'see. Heard it was a gift from some devil back in the day to the demon lord at the time. And since it was built by someone from 'round these parts, well, naturally, the key to breakin' it was made and tucked away right here too."

"So that's...the connection!"

"My word..."

In all likelihood, the heroes had been skeptical. I mean, logically speaking, why would the key to dispelling the barrier around the demon lord's castle be hidden in a dungeon beneath Academy Town in human territory? It just didn't make sense. It was far too illogical.

But now, hearing Tsubaki's explanation, it was all falling into place. It seemed even Kuon was only learning the truth of the barrier's origins for the first time, as her eyes were wide as plates.

"Will you give us that key...lady? Miss?"

"Just Tsubaki's fine. But I can't be givin' it up that easily. Y'all still ain't cleared the Backdoor Dungeon, y'see."

"What?"

"C'mon now, this here's still just the fiftieth floor. You'll need to get all the way to floor ninety before you can claim that prize."

"You mean...we're still inside the dungeon?"

Cain—no, all of us—peered out from within the vehicle. The street was lined with buildings of incomprehensible heights, each filled with all manner of establishments and residents of hell happily shopping around.

There wasn't a single vicious monster that might attack a civilian in sight. It was hard to believe we were inside of a deadly dungeon.

"Yep, this here's a town built to keep a part of the dungeon nice and runnin'. For folks lookin' to train for battle, we've got facilities that spawn monsters whenever you need 'em."

"Y-You built a town inside a dungeon?"

"Unbelievable..."

Cain and Rachel were dumbfounded—not that the rest of us were any better off. Living and playing inside of a dungeon—it was unheard of. This world operated on a different culture than what we were accustomed to.

"And right now, we're headin' straight to where the fiftieth-floor boss is waitin' on you. I'm thinkin' of having y'all heroes take a crack at that boss—you ready for it?"

"That's exactly what I came for."

As Tsubaki flashed an incendiary smile, Cain responded with a fierce grin of his own.

There was a moment of silence. We were drawing closer and closer to the fiftieth-floor boss. What's more, our enemy wasn't going to be just any dungeon boss. It was a boss born from the higher realm known as Hell. It wasn't just me; even the most battle-hardened among us tensed up as we all foresaw a battle more intense than any before it.

This was Hell—a higher realm where everything seemed to exceed our expectations. We were in an incomprehensible vehicle

speeding along at an unbelievable pace, carrying us toward an unknown battlefield.

Soon, we arrived at the dungeon boss's lair.

"Now! Let's get this started! A special emergency broadcast: 'Excuse us, Coming in Through the Back! Humanity's Backdoor Dungeon Challenge!' is now live!"

"Yeeeaaaaaah!"

"...?"

We were immediately stunned yet again.

Before us stood a massive arena, featuring a large battle stage at the very center surrounded by row upon row of spectator seating. A bright spotlight shone down on us, and there was even a commentary booth stationed beside the audience. There, a devil in a white suit projected his voice through a microphone, and the entire stadium erupted in cheers. The stands were packed with devils, hellspawn, and other residents of hell, their eyes all locked on us with feverish excitement.

"The hell is this?"

"A dungeon boss battle...right?"

We were all perplexed. A boss battle was usually fought in a dank and dreary cave. It was a solemn life-or-death duel between the boss and the challengers with no room for interference. That was how it was supposed to be.

But now? We were standing in a splendid coliseum, surrounded by a massive crowd. This hardly seemed like a dungeon boss battle at all.

"They're making a spectacle of us again..." Cain muttered, dejectedly.

He was probably thinking back to his duel with Altina. Back then, the adventurers' guild had turned their heartfelt struggle into mere entertainment. This did feel like a repeat of that.

"But what do you think those are?" Melvy asked with a quizzical tilt of her head.

Dozens of camera-like magical devices were set up all around the venue. Why would they need to take so many photographs? Or were they magic devices that didn't exist in the human world? I didn't

really get it, but it was clear this wouldn't be a conventional boss battle.

"How exciting! The last human to reach the fiftieth floor of the Backdoor Dungeon was the hero from four hundred years ago! That means this special broadcast is airing for the first time in four centuries!"

The devil doing commentary spoke into a microphone imbued with sound amplification magic. His voice reverberated throughout the venue.

"And our challengers this time are none other than those making waves in the lower world: Hero Cain and his party! Cain is said to be the strongest hero in all of history! Will he be able to conquer the trials that await him?!"

"Hey."

"Oh? What's the matter, Mr. Cain— Ow-ow-ow! Don't twist my arm like that!"

Cain, ruthless man that he was, chose violence as his first option. He grabbed the announcer's arm and got him into a joint lock.

"I get that you're trying to turn our fight into some kinda spectacle. Sure, go ahead. But don't just keep moving forward without us. At least give us an explanation. What exactly are you putting us up to?"

"Ow ow ow ow! I-I'll explain properly... No violence, please! Let go! You're going to get us kicked off the air! Hey, someone stop the camera!"

Laughter erupted from the audience. But...to us, the phrase "stop the camera" was an unfamiliar one. A camera was a photo-taking device, but that didn't seem to fit the context. The way he put it made it sound like the cameras were constantly running. And I didn't understand what he meant by "off the air" either.

"*Hff... Hff...* Well, looks like they didn't cut them, dammit. Now my screams have been broadcast to every living room in Hell."

Cain finally released the man's arm.

"Ahem... Now then, allow me to explain in detail. You are on a television program titled, 'Excuse us, Coming in Through the Back! Humanity's Backdoor Dungeon Challenge!'... But of course, television

doesn’t exist in the lower world, so I doubt you’re familiar with the concept.”

“Television...?”

We tilted our heads in confusion. Even the demons Kuon and Orc Emperor seemed just as puzzled.

“Television is...well, to put it simply, it’s an entertainment medium that uses electromagnetic waves to transmit moving images and audio over long distances. What does that mean, you ask? Well now, at this very instant, you are being seen and heard live in households all across Hell! It’s a live broadcast!”

“What?!”

“Transmitting moving images...over long distances?!”

We were all shocked, but none more so than Kuon. We had a vague understanding of what “moving images” were. During our visit to the demon lord’s villa, the demons had shown us a technology called movies. That was presumably what he meant by that.

However, the idea of transmitting those images across all of Hell and into ordinary households was beyond anything we could comprehend. Such magic was easily hundreds of years ahead of what humanity could achieve. This wasn’t just an arena—it was a battlefield operating on concepts entirely beyond our understanding.

“And Celestia, I don’t want you to feel left out! Simply subscribe to our premium Hell Broadcasting channel to get access. We’ll provide more details separately, so everyone in Celestia, please consider signing up!”

“I understand even less now.” Cain furrowed his brow.

It felt like my head was going to explode with all the incomprehensible things going on.

“People from the lower world always get confused whenever we introduce them to television. But that’s not what you should be focusing on, is it? Your real concern should be the nature of the trial that awaits you.”

“Point taken...”

Cain’s expression changed from confused to stern. Whether our battle was broadcast across Hell didn’t matter. What mattered was whether we could overcome the battle itself.

“And let me explain for those of you in the audience unfamiliar with the premise of this program! This show features human challengers who have reached the fiftieth floor of the Backdoor Dungeon taking on the various trials we have prepared for them! This time, we have the fiftieth-floor trial... And after that, the sixtieth, the seventieth, and so on—until they reach the final ninetieth floor. If they manage to clear it, we will grant the challengers any reward they desire. So, humans, aim for total conquest and give it your best shot!”

“I don’t really get all that... But basically, we just have to take down the dungeon boss, right? Fine, let’s do this thing!”

Cain exuded confidence as he cracked his knuckles. His desired reward was undoubtedly the treasure that nullified the demon lord castle’s barrier. For the hero’s party, this was an unavoidable trial.

“Now that we’ve got that lengthy explanation out of the way, it’s finally time for what you’ve all been waiting for! The battle is about to begin! Now come forth! The fiftieth-floor dungeon boss—Devil Slime!”

A dramatic hissing sound filled the arena as a flashy plume of smoke burst from the center. At the same time, the floor beneath it split open, revealing a creature—no, a devil rising from below.

“Is that...a slime?”

“No, a demon...maybe?”

Its texture, or rather its composition... Everything about it resembled that gelatinous monster we all knew as a slime. A common, relatively weak monster that could be found in humanland. However, the aura this monster radiated was something else entirely. The sheer pressure it exuded was on a whole other level.

For starters, despite its body being made of slime, it possessed a humanoid form with four limbs and a head. There were large wings sprouting from its back and horns jutting from its head. The being was pitch-black from head to toe.

A Devil Slime. Perhaps, quite literally, it was a slime with the power of a devil.

Silence.

Tense silence.

Cain and the Devil Slime locked eyes.

As tensions rose, our comrades gripped their weapons tight and shifted into battle stances. There was no doubt—we were facing a superior being, distinct from humans and demons. A pressure greater than anything we'd felt before was making our skin tingle.

"Challengers! Are you ready?!"

We silently nodded at the announcer's call.

The battle against a true Devil of hell was finally going to begin.

"The fiftieth-floor trial! Dungeon Boss Devil Slime! Let the match...commence!"

With that final word from the announcer, an array of fireworks burst across the skies above us, signaling the start of the battle.

"Hrah!"

Not a moment later, our leader Cain rushed in, charging straight at the devil slime at blinding speed, swinging his holy sword with incredible might. In any other circumstance, this single strike alone would have spelled death for the enemy. Be they human or demon, only a handful of beings could even react to his overwhelming speed and power. But the opponent this time was a devil from Hell—a being from a higher plane of existence. The Devil Slime dodged Cain's preemptive strike and all the slashes that followed by a hair, the composed look on his face never faltering. Then, reshaping his arm into a blade, he met Cain's next swing head-on.

"That's how it oughta be! Hell, huh?! You guys ain't half bad!"

"That is my line, hero of the lower world. Even this much is beyond my expectations."

For the first time, the Devil Slime spoke. He had a surprisingly deep and somber voice... Not that it mattered. The exchange continued.

"Holy Sword Ikryl! Unleash your light!"

From behind, Altina released the power of the holy sword Ikryl. She transformed its radiance into countless swords of light, forming the blades all around the Devil Slime without a gap to be seen. The instant she released them, Cain swiftly withdrew a step, unprompted. Their coordination was flawless.

"Onward!"

A storm of radiant blades came down upon the Devil Slime all at once. There was no space to dodge, and the holy magic imbued into each individual sword was formidable. By all logic, our foe should have had no way to defend himself.

"Divide."

Yet with nothing but a quiet murmur, the Devil Slime detached his left arm. The arm split into tendrils that divided into more tendrils after that. They swelled and split, swelled and split until the goop that had once been his arm had quickly enveloped his entire body. With a severed appendage, he had blocked Altina's swords of light.

It was a clash of darkness and light. The light of the holy sword and the devil's body offset one another, both forces canceling each other out and vanishing.

"Tch!"

As a result, Altina's attack failed to affect the Devil Slime, leaving him completely unscathed. By the time the onslaught had finished, his left arm had already regenerated, good as new.

"Now, allow me to make my move."

For the first time in the battle, the Devil Slime went on the offensive. His target was Orc Emperor, the second-weakest among us (naturally, I was the weakest one).

The Devil Slime moved unbelievably fast, dashing forth so swiftly it was almost like he'd simply disappeared one moment and reappeared somewhere else the next. And, in the next instant, he had already slipped into range, his right arm—now turned into a blade—ready to strike.

"Erk!"

A bead of sweat rolled down Orc Emperor's brow. He was unable to react to the Devil Slime's speed with his abilities. At this rate, he was set to be cut down.

"Not on my watch! Darkest King!"

At that moment, Kuon brandished her strongest weapon to protect her subordinate. The massive squeaky hammer crashed into the ground, scattering star-shaped masses of mana.

It seemed she was going to go all out from the start.

"My... My deepest thanks, Lady Kuon!"

"Our foe is stronger than any we've faced before. Fall back and lend thy aid from afar, Orc Emperor!"

"Understood!"

Her strike had created space between the Devil Slime and Orc Emperor, and Orc Emperor took the opportunity to retreat to the edge of the arena.

"Do you think I'll let you escape?"

"You think I'll let you follow?"

"Hmm?!"

It was Mitter who intercepted the Devil Slime as it attempted to pursue Orc Emperor. He was a master of the shield, ready to withstand the Devil Slime's fierce assault with the highest defensive capabilities known to humankind.

"Urgh!"

But—as I've reiterated time and again—our opponent was a being from a higher plane. Even against absolutely perfect defenses, he could still discern openings, carving wounds into Mitter's body. Despite Mitter's defensive prowess, there was a limit to how long he could hold off the Devil Slime alone.

Thankfully, he *wasn't* alone.

"Take this!"

"Magic Sword!"

"...!"

Attacks from Rachel and Sylphie sent the Devil Slime staggering back a few steps.

"Mitter! If you think you can just go out and take on such a powerful foe alone, you've got another thing coming!"

"Ha ha...that's actually a commonly mistaken turn of phrase. It's another *think*, not another *thing*."

"Does that even matter right now?!"

"I'm glad to hear you've still got enough fight to be pedantic, Mitter."

Even as they exchanged their light banter, their coordination was flawless, between Rachel with her massive hammer and Sylphie with her magic sword, all while Mitter used his shield to deflect the enemy's counterattack. Their teamwork allowed them to press the

Devil Slime back.

"Umm, er! We should go too, Liz!"

"Y-Yes, of course, Melvy! Time to make my move!"

I swallowed my breath. The time had come to put my training to the test.

"Fallen angel powers...release! Whoooooo-aaaaaah!"

"Activating holy magic control!"

I unleashed my fallen angel powers. With all my training, I'd learned how to activate it without relying on Lilith's assistance.

Of course, the risk of me losing control was ever-looming. But even Orc Emperor, who was stronger than me, had been completely unable to react to the Devil Slime's attacks. If I didn't unleash my power now, I'd end up the same as him.

So even taking the risk of rampage into consideration, I had no choice but to harden myself.

"Please help me keep it under control, Melvy! *Voooooooaaah!*"

"Understood! Nngh...! As overwhelming as ever!"

We had discovered one way to lower the risk. The power of a fallen angel came from two immense and opposing forces—holy magic and hell magic. If I could leave the control of just one of those powers to someone better suited than myself, I could reduce the chances of me going berserk significantly.

As a saint, Melvy was naturally well-versed in handling holy magic.

I carried Melvy on my back, keeping our bodies pressed close together as I spread my wings to take flight. All the while, we unleashed a barrage of holy magic and hell magic.

It was a simple strategy that lacked much of the coordination the other members were showing, but even so, the bursts of magic I was tossing around were incredibly powerful. This was the strongest combined assault the two of us could muster.

"Everyone! Be careful not to get caught in the cross—Ugoaaaaaaah!"

"Forget about friendly fire! Go all out, Liz!"

"Yes, Sir Cain...! Oogweeeeeeh!"

"Guh! It really is an impressive power," Melvy groaned as she took

on the torrent of power overflowing from deep within me.

Even for a master of magic like her, it was a difficult power to handle; just thinking about it logically, it should have been impossible for someone like me to control it on my own. But after all the hard work I had put in... *Yeah, you* really *put in the effort, Liz.*

Half my mind had slipped away before I managed to let off a Holy Laser, Hell Laser, and their hybrid Twilight Laser.

"Do-wa-wa-wa-wa-waaa! Be careful, everyone!"

I was trying my best to aim my lasers at the Devil Slime, but my hazy mind was making that a bit difficult. Still, with Melvy's help, my concentration was several dozen times better than it had been during my training.

"Hell Magic: Slime Bomb."

Yet again, the Devil Slime separated a piece of its body, this time igniting the slimy substance. Several powerful explosions rocked the arena, offsetting my laser attacks.

"Erk!"

"Well, of course! He's a boss from Hell, so of course he's gonna use hell magic!"

Cain, who'd been crossing blades with the Devil Slime, quickly backed away.

Though I did have the powers of a fallen angel, hell magic wasn't my field of expertise. Even the residual waves of true hell magic I could feel from a distance were too powerful for me, rattling me to my bones. If Cain had taken a direct hit, even he wouldn't have gotten out of it in one piece.

"Holy Hell... Defensive Wall!"

I melded holy magic and hell magic together to deploy the barrier I'd just learned. Perhaps because I'd initially used it by pure instinct on that night by the sea, it seemed to come naturally to me.

All right! If things get dangerous or it feels like I'm losing control, I'll just put up the barrier and wait for myself to calm down. That should work from here on out!

"Things are really heating up in here! So hot!" the announcer boomed. "What an incredible battle! Miss Lilith! Do you have any thoughts on the battle so far?"

"Yes, let's see. I'd expect nothing less than what we're seeing from humanity's strongest, and of my adorable little apprentice Lizzy. What a wonderful showing ♪"

"What does she think she's doing?!"

Startled, I glanced over at the commentary booth. And for some reason, my master, the fallen angel Lilith, was the one providing commentary on the fight. Why on earth was an angel—fallen or not—commentating on a battle in hell? Weren't Celestia and Hell supposed to be opposites?

"As I'm sure everyone in Hell knows," Lilith went on, "There's a massive power gap between us from the higher realms and humans from the lower realm. So much so that anything resembling a fight would normally be impossible. But Cain and his friends are among the most powerful fighters in human history. It seems even Mr. Devil Slime himself is surprised to find human and demonkind standing on equal footing with him."

Paying no heed to our surprise, my master continued commentating without a care. *When exactly did you get over there?!*

"What's thiiis? Mr. Devil Slime is changing up his combat style."

"Huh?!"

I'd been too distracted by Lilith, but it was thanks to her words that I realized what was going on. The Devil Slime's body was trembling violently as though he was gathering strength. I could feel his mana surging.

"Not on my watch! Attack!"

"Wait! Altina! First, strengthen your defenses!"

"Huh?!"

Cain's warning came too late. Altina was already charging at the Devil Slime. In terms of speed, she was easily among the fastest in our party. The combination of her half-beast physical abilities and the power of the holy sword was nothing to scoff at. But this time, those factors were working against her—the cautionary words only reached her ears after she had accelerated to her top speed.

"Huh?! Oh no!"

And I, too, was too late. With my fallen angel wings out, I could also reach high speeds, so I'd followed Altina's lead and charged in.

Altina, me, and Melvy on my back—we had all closed in on the Devil Slime in an instant. But the Devil Slime was a split second faster.

"Huh?!"

"Wha?!"

The Devil Slime's body swelled to massive proportions—then burst. His dark, slimy form exploded and scattered all across the arena. A thick wave of black, slimy material spread, oozing, writhing, pulsing as it filled the space.

"Wah?!"

"Eep?!"

"Yipes?!"

We, being the closest, were swept up as if by a wave. My entire body was bathed in the spray of black slime, the impact sending me flying back and landing hard on my backside.

"Are you all okay?! Sylphie, Mitter! Prepare some healing magic!"

Cain quickly raced to our side.

"Ow ow ow... I-I'm fine. I'm not seriously in— Eep?!"

Altina cut off midsentence. Like her, I felt the pain of the hard landing, but I didn't sense anything serious. *Only minor injuries. I'm fine...* Or at least, that's what I thought—until I heard the sounds and quickly realized how naive I had been.

"M-My body is...melting?!"

I could hear the sizzling, searing sound. White smoke began rising from the parts where the black slime clung to, accompanied by the unmistakable sound of something dissolving.

And what was dissolving? Naturally, everything it came in contact with: clothes, weapons, skin, and bones. We were up against a creature that brought death by reducing its foes to mere puddles of what they once were. The Devil Slime was a creature from Hell. It was only natural for it to have such power.

"N-No... No...! I'm going to die!"

"Calm down, Liz! I'll do something about it! Sylphie! Mitter! We need that healing right now!"

"Yeah! Got it!"

That sizzling sound was coming from my body too. If this went on, I'd be dissolved until nothing was left of me. I felt like I was

going to cry.

Before anything else, Cain used a hand to brush the black substance from my body. Even though doing so meant his hand would dissolve too... The others rushed over and frantically tried to remove the slime from me, Altina, and Melvy.

It wasn't just a feeling anymore—their selfness had moved me to real tears. Even at the risk of their own lives, they didn't hesitate to help us. If I were to die here, at least my heart would be warm with gratitude...

Then, after a moment... "Hm?"

"Huh...?"

Something was off. And we finally realized what it was.

There was definitely a sizzling sound and white smoke rising where the black slime had stuck. But we weren't feeling any pain. If our bodies were melting, it should have been excruciatingly painful, or at least there should have been a sense of *something* happening. But there was nothing.

"Umm...? The hell is this?"

Cain and the others had picked up on it too. The slime had stuck to their hands as they tried to peel it away, but there was no sign of it dissolving their flesh.

I...closely examined the slime that was still clinging to my body.

It was...melting, yes, definitely melting something. But it wasn't affecting any of the vital, living parts of our bodies. The black slime was...only dissolving our clothes.

"Nyaaaaaaaaah?!"

"Wh-What is this?!"

Our clothes were rapidly melting away, leaving the three of us in increasingly scandalous states of undress.

What is this?! Is this the black slime's power?! For what?! What's the point?!

"There it is! The Devil Slime's ultimate move! The Corrosive Attack that Conveniently Only Melts Clothing!"

"Woooooo-hoooooo!"

The commentator's excited voice sent the crowd into a wild frenzy.

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

I don't get it at all! Why does it only dissolve clothing?! What would the Devil Slime even gain from that?!

Yet, the sight of me, Altina, and Melvy standing there half-naked had clearly had a positive effect on the crowd.

"Wooohoooooo!"

"What *is* this?!"

While I was relieved that our lives weren't in danger, in the time we'd spent complaining about it, the black slime had continued to work away at our clothes.

"Nyah! Nyah?! If it melts anymore...my chest will be completely exposed!"

Altina's face flushed as she grew even more desperate to peel the slime away. But it was sticky stuff, and it was dissolving her clothes faster than she could remove it. Her desperate struggle was pointless, her face as she trembled with embarrassment a pitiful sight to behold.

And I wasn't any better off. My clothes were melting off, and I could only barely manage to cover my one exposed breast with a hand and arm.

This heat! It feels like my face is letting off steam from pure shame!

"And there it is! The ratings are skyrocketing! That's our Devil Slime! He truly understands the art of entertainment!"

"Mr. Devil Slime is a seasoned pro at the station! He knows exactly what the viewers want. Hee hee, my dear disciple is so adorable when she's embarrassed! ♡"

"You wicked master! Do you have any idea what we're going through right now?!"

"Wait... Damn! On your guard, everyone! We need to get out of here!"

"Huh?"

Cain let out a frantic order, seemingly picking up on something. And then, in the next instant, the scattered puddles of black slime across the arena began quivering—before gathering up and shooting straight at us!

So the Devil Slime can even control pieces after they've been separated from his main body!

"Wah?! Wah!"

"Guh, dammit!"

We were all desperate to dodge the incoming slime, but there was too much of it coming from every direction. Almost no one could avoid it completely.

Worse yet, the Devil Slime was clearly aiming for the women. Thanks to that, while the male party members got away with only minor contact, Sylphie and Rachel were both drenched in slime.

Only a single woman—Kuon—managed to avoid it entirely with the Forestep she had demonstrated in our previous battle.

Though Altina and I were already trembling in shame from all the exposed skin, Cain lifted us both under his arms and did the evading for us. I was truly grateful for that.

"Clothes are melting left and right!" the commentator exclaimed. "What will the hero's party do now?!"

"What the hell's your game?! Is this harassment or what?!"

"But this presents a tricky problem," Lilith continued. "If they're too flustered by the embarrassment, that will dull their movements. And if they try to cover their breasts and important bits with their hands, they won't be able to use them to fight. Team Hero will need to overcome their shame if they want to win."

"Urgh..."

Lilith's analysis was spot-on. Altina and I were still trembling in Cain's arms, our minds overwhelmed with shame. There was no way we could fight properly like this. Sylphie's and Rachel's clothes were steadily melting away too. Mitter was trying his best to cover up his girlfriend Rachel's body with his large shield, but that only restricted his movements further.

This is insidious! Humiliating! A dirty trick! My cheeks burned as I gritted my teeth in frustration.

But then, someone acted in a way that I...no, that no one in the crowd had expected.

"Hmph. Is that all you've got? This is nothing."

It was Sylphie.

She stood tall, taking an imposing stance with her blade. Her clothes had melted just as much as ours—her chest was mostly exposed and she was in a highly revealing state... And yet, she showed not a hint of shame. Boldly, she stood poised for battle.

"You're right... This much isn't embarrassing at all."

"Yes, yes. This isn't a big deal."

Rachel and Melvy stepped out, lining up beside Sylphie.

All three of them were in the same state of undress—and didn't bother to hide it. They raised their weapons, embodying the dignity and pride of true warriors.

Sylphie spoke in a powerful tone that overwhelmed all who heard her.

"We've endured embarrassment far worse than this! Countless times! There isn't a single veteran member of the hero's party who'd be shaken by something as petty as losing their clothing!"

"What?!" the commentator cried out in shock. "Such unyielding spirit! Such overwhelming resolve! To remain unfazed by Devil Slime's underhanded tactics—this is the true grit of humanity's strongest!"

"Whoooaaah!"

"No, no, no, no, no!"

Though the audience roared with admiration, Cain frantically cut them off with a dismissive wave of his hands.

"Have a bit of shame, dammit! I don't really get it, but this whole situation is being shown all across Hell, right?!"

"Yes, but Cain. Remember. We...went through that exposure training. Thanks to that, this really isn't embarrassing at all."

"Don't let that damn training mess with your head!"

Exposure training? What's that supposed to mean? If I took it literally, it sounded like something perverted, but there was no way the hero's party would engage in something that sketchy. *It must have been some sort of grueling mental training!*

For some reason...Cain was glaring at *me* with a look of deep resentment.

I don't get it... The way he's looking at me, it's almost like he's claiming I'm the one who took the lead and organized this exposure

training for everyone. Not me. Definitely not me. I don't even know what exposure training is.

"But..."

Just like Sylphie and the others had shown, this was no time to be embarrassed. Even if our chests were exposed, we had to stand tall and fight with everything we had—or else, we really would be killed by the foe before us.

Indeed. There was no room for shame. Come to think of it, during that ping-pong match, even when Sylphie's top slipped off and her chest was exposed, she maintained her cool and landed a perfect smash. That kind of mental fortitude was exactly what we needed right now!

"Yeah! There's no time to be embarrassed! We're in the middle of a fight! A little chest exposure is... No, wait. Hold on."

And it was then that it hit me.

"Isn't this humiliation on a global scale...? This would be impossible in the human realm. It's completely unprecedented, wouldn't you say?"

"Hmm?"

"If that's true, then what we're experiencing right now...*hff*, *hff*...is the greatest humiliation in history... *Hff*, *hff*...! This embarrassment...it's actually starting to feel kind of...good... *Hff*, *hff*...!"

"Oh, no!"

"The pervmaster is starting to rediscover the thrill of public exposure!"

I could feel something rising inside of me. There was no need to hide anything.

What need was there for embarrassment? I had to fight with confidence, even if I was practically naked. That was the only way forward... And what could I even do to stop it? This exposure? As a matter of fact, I was starting to feel a desire for everyone to see me exactly as I was.

Yes, this is completely unavoidable... Even if I'm in this humiliating state, I'm in the middle of a battle. It's unavoidable. Even if I'm naked, I've done nothing wrong. This is a life-or-death

situation. I have done nothing *wrong. I must reach it too. The nirvana that Sylphie and the others have achieved!*

"The pervmaster is opening a new door— No, she's about to reopen an old one!"

"Liz! Don't get any more aroused! Cover yourself!"

Cain grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me. But my resolve remained unchanged.

"*Hff*, *hff*... But I have to fight! Even if I humiliate myself! Even if I have to expose every last inch of myself! *Hff*, *hff*...!"

"Liz! Knock it off already!"

And then.

"Liz! Cain! Look out!"

"Huh?"

In the middle of our quarrel, the Devil Slime launched a fresh spray of his corrosive liquid right at me.

Oh nooo! At this rate, I'm going to be even more exposed!

"*Hff*, *hff*... What*ever* shall we do? *Hff*, *hff*..."

"At least *try* to dodge, idiot!"

I couldn't avoid this attack—or so I convinced myself... No, scratch that. I just got the feeling that I'd never be able to dodge in time. I steeled myself, ready to take the hit.

But it never came. Cain stepped in front of me, covering me from the blow.

"C-Cain..."

"Gah?! Dammit!"

He'd shielded me with his body, taking on the full brunt of the attack. His body was of course unharmed. The black slime didn't harm flesh whatsoever. It only melted clothing and other equipment.

But the spot that it hit was...unfortunate. Cain's trousers and underpants melted away, leaving his nether regions exposed for the world to see!

"Boooo! Boooooo!"

"Aaaaaaaaah!"

"Whoa there! We're getting some boos and screams from the crowd! And it's huge! Contestant Cain, you're packing something outrageous there!"

“Even with devils and hellspawn, you get such a different reaction depending on whether it’s a man or a woman. How fascinating! ♪”

“……”

Cain Jr. was now swinging free. Cain’s trousers and underpants had melted, putting him in quite a compromising state.

“Aaah, for crying out loud! Today’s the worst...!”

“Boooooo! Boooooo! Booooooooo!”

“Shut it! You think I wanted this to happen?! If you didn’t want to see it, you shouldn’t have prepared a monster like that in the first place!”

Cain snapped back at the crowd. But more importantly...Cain’s underpants...had melted to...nothing...

Nothing.

“Are you okay, Liz? You didn’t get hurt... Huh?”

“Cain’s underpants...melted...”

I could feel a dark, seething emotion sprouting deep within me.

This is...rage. Pure, unadulterated rage for the unforgivable crime of melting Cain’s underpants.

“Underpants... Cain’s underpants...are gone...”

“H-Hey, Liz? Wh-What’s...?”

“Unforgivable.”

A searing heat of anger coursed through my entire body. My teeth ground together with a sharp, grating noise. It felt like my head was going to burst from the heat.

How could this be? A sacred treasure of the highest order, gone from the world. How could something like this ever be allowed?

“Cain’s underpants...dissolved... U-Unforgivable. Unforgivable. Unbearable...”

“What are you saying, Liz? C-Calm down...”

“Completely...absolutely unforgivable. H-How dare you erase...my precious *underpants*?!”

“No, they’re *my* underpants. Mine, you hear?”

Anger and hatred swelled within me. And as my loathing surged, so too did my mana. The time had come. My foe could never be forgiven. The wicked fiend that had erased Cain’s underpants had to face judgment.

“Groooooooooh! I will never forgive yooooooou!”

I let out a roar from the very depths of my soul as a torrent of mana erupted from within.

“Wha?!”

“What?!”

“L-Liz?!”

I had awakened. Memories long forgotten had all come back to me, and with them, the power I’d once wielded as my own. No, this wasn’t an awakening—this was me returning to my true self!

“My soul quivers once more!”

“Wh-Who are you?” asked the vile sinner—the Devil slime.

“Very well, I’ll tell you. My name is Liz—the one being graced with sniffing Sir Cain’s sacred undergarments.”

“Huh? Are you sure you want *that* to be your legacy?”

“Rather, are Liz’s memories and powers back right now?”

My dear comrades, as perceptive as ever, were astir. Altina, who was, for the first time, seeing me with my memories intact, was staring at me, her cute, round eyes wide.

“I am the warrior awakened by burning rage! The legendary...Super Liz!”

“Whoa! Hold it right there! You’re violating a classic right there! Do we have our copyrights in order?!”

I paid no heed to whatever the announcer was shouting about. I was a creature of pure fury now—it was impossible to stop me.

“Repent! Feel the crushing weight of your sin for destroying Sir Cain’s underpants!”

“I can just buy another pair, you know...”

“Uooooooooh...!”





I launched my attack on the Devil Slime. With my strength returned, I was mighty. But more than that, I now had access to the powers of a fallen angel. In my current state, I could control it somewhat—even if I had to force it a bit.

"Holy Hell Barrage!"

"Gah! Hell Magic: Black Slime Barrier!"

I mixed my holy and hell magic into a great number of twilight magic orbs and fired them all at once. The Devil Slime quickly formed a shield of hell magic, but the twilight orbs continued chipping away until they eventually made contact with the Devil Slime himself.

"Guh!"

"She did it!"

"The first clean hit!"

The Devil Slime dropped to one knee, glaring up at me.

"H-How are you—?!"

I gave him his answer: "What drives me, you ask? You mean...Cain's underpants, don't you?! You'll pay for that!"

"That's definitely not it."

"Please stop picking a fight with copyright law!"

The announcer was shouting something again, but I ignored it.

"Twilight Grand Sphere!"

"Gah!"

I formed a massive orb of twilight magic and launched it at the Devil Slime. Try as he might to stop it with both hands, he couldn't hold it back. The sphere began to devour him, starting from the hands, then the arms, the shoulders, and finally his entire body. Before long, my twilight had swallowed him whole.

"Uooooooooh...!"

The sphere burst.

A powerful shock wave tore through the arena, cracking even the protective barrier that shielded the audience. I'd managed to contain most of the blast to keep the damage from reaching my comrades, but the impact was still great enough to knock them off their feet.

"Owww... What just happened... Ah?!" The announcer's startled voice echoed through the arena.

I wasn’t surprised. Where the Devil Slime once stood, there was now nothing but a large, hemispherical crater. The Devil Slime that should have been at the center of it was gone.

I thrust my fist into the air—a declaration of victory.

“A-Amazing! Devil Slime has been completely obliterated! He’s gone! This match goes to the—”

“Nooooooope. Not yet.”

“Huh?”

Indeed. Just as my master pointed out, the battle wasn’t over yet.

“Now you’ve done it...”

The Devil Slime was right behind me. The enemy was alive. And now, he was trying to take me by surprise.

I knew exactly how he’d escaped my attack: The twilight magic had destroyed a large part of his body, but he had separated a small portion of himself and burrowed underground to escape. He’d tunneled beneath the arena’s floor and reformed behind me, using the scattered fragments from his earlier explosion to regain some of his strength.

And there he was now.

“You’re dangerous! I’ll finish you off right here!”

“Impressive... You really are a dungeon boss from Hell.”

The blade-arm of the Devil Slime shot forth to pierce through me. I was wide open. But...I had people I could trust from the bottom of my heart.

“We can’t let Liz take all the cool parts!”

“You got that right.”

“We saw right through you!”

As the Devil Slime tried to launch a surprise attack, he fell victim to one himself. Cain, Sylphie, and Mitter had ambushed him before his blow could land.

“Gah?!”

The Devil Slime couldn’t avoid their strikes. His body was shredded to pieces by their combined assault.

“Gwooooooooh?!”

His howl of agony filled the arena as a spray of slime splattered

across the floor. Before long, there was nothing left but a small trembling piece of him—barely bigger than a fingertip—shivering weakly. And from that fragment came a voice. "I surrender. I concede defeat."

Even reduced to that size, he was still alive and conscious, a stark reminder that creatures from Hell were fundamentally different from humans.

But in the end, it was our victory. He'd thrown in the towel.

"Huh?! Ah... Devil Slime has surrendered! The hero's party wins!"

"Yay! Congrats, Lizzy!"

The announcer gave the final call, while Lilith beamed and clapped her hands.

"Whoooaaa!"

The crowd erupted in applause. The fight was truly over. It was a complete victory for our team.

"You did it, Liz!"

"Sir Cain..."

He approached me with that refreshing smile on his face.

"But...the loss we suffered today was far too great..."

"Huh? Loss?"

"Farewell... Cain's underwear..."

Bonk. A fist came down on my head.

"Owww! But this pain feels so good! *Hff*, *hff*..."

"You got your memories back, huh? Even somethin' that dumb can bring 'em back, I guess."

It's not dumb at all! Cain's sacred undergarments are the ultimate unparalleled treasure! It's unacceptable to lose even a single pair... Or so I tried to explain with fervor, only for Cain to ignore me. *But being ignored...can be nice in its own way!* ♡

"Liz! Did you get your memories back?!"

"Umm, er, welcome back, Liz!"

"Sylphie, Melvy, it's been too long. Unfortunately, it will only last a day again, but I'll be in your care."

I exchanged waves and greetings with my dear comrades.

Hmm... It really is a peculiar feeling. Even though I'm the same person before and after regaining my memories, I can tell that the

way I think and the way I feel about my comrades has shifted a bit. And maybe...that's how it ought to be. Yes, regaining memories is such an odd sensation.

"Liz..."

It was then that a hesitant voice called out to me.

"Lady Altina."

"I don't really get it, but I guess your memories are back. Should I say, 'It's a pleasure to meet you' or something?"

"No, it's not like my personality changed, nor did my existing memories get replaced, so you can treat me as you usually do. I'm still me."

"That so? Ha ha ha, that's kinda confusing."

Since I'd met Altina after losing my memories, my feelings toward her hadn't really shifted at all. It really was a convoluted position I found myself in.

"But this doesn't happen every day. Now that my memory's back, how about we sit down for a long chat tonight? In my room, with some wine and cookies..."

"Oh, that sounds nice. I've got a lot of things I'd like to ask you, Liz."

"Wait, wait, wait! Don't be fooled, Altina!"

Just when I thought I'd gotten her hook, line, and sinker, my dear comrades got in my way.

"Altina! You can't let your guard down around Liz when she's like this!"

"Yes, yes! There's no telling what might happen to you! We're coming too!"

"Huh? Huuuh?!"

My dear, dear friends who understood me so well all stepped in to protect Altina as the poor girl flailed around in confusion. *Tsk... I thought I might get to savor Lady Altina tonight, but I guess it's not going to be that easy.*

"Ahem! Congratulations on clearing the fiftieth floor of the Backdoor Dungeon!" The announcer descended from the commentary booth to offer some congratulatory words. "Excellent work! So, how was it, hero? Any thoughts on that battle?"

"First, gimme somethin' to wear."

"Oh of course! You're exactly right! Any more would be a serious broadcasting issue... Staff! Please get them some clothes, ASAP!"

Cain's splendid hero was still dangling free. I should have guessed that would be his first priority.

But you know, what a waste... It was such a glorious sight... Aww man...

Once the staff handed out clothes and everyone was properly dressed, we could finally say that the battle was well and over for good.

"To think you cleared the dungeon boss in a single attempt! That's an incredible record! How do you feel about your accomplishment?"

"Ah... Well, this time, Liz's powerful magic was the clincher. Honestly, I can only really say we got lucky. The Devil Slime was far stronger than expected, so we'll need to adjust our attitudes and strategy going forward."

"Wow! As expected of the human realm's hero! Already reflecting and preparing for the next fight! I guess we should all look forward to the next dungeon trial!"

"Yeah, about that... Could you give us a minute? Hey, everyone! Gather up!"

"Hmm?"

Cain's order brought us all running.

"First...Liz, how's your condition?"

"My condition? Well, since my memories and powers are back, I'd say I'm in peak condition."

"But you'll be back to square one come tomorrow. If that's the case, wouldn't we have a better chance if we challenged the next boss right now? What do you all think?"

He was talking about challenging the sixtieth-floor boss right away. Meaning we'd be fighting back-to-back battles. We all gulped at his suggestion. But he wasn't exactly wrong.

"I-I can do it! I still have plenty of mana and stamina left!"

"What about you, Sylphie?"

"Right, I'm good to go. The battle with the Devil Slime was a

special one, and I'm not exaggerating when I say I suffered no physical damage whatsoever."

Cain properly checked the condition of his party members one by one. He confirmed that no one was seriously injured or exhausted.

"All right... Then let's keep up the momentum and go straight to the sixtieth-floor boss!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Hey, you! Announcer! We've made our decision! We're challenging the sixtieth-floor boss right now! Lead the way!"

"Huh?!"

The announcer seemed surprised by Cain's proposition. Understandably so. Challenging dungeon bosses in succession like this was unheard of in the human world too. Yet despite that, we beings from a lower realm were attempting to do it in Hell. It was no wonder that the announcer was so shocked.

But the words we got back surprised us too—in a different way.

"Ah, sorry, that's not allowed. We've got a programming schedule, see... It's about that television thing I told you about..."

"Huh?"

"Programming schedule?"

"Yes. 'Excuse us, Coming in Through the Back! Humanity's Backdoor Dungeon Challenge!' only has one broadcasting slot per week. We're almost out of time for today's episode, so the sixtieth-floor boss challenge will have to wait until next week."

"What?"

Cain stared at him blankly. We still didn't quite understand what television was. One broadcast per week? Why so? What was so wrong with doing it two or three times? What did it matter?

"And so, humanity's strongest heroes have triumphed once again! We can't wait to see how they fare in next week's trial! You better not miss it!"

"H-Hey! Hold up! Don't just wrap this up! If we wait until next week, Liz's powers will be gone again!"

"And with that, the first episode of 'Excuse us, Coming in Through the Back! Humanity's Backdoor Dungeon Challenge!' in four hundred years comes to a close! Be sure to tune in next week!"

“Hey, wait! Let us keep going! Let us fight the next boss right now!”

“See you then!”

As the announcer gave his closing line, cheerful background music started to play from nowhere in particular. The audience began cheerfully waving their hands. Just going off the mood, this was clearly meant to be the end.

Ah...the Devil Slime has regenerated a bit. Now, even he’s waving a tiny hand.

“I said wait, dammit!”

Cain’s scream fell on deaf ears.

Television broadcasts. A culture from Hell. We were at the mercy of customs completely foreign to humankind.

Chapter 73: Then—Skirting the Line! Hellish Exposure Training!

"Hello, everyone! As you can see, I am the charismatic exhibitionist you all know and love—Nude King!"

"The hell are you on about, Liz?"

One afternoon, while the sun sat high in the sky, the heroes found themselves in a room at an inn. Despite the bright, hot rays streaming in through the window, within the room, a rather shady individual was making quite the shady declaration.

That individual was none other than the charismatic exhibitionist, Nude King. Supposedly, their identity was meant to be a mystery.

"Today, I intend to teach you all the pleasures of exhibitionism—the absolute wonder of nudity! Is everyone ready?!" Nude King declared, dramatically flinging open the front of their long trench coat. In the next moment, their—or rather, *her*—glistening, unblemished skin was on display before them, without the slightest hint of modesty.

Nude King wore nothing but a hat, sunglasses, and a coat with nothing underneath. The moment she opened the coat, everything that should have remained hidden was in clear, full view.

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'm good to go."

"I'm still not on board, thank you very much."

The students of this crash course were the usual three—Sylphie, Melvy, and Rachel. Though Rachel looked less than enthusiastic, Sylphie and Melvy were both surprisingly willing to go along with the situation.

"You guys... Are you really okay with this?" Cain voiced his doubts from the corner with a frown.

"Heh..."

And in response, Sylphie let out a small chuckle, the corners of her lips lifting ever so slightly. There was a hint of resignation in her smile.

"Cain...when Liz starts to go off the rails, resistance is futile."

"Yes, yes. Even if you manage to get away, that takes far more energy than it's worth, and she'll just come after you again another day. It's a waste of effort, really..."

"You've...been going through a lot, huh?"

By their faces, one would have sworn that Sylphie and Melvy had reached enlightenment. They had long since come to terms with their fates and their futures, and now they were both seasoned veterans standing at the threshold of higher understanding. In other words, they had both been thoroughly poisoned by Liz.

"Now then, regarding the joys of exposure..."

Nude King pulled her coat shut again and began her lecture.

"Let us start with an understanding of the fundamental purpose of clothing. As you all know, clothes serve basic functions such as keeping us warm and protecting our bodies from harm. It is only natural to bundle up in cold climates, and clothes will shield our skin from accidental cuts caused by branches or grass. That is the primitive role of clothing."

"Yes, yes, that is true."

"However! As human civilization advanced, clothing took on another role. That is...to conceal the so-called 'sexual' parts of the human body. At some point in history, exposing areas like the chest, buttocks, and genitals to others turned into something shameful, leading humans to keep them hidden from anyone save for their most trusted partners. These private regions became sacred ground, so to speak."

"Teacher! Is this shame truly purely cultural? Is it not an instinct that humans are born with?" A student (with long red hair) posed the question.

"I should say not. If you examine the documents and wall paintings left by ancient civilizations, you will find plenty of depictions of women with bare chests. That means that, in those times and in those places, a woman's chest was not considered

shameful at all!”

“This is such a stupid meeting. How are they getting so deep with this?” Cain muttered, scowling from the corner. His lack of any formal education meant he could only follow around half of what was being discussed. It frustrated him...just a little.

“But! If we take that socially ingrained shame and turn it on its head, we find the pleasure known as exhibitionism! To slip free of the shackles of cultural norms and expose your true self! The exhilarating sense of shame that gradually transforms into pleasure! A rush of liberation! That is the true charm of exposure!”

And once again, Nude King threw her coat open. Her proportions were immaculate.

“The tickling of shame is what draws out the pleasure! It’s embarrassing! But that’s what makes it so good! The thrill of baring yourself! That is the essence of exhibitionism—a proclivity best suited to those on the masochistic side of things.”

“Nope, stupid after all. Who would’ve guessed?” Cain shot the idea down without hesitation.

“Hmm... If it’s suited to masochists, then I might have some aptitude for it.”

“Indeed. I do believe you have the potential, Sylphie.”

“Umm, er, teacher... What about me? I’m not very confident...”

“You don’t need that kinda confidence, Melvy,” Cain tried to chide Melvy, but Nude King wasn’t about to stop.

“Melvy, you are a wealth of natural talent. You might feel reluctant at first, but with training, you will surely come to experience true pleasure.”

“Teacher...”

“Quit leading people straight to hell like it’s the most natural thing in the world.”

“But now, everyone... I must warn you. There is something very important to keep in mind.”

Cain’s protests were ignored as Nude King pressed on. There really was no stopping Liz when she got like this. And realizing it was going to be more of the same, Cain let out a deep sigh.

“This is a very, very crucial and fundamental point of concern.

Exhibitionism is, by and large...a crime!”

“Then what’s the point of this?!”

“A large majority of the populace finds blatant exposure to be rather unpleasant. And so, acts of wanton exhibitionism will drag innocent bystanders into your personal thrill, harming them in the process. The law doesn’t look kindly upon such behavior, and more importantly, the Nude King creed will not allow it!”

“Yeah, I’d rather not...be a criminal.”

“Naturally.”

“Cut it out already, seriously. If word gets out that the hero’s party’s caught up in some scandal, it’s gonna be a real pain in the ass.”

The students stood their ground. And that was only natural. Breaking the law was something their morals wouldn’t allow, and more than that, not a single member was keen enough to indulge in their own selfish desires that they would do so at the expense of hurting others.

“There are other downsides as well. Most people aren’t okay with their romantic partner being an exhibitionist. The idea of having your lover expose themselves to others—why, that’s almost universally repulsive.”

“Your take, Cain?”

“Umm, er, yes. What do you think, Cain?”

Sylphie and Melvie glanced at their lover, Cain.

“Well, yeah, obviously I’d hate it.”

“Ngh... We’ve run into a dead end...”

Cain had answered as anyone would. It was a crime, it caused trouble for others, and to top it all off, their lover was against it. The road to exhibitionism was proving to be a steep one indeed.

“So, let’s give up on being exhibitionists. It’s a crime, and it inconveniences both strangers and loved ones alike,” Nude King calmly stated. “If you have your partner’s consent, you can still experience the excitement of embarrassment, the tension of possibly being caught through outdoor sex... It can provide a sensation similar to exhibitionism. However, if someone else—an innocent bystander—actually sees you, then it becomes a criminal act. I

wouldn’t recommend it too much.”

“Hmm... Then it’s completely off the table. Exhibitionism, that is.”

“Yeah, sounds like it’s fundamentally a crime.”

Silence.

More silence.

“What... Is that it?”

And again, more silence.

Summing up everything Nude King said, the conclusion was clear: Exhibitionism was a very bad idea. A perfectly reasonable and rational conclusion, but with that said, it came off as a little underwhelming. Was this really how the lecture ended? Were there some desires even Liz couldn’t act on? The lecture’s attendees couldn’t hide their surprise.

“Heh...heh...heh...”

But then...she smiled. A fearless grin spread across Nude King’s face.

“Of course, that isn’t where the lesson ends! There is a way—one that lets you savor the thrill of exhibitionism legally without troubling your partner or innocent bystanders! A way to expose yourself while minimizing any potential harm!”

And with that, Nude King dramatically flung open the front of her coat again. This seemed to be her signature pose. It was a pose that she could never do in public.

“Now then, everyone! Get ready to head out!”

“Head out?”

The students cocked their heads.

“It’s time for some hands-on training! Allow me to show you a sort of exhibitionism that makes everyone happy!” Nude King declared as she puffed out her completely exposed chest.

And so, the party set out.

“All right! We’ve arrived! This is today’s training ground!”

“This is...”

“A public pool?”

The place Nude King had brought them to...was a perfectly ordinary swimming pool. There, people of all ages, from all walks of

life enjoyed the coolness of the water beneath the blazing sun. It was the most typical pool imaginable.

"Incidentally, what kind of training is this? You just kinda dragged me here without explaining anything."

"Why, Mitter, it's exposure training."

"Huh? Exposure?"

Mitter had also been brought along for some reason. The group now consisted of Nude King, Sylphie, Melvy, Rachel, Cain, and Mitter—six in total.

"Come now, everyone! Let's start by simply enjoying the pool!"

Nude King took the initiative, hopping into the pool and reveling in its refreshing coolness. She waved to her adorable students, urging them to join her.

"Well... I guess some pool time would be a nice breather..."

"I'm scared about what comes next... Still, we're already here, so we might as well get in."

Though the men exchanged wary looks, they too entered the water. It wasn't long before everyone was enjoying themselves.

Curiously, Nude King had already prepared swimsuits for the women, having picked them out in advance. They were string-tied triangular bikinis. They had slightly less fabric coverage than typical swimsuits, making both Melvy and Rachel a bit bashful.

"Umm, er... Is this what Liz meant by a legal way to experience the thrill of exhibitionism...?"

"Sure, it's a bit embarrassing, but...I guess I can put up with this much..."

The two girls tilted their heads, their cheeks a little flushed.

They definitely felt a little embarrassed, but for one of Liz's schemes, this still seemed quite tame. To start with, while the swimsuits were on the small side, they were still within the realm of normal swimwear.

Was this all Liz had in store? Or perhaps even for Liz, this was as far as she was willing to go when it came to exhibitionism.

The group continued to enjoy the pool, though they were wary all the while. They swam and splashed water at one another... But no matter how much they stayed on guard, Liz did nothing strange. The

six of them simply had their fun like any other group of young people.

Around the time Melvy and Rachel had grown used to their swimsuits—the moment they'd all dropped their guard, Nude King struck!

"Oh nooo! My swimsuit was swept away by the water!" she called out in an exaggerated monotone, untying the strings of her own bikini top.

Nude King had feigned an accident to carry out her exhibitionism.

Her chest was completely exposed—but her scheme didn't end there. She immediately sank into the water up to her shoulders and latched onto Cain, using his body to obscure herself from the people around them.

"Wah...?! Wh-What are you doing, Liz?!"

"Did you see that, my students?! This is a secret technique devised by yours truly! A relatively legal way to expose yourself!"

While Cain was flustered from the sudden embrace and the bare breasts pressed against him, Nude King proudly began explaining her technique.

"By pretending your swimsuit was washed away, you can claim it was an accident! This allows you to present yourself as the victim rather than an intentional flasher!"

"Oh...?!"

"I never thought of that!"

"And by pressing your body against your lover while submerging yourself, you reduce the risk of exposure. At the same time, you maintain the pretense of modesty, staying faithful to your partner! Furthermore, by creating this accidental pervy situation, your lover gets to share in the thrill of embarrassment and excitement!"

"L-Liz...! Quit it! Cut it out already!"

Though Cain called out to Liz in a panic, he wasn't actually making any real attempts to stop her. After all, he wasn't trying to pry her off of him. If he did, her chest would be more visible to the surrounding eyes. He needed to turn himself into a shield.

But first and foremost, Cain's face was flushed and he seemed almost...happy. Whether it was by accident or intention, his lover's

breasts were pressed against him. What man wouldn't be thrilled by that?

Even Cain, the hero, was still a boy at heart.

"And even after taking these defensive measures, there's still the lingering risk that someone might see your chest! The nervous thrill of exhibitionism... The guilty pleasure of knowing you're intentionally exposing your skin! And you even get to experience the liberating freedom of stripping off your own clothes in public!"

"What?!"

"Umm, er...! What perfectly calculated reasoning!"

"This is what I call skirting—no, *un*skirting the line! A somewhat legal exposure technique!"

Nude King declared this triumphantly, leaving Sylphie and Melvy with no choice but to stare back in awe.

"It's... Th-This is ridiculous! It's a farce! Hey, Sylphie, Melvy! Go retrieve Liz's swimsuit already! Put a stop to her madness!"

Cain outwardly scolded Liz, trying to bring an end to this mess. But his voice wavered. It was clear from his pounding heart that he was just as flustered and excited as anyone else.

His orders were met with silence.

"Hey, Sylphie! What are you spacing out for?! Hurry and get Liz's swimsuit..."

"Oh nooo! My swimsuit was swept away by the water!"

"Huh?!"

Sylphie repeated her master's words verbatim before untying her own strings and embracing Cain just as Liz had. Now two topless girls were pressing their ample chests against his body.

"S-Sylphie, you little..."

"Heh heh... Y-Yes, I see it now... This is keeping me on edge! Just hugging Cain like this is enough to get my heart racing, but the thought of someone seeing me like this... Ha ha ha... I might get a nosebleed!"

"I knew you could do it, Sylphie! You're such a quick learner!"

With the natural makings of a masochist, Sylphie was already savoring the thrill of Nude King's exposure technique.

"You shameless women!"

Cain let out a pained cry, though his face was bright red with embarrassment and pleasure.

He hadn't given up—summoning every last bit of reason he had left, he did what he could to put an end to their antics. But what could he do? With two women clinging to him in the water, he was in no position to move his body freely.

"Umm, er... For now, I picked up the swimsuits, so... I guess I'll go next."

"Melvy?! Don't tell me you're gonna do it too?!"

"Umm... Well, since we're already here... I might as well."

Despite Melvy's bashful blush, she was already an expert. She gave a reserved nod, prepared to follow her master's example and step through this new doorway.

Rachel and Mitter were watching it all unfold from a slight distance away.

"I-I could never...show my chest in public like that... Th-There's no way!"

Rachel's face had turned red, her body had started to tremble just from watching. She was clearly overwhelmed.

"Well, you really don't have to. No need to do something that ridiculous," Mitter gently reassured his girlfriend. He let out a deep sigh as he watched the idiotic spectacle unfold before him.

But...

But despite that, despite her pounding heart, Rachel posed the question.

"Mitter... I-If I were to...hold you, you know. Give you the same treatment Cain's getting...w-would you be...happy?"

"Huh? U-Umm... W-Well, I guess I wouldn't dislike it...?"

Mitter found himself answering honestly. As a man, there was no way he wouldn't be happy if his beloved clung to him like that.

And there was his fatal mistake. That simple statement was enough for Rachel to resolve herself.

"Oh noooo! Oh no, oh no! My swimsuit was swept away by the waaateeeer."

She, too, had gone mad. The redness had spread from her face to her entire body. Her heart pounded so hard it hurt, and her body

trembled from sheer nervousness. But...if it was for the sake of her dear boyfriend...! Rachel was indeed a proud warrior.

"Wait! Rachel?! Ah... How am I supposed to defend against this?!"

Mitter finally realized that he had become a victim. The moment the exhibitionism succeeded, the man could do nothing. If he tore her away, her chest would be exposed and he would be humiliating her. And since he could barely move, he couldn't reach for her discarded swimsuit.

"Liz! Sylphie! Give it a rest! How long are you going to cling to me?!"

"Heh heh heh! ♪ Until we're satisfied! ♪"

"Ha ha, this sensation, this tension... A new door, indeed!"

"Rachel! Stop it! This isn't like you!"

"But, if it makes you happy... Oh wait... Why does my spine feel all tingly?"

"Hee hee, Rachel. That is the feeling of stepping through a new door!"

"This is...the new door?"

"Cain, I'm next, you hear? You mustn't get out of the pool."

"Melvy?!"

The men found themselves helpless (and a little pleased) in the face of the women's antics.

"You shameless women!" Cain shouted again, but he couldn't draw too much attention to their situation. His voice naturally lowered to a subdued grumble.

And like that, Nude King's exposure training was a complete success. Having undergone such training, the women would surely become far more resistant to shame. No matter when or where their skin was exposed, they would remain unfazed, even transforming the tension into exhilaration instead!

Thus, one after another, warriors with ironclad mental fortitude were born into the hero's party.

Chapter 74: Now—A Trial Like Never Before

It had already been a week since we defeated the fiftieth-floor boss of the Backdoor Dungeon, the Devil Slime. We returned to the arena several days later, as was requested of us during the first trial. Our goal, of course, was to challenge the sixtieth-floor boss.

We received a warm welcome from the announcer.

"Just the people we were waiting for! Magnificent members of the hero's party! Thank you for making the long trip again!"

"You kept us waiting a whole week. Now c'mon, bring out the dungeon boss. I'll beat the living hell out of them."

Cain was cracking his knuckles, full of gusto.

And so was everyone else. We'd had a week to prepare, and we'd spent it devising strategies to counteract the hellspawn and devils of Hell. We simulated every possible situation, predicted what the dungeon boss might throw at us, and even listened to Lilith's tales about Hell. We made sure we were fully prepared for whatever battle lay ahead of us.

Now everyone was fired up and ready to go.

"Did the people who greeted you treat you improperly in any way?"

"Nah, they provided excellent support. It's that, you know. I'm surprised we were able to jump straight from floor fifty-one to sixty."

As Cain had laid it out, we were once again amazed by the strange culture of Hell. We'd already cleared the fiftieth floor, so we could jump straight there with the teleportation circle. But when we did, we found some of hell's denizens waiting to greet us, and they guided us the rest of the way.

We thought we'd have to go through each floor from the fifty-first to the sixtieth, but instead, we rode a strange vehicle called an

elevator and were taken straight to floor sixty. It seemed that we'd only have to take on the trials that came every ten floors.

While similar devices known as lifts existed in the human world, they were small and used in places like mines and construction sites to transport raw materials. The elevator we rode seemed completely different in structure and principle.

Not only was the elevator a surprise, so too was the view we saw from within it. Each level from fifty-one to sixty had been transformed into a bustling city of Hell. According to our guides, all the floors beyond the fiftieth had been remodeled into an entertainment district.

"It's extraordinary. So, this is what a higher plane is like."

"You said it..."

It seemed everyone else shared my opinion, as we all shared in a sigh. The difference in civilization between the upper and lower worlds was vast. This was a stark reminder of the reality of our situation.

And this difference in civilization would also play a role in the strength of the sixtieth-floor boss we were set to face.

"We're ready to start the show. Everyone, please make your way to the stage."

"A'ight! Here we go! Get ready for a tough battle!"

"Let's go!"

We started on our way out of the waiting room.

"Good luck, everyooone. Today, I'll be watching over you as an audience member."

"Speaking of which... What were you doing in the commentary booth last time, master?"

"Hee hee. ♪"

Lilith evaded the question with a smile. After parting ways with her in the waiting room, we stepped out into the arena.

Just like last time, the arena was surrounded by spectator seats, making it feel like a coliseum. It was clear we were going to be made into a spectacle again. *Well, I already suspected as much when we entered a dome-shaped building. It was probably constructed specifically for this phenomenon called television.*

The environment was mostly the same. The audience, the spotlights, and the television cameras were focused on us. Those magical devices were supposedly broadcasting footage across the entirety of Hell. They were quite curious contraptions. But there was one significant difference from our last battle.

"What are...all of those things?"

On the large stage that was supposed to be our battlefield were many strange devices whose purposes were unclear. There were chairs attached to complicated mechanisms, a platform around twenty meters high, tin boards marked with 'X's and 'O's...and various other objects that didn't seem related to fighting at all.

Aren't those just going to get in the way of the battle?

"Now, it's time for this week's show to begin! Welcome to 'Excuse us, Coming in Through the Back! Humanity's Backdoor Dungeon Challenge!' Last week, the hero party defeated the boss of the fiftieth floor with ease! What kind of performance will they give us against the sixtieth-floor boss? We've got big expectations riding on them!"

The announcer began speaking. It seemed the "broadcast" had begun.

"And here he is! The sixtieth-floor boss is... That's right! The Quiz-Loving Hellspawn, Kwizler!"

"Yo! The name's Kwizler, and I just love quizzes! I've got plenty of fun and challenging quizzes for everyone! I hope you all enjoy it!"

"Wha?"

What's that supposed to mean? Something's off.

The hellspawn claiming to be the sixtieth-floor boss—who was supposed to be an enemy—was sitting comfortably in the commentary booth. Why was the dungeon boss sitting safely on that side of the arena? Weren't we supposed to fight Kwizler?

"Hey, Kwiz, or whatever your name is! Get down here! Let's fight already!" Cain raised his voice, but Kwizler simply shook his head.

"No, no no, you've got it all wrong, Hero Cain! What I want isn't some violent and barbaric sword fight! I desire an intellectual battle of wit that everyone can enjoy! That's right—a quiz battle!"

"Huh?!"

The dungeon boss known as Kwizler flexed his arms, flaunting his massive biceps...all while insisting he didn't want to come to blows. He was a muscular, blue humanoid hellspawn with horns. He sported a clearly powerful physique, and yet...a battle of wit? A quiz battle?

The announcer began explaining.

"Ahem, it seems there's been a misunderstanding on the hero's side, so allow me to clarify something. The trial of the sixtieth-floor boss is a quiz battle. Not a combat trial; you'll have to overcome this dungeon boss by answering quizzes!"

"The hell's that supposed to mean?!" Cain cried out in shock.

"Quiz battle?"

"Wh-What do you think they mean by that?"

A wave of unease spread among us. When it came to dungeon bosses, it had always been combat. How were we supposed to defeat a foe if not through battle? This was so far removed from human logic that we were left utterly baffled.

"Yeah, yeah, just get down here already! Fight! C'mon!"

"Whoa! No violence! That's barbaric! Uncivilized! Someone help me—guards!"

Cain had leaped up to the booth, attempting to drag Kwizler down into the arena.

"Tch!"

However, the booth was protected by a powerful barrier, one that not even Cain's holy sword could cut through. As he struggled, a group of Hell's guards arrived: devils and hellspawn clad in uniforms that resembled the ones worn by the angel cops from Celestia.

With his attention so focused on the barrier, Cain was quickly apprehended by several guards.

"Please try to understand! This is television! If every single program was just about battle, the viewers at home would get bored!" the announcer explained while repeatedly bowing his head. "We have to come up with different kinds of shows to keep things fresh and exciting... Otherwise our ratings will plummet! We're just getting off the ground here! Please, hero! Work with us!"

"Grrr..."

Still in the hands of the guards, Cain gritted his teeth in

frustration.

"Dammit... You're the ones making the rules here. I guess we just have to follow them."

"Thank you for being so understanding, hero!"

Cain begrudgingly nodded. Even though the announcer had framed it as a request, he was right. We were bound by whatever rules they made for us. Even if we managed to resolve everything with brute force, the inhabitants of hell wouldn't simply hand over the treasure that could break the barrier on the demon lord's castle.

And we couldn't just go around making an enemy of Hell in its entirety. If Celestia contained beings as powerful as Lilith, then surely Hell had a few combatants so strong we could never even hope to defeat them.

In other words, we had no choice but to participate in this so-called quiz battle.

"The rules are simple!" Kwizler explained with a microphone in hand, "Answer my questions correctly to earn points! Get enough points and you'll clear the challenge and successfully complete the sixtieth floor of the dungeon!"

Meanwhile, Cain walked back down to us.

"Hell is insane," he sighed. "Every single one of those guards was ridiculously skilled."

"So they're like the angel cops from Celestia? No wonder it's so hard to deal with these upper worlds."

"But beware!" boomed Kwizler. "Answer incorrectly, and you'll be subjected to all sorts of punishments! Prepare yourselves, heroes of the human world!"

All sorts of punishments... The words had us tense up. Typically, dungeon boss battles were fights to the death. There was nothing strange about a mistake leading to a fatal penalty.

This quiz battle isn't something to take lightly. A single wrong answer can mean death. I need to stay sharp...

"Now then, let's proceed to the first question! And who's going to answer it? Let's have a look!"

Dramatic music played as an image was projected on a large board in the arena. *I'm still not used to it. Movies, videos. This*

technology to make photographs move.

The images projected were of our faces, rapidly cycling from one face to another in sync with the music. Then, with a fanfare, the cycle came to a sudden stop. The face on the screen belonged to Cain.

"Our first contestant is Cain the Hero! What a fantastic start! Let's see how intelligent the leader of the team really is!"

"Fine! Bring it on!" Cain shouted with a belligerent glare.

The trial of the sixtieth floor, the quiz battle had finally begun!

"For the first question! True, or false? The official term for the sudden twitching movement that occurs as you're nodding off is called 'knocking.'"

"What...?"

As soon as the question was asked, a staff member escorted Cain to a designated area.

A few meters ahead of him were two thin boards—one labeled "O," the other one "X."

"Contestant, please jump through the board with the answer you believe is correct! O for true, and X for false! Don't worry—they'll break easily, so feel free to charge right in!"

"..."

Oh, I see. I was wondering what all those weird structures were for, but they were all part of the quiz.

"Damn it all!"

For some reason, Cain cursed and began barreling toward the boards. He chose "O," bursting through the thin panel and diving into whatever lay beyond it.

The result...

"Bweh?! Pffft! Th-The hell is this?!"

The camera zoomed in, the image showing Cain front and center. Our leader was completely covered in a white powder.

What is that? Flour, perhaps?

It seemed that the area he'd jumped into had been filled with white powder, leaving him completely coated. Meanwhile, the side with the "X" was revealed to have nothing but a soft mat behind it.

"Wah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha hah!"

The audience erupted in laughter.

The sight of Cain's flour-covered face was so silly that we couldn't help but stifle our own laughter—well, most of us. Rachel and Kuon were clutching their stomachs, laughing along with the crowd.





An unpleasant buzzer sound filled the air. Surely that was the sign of a wrong answer.

"Too bad! Incorrect, hero! The correct answer was 'False'! The official term for that sudden bodily movement is 'jerking'! Learned something new, didn't you?"

"Dammit..."

Cain trudged back to us, still covered in white powder from head to toe. Just the sight of him looking like that was amusing.

When he said there would be all sorts of punishments...is this what he meant?

A moment ago, Cain had raced toward the answer, screaming, "Damn it all!" In other words, he had absolutely no idea what the right answer was. His grades in school were bad. A quiz battle was simply not his forte.

"Kya ha ha ha hah! Cain! You look real idiotic right now!"

"Gya ha ha ha hah! And thou call'st thyself the hero of the human race? Pathetic! Look upon thyself! Thy disgraceful image is being broadcast across all of hell! If only the humans could see thee too!"

"You guys are dead meat!"

"Gyaaah!"

Cain finally snapped at Rachel and Kuon's merciless laughter. He charged at them, swinging his sword like a maniac.

"Whoa there! No in-fighting, please! We don't allow violence here!"

The announcer tried to mediate... The opposing team was now expressing concern for us. *This is strangely disheartening*.

"Next up! Question two! The next contestant is... You!"

Just like before, the screen displayed the next contestant. The face that appeared...belonged to Kuon.

"Huh?"

The girl who had been laughing her heart out as she ran from Cain was now petrified, a completely sober look on her face.

And so, the quiz battle continued.

"Question twelve! What is the official term for the white stringy bits on an orange after you peel it? Answer within ten seconds!"

“What?! Um?! An orange’s...what?!”

Rachel was losing her mind at the quiz podium. The timer kept ticking down without mercy. And she still had no answer.

“Five...four...three...”

“You’re talking about that white stuff, right?! Why would that even have a name?! How the hell do you expect me to know *that*?!”

“Zero! Too bad! You failed to answer! The correct term is the ‘albedo.’ Look at you, getting smarter by the second! And now, it’s time for the penalty!”

Kwizler casually pressed a nearby button.

“Gyaaaaaaaaah?!”

The floor beneath Rachel snapped open, sending her plummeting. Fortunately, a flexible cord fastened to her leg yanked her back up before she could hit the ground. She bounced up and down, again and again.

Yes, it was bungee jumping. Rachel had been pressed to answer the question while standing on a platform twenty meters high. Her punishment was a sudden, forced bungee jump through a trapdoor.

The camera made sure to capture her expression in all its detail. The image it showed was one of her mid-scream with her mouth stretched wide in panic—an absolutely ridiculous face.

“Wa ha ha ha ha hah!”

The audience burst into laughter.

Rachel stumbled her way back, miserably.

“Wa ha ha ha ha hah! Rachel! Did you see your own face back there?! Get a load of that!”

“Gya ha ha ha ha hah! One of thy caliber should be able to land safely from twenty meters no trouble! And yet, that expression? What art thou so afraid of? Wah ha ha ha ha hah!”

“Jumping on my own and being dropped are two completely different things, jerks! Curse you!”

Cain and Kuon continued to fan the flames with teasing and laughter, and finally, Rachel began swinging her hammer in a huff. Our team members were turning on each other yet again.

“Ahhh, there they go again... Is Team Hero going to make it through this?”

“Just don’t hurt yourselves!”

“This stuff happens all the time! We’re fine!”

Once more, the enemy side was the one worrying about us. Incidentally, Kuon got the second question wrong and wound up covered in mud. Just like what was happening right now, those three had gotten into quite the quarrel right after.

“This is...bad.”

“It definitely is.”

Sylphie and Melvy were both frowning. For a while now, it had been nothing but one wrong answer after the next. The hero’s party was full of elite combat specialists who’d achieved countless victories through sheer might—but this quiz battle had thoroughly exposed their weakness.

It was perfectly understandable—unavoidable, even. How could they have studied when they were so busy fighting the demon army? They had to dedicate so much time to combat training that their general knowledge had inevitably fallen by the wayside.

In fact, the only reason that Cain and the others were now able to attend the school was because the war with the demon army had reached a stalemate. Otherwise, they wouldn’t have had the luxury to attend the Academy.

And yet...

“Correct! The name of the national heritage site in the Vengalin region of the Lemrest Kingdom is indeed... The Great Ruins of Mears! Congratulations, Melvy! That will net you a solid fifty points!”

“Yay! Umm, er, I did it! I really did!”

“Oh!”

Melvy returned, bouncing up and down in excitement. That’s right. There were still those holding their own in this quiz battle. As a Saint, Melvy had received a high level of education from the Grand Cathedral. And now, that education was paying off. She was mass-producing correct answers.

“Question fourteen goes to... Lisalinde!”

“Ah... It’s my turn. Very well.”

I sat in some sort of special modified chair as the question was presented... Who knew what kind of mechanism would be set off if I

got it wrong? *It's a little scary to think about...*

"Correct! You've earned your team seventy points!"

"Phew..."

I somehow managed to answer correctly and avoid the punishment.

"Nice work, Liz."

"I knew you had it in you. You two are our only hope."

"Ah ha ha, I was just lucky."

I could feel myself turning red from all the praise.

As someone from a distinguished noble family, I, too, had received a high-level education since childhood, and I'd been exposed to many different disciplines. Fortunately, my experiences and studies were getting results.

"If it's just Melvy and Liz...and maybe Mitter and Sylphie... If we're lucky enough for them to keep getting picked, we might clear this thing after all! Come on, scoreboard! Work your magic!"

"You're just...pushing it onto everyone else..."

"For me and Mitter, our success rate is around fifty-fifty."

"Right. I'm not that confident."

"Our next contestant is... New Hero Altina!"

"Erk..."

Altina promptly failed her question.

"Nyaaaaaaaaah! Gnyaaaaaaaaah!"

"Wa ha ha ha ha ha ha hah!"

"Ah ha ha ha hah! What a riot!"

"Gya ha ha ha hah! This is the best!"

The chair she was sitting in began to spin rapidly, and Altina let out an incredible scream. She was making quite a face. And of course, our horrible friends laughed right along with the crowd.

Cain, Rachel, and Kuon had already gone through multiple punishments and were completely covered in filth. Yet the three of them were laughing the hardest at their comrade's misfortune. Honestly, they seemed to be enjoying the quiz battle more than the spectators.

"Wa ha ha ha hah! Altina! What was that face back there?! Were you really that scared?!"

"Bwa ha ha ha hah! Thou shouldst remember your own ladyhood, now and again! Who in their right mind would wed thee when thou lookest like that?!"

"Arrrrgh!"

Altina came back fuming, swinging her holy sword and giving chase. It had practically become a tradition at this point.

"Next time... I'm definitely bringing Wolfe!"

"Good idea! He should get a taste of these punishme— Ahem, I mean, he should get to enjoy such a fun quiz battle too!"

Cain readily agreed with Altina's suggestion... *I'm not sure what to think about dragging your childhood friend in as a sacrificial lamb.*

"Correct! Lisalinde earns eighty points!"

"Hooray!"

"Correct! Melvy earns one hundred points!"

"I did it!"

"At this point, can't we just leave it to those two?" someone muttered.

That won't do. You can't just rely on others for everything.

With that said... I was genuinely happy that I was making real contributions to the fight. Just as I'd lamented when I'd broken down in tears by the sea, I was still inexperienced. I could do nothing but let my fallen angel powers rampage beyond my control. But I'd never imagined I would get the chance to shine in a place like this. If answering these questions correctly meant I could help everyone, then I couldn't possibly ask for more.

"But...things aren't looking good."

"Quite right, Sylphie."

Despite our efforts, we still had too many incorrect answers overall. At this rate, clearing the challenge seemed impossible.

And then.

"What's this?! We're entering bonus time! If you answer this one right, you'll get a whopping three hundred points!"

"What?!"

Bonus time? They never mentioned that!

"The contestants this time will be... Melvy and Lisalinde! The same question will go to both of you! If you both answer it correctly,

you'll get your team three hundred points!"

"Whoa!"

"This is our big break! I'm counting on you, Liz, Melvy!"

"Y-Yes! I'll do what I can!"

"Um, er... I'm off!"

Both of us had to get the question right. The difficulty was rising. But the reward was massive.

We need to win this one! I thought as I exchanged a glance with Melvy. We shared a silent nod.

We stood on what seemed like a perfectly normal floor panel. There were no obvious mechanisms, which only made it that much more nerve-racking—there was no way to predict what the punishment would be if we got it wrong.

No... No pessimism! I can't afford to think like that! I'm going to get this question right, no matter what!

"Now then...here comes the next question!"

I swallowed my breath.

"The topic is Hell Trivia! Out of all of Hell's famous figures that have appeared in elementary school textbooks, which one has been doodled on by children the most? A, Donbas Goldrosa; B, Mighty Hellspawn Dark Inkler, Lord of the Eight Heavens; C, Asmor Demon; or D, Anti-Kshitiharbha the Fiendish Bull?"

"Huh?!"

"What?!"

The question hit us like a brick.

Hell Trivia? How were we supposed to know anything about that? We'd only arrived in Hell last week! There was no way we had any detailed knowledge about the place! And as for the names he brought up... I'd never heard a single one of them before.

"M-Melvy...?"

"Th-This is..."

I turned to Melvy, but she looked just as lost as I was. A look of utter confusion was plastered over her face, and...I knew I probably had the same look on mine.

"Your answer, please! No discussing!"

"Erk!"

Prompted by the announcer, we each picked our answer cards. The odds were one in four. It was pure luck at this point.

At the reveal, I raised the A card, while Melvy raised the D... That meant it was completely impossible for both of us to be correct.

"The answers are in! Now, the correct answer is... I'm sorry! You're both incorrect! The right answer was B, Dark Inkler, Lord of the Eight Heavens! Despite being nearly bald, the fact that he has exactly four strands of hair on the top of his head seems to spark the creativity of children everywhere!"

"That's the first I'm hearing of it!"

"Now! It's time for your punishment!"

Ignoring my protest, Kwizler calmly pressed the button.

"Waaah?!"

"What is this?!"

The floor beneath us suddenly rose and began tilting. The angle grew steeper and steeper until it had essentially become a slide.

"Wah!"

"Aaah!"

With nothing to grab onto, we lost our balance and slid. And at the bottom—the floor where we were supposed to land had opened up.

"Ah... That's...?!"

At the end of the slide...was black slime.

The entire cavity was filled with a thick layer of black slime. There was no mistaking it. We'd been tormented by that jiggly, squishy mass just last week.

Though I can't seem to remember much past a certain point...

"Our punishment this time is brought to you by Sir Devil Slime! Introducing... The Convenient Solvent that Only Dissolves Clothing!"

"I knew it!"

Curse you, Devil Slime! I screamed in my head as we plunged straight into a pool made entirely of his body.

"Waaaaaaaaah!"

"Erk... So this is how it ends..."

There was a sizzling sound as the black slime started eating away at our clothing. It truly was the enemy of all women. Our skin was

mercilessly exposed to the world.

"Woo-hoo!"

The audience erupted in cheers. *Darn it, we really are just a spectacle to them. Hell's television culture is a true menace.*

Nearly tripping on the gooey, sticky substance that clung to our feet, we hurriedly made our escape. I was livid, while Melvy looked oddly composed as we returned to our comrades.

"That was just tough luck. Not your fault. Here, wear these."

Cain removed his own jacket and draped it over me. Then, he gave his shirt to Melvy. It was a gentlemanly gesture that I truly appreciated...but now, he was left shirtless.

"Booooo! Boooooo!"

"Eeeeee!"

Boos and squees rang out in unison. What a shamelessly honest crowd. So this was the standard for Hell's residents.

"The crowd is going wild, but...what a shame! Time's up! We're out of broadcast time, so this is the end of the challenge! Looks like you failed to clear the sixtieth floor's trial, heroes!"

"Damn!"

Yet again, it came down to scheduling issues. Something called a "broadcasting schedule" had cut the challenge short.

"Hold on! Give us another chance! We need the treasure that dispels the barrier on the demon lord's castle!" Cain raised his voice, clearly desperate.

We'd failed the dungeon, meaning we'd lost our chance at the treasure. This was a huge problem, and not just for us—all of humanity needed that treasure.

However, the announcer casually replied, "Oh, there's always next week."

"Huh?"

Cain stared back at him blankly.

"The hero's party will challenge the sixtieth-floor dungeon trial quiz battle again next week! 'Excuse us, Coming in Through the Back! Humanity's Backdoor Dungeon Challenge!' is a multi-week documentary slash variety show! It wouldn't be convenient for us if you cleared the trial too soon."

I...didn't really get it, but it seemed like we'd get another chance at the boss next week. At least we hadn't completely lost our opportunity. But...it felt like a bit of a letdown.

"And now, it's time to say goodbye! Tune in next week, same time, same channel! Look forward to the next exciting episode of 'Excuse us, Coming in Through the Back! Humanity's Backdoor Dungeon Challenge!' Until next time!"

"Let's enjoy another round of quizzes!"

We fell silent as the ending theme played, and the show came to a close. The last shot was of us, covered in dirt, grime, slime, and whatever else they'd slathered us with.

"What the hell is this dungeon boss challenge?!"

We'd been thrown into a quiz battle without warning. Cain's frustrated scream perfectly echoed the thoughts of everyone in the party.

And so, our weekly challenge had ended. Next week, it seemed we'd face the same quiz battle again.

"And so...it's time to study!"

After returning to the human world, Melvy wasted no time in devising a strategy for our next trial. She brought a mountain of books to a room at an inn, getting groans and frowns from a few of our party members.

"Umm, yes, well, the only way to overcome the sixtieth-floor trial is by studying! And we need a wide range of general knowledge! I've gathered plenty of quiz books and trivia collections, so everyone, please start cramming them into your head."

"Melvy... I think I'm coming down with a stomachache."

"I suddenly...feel feverish..."

"Um, no... I'm not letting you escape this time."

"Erk..."

Melvy flashed them a smile; it was the kind of radiant smile one might expect from an angel, yet the pressure she exuded was immense.

Rightfully so. Cain and Rachel were both dunces when it came to academics. They always found some excuse or another to avoid studying, even going so far as to schedule campaigns against the

demon army on the same days as their exams to slip out.

Technically, they were following proper procedure, and since their expeditions were an essential duty of the hero's party, their actions had been overlooked up until now.

But this time, there was no escape from studying.

"Why don't we study for our school exams while we're at it? Midterms should be coming up soon."

"That, er, sounds like a good idea, Sylphie. We can never know what kind of knowledge might come in handy for the quiz battle, and school exams are important."

The two honor students quickly decided our course of action.

"Nooo! I hate studying! When I study, my head gets this sorta itch all over!"

"You got that right! We've all got our strengths and weaknesses! I'm against forced studying!"

"Enough! Stop whining like children!"

"Yes ma'am..."

And thus, the strongest warriors of humanity—feared by demons everywhere—were silenced by a single scolding from Sylphie, leaving them with no choice but to sit and study. It was hard to believe that these were high school students.

"And...as for me and Liz, we stopped by a bookstore on the way back and picked up some books on Hell. Let's study them and improve our knowledge of Hell."

"Y-Yes...understood."

That's right. The last question today—if anything about hell's history or culture shows up in the quizzes, we won't stand a chance. Deepening our knowledge of Hell is absolutely necessary.

"But Melvy...how did you manage to get your hands on those books? You don't even know where to find a bookstore in Hell, do you?"

"Oh, well... Ms. Tsubaki and Ms. Lilith helped out."

"Ah."

Tsubaki was the first hellspawn we'd met in Hell. And then, there was my mentor, Lilith. They both gave off a sense that they liked to help people, and they probably wouldn't hesitate to help if asked.

“All right, everyone! Let’s do our best and study!”

“Yeah!”

“Yeah!”

“Urp...”

“This is hell...”

“No, we were just in Hell.”

“Unyaaaaaaaaah...”

Some of us were clearly less enthusiastic than the rest, but skipping out wasn’t an option. And so, like real students, we tackled the cliché event known as the study session.

“Ngaaah! My brain’s gonna burst!”

“Aren’t you hitting your limit a bit too quickly, Cain?”

I was starting to feel anxious about where this session was headed...

Time passed, and before we knew it, a whole month had gone by.

We challenged the sixtieth floor every week, and every week, we failed. Knowledge wasn’t something that could be picked up overnight, and our party members continued failing in the quizzes, suffering punishment after punishment.

Wolfe was especially pitiful. He was dragged in without any prior explanation and sent in to fail. As I watched his childhood friends cackling with laughter at his misfortune, I could have sworn I saw the embodiment of true evil within them.

Meanwhile, Remphie, who pined for him, watched the punishments unfold from the audience seats. “I’ll watch every week!” she declared with delight.

To her, any moment involving her beloved was worth treasuring. Love truly did wonders to cloud the eyes.

After each episode, the announcer would come over to thank us. “We had record-breaking viewership again! The reactions from all of you are so entertaining that you’re building a real fanbase in Hell!” he’d praise us. Even though it was a compliment, the fact that our humiliation was what was drawing the viewers made it hard to feel proud of it.

In that way, we continued to dedicate ourselves to studying, even shaving away at our combat training hours. But, at some point, we realized something.

We...figured it out. The real key to winning the quiz battle.

"Here we are again! Welcome back to this week's episode of 'Excuse us, Coming in Through the Back! Humanity's Backdoor Dungeon Challenge!' Today, the hero's party is once again taking on the sixtieth floor's quiz battle!"

The announcer's magically amplified voice echoed through the arena, reaching all the way to our waiting room.

"Let's welcome the contestants! You all know them by now—the hero and his delightful companions!"

"A'ight, everyone! Let's knock 'em dead this time!"

"Yes, sir!"

On Cain's order, we stepped out of the waiting room and made for the arena.

"Once again, our challengers from the human realm have stepped up to the plate! First up is our unexpectedly roguish hero, Cain! A bit of a bad boy, but that's what makes the female fans crazy about him! Next, we have the elegant and ever-popular Princess Sylphonia! And let's not forget the Saint of the Grand Cathedral, who's captured everyone with her cuteness, Saint Mel—hmm? Hmmm...?"

It was around that point that the announcer noticed something was off. Today, the hero's party had brought far more members than usual. In fact, our numbers had nearly doubled.

"W-Wait a minute... What's going on here?! Who are all these new faces?!"

The answer was simple. We'd come with reinforcements. If the hero's party was no good at studying, then we just needed to bring in people who excelled at it!

"My word... I always thought Hell was just a myth. To think it's real, and to think I'm standing in it right now..."

"If we published this in an academic journal on sociology or theology, it would cause an uproar..."

The special recruits for today were none other than the university researchers who we'd asked to examine the holy swords. They were

all still in their lab coats; Cain hadn't given them time to change when he'd unceremoniously abducted them and forced them to participate in the quiz battle.

He'd taken a bit of a forceful approach, mainly because explaining everything would have been too much of a pain.

"Wh-Wh-What is this?! Team Hero...brought in reinforcements?! The rules... The rules say...absolutely nothing! There's no regulation! It's allowed! This is not a violation!"

We got the announcer's stamp of approval. Now, we could use our powerful backup with pride.

The quiz began...but the outcome was completely one-sided.

"Correct! Brigitta, you just got yourself forty points!"

"Phew."

"Correct! Contestant Nathanial, that's fifty points to you!"

"It looks like we can manage one way or another."

"How underhanded! How sly! Don't you feel ashamed, heroes?!" the announcer grumbled, but now that it had been deemed valid, we were going to take full advantage of it. *Underhanded or sly, or whatever else you want to call it—history is written by the victors. Victory is justice itself.*

"Contestant Lamilia gets it right! Another eighty points added to the scoreboard!"

Young Lamilia, granddaughter of Lalo, continued to rack up correct answers at an incredible pace. Our team already consisted of highly intelligent and knowledgeable individuals, and we'd managed to cram an extensive amount of trivia on Hell into their heads in no time at all.

Before, we hadn't stood a snowball's chance in hell—but now, it was like that snowball had caused hell to freeze over.

"Oooh? You're only throwing out super easy questions that even a widdle kid like me can answer? Aren't you embarrassed to call yourself the host of this event? So lame, so weak. Total bottom-tier quizmaster! ♪"

"Grrr...!"

Lamilia's cheeky brat nature was on full display. She was up against a higher being—an absolute power that could snuff out her

life in an instant if he so desired—but she continued riling up Kwizler, the dungeon boss of the sixtieth floor. Even in Hell, this was all business as usual for her. Was her heart made of steel or something?

"But...a little girl's insults...might actually feel...kinda nice."

"Oh, he's a masochist."

As it turned out, Kwizler had the makings of a masochist.

"Well, no matter! The next contestant is...Cain, the Hero!"

We gulped.

Even if we had powerful helpers, the contestants were selected at random. That meant our weakest link could still get chosen. *It somehow feels like blasphemy to call Cain our weakest member...*

"Fine, bring it! I've got nothing to fear! Let's do this thing!"

Having gone through countless punishments already, Cain boldly stepped up to the podium. He didn't need any further prompting.

"Heh heh heh, oh, Cain. The audience is eager to see you fail and suffer again, you know."

"Don't think I'm the same as I used to be...!"

"I wonder how many times I've heard you say that... All right, here's your question! The topic is Human History! In the nation of Gogorr, a deadly plague known as Jhatsune Disease spread like wildfire. What is the name of the scholar who researched it and discovered its cure?!"

Cain's eyes widened. He was hopeless at quizzes in general, but he especially struggled with history—or rather, anything that was based on pure memorization; any problem that he couldn't work out through logical reasoning. As far as I could recall, he had never once answered a history problem correctly.

"Hee hee..." A few giggles leaked out of the audience.

To them, Cain's humiliating defeat was already a foregone conclusion. They were eagerly anticipating the punishment that would follow.

But today, Cain was a little different. His eyes had widened in surprise, but the corners of his lips had curled into a grin.

"That..."

"Oh...?"

“That was on the midterm study guiiiiiide! The answer is Billygail Hendergil! The great scholar from three hundred years ago!”

“What?!”

Now, it was Kwizler and the audience’s turn to stare in shock.

The strongest warrior humanity had to offer—yet hopelessly weak at quizzes. A walking joke who existed only to suffer punishments for everyone’s amusement. And yet, that man had just answered a history problem correctly!

“That’s...correct! The answer is Billygail Hendergil! Sixty points to Cain!”

“Rock on!”

“But wait, hold on!”

Kwizler turned to the massive progress bar that had been installed in the arena. That was where our points were added up and stored—and now, it was filled to the brim. That meant...we had conquered the quiz battle!

“No... Who would have guessed?! The finally correct answer was given by Cain! The strongest hero on the surface world! And in hell, the comedian with the best reactions! Hero Cain has led his team to victory!”

“Wooooooooo!”

“Hey, wait! You guys think I’m some sort of comedian?!”

The announcer’s words had the entire crowd erupting in cheers. The hopeless, clumsy underdog had triumphed where it counted. The path of the clown, the growth of this pitiful child had pulled at the heartstrings of the audience...if not the entire viewership of hell...despite Cain’s screams of frustration.

“Regardless... Congratulations! You’ve done well to overcome the trial set out by me—the sixtieth floor’s dungeon boss! Humanity’s greatest champions! I now grant you permission to advance to the seventieth floor!”

“Finally!”

“Urgh... That took forever.”

“I hope the next trial is something straightforward.”

We’d participated in five consecutive events, spanning slightly over a month. Our less quizzically inclined members were completely

drained. They had endured a never-ending barrage of punishments, so I couldn't fault them for it.

But regardless of all that...we had successfully conquered the trial of the dungeon's sixtieth floor!

"Hold on a damn second! Just what kind of reputation do I have in Hell?! I'm getting a real bad feeling about this!"

Despite that, Cain was still letting out his discontent.

"And with that, we'll be wrapping up this week's episode a little earlier than usual! Next week, the hero's party will face a brand-new trial as they challenge the seventieth floor's dungeon boss! What kind of challenge awaits them?! Will Hero Cain once again become our resident comedian?! Stay tuned...!"

"Wait! Stop! I don't need that kind of disgraceful title! Make it a battle! Change all the upcoming trials to battles instead! Isn't that nice and simple?!"

"That's all for today's episode of 'Excuse us, Coming in Through the Back! Humanity's Backdoor Dungeon Challenge!' We'll see you all next time! Until then, take care!"

"I said wait, goddammit!"

Though Cain alone continued voicing his strong complaints, the program wrapped up on a cheerful note.

At first, we'd felt completely out of place, but over time, we'd all grown accustomed to being on television. Now, as the show came to a close, we smiled naturally and waved at the cameras.

What kind of trial awaits us next? The question still lingered, but for now, we'd taken another step forward. I wanted to press on with this momentum.

"To hell with all of you!"

The week's broadcast ended with Cain's scream. Slowly, but surely, his reputation as a comedian was being firmly cemented in Hell.

Chapter 75: Now—The Trial Continues

"A!"

"Hell no! I'm telling you it's B! The flavor's completely different!"

"Hah! What a poor excuse for a palate! You seriously can't understand the depth of A's flavor?!"

"I have to agree with him. B tastes better to me."

"Huh?!"

Cain, Altina, and Wolfe—the three childhood friends—were in the midst of yet another heated, unsightly squabble. They continued to hurl insults at one another, going back and forth in a never-ending debate.

We were on the seventieth floor of the Backdoor Dungeon, in the middle of the dungeon boss's trial. Considering we were up against a boss from a higher plane of existence, we should have been approaching this life-or-death struggle with some amount of seriousness, but...

"All right, it's two against one. B it is. No complaining, Altina."

"What?! You're going to regret this, and it won't be my problem!"

"Majority rules. Just give it up."

"Hmph!"

With the way the three of them were bickering, one would think they were lounging around at home, arguing over something completely inconsequential.

"All right! Team Childhood Friends has locked in the answer B! Have they correctly identified the highest-grade foie gras? Let's see!"

Silence.

Tension.

"The correct answer is...C! What a shame! Team Childhood Friends got it wrong! And what's more... The dish they chose,

B...was a blend of frog livers! Two ranks down from the right answer!”

“What?!”

Their eyes widened in shock.

The rules for the seventieth-floor trial were simple enough: a battle to distinguish high-end products from cheap knockoffs. Each round presented us with two or three items of varying price points, and we had to identify which one was the real luxury good.

We had been split into multiple teams to tackle the challenge. If a team got a certain number of incorrect answers before the game show ended, they’d fail the challenge and have to try again next week.

Conversely, if they kept getting right answers, they’d win. But the trial had a nasty catch—if even a single team failed, our entire party was considered a failure.

“What did I tell you?! You should’ve listened to me and gone with A!”

“Are you stupid, Wolfe?! That would’ve still been a wrong answer!”

“At least it would’ve been better than being bumped down by two!”

It was a battle of the blind leading the blind.

“And now, it’s time for the punishment! Since you’re down two levels, that means...*two* metal washbasins!”

“Erk...”

Their expressions stiffened up. Before they could even finish their squabbling, two large metal basins came crashing down from the ceiling, striking them square on the heads. It was like two gongs had been struck, one shortly after the next, a deep metallic timbre echoing across the arena for some time.

“Gwah?!”

“Ngyah?!”

“Erk!”

“Wa ha ha ha ha hah!”

Cain and his childhood friends rolled on the floor in pain as the audience erupted in laughter. Normally, a metal washbasin wouldn’t

have done a thing to them. The basins were surely infused with some kind of magic from Hell.

From the testimonials of our party members, getting hit by them apparently felt like having your skull rattled from the inside, sending shock waves through your whole nervous system. The shock was so bad, your body would stop listening to you for a bit. Those who experienced it described it as turning into a literal ringing bell.

I personally had yet to experience the punishment.

As the three of them writhed from this special Hell magic, the crowd watched them and laughed.

"Ahem, since Team Childhood Friends has dropped two levels, they've fallen from Third-Class to Peasant...and from Peasant to...Disqualified!"

"Wa ha ha ha ha ha ha hah!"

"Oof..."

And so, as the three of them lay there, the rest of us clutched our heads. Now that their rank had plummeted to Disqualified, the entire party had failed the challenge. And so, our first attempt at the seventieth-floor trial ended in defeat.

The following week, we returned for another attempt at the Luxury Item Guessing Game.

"Screw it! How the hell am I supposed to tell the difference in sound between a super high-end violin and a regular one?!" Cain groaned, holding his head.

It wasn't like we'd spent the past week doing nothing. We'd scoured the land for every luxury item we could find and forced Cain and the others to compare them until they'd grown sick of it. They were elite warriors with finely honed senses. With their abnormal concentration and exceptional perception, they were gradually building up their skills of judgment.

But still, this wasn't something that could be mastered in a handful of days.

Discerning luxury was a skill cultivated from childhood and raised through constant exposure to high-end products. Hearing and scent sensitivity, in particular, were said to be shaped by early training and

were difficult to develop later in life. No matter how much taste-testing or sound comparison we crammed into a single week, it was merely a drop in the ocean.

Meanwhile, it was Sylphie who stood head and shoulders over everyone.

It made perfect sense when you thought about it. She was a princess, raised in an environment where she'd been surrounded by only the finest goods from birth. Her discerning eye was already fully developed. She landed every answer with perfect accuracy and complete confidence, and had yet to take a single punishment.

Mitter and I were both nobles who had also been exposed to fine goods since childhood to some degree. But while we hadn't answered incorrectly so far, we weren't nearly as confident in our answers as Sylphie. My heart raced each time I waited for the correct answer to be revealed, and I'd sigh in relief every time.

Then, there was Kuon, the former Demon Lord. Much like Sylphie, she was completely accustomed to luxury and had yet to show any signs of making a mistake.

On the other hand, Cain, Altina, Wolfe, and Rachel...were all country folk and were struggling hard with the quiz. That much was predictable.

What *was* surprising, however, was Melvy.

"Hrrrrngh... A!"

Melvy thought long and hard, agonizing over her decision before making her final choice. But reality was a harsh mistress.

"The correct answer is...B! Melvy gets it incorrect! She's dropped one rank from Second-Class to Third-Class! And now—it's punishment time!"

"Waaaaaaaaah!"

A metal basin dropped on Melvy's head with a loud *gong*. The pain sent her writhing on the floor. She was always so calm and composed...the very image of a saint. Seeing her like this was a little refreshing. Her vast knowledge and education had made her a key player in our previous quiz battle. I'd assumed she would breeze through this one as well, but that wasn't the case. Her accuracy was surprisingly low.

Albeit...not as bad as Team Childhood Friends.

"You tried, Melvy."

"Urrrgh... I'm so bad at this..."

She was teetering on her feet as she returned. Apparently, she had grown up in a monastery where an emphasis was placed on living a life of simplicity and frugality. *I see. If she were raised like that, she would never have had the chance to develop a palate for luxury goods.*

That said, she was utterly adorable as she pouted, rubbing the sore spot on her head.

"Now then, Team Lovers! Which one is the professional dancer?! Submit your answers!"

"Can't we, like...do something about this team name?"

"Ha ha ha, agreed. It's embarrassing."

Team Lovers consisted of Rachel and Mitter. The name was so on-the-nose that it left them both visibly flustered. Understandably so.

"I-I say it's...A!"

"It'll be a B from me..."

"Then I'm changing to B too!"

"What's this?! Our contestant Rachel immediately abandoned her own opinion to side with Mitter!"

"Hey, Rachel! Don't you have any pride in your own judgment?!"

"You tell her! Aren't you ashamed of just leaning on Mitter?!"

Jeers rang out from her own allies—particularly those who had fallen victim to the basins... *Yeah, it's like that. It's simple enough: They want someone else to get a taste of their misery. A twisted drive to drag others down with them. Is this guy really a hero?*

"Nuts to my answer! I'm going to do whatever it takes to get it right! That's all that matters! And you know what else? I changed my answer thanks to my wonderful and commendable faith in my partner! I've done absolutely nothing wrong!"

"Grrh...!"

Honestly, Rachel wasn't wrong. Relying on the high accuracy of a teammate was a completely valid strategy. If anything, it was foolish not to. This was the best way to clear the challenge...so really, Cain and his cohorts were the ones with the warped mentality.

Just like that, Rachel continued to scrape through by the skin of her teeth, avoiding punishment after punishment. However, the quiz didn't always let them answer as a team.

There were times when she had to answer individually too.

"Rachel gets it incorrect! That drops you from First Class to Second Class! And now—the punishment you all know and love!"

"Angyaaaaaaaaah!"

When it came to those rounds, even Rachel had no way out; just like Cain, Altina, and Wolfe, she would fall prey to the wash basins of doom. A nice, meaty sound would ring from her head as she fell to the ground and writhed in pain. The audience would erupt in laughter alongside her so-called comrades.

"Wa ha ha ha ha hah! Serves you right, Rachel!"

"You were talking big just a second ago! How the mighty have fallen!"

"Grrrrrrrr!"

As soon as she recovered from the pain, Rachel grabbed her hammer and swung it around as she chased the ones who had laughed at her.

It was practically tradition at this point, a sign of just how close our party members were. The squabbles that had carried on from the last quiz battle also seemed to boost viewership, so the announcer no longer made any attempt to stop it. If anything, he seemed grateful for the added drama.

Incidentally, the teams were divided like so: Team Childhood Friends consisted of Cain, Altina, and Wolfe; Team Lovers had Rachel and Mitter; Team Angel Heart was composed of me and Melvy; and finally, Team Royalty claimed the two royals, Sylphie and Kuon. Mr. Lalo remained on standby on the surface to ensure the human territories weren't left unattended in our absence.

Unlike the quiz battle, we couldn't call for backup. Hell had taken countermeasures for that express purpose, locking us into fixed teams for the trial.

The ranking system for the trial had five tiers: First Class, Second Class, Third Class, Peasant, and Disqualified. Everyone started at First Class, and each incorrect answer knocked us down a rank. The

moment any team fell all the way to Disqualified, the trial was considered a failure.

In short, four misses meant failure, but some questions could penalize two ranks at once, so it wasn't always that simple.

"Too bad! Team Childhood Friends gets it wrong! I'm sure you know what comes next—it's punishment time!"

"Gaaaaaaaaahhh!"

"Ngyaaaaaaaaah!"

"Urrrgh!"

"With that, Team Childhood Friends drops from Peasant to Disqualified! This week's challenge ends in failure!"

"Goddammiiiiiit!"

"Wa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha hah!"

Cain cried out as he took a basin to the head and collapsed to the floor. The audience burst out laughing at the sight.

"Yet again, the heroes have failed the challenge! It looks like they're not going to overcome this one so easily!"

"As I suspected, the heroes are very specialized in combat. As it should be—after all, they must have sacrificed all sorts of things for mere humans to become so strong. It must have been a harsh life for them indeed."

"I see! Now, how will the heroes overcome this seventieth-floor trial?! Keep your eyes peeled! We'll see you next week, same time, same place! Viewers, look forward to the heroes' valiant efforts! Until next time!"

"Buh-bye!"

"Just let us fight normally!"

Excluding Cain's furious roar, the program ended on a peaceful note.

Over the next week, we continued our training.

"All right, Sir Cain," Sylphie prodded. "Which one is the premium abalone?"

We were at the dining hall of the hotel we had been calling our home for some time.

There, we'd borrowed a corner of the hall to conduct our training

for the seventieth-floor trial. Though we drew some curious stares, we remained serious—after all, this training was vital to the future of humanity. Even if...it was quite the odd sight to stumble across.

"Nnnngh..." Cain groaned as he pondered the question.

He crossed his arms in serious thought. Yes, he was indeed serious, as we all were.

"I think...I'd say...B. Did I get it?"

"Oh!"

Cain anxiously peeked at Sylphie's expression, and was met with sparkling eyes.

"You got it right, Cain! That's incredible!"

"Ha ha! I think I'm getting a feel for it! Keep 'em coming!"

He grinned and clenched his fist. His accuracy was improving with each passing day.

"What's gotten into you, Cain? You seem pretty motivated. You weren't like this when we were strategizing for that other quiz."

"Well, yeah, I get to eat delicious food! This is a thousand times more fun than studying!"

"I see..."

When we'd done quiz training, we had done so alongside studying for our school midterms. In the end, this had led to Cain's final correct answers, making the endeavor a massive success. However, this had tanked his—no, *all* of our study-adverse members' motivations to rock bottom.

By contrast, this time the training involved eating delicious food and drinking the finest liquor.

"Umm, err... C!"

"That's right, Dame Altina!"

"Let's see... B!"

"Correct, Sir Wolfe!"

Compared to last time, everyone was visibly more enthusiastic in their preparations—and the training was yielding clear results. Even though this challenge required more delicate senses and was objectively harder than school studies, their accuracy rate was steadily improving.

"We're on fire! More food! More wine!"

Here stood a hero riding high on success.

"How should I put this—if anyone heard you say that, they'd think you were some corrupt hero abusing your power and status."

"You're not wrong."

We let out a collective dry laugh. Who in their right mind would believe that indulging in extravagant food and drink was directly tied to humanity's salvation? But we were very serious.

"Well, it's good that you're motivated... Now let's change locations. Next, we'll refine your aesthetic eye at the theater."

"Urk..."

As soon as Sylphie announced the next phase, Cain and the others immediately deflated. Oh where, oh where had all that motivation gone?

We all knew the reason, though. No one uttered a word as Sylphie led us to a reserved theater where we began by watching a world-class opera. First-rate singers, seasoned by all their years of training, graced the stage with flawless execution. Their voices were heavenly, refined to a level that resonated deep within my soul.

Meanwhile, Cain and the others...

"Zzz..."

"Honk-shoo-mi-mi-mi-mi..."

"Mmm..."

"Don't fall asleep!"

"Oww!"

Sylphie smacked them awake.

Sleeping was certainly discourteous, but I could somewhat understand how they felt. Appreciating the wonders of art required a certain level of education and exposure. Until you reached that point, it was easy to find these performances dull and uninteresting.

"You must muster your motivation, Cain! Feel the magnificence of this world-class opera in your very soul!"

"It's not like the food... It's...how should I put this...complicated..."

Only those with massive amounts of wealth or influence could afford to bear witness to such a performance. It was only through Sylphie's standing as a princess that we had the privilege of

experiencing this masterpiece firsthand.

Yet a few of us simply couldn't grasp the sheer luxury we were experiencing.

Though we were seeing some progress in our training, some areas were still a lost cause.

We continued our training while challenging the seventieth-floor dungeon each week. Each week, we'd fail and spend another week preparing.

Today marked our fifth attempt. Before we knew it, it had been a month since we had our first shot at it. But it wasn't like we hadn't made any progress at all.

"Can you believe it?! We've finally reached the final question! Ladies and gentlemen, the heroes are about to take on the final question for the first time!"

"Whoooooaaaaa!"

We made it to the final question. Up to that point, a team would always drop to Disqualified rank along the way; it was the first time we'd ever gotten this far.

"Hell yeah! Final question! Brace yourself, everyone!"

"Yes!"

"Hey, say that to yourself, Cain. You're the one who needs it."

"Shut it, Rachel!"

As expected, the heroes really did possess extraordinary senses. It would have normally taken years, if not decades, to cultivate one's aesthetic judgment; it wasn't something that could be mastered in just a month of training. But they'd done it. They'd overcome the challenge through brute force.

Their battlefield had sharpened their five senses far beyond those of ordinary humans. It was through their hearing, smell, and sight being honed to the extreme that they'd managed to take down their foes. With these superhuman senses, they could distinguish the slightest differences in scent and precisely identify the minute differences in deep and high-pitched sounds. Now, it just came down to choosing the luxury options that they'd learned to recognize beforehand.

They weren’t relying on anything like aesthetic judgment—instead, it was memory and raw instinct that had won them the game.

“The final question will have three options! One answer is correct, one will cause a two-rank drop...and one answer will result in immediate disqualification!”

“Huh?!”

The announcer’s words caused a wave of tension to race through us. This meant that any team had the possibility of failing the whole party with just a single wrong answer. Throwing all the previous criteria out the window just to drum up some tension... So this was the true nature of variety entertainment.

Team Royalty and Team Angel Heart would survive as long as they didn’t pick the instant fail option. But Team Childhood Friends and Team Lovers were in a precarious situation. They’d just barely scraped through, and anything other than the correct answer would result in disqualification.

“The final question will require all team members to participate! Everyone, please get to your positions!”

The announcer’s words did give me a bit of relief.

It seemed the final question could be answered as a team rather than individually. That meant I could cover for Melvy, who wasn’t particularly confident in her choices, and it meant that Rachel could be supported by Mitter.

Though that did mean the pressure was on me and Mitter...

“Team Angel Heart, correct!”

“We did it!”

“Team Lovers, correct!”

“All right!”

“Th-Thanks for the save, Mitter!”

We somehow managed to get the correct answer. Even Mitter, who was usually quite subdued with his emotions, made a fist pump... Also, the meat was delicious.

“Team Royalty, correct!”

“Phew...”

“’Twas a trifle.”

Sylphie and Kuon had never gotten a question wrong thus far, and naturally, they got this one right too.

But this was where the real challenge began.

"It's A, I tell you!"

"No, it's gotta be B! The texture of the meat is all wrong!"

"You're wrong. It's C. I won't back down on this point."

"What's this?! Team Childhood Friends is completely divided in their answers! All three of them have picked a different option! Is the final obstacle for the heroes the comedian hero himself?!"

Altina, Cain, and Wolfe were arguing over their answer.

Only one of them was correct, and if either of the other two answered instead, we would fail the challenge. We'd need to do it all over again next week.

"A!"

"No, B! I'm sure of it!"

"It's obviously C."

The argument—or rather, the shouting match continued with no consensus in sight.

"How could this be?"

"I'm feeling nothing but anxiety right now."

We covered our faces in despair.

"At this point..."

"Yeah, no way around it..."

"That's right. No hard feelings."

"What's this?! Team Childhood Friends has stopped arguing... What are they going to do to decide their answer?!"

The three of them had fallen silent. Warily, they glanced at one another. What were they going to use to make the judgment call? It became clear soon enough.

"Rock, paper..."

"Oh no! With everything on the line, Team Childhood Friends is settling their fate with rock-paper-scissors?! They're using the most primitive method imaginable!"

I was screaming in my head all the while. They were going to settle the most important multiple-choice question of their lives with rock-paper-scissors. When I looked around, I saw that everyone

else's face had turned a ghastly pale. Their despair was evident.

What a foolish decision! No, in a way, this takes extraordinary nerves of steel and an almost insane level of bravery to even attempt. They really are heroes, after all!

"A'ight! It's my win!"

"Dammit!"

"Th-The answer has been decided! The winner of the rock-paper-scissors match is Hero Cain! The answer Cain has chosen is B! It's B! Now, let's see if that's the correct answer...!"

We watched with bated breath. We clasped our hands together, praying that they'd somehow stumbled upon the right answer... In the midst of hell, we were praying to the gods.

Only Cain stood tall with his chest puffed out. Was he that confident? In *this* situation? His heart had to be made of tougher stuff than mine.

"The correct answer is..."

There was a moment of silence.

"What?! B?! It's B! Splendid work, Cain! You've got it right!"

"Boo-yah! What did I tell ya?!"

"Whaaaaaaaaat?!"

To everyone's surprise, the answer decided by rock-paper-scissors turned out to be correct.

I was so shocked that my mouth was hanging open in disbelief. No, it wasn't just me—nor was it just the whole party. Everyone in the arena was making the same face.

"Piece of cake!"

And, as if to shame us all for our doubts, Cain flashed a mischievous grin. It was clear that he felt like the savior of the day.

"That correct answer means...the heroes have cleared the seventieth-floor dungeon boss trial! Congratulations, heroes!"

"Huh?!"

"I-I see... So we really did it..."

The brutal shock of rock-paper-scissors made us forget the most important thing. The shock had hit us before the joy could set in.

"I should've expected nothing less of Cain, hope of humanity! Without his ability to discern the correct answer, his confidence in his

choice, and the luck to win at rock-paper-scissors, he could have never seized this victory! I guess there's something special about the man who has it all!"

"How about that? I got it right!"

"Y-Yeah...w-well done, Sir Cain."

"That was...a-amazing, Cain. Good...good job."

Cain was smiling ear to ear as he approached us. He was the key figure who'd led us through the trial. There was no doubt about that... But no one felt inclined to offer him any sincere praise. Delighted as we were, we all found our eyes drifting away from him.

"Urgh!"

"No way. I can't believe I got it wrong..."

Despite our success, two people were left feeling a bit frustrated. I decided to ignore them.

"What a surprising turn of events...but well done! The heroes have conquered the seventieth-floor dungeon trial! They'll face the eightieth-floor trial's next! What kind of challenge awaits them?! Stay tuned, viewers, and look forward to a new battle!"

The announcer excitedly began to wrap things up.

"That wraps up today's episode of 'Excuse us, Coming in Through the Back! Humanity's Backdoor Dungeon Challenge!' Until next week!"

"Bring it on, whatever you've got!" Cain boasted as the show came to an end.

We'd somehow managed to conquer the seventieth floor of the dungeon. We were growing ever closer to the treasure we needed to break the seal on the demon lord's castle.

And just like that, a week flew by.

A new trial, the trial of the eightieth floor, began.

"Rachel, Cain, out!"

"Grr...pfft... That's unfair..."

"Pfft... Of course I'd laugh! How can I not?!"

The two who had been judged as 'out' by the referee—the boss of the eightieth floor—were clutching their stomachs in laughter... No, it wasn't just Cain and Rachel. The rest of us were also

desperately trying to hold it in from our nearby seats. We clamped our mouths tight and fought off the urge to chuckle.

In front of us stood two comedians from hell. Devils with black wings, dressed in suits, were performing a comedy skit. The theme was "predictions for next year." The skit itself was interesting enough, but...the worst part was the other devil beside us laughing away.

"Speak of next year, and the Devil will laugh" was a proverb known to everyone in our country. It essentially meant that no one could know the future—and now, that proverb was being reenacted by an actual devil. This was a sight that we could never see in humanland.

And that devil's loud, hearty laugh was...frustratingly contagious.

"I... I can't... Hold it... Nya ha ha hah!"

"Altina, out!"

As soon as Altina burst out laughing, the referee made the call.

Indeed, this was a battle to maintain composure. We were all equipped with simple devices to monitor our heart rates. We weren't allowed to laugh, be surprised, or even get angry.

Once the whole party accumulated a certain number of "outs," we would fail the challenge—not to mention the looming threat of those punishments that Hell seemed to love dishing out. Three tough-looking devils approached Cain, Rachel, and Altina with paper fans, using the fans to smack them on the behind with all their might.

"Urk!"

"Urgh!"

"Ungyah!"

The three of them writhed on the floor, rolling in agony. The fans seemed to be enchanted with Hell Magic, as the moment they struck the behind, it was like an electric shock was coursing through their entire body.

Unlike with the wash basins, I'd experienced this one personally, so I could tell. Those packed a punch.

It wasn't pain or discomfort or anything like that. It was strange—a strange sort of numbness that made you want to scream. The sensation faded in a few seconds. It didn't cause any wounds of any

sort. If I had to take a guess, it was a spell that imparted only the sensation...what peculiar magic.

It wasn't a punishment I wanted to experience often...it wasn't, but...

"Now, let's move on to the fashion show!"

"A fashion show?"

A long, narrow runway called a catwalk was set up, and we were seated nearby. The show started in no time at all, and it was an incredibly refined one at that.

People dressed in outfits I'd never seen before—neither in humanland nor demonland—walked down the catwalk. Their clothing ranged from gorgeous dresses to simple yet elegant attire. Each one was high-quality and varied.

"Beautiful..."

"Yes, the quality is very high."

Perhaps the fabrics were different from the ones we had back home. Hell's finely crafted textiles allowed for more freedom in clothing design, leading to more polished and sophisticated styles. It was a fashion show that left us in awe of the culture from a higher world.

But why here? Why now? We were all in doubt.

Will strong admiration result in an 'out'? I wondered. But even though I felt quite in awe, there was no such call.

Sometimes, people with ridiculously flamboyant and flashy outfits would take the stage, but that was something I'd seen before in the world of humans. Whenever a designer tried to create something distinctive that no one had ever done before, they usually just ended up with something bizarre.

It might have been groundbreaking to fashion experts, but to ordinary people, it was just a bit hard to understand. Although, there were a few of my comrades who still ended up laughing at these extravagant outfits and getting an 'out' in the process.

Is that the point? Are they trying to get a laugh...? I mused. Then it happened.

"Huh?"

A peculiar devil appeared. A devil shrouded in white smoke that

let off a sizzling sound. We'd only been in Hell for two months, but we had grown quite accustomed to the sight.

The fashion model devil on the catwalk...

"Devil Slime?!"

Yes, it was Devil Slime, the devil who possessed the convenient liquid that only melted clothing. He appeared on the scene, dressed in a wonderful, high-quality outfit that was cruelly and mercilessly melting away.

Where the beauty of clothing was supposed to be the highlight, Devil Slime's clothes were covering less and less with each step. Of every individual I'd ever met, he was the worst possible choice for a fashion model.

"Hey, hey, hey!"

"Isn't that a bit risky?!"

By the time Devil Slime struck a pose at center stage, most of his clothes had already melted away. What he wore could no longer be called fashion—it was nothing more than scraps of fabric. Even those scraps were sizzling and disintegrating.

Without saying a single word, Devil Slime turned on his heels and made his way out. By the time he exited the catwalk, the last bit of fabric was gone, and he swaggered out, his behind jiggling behind him.

"Everyone, out!"

We all burst out laughing... It was frustrating to lose to something like that.

Devil Slime was a tour de force. I never could have expected that the same formidable foe we'd faced in mortal combat on the fiftieth floor would sacrifice his dignity to pull off such physical comedy.

We all received a punishment.

"Urgh..."

"Ah!"

"Ugh!"

A sharp, snapping sound filled the air as we were struck on the bottoms with the paper fans. We felt the electricity coursing through us as we writhed. The arena was filled with loud laughter. It must have been quite the spectacle to see all nine of us tumbling over

ourselves.

"Man, that's Devil Slime for you! Four hundred years in the television business! The entertainment legend wipes out the heroes in one fell swoop!"

"Dammit..."

Soon, the numbness left us, and we sat back down in our chairs.

Meanwhile, the fashion show continued. Despite the pathetic state we were in, the models kept their composure, walking the catwalk without the slightest change in expression. They truly were professionals.

"Screw this; I'm not laughing again. I'll take whatever you throw at me," Cain declared, smacking his cheeks to refocus himself.

That's right. I need to steel myself. If I relax now, we'll be hit by another gag, and I'll be caught up in a chain of contagious laughter. I need to tense my stomach and stand firm!

It only took a moment.

"Devil Slime is back for the second time today!"

"Pfft?!"

The entertainment legend was back at it. The folks in the industry seemed to call this a "callback." Once again, sizzling and melting his clothes, he strutted confidently down the catwalk without a hint of shame. His chest was puffed out as if absolutely nothing were amiss.

We couldn't endure the laughter that assailed us in waves.

"Everyone, out!"

"Arrrgh!"

"Erk!"

"Ngyaaah!"

"Would you look at that? The heroes have exceeded their quota of allowed 'outs'! The battle ends here! The first attempt at the eightieth floor is a failure!"

We were punished. The challenge was lost. It was one tragedy after another. Having all nine of us strike out twice in a row was the clincher.

We were told not to laugh, not to get too emotional. It was a trial unlike any we'd ever faced before. No, to be honest, every trial we'd faced since coming to Hell had been like that, but the eightieth-floor

trial felt especially peculiar.

"That concludes this week's 'Excuse us, Coming in Through the Back! Humanity's Backdoor Dungeon Challenge!' Will the heroes manage to overcome the trial next time?! Viewers, please look forward to their struggles and punishments!"

"Go to hell!"

"See you next week!"

The show ended with all of us writhing on the floor. I had somewhat predicted it, but in the end, our first attempt at the eightieth floor had failed.

"But...what exactly are we supposed to do about this?" Sylphie muttered, her arms crossed.

We returned to the human realm and opened up our meeting to discuss our strategy for the next week. Unfortunately, her very first statement hit the nail on the head.

Laughter, surprise, excitement... They were all based in human emotion, and it wasn't so easy to control them just because you wanted to.

"Umm, well, magic that affects the mind is prohibited, so..." Melvy chimed in.

Among the many types of magic, there were those that involved mental attacks alongside counter spells to defend against mental attacks. If we cast those defensive spells on everyone in the party, we'd be able to maintain our composure for some time... But the use of those spells was prohibited.

In other words, we had to face the trial fair and square. It wasn't like Hell's staff was trying to force us to laugh with mental attacks, so they were upholding fairness on their end.

"But I can't think of any countermeasures..."

That was the issue. That was the trickiest part of the trial. With the previous trials—the quiz battle and the luxury item guessing battle—we had some idea of how to prepare and train for them.

But this time, we just couldn't see it. We couldn't tell what sort of training would help in any way.

"Hmm..."

"Hmm..."

We scratched our heads, trying to come up with a solution to a question with no answer.

"Sup, I'm back."

"Ah, Cain."

It was only at that point that Cain intruded on the meeting. He entered the room carrying a large box.

"What are you all doing?"

"We were brainstorming strategies for the eightieth floor, but...honestly, we're at a loss. We can't think of any good ideas."

"What about you, Cain? Have you thought of anything? What's with the box?"

"Well, I'm pretty much in the same boat. I tried racking my brain, but nothing came to mind... So I thought I'd just try out whatever I could."

"Hmm?"

Cain gave a vague reply as he opened the box and began to pull out various items... They were all unfamiliar and confusing to me.

"Cain... What's that?"

"Umm, err... Could that possibly be...television?"

"You got that right. They kept telling me that bringing Hell technology to humanland was a no-go, but I figured it was necessary this time and insisted until they let up."

"Oh?!"

What Cain had brought was a television from Hell.

Certainly, it made sense to have a television when we were devising a way to overcome a television challenge. Items from Hell and Celestia were far beyond human technology, however, so they were generally prohibited from being brought to the human world.

But right now...given that we don't have any leads on the next trial, it might prove to be a crucial asset.

"That's amazing, Sir Cain! We've taken a huge step forward... No, make that four steps!"

"Well, wait. Calm down... Umm... So, we need to synchronize the *mana antenna* to the television set... And then... Hmm? Plug it into a *power supply* or a *mana source cartridge*...?"

Reading through the instruction manual, Cain was doing whatever he could to get the television in a usable state. We tried to help, but with all the unfamiliar terms and enchanted devices, setting up the television was proving incredibly difficult.

"Incidentally, Cain," Sylphie piped up, "are we sure the television will even work? I asked some devils from the station about the principles of television... They said it is impossible to receive the *electromagnetic mana waves* that thing uses in these lands..."

"Yeah, I heard about that too, but it should be fine. It looks like Hell television stations broadcast to Celestia too. And humanland and demonland are somewhere between them, right? So...what did you call it? *Electromana waves*? Yeah, those should be flowing through here... Not that I really get it."

Sylphie and Cain were discussing technical jargon that I didn't really understand. It was too specialized for me... But from what I could gather, unbeknownst to us, human and demon territories were being used as some sort of passageway. They really were doing whatever they pleased with the lower realms.

"So then... If I put this in here... Press a button on the remote..."

"Ooh!"

"It turned on!"

We cheered. A magical device far surpassing human technology was now up and running in this room. Even if it was only temporarily, we were experiencing technology from centuries ahead of our own.

From now on, this room was off-limits to anyone who wasn't involved. We couldn't let anyone who didn't know about the higher realms see such advanced technology.

A device filled with the magic of an advanced civilization... This one television alone could potentially lead to wars between human nations and demonland.

"Now you just need to operate it with the remote... And voila. Apparently, you can watch past broadcasts all you want."

"Hmm... Err, umm, so, does that mean we can watch the program we were on?"

"Probably, yeah. But I don't wanna..."

We all nodded in silence at Cain's words. We didn't want to relive any of the embarrassing moments we had on that show.

"Wait, past broadcasts? I heard that Hell's television history goes back almost five hundred years. Can we watch all of it?"

"It's not gonna be that easy, Mitter. Some of the older ones are behind a paywall, so it's not without restrictions. Different television stations have different payment models, and the conditions for watching them depend on the broadcast."

"That's complicated."

"I don't get it either."

It was still a culture we weren't familiar with. Even comprehending the fundamentals was a challenge.

"Just so you know, we're not gonna instantly conquer the eightieth floor just because I dragged a television here. We're just gonna be watching variety shows and getting used to their humor. That was the only countermeasure I could think of."

"That's still plenty, Cain."

"Yes, yes! Without this television, we might have spent the next week completely in the dark!"

Cain was right about that—bringing the television didn't solve the fundamental problem. But there was a high chance we would have otherwise spent the next week in vain, unable to find any way to build our resistance to laughter.

After all, this was an unprecedented trial, the likes of which humanity had never faced before.

"A'ight, then let's watch some television!"

"Yes!"

We all took our first step into the unknown marvel known as television.

The next week came, and just as expected, the training did not yield immediate results.

"Lisalinde, Melvy, out!"

"Grrrgh!"

"Umm, err, this is unfair!"

The two of us were smacked across the bottoms with paper fans.

The numb feeling raced through our bodies, sending us writhing on the floor. This time, the act that set us off was a hellspawn cosplaying as Dark Inkler, Lord of the Eight Heavens

Yes—the very same Lord of the Eight Heavens that had lost us the quiz battle. Of all the historic figures in Hell's elementary school textbooks, the one that was doodled on the most. Despite being nearly completely bald, he had exactly four strands of hair sticking out the top of his head, igniting the imaginations of schoolchildren everywhere.

The cosplayers took the stage one by one. First came a faithful recreation of the textbook photo. Then came a mildly altered one mimicking the doodles the kids would draw on him. And with each successive cosplay, the alterations grew more and more absurd.

During the sixtieth-floor dungeon trial's quiz battle, Melvy and I failed to answer the question regarding the Lord of the Eight Heavens. That's why I'd done my fair share of study on him since. But the television staff had turned that preparation against us. We knew all too well that giving him an afro and sunglasses was the go-to doodle... And it was precisely because of that knowledge that the laughter had overwhelmed us all the more.

"Urgh! Those sly little..."

"You two okay? Liz? Melvy?"

"Th-Thank you, Cain... Um, I haven't given up yet!"

Singled out and provoked, Melvy and I grew even more determined to see this through.

But, as if to mock our resolve at every turn, their tricks and gags were ever-changing as we were assailed by all manner of japes. They truly were veterans of the entertainment world, having honed their craft for over five hundred years. And who were we? Nothing but newborn chicks who'd only just been exposed to the concept of television. Everything they showed us was fresh and new—and we couldn't stop ourselves from laughing no matter how hard we tried.

And just when we were about to forget it was coming, we'd be struck by Devil Slime's surprise fashion show again. We never stood a chance.

"The heroes are really racking up the penalties! A few more and

they'll fail the challenge! But...to their credit, they've made it to stage *two*!"

"What? Stage two?"

We tensed up at the announcer's words.

Stage two*? We're already on the brink of death—what could they possibly throw at us now?* While we nervously held our breaths, the announcer went on with gusto.

"The preparations are complete! Now shall we get things started? Stage Two: Cabaret Club Hell!"

"Huh?"

Suddenly, a horde of women appeared before us.

"Hellooooo, boys!"

"Umm, what? 'Cabaret Club Hell'?"

We were still struggling to grasp the situation as the women quickly sat down beside the men of our party and snuggled up to their arms.

"I'm Clara, a devil from the main Nikita club over in Asraella Town. ♡ I'm sooo happy to meet you, Sir Mitter! ♡ Let's have some fun, okay?"

"You may call me Matrina, a hellspawn of the horned oni tribe. I hail from Veris' main venue, also in Asraella. I do hope you enjoy a night of unearthly delights..."

"What?! Huh?"

Devils and hellspawn in highly revealing attire surrounded our men and refused to part from them. The first to panic was Mitter.

"Wha—?! Wh-What?! Please stop! Your, umm, your chest is touching me!"

"Oh, dear! ♡ Hee hee hee! ♡ You're such a gentleman, Sir Mitter. ♡ This is just a little greeting, isn't it? Right, Matrina?"

"That's right. We can't offer any explicit services on television, but we do strive to entertain our guests as much as possible. Please, relax and enjoy yourself."

"Umm...no, seriously. This is very troublesome for me..."

Sandwiched between two bountiful bosoms, Mitter's face had turned beet red.

"Mitter, out."

"Huh?!"

Then came the 'out' call. He hadn't laughed or even cracked a smile...

"I see! That's right! This trial isn't about *laughing*..."

Indeed. Laughing wasn't the only thing that was off-limits.

You couldn't get angry, you couldn't be surprised. You needed to maintain your composure. The devices attached to us monitored our heart rates and picked up the sways in our emotions. Getting flustered by scantily clad women? That was also an "out."

"But how...how are we supposed to deal with *this*?"

Wolfe had also been surrounded by cabaret girls from Hell who were fawning all over him. His face was flushed, and he was clearly losing his mind.

"Wolfe, out!"

"How is any man supposed to endure this?!" he cried out in frustration.

But rules were rules. There was no way around it, especially not for a virgin like him. He fell victim to the paper fans alongside Mitter.

"M-More than that...what I'm truly afraid of..."

Despite the numbness taking over his whole body, Mitter desperately lifted his head. His gaze landed on Rachel, his lover.

"Yeah, I know. Of course Mitter prefers sexy women... I mean, look at me. I'm short and scrawny...and I don't even have tits..."

"You...! You made Rachel cry, you monsters!"

"Rachel, out!"

For Rachel, a complete weakling when it came to love, seeing her boyfriend surrounded by cabaret girls was simply too much. Her heart was on the verge of collapse.

She's pitiful... How can such a fragile being survive in this world?

And to make matters worse, even her sadness apparently triggered an out, truly adding insult to injury.

"Rachel! You have it all wrong! I've always, always—!"

"Oh dear. Sir Mitter? Where do you think you're going? ♡ Come back. ♡ You need to enjoy yourself to the fullest today. ♡"

"That's right. We're professionals. It's our job to offer you the finest hospitality."

“Guh...!”

Mitter was immobilized, the women holding securely to both his arms. Rachel’s heart sank lower and lower as she watched the scene unfold before her.

“Liz! Melvy, I’m sorry, but can I ask you to look after Rachel? I know I’m asking a lot from you, but I’m begging you!”

“Of course.”

“Yes, yes. Umm, you have it rough, Mitter.”

He was the ideal boyfriend, concerned more about his partner’s emotional well-being than his own predicament.

“Mitter, out!”

“Urgh!”

It was hard to say if the women pressing up against him had caused his heart to race—or if it was because of his concern for Rachel. Either way, the call was made.

“Ah ha ha! ♪ You’re the only one who hasn’t gotten an out yet, Cain. ♪”

“Don’t be so cold. I’ve always wanted to sit down and have a nice long talk with you, darlin’.”

“Uh...Lilith, Tsubaki, what are you doing?”

Meanwhile, Cain had been surrounded by Lilith—my mentor—and Tsubaki, the first hellspawn we met in Hell. Apparently, Lilith and Tsubaki were old acquaintances, and they were teaming up to mess with the hero. Naturally, both of them were dressed in highly revealing outfits. Lilith wore an angelic dress of pure white, while Tsubaki had donned an elegant but loosened kimono, revealing as much skin as she could get away with on air.





“This won’t do one bit, dear. You’ve already got yourself a few fiancées, don’t you, Cain? You can’t let yourself get all distracted by other ladies.”

“Then maybe you could quit trying to seduce me?”

“She’s riiight. If you ever make my adorable little descendant cry, I’ll get a teensy bit angry with you, you know.”

“Then would you be so kind as to stop pushing your chest against me?”

Cain raised his voice a bit. While on the surface, it looked like he was holding strong, he was clearly on edge. And who could blame him? Both Lilith and Tsubaki were exceptional beauties. Asking someone not to get flustered by their combined seduction was asking for the impossible.

As someone who wasn’t romantically involved with him, I didn’t have any right to complain. Interestingly, his fiancées—Sylphie and Melvy—didn’t look angry in the slightest. Instead, they watched with calm composure; they seemed to accept what was going on and were, in fact, curious to see how he’d handle it.

Is this what they call the composure of a faithful wife?

“Hmmmmmmm...”

One person was puffing out her cheeks and pouting. Her name was Altina. Though she was his childhood friend, she’d only recently started dating him, and perhaps she felt a little insecure about their relationship.

“Ah!”

Just as Cain was barely managing to hold them off—Lilith and Tsubaki exchanged a quick glance. Then, with exaggerated clumsiness, Lilith “accidentally” tipped her glass of wine onto Tsubaki.

“Oh nooo. So sorry about that, Tsubaki.”

“It’s all fine, sugar. No big deal. You didn’t spill all that much.”

The wine splashed directly onto Tsubaki’s exposed chest.

“Cain, darlin’.”

“Wh... What now?”

“Would you be a sweetie and wipe it off for me? Right here, on my chest?”

“Huh?!”

Tsubaki leaned forward, presenting her ample bosom directly to Cain.

Her luxurious kimono was already dangerously loose, with the top of her cleavage barely skirting the line. Wiping off the wine would mean directly touching her large, soft chest...

“Cain, out!”

“Goddammit!”

Cain was tragically defeated. He never stood a chance against a fallen angel and hellspawn, neither of which had any intention of playing fair.

“Yaaay! ♪”

“Yaaay.”

Lilith and Tsubaki exchanged a high five as Tsubaki casually wiped the wine off herself. Cain had been fully at their mercy.

“Now then, this trial isn’t only for the men! The ladies, who’ve only been watching so far, will now face a trial of their own!”

“Huh?”

Just when we were watching the boys struggle like it didn’t concern us, the announcer gave an ominous declaration.

And then—they arrived. A fold of handsome men surrounded us, just as the women had done for the boys—the Hosts of Hell.

“Welcome, my lovely ladies!”

“We’ll give you an evening of bliss.”

“Wha—?!”

In an instant, we were surrounded by hot devils and devilish hellspawn. There was no escape—at this rate, we were going to wind up just like our boys.

“Can’t you do something, Sylphie?!”

“I would love to... However!”

“However?!”

Sylphie clenched her fist, frustration written all over her face.

“While we have undergone countless training regimens to resist women, we haven’t conducted a single drill to resist men!”

“What does that even mean?!”

I couldn’t understand a single word she had just said.

"Li... Umm, err, to make it so we weren't cheating on Cain, the pervmaster only trained us in things we could do with just the girls or with Cain directly."

"Who's the pervmaster—no, what even is a pervmaster?!"

I was occasionally called that myself—for some inexplicable reason—but this pervmaster had to be someone else entirely. The context and timeline were both off, and besides, I was not some impure human that deserved such a name to begin with!

"But...in short, you're saying..."

"We have...no way of overcoming this trial!"

"You're kidding me!"

The hosts were professionals through and through. With every word, every gesture, they made our hearts flutter.

"Sylphonia, Melvy, Altina, Lisalinde, Kuon, out!"

We were helpless, hopelessly overwhelmed, forced to face the same fate as the men of the party.

"Don't be so sad, princess. Tomorrow's a brand-new day."

"But, but...I just know Mitter likes women who are taller and prettier and kinder than me..."

"Anyone who makes a woman like you cry isn't worth your time, Rachel. You don't realize just how beautiful you are."

"Don't you dare insult Mitter!"

"Rachel, out."

In the other corner, Rachel was taken down for an entirely different reason.

"As chaos reigns supreme!" boomed the announcer. "It's time to introduce our surprise guest! Come forth, our ultimate weapon!"

"Hmm?"

"A surprise guest?"

I felt a chill race down my spine. *Our prospects are already grim enough. You're telling me we have another bombshell waiting for us?!*

We had no way of dealing with this...and no time to try. Immediately, smoke burst from the entrance of the arena. From within the thick cloud, a single woman emerged, and as the smoke cleared, we were gradually able to make out her identity.

“What?!”

Wolfe’s eyes widened in shock. Of course they did—the girl who appeared was effectively his greatest weakness.

“Good day, Sir Wolfe! I am here for a trial shift at this Cabaret Club! My name is Remphie! I look forward to working with you today!”

“What are you doing here, princess?!”

The surprise guest was Remphie, Wolfe’s forcibly fated partner. With an elegant gown draped over her petite build, though she wasn’t exactly lewdly dressed, she showed just enough skin to make her impossible to ignore. It was a strategy aimed entirely and exclusively at Wolfe.

“Now then, Sir Wolfe, let’s start with a drink! Allow me to pour one for you!”

“Remiphinia, you need to press your chest against him a little more! ♡ Men love it when you snuggle against them like this! ♡”

“Y-Yes! Thank you for the advice, Clara!”

“Q-Quit it... Don’t do anything foolish! Princess Remiphinia! You’re royalty, aren’t you?!”

“Wolfe, out.”

Alas, he lacked the means to escape from this dastardly trap.

“Did your heart skip a beat because of me? Your heart skipped a beat, didn’t it?!”

“Wrong! I’m more anxious than any— Oww!”

Wolfe took the punishment in the meantime.

“Wa ha ha ha hah! Wolfe, the bastard. They locked onto him!”

“Gya ha ha hah! The lolicon’s path be a hard one! A hard one indeed!”

“Cain, Kuon, out.”

“Ah!”

It’s not the best time to laugh. Honestly.

Realizing what they’d done far too late, Cain and Kuon took their punishment with stunned faces. The antics of these natural-born comedians had the audience erupting in laughter.

“Police!”

“Freeze! You’re under arrest!”

“Huh?! Angel coppers?!”

The situation took another turn. Suddenly, a squadron of angel officers stormed into the venue and grabbed Wolfe by the arms.

“I sensed the presence of a wicked man dressing a young girl in a revealing outfit and sexually harassing her! Don’t resist!”

“No, that wasn’t my fault... Actually, what are you even doing here?! Isn’t this outside your jurisdiction?!”

Confused as he was, Wolfe was right. The angel officers were only supposed to maintain order in Celestia and humanland. Demonland was under Hell’s jurisdiction, so it was impossible to station any officers there. So what were those officers doing in Hell—the complete opposite of Celestia—of all places? This was a place where no angel officer should have been.

“Ahem,” said the announcer, “For the sake of the gag, we had officers dispatched all the way from Celestia. Thank you for finding some time in your busy schedules.”

“You’re all actually on good terms, aren’t you?!”

It had been two thousand years since the War of Heaven and Earth. Perhaps the relationship between Celestia and Hell had grown more relaxed than we thought.

“You filthy pervert! Making a little girl serve you drinks! You’re under arrest!”

“Y-You’ve got it wrong! She’s the one who keeps coming onto me! I am not a pedo!”

“That’s what they all say!”

“We’ll hear your excuses at the station!”

“Stop! Let go! I’m—”

With a firm grip on his arms and legs, four burly officers carried Wolfe away. It was a familiar sight by now. And yet, it never stopped being amusing, no matter how many times we saw it...

“Everyone, out.”

We all burst into laughter... Really, how could we not?

“You’ve exceeded your out allowance! Heroes, this week’s challenge ends in another failure!”

We’d more or less seen it coming, but once again, we’d failed to conquer the floor. As we all received a smack on the behind and

writhed in pain, the week's broadcast came to a close.

To think Sir Wolfe would end up being the final hurdle... This eightieth-floor trial turns even our allies into joke fodder. It truly is the hardest trial yet.

"No, umm... I just wanted to flirt with him a little..."

Remphie's disappointed face left a strong impression... *I wonder if she'll show up again next week.*

Time just continued to slip by. Week after week, we challenged the eightieth floor—only to fail again and again. The difficulty was incomparable to anything we'd ever faced before.

What made it stand out the most was the fact we could hardly prepare any countermeasures for it. The producers came at us from every angle, Hell-bent on making us laugh. Their bag of tricks was seemingly endless and it was impossible to build up a resistance to laughter.

If anything, the repetition of the same jokes made some of them even funnier. The number of times we'd burst out at Wolfe's arrest scene was hard to count. The boss of the eightieth floor—the director—had an expert grasp of comedy.

There was one silver lining, however. Stage Three—the one that came after Cabaret Club Hell—was a haunted house designed to scare and startle people.

The members of the hero's party weren't afraid of ghosts in the slightest.

And why would they be? During the war with the demon army, they'd fought off evil spirit users more times than they could count. Ghosts were made to be vanquished—what other purpose could they serve? Logic-wise, it was quite unreasonable, but it worked for them.

I was the only one who occasionally got an "out," since I wasn't as accustomed to ghosts.

Thus, we cleared the third stage with ease, but the eightieth-floor trial as a whole remained a formidable challenge. Over and over, we charged in, failed, and repeated.

The turning point came about a month and a half after our first attempt, during our seventh go.

"You know it, you love it, it's become a weekly tradition at this point! It's time for 'Excuse us, Coming in Through the Back! Humanity's Backdoor Dungeon Challenge!' Will the hero finally overcome the eightieth floor this week?!"

"Whooooooooo!"

The announcer's voice boomed through his microphone, resounding all across the arena. The crowd wasn't about to be outdone as they roared in response.

But there was one response far more subdued than usual. The heroes all seemed calmer than they'd ever been.

"Now, Cain! This is your seventh attempt now, but how are you feeling? How's your confidence? Got any tricks up your sleeve?"

Cain was silent.

"H-Huh...? Cain? Did you get up on the wrong side of the bed?"

Even as the mic was pointed his way, Cain hardly reacted.

And it wasn't just him. The whole team, myself included, was enveloped in a heavy air of gloom. Our shoulders were slumped, our heads drooped as we exuded utter apathy. Nearly all of us were pale-faced.

"I'm tired."

"Huh...? T-Tired?"

The announcer's eyes widened at Cain's barely audible response.

"Hey...let's get the trial going already. I wanna go home and sleep."

"I... I don't really know what's going on, but the members of the hero's party don't seem to be in peak condition! Will they be all right?! But the show must go on! Let the eightieth-floor trial...begin!"

At the announcer's cue, the battle began. A battle that had thoroughly tormented us for so long. But now, even the blade known as comedy was useless on us.

"So get this—that devil bloke? Said he wanted to be an angel, so I just went and scared the Hell out of 'em!"

"The Hell's up with that?!"

"Ah ha ha ha ha!"

"..."

There were some laughs from the crowd, but we, the hero's

party, didn't react at all. With eyes like dead fish, we just stared blankly as the skits unfolded before us.

"Wh-What's going on with the heroes? We haven't had a single 'out' yet! I know that's good news for them, but...they look completely lifeless... I'm actually starting to grow concerned as I watch them..."

Eventually, the announcer approached Cain again and turned the mic to him.

"S-Seriously, what happened? You don't seem well. Do you have any idea what might be causing this?"

There was a moment of silence after the announcer's questions. Sluggishly and painstakingly, Cain raised his face.

"We haven't slept."

"Huh? Haven't slept?"

And so, Cain explained the situation.

"To train our comedy resistance, we watched variety shows nonstop for seven days and seven nights."

"What?! You're telling me you haven't slept for this entire week?"

"That's right. One whole week...over, and over, and over, and over...we kept watching every comedy, every comedy we could find. We watched, and watched...and watched, and watched, and watched..."

There was a flicker of madness in Cain's lifeless eyes... The man told no lies. The whole team had spent the last week in front of the television, never sleeping, never resting, watching variety shows nonstop.

"It started out as drastic measures for the comedy bit...but by day four or five... I stopped feeling anything. No joy. No pain. No boredom. Nothing... Just...nothing..."

"Yes, nothing..."

"A week glued to the television... I laughed so much...and by the time I realized it, I couldn't laugh anymore."

One by one, the party members shared just how dead they'd become inside.

"Someone get them to a bed!"

The announcer shouted out of serious concern.

We knew...our minds were broken. Staying awake for a week was brutal enough, and we'd added to that by watching television for every second of it. Not a single thing else. We simply watched show after show to build up immunity. As a result, we couldn't laugh or feel anything anymore.

"I think I've forgotten how to smile..."

"That sounds like something straight out of a tragic drama...for now, just get some sleep!"

The announcer was in full panic mode now. But even watching him so flustered didn't stir any emotion in us.

"Wh-What should we do?! This qualifies as a serious health issue! Do you want to stop now?! There'll be a hole in the schedule, but we'll fill something out!"

"Thanks for the concern... But this seems to be working in our favor for the trial. We'll continue."

"How rational! Has there ever been a team to clear the trial like this?! Rule-wise...you're not using any magic, so it's technically all right."

So the challenge continued. We soldiered on. If we could just clear the trial this week, that week of metaphorical hell would all be worth it. Even with our hearts and minds shattered, we forged ahead through the thorny path of comedy.

The trial continued. The comedians of Hell threw everything they had at us, but we felt nothing. Not a single "out" was called. There had to be something wrong with our faces as even the comedians seemed concerned whenever they looked our way.

Watching them now, it felt like their gags had lost their edge... It made sense. The folks from the station needed to come up with new material every week. They'd have to run out eventually.

In other words, the trial was designed to become harder for the production side the more attempts we made at it. If we kept it going another ten weeks, they'd probably run out of material entirely, and the show would get boring. Fortunately, it seemed like we'd get through it before it came to that.

"Stage Two! Let's just move on to Stage Two already! Maybe you'll feel a bit better when you're surrounded by gorgeous men and

women!”

And as always, a swarm of cabaret girls and hosts gathered around us and showered us with affection.

Even so, Cain and the others remained stone-faced. Their eyes remained vacant and unfocused as they simply took in whatever was said to them in silence. I couldn’t even taste the drink that had just been poured for me.

“No change from the heroes! Is it hopeless?! Even the finest hosts and hostesses can’t heal their broken hearts?!”

“Nooo, it looks like there’s more to it than that.”

“Wha—?! Lady Lilith? What brings you to the commentary booth?!”

All of a sudden, my mentor Lilith was providing some commentary. It seemed she’d quickly realized something was wrong.

“All those men, they’re in an advanced stage of post-nut clarity, you see. If I had to take a guess, I’d say they were milked completely dry yesterday.”

“Huh...? Which means...which means what?! Are you saying the heroes had some wild fun the night before?! In that state?!”

As Lilith had explained, Cain, Mitter, and Wolfe had emptied themselves completely the day before as a countermeasure for Stage Two.

Although they couldn’t get it up at all in their broken mental states, thanks to the powerful aphrodisiac that Melvy had learned from that so-called pervmaster, they’d forced themselves to stand tall and pushed past their limits...apparently.

I had not been part of this, as I was not romantically involved with anyone here. But apparently, Cain had been attended to by Sylphie, Melvy, and Altina, while Rachel had worked hard all night to thoroughly drain Mitter.

Wolfe had worked hard all by himself, apparently.

Tragic.

That’s why Cain and the others weren’t just mentally broken—they were also in hyper post-nut clarity. No matter how much cleavage was pressed into their faces, no matter what lewd acts were done to them, they felt nothing. They had become sorrowful

monsters who didn’t register the beauty of the world.

“Is this...the heroes’ resolve?! A demonstration that they’ll do anything to overcome the trial?! That they’ll sacrifice anything to defend humanity?! Those empty eyes, those pale faces—it’s all screaming an overwhelming level of determination!”

The announcer spoke heatedly about it, but even that didn’t reach our hearts. We’d done everything we could. This was a by-product of that.

“Sleepy...”

That was Cain’s only response to being surrounded by the finest women.

There was nary an obstacle to stand in our way. We did not laugh. We weren’t swayed by pretty faces. We felt no surprise, or fear, or joy. We felt nothing.

And so, busting straight through every trick in the book, we conquered the eightieth-floor dungeon trial.

“Congratulations! Heroes! With an outrageous strategy, you’ve splendidly overcome the trial of the eightieth floor! May we have your thoughts on this victory?!”

The announcer turned the mic to Cain. He slowly lifted his head.

“Is it over?”

“Yes! It’s your complete victory! A perfect victory! Your next challenge will be the boss of the ninetieth floor! Please let us hear how determined you are to face your final trial!”

“I see. It’s over.”

“...”

“...”

“Umm, Cain? Hero Cain...?”

“...”

Cain did not reply. Even when the announcer shook his shoulder and shouted in his ear, there was no reaction. Eventually, the host realized: “He’s...dead.”

At that moment, Cain’s face looked strangely peaceful.

No, wait... He just fell asleep with his eyes open. He’s not dead after all.

Thus, having lost something important along the way, we cleared

the eightieth-floor trial.

Later on, I couldn’t help but think—maybe...there was a better way to go about it.

Chapter 76: Now—The Backdoor Dungeon: Final Battle!

"Ladies! Gentlemen! One and all! For more than three months, we've been bringing you the thrilling saga: 'Excuse us, Coming in Through the Back! Humanity's Backdoor Dungeon Challenge!' Thanks to our many heroes, we've finally reached the final trial: the challenge against the ninetieth-floor dungeon boss!"

"Whooooooooo!"

As per usual, the show began with an opening speech from the announcer. However, both he and the crowd seemed a bit more heated this time—and for good reason. We'd cleared the eightieth floor's trial last week; now, we were set to face the last one.

"Now, team leader Cain! Any thoughts before you take on your final challenge?"

"I'm still kinda sleepy."

"Oh! Seems like you're still suffering from the aftermath of last week! A mere week of rest wasn't enough to recover from that total breakdown of body and mind!"

Last week really was a brutal one...

"By the way, it's been bugging me...why is floor ninety the last trial? Doesn't it usually go up to a hundred?"

"The hundredth floor of the backdoor dungeon is directly connected to the abode of our king—the Grand King of Hell. So, for broadcasting purposes, we're only allowed to use up to the ninetieth floor."

"Hmm."

Cain didn't seem particularly motivated. Some of it was the lingering fatigue, but having gone through so many bizarre games, it was reasonable for him—for all of us—to assume it would be unlikely for us to clear this on the first attempt. In short, most of us were

just here to get a feel for what the trial was going to be.

But that mood shifted in an instant, thanks to the announcer's next words.

"Now then! This is the final program! The ninetieth-floor dungeon trial is... Kickboxing!"

"Huh?!"

Cain's and Rachel's eyes lit up. They were the most martially minded members of the team.

"The rules are simple. Defeat the ninetieth-floor dungeon boss in a kickboxing match, and you win! You'll have fully cleared the dungeon!"

"H-Hey...let me confirm something. This is seriously just a straightforward kickboxing match, right?! No weird tricks or gimmicks or anything like that?!"

"That's right! We're ending it off with an honest man-to-man, face-to-face showdown!"

"Hell yeah! This is what I've been waiting for!"

Cain was clearly thrilled. When combat was the game, there was no one who could best him. Finally, we were facing a trial that played to his strength—his excitement knew no bounds.

"It will be a one-on-one match this time around. Am I correct in assuming that you'll be selecting your leader Cain as the challenger?"

"That's what I'd like...but what do you all think?" Cain turned to his comrades to see if they had any objections.

We all nodded in agreement. When it came to fighting, naturally Cain—the hero, our team's leader, humanity's strongest—was the best one to represent us. Well...perhaps in a one-on-one battle, Kuon would be a bit stronger than Cain, but she didn't seem all that interested. Rachel looked like she wanted to fight too, but she swallowed her desire and ceded the opportunity to Cain.

"Very well! The challenger representing the heroes will be Cain! And now, the final boss of the ninetieth floor is..."

Just what sort of formidable foe would come out? Going off what we'd been through thus far, there was a high chance it would be someone who could provide laughs and mishaps for the audience's

entertainment.

Maybe Devil Slime will make his return? But hmm...we're only sending Cain, and melting Cain's boxers won't get the ratings up.

"Huh?"

My thoughts had grown a bit television-savvy over the past few months. But as I weighed the network's options, the announcer in front of us suddenly tore off his white suit.

"What?"

His body swelled larger and larger. While he had originally stood at an average human height of one hundred and seventy centimeters, he now stretched to two hundred and fifty, his muscles ballooning in size. Two extra arms burst from his shoulders.

"Allow me to reintroduce myself..." An overwhelming aura of aggression radiated from the announcer as he gripped the microphone. "I'm Demon-Deviler, an active lieutenant colonel in Hell's Army! I am a half-devil, half-hellspawn hybrid."

"Wha?!"

"You're kidding me!"

The very man who'd been commentating our entire journey had transformed before our very eyes—now standing before us as the final boss. Introducing himself as Demon-Deviler, he stripped down to nothing but boxer shorts. His skin had turned a deep, reddish black, his body chiseled with muscles. He sported both the horns of a hellspawn and the wings of a devil.

He looked strong... No, he *was* strong.

In my training to control my fallen angel powers, I'd grown quite a bit stronger, but even I could feel my body trembling beneath the pressure he exuded. Any normal person would have trouble even maintaining consciousness in his presence. I could hear gulps from Sylphy and Melvy, who were both far stronger than me.

"Ha ha!"

But amid it all, Cain looked happy as could be. He had that familiar, nasty smile on his face as he truly, from the bottom of his heart, welcomed the challenge of a worthy foe.

A ring had already been set up at the center of the arena. Without waiting for any further instructions, Cain leaped into his

corner.

"Let's get this started, Demon-Deviler! You've finally made it worth my time!"

"Impressive... You're the first human I've ever met to stand firm after seeing my true form."

Demon-Deviler gave a bemused laugh. Sparks flew as their eyes locked across the ring. I could feel it in the air—an unprecedented clash was about to begin.

"But...in accordance with the rules of kickboxing, I must ask you to change first. Please step out of the ring and go to the locker room."

"Ah, r-right..."

Following his instruction, Cain trudged his way out. The unprecedented clash wasn't ready to start just yet.

"Well...that kinda killed the mood."

We silently nodded at Sylphie's words.

"A'ight! I'm here! Let's do this!"

Ten-odd minutes later, Cain stepped into the ring, fully prepared. He was shirtless, wearing kickboxing trunks with gloves on his hands. There was no headgear or protection of any sort. A single clean punch could prove fatal.

"Then let me explain the format! We'll have three minutes a round with a one-minute break in between. No limit to the number of rounds! Victory can only be achieved by a ten-second knockdown, technical knockout by referee stoppage, or surrender from your corner! There's no limit to the number of knockdowns, and a TKO won't be called from multiple knockdowns in a single round!"

Demon-Deviler explained the rules despite being a contestant himself. He probably hadn't switched out of his announcer mindset just yet.

"We'll be using the Super Boxing rules everyone in Hell knows and loves! Any close-range strike is fair game, be it knees, elbows, or headbutts! What's banned are throws, joint locks, and grappling! Magic is allowed if it's close range or physical enhancements! Long-range spells, illusions, and things that do indirect damage are prohibited!"

"Hmm..."

"Basically, anything goes as long as it's melee-range!"

"Anything, huh? What about attacking the eyes?"

"Allowed!"

"Back of the head? Groin?"

"Allowed!"

"Hmm..."

This so-called kickboxing seemed quite different from the human version, with its dangerous ruleset allowing attacks to the vitals.

"Now that's what I like to hear."

But Cain's excitement was only rising. Of course it was—he'd spent his life swinging a sword on battlefields where there were no rules. It had always been life or death. The fewer restrictions, the more fired up he got.

"Now, enough of the boring talk! The fighters are already in the ring! Let me return the mic to the commentary booth!"

Demon-Deviler tossed the mic, which was slickly caught by a new announcer. As he raised his four fists in a fighting stance, Cain slipped into a stance of his own.

The match...no, the *fight* was about to begin.

"You heard Demon-Deviler! Enough chitchat! Referee! Is the gong ready?!"

For a brief moment, the whole arena fell silent. The palpable tension needled my skin.

"Then let the match...begin!"

The sharp clang of a gong echoed through the air. The two fighters briefly touched gloves out of courtesy before shooting toward one another to close the distance. No sizing each other up; they went full-throttle from the get-go, launching a rapid flurry of punches at one another.

"What's this?! A fierce volley right out the gates! It's punch after punch! We're already seeing an all-out exchange in the opening seconds!"

"Wooooooooo!"

Demon-Deviler had four arms. Just doing the math, that meant he could send out twice as many punches as a human, but Cain

wasn’t fazed in the slightest. He dodged, he parried, he weaved through all four fists without any wasted movement on his part. And in between, he snuck in some strikes of his own. He truly was the strongest warrior humanity had to offer!

But Demon-Deviler was no slouch; despite being two hundred and fifty centimeters tall, he moved with the finesse of a much smaller fighter, slipping through and deflecting Cain’s strikes with swift and sharp movements. He wasn’t just a brute relying on sheer strength—he was a warrior instilled with masterful technique.

Although it seemed that the combatant with four arms would have an overwhelming advantage, Cain had once bested a demon with six arms in a sword fight. For a fighter of his caliber, perhaps the number of limbs wasn’t that much of an issue.

“Hrah!”

In the middle of their barrage, Cain landed a swift roundhouse kick that batted one of Demon-Deviler’s arms away. Using his forward momentum, he leaped into a spinning aerial kick aimed at his opponent’s jaw. His kick was dodged by a precise backward step on Demon-Deviler’s part, the blow avoided by a hair. Now with distance between them, the exchange had been reset.

“Whoooooooooo!”

“Amazing! What an incredible battle!”

The crowd was ablaze with excitement. This was a clash of titans, two beings of overwhelming might. The intense, overwhelming back-and-forth had whipped the audience into a frenzy.

The spectators were somehow able to keep track of Cain’s and Demon-Deviler’s movements with just their eyes. If they were normal humans, they may as well have been blind—it’d all be a blur. But this was Hell. Every resident was blessed with high physical prowess, allowing them to just barely follow the high-speed battle.

“Amazing! Seriously amazing! To think a human could go toe-to-toe with Lieutenant Colonel Demon-Deviler! Lady Tsubaki, any thoughts on the opening exchange?”

“My, my, Cain’s stronger than I ever imagined. That ‘strongest of humanity’ title sure ain’t just for show. I gotta admit, I’m a bit shocked myself.”

Tsubaki was sitting in the commentary booth. We'd been acquainted for a while now—the men of our team getting *quite* acquainted with her during the Cabaret Hell in the eightieth-floor trial.

But if she's doing commentary, does that mean she's quite strong?

"Such praise from Lady Tsubaki! Cain's really living up to his title as the hero! Now, both fighters are evenly matched! Who will be the first to seize the moment?!"

"Well, now, I wouldn't go that far..."

"Hmm? What do you mean by that, Lady Tsubaki?"

"This ain't what I'd call even...not at all..."

"Huh?"

Tsubaki gave a small, wry smile as she muttered those ominous words. The other members of our party furrowed their brows, as if to lend credence to her words.

"This is bad..."

"Sylphie?"

"Yeah, this is far from even..."

Both fighters had continued to parry and dodge without letting a single punch land. From the outside, it looked perfectly even. But Tsubaki and Sylphie knew better.

And then, a bead of sweat trickled down Cain's forehead.

"Hah!"

Yet again, Cain went on the offensive.

A sharp one-two followed by a hook—a classic combo. He followed it up with a powerful kick using the full twist of his body. His perfectly honed muscles unleashed an array of fierce techniques, pressing down upon Demon-Deviler. The former announcer had been forced on the defensive, blocking, deflecting, parrying, barely holding on under Cain's relentless fury.

At least...that's what it looked like at first.

"Hmph!"

But in the next instant, Demon-Deviler slipped through the narrowest gap in Cain's offense and unleashed a counter.

"Ghh...!" A slight groan escaped Cain's lips. He'd managed to

block the counter with an arm, but the damage still reverberated its way to his head. Quickly, he leaped a few steps back to take some distance from his foe. “Pheeeeew...” he let out a deep exhale, trying to reset.

Meanwhile, Demon-Deviler was breathing calmly, not a drop of sweat on his skin.

Tsubaki and Sylphie had been right all along... This wasn’t even at all.

Clang!

“And there’s the gong! That’s the end of Round One!” the announcer called it.

The three-minute round had come to an end. Cain returned to his corner for a one-minute break.

“Phew...”

“Are you all right, Cain?”

“I’m just startin’ to get fired up... He knows how to have some fun, that Demon-Deviler guy.”

He didn’t show the slightest bit of weakness. But looking at him up close, the truth was obvious. His whole body was slick with sweat. His breathing was heavy and strained. He was already giving it his all. He hadn’t any composure to spare in that battle.

“Cain...” began Sylphie, “Your opponent is stronger than expected. I’m not sure if I can offer any precise advice, but...keep your attacks smaller. Endure until you can adjust to his rhythm. That’s what I’d recommend.”

“Smaller attacks, huh? Thanks, Sylphie. I’ll keep that in mind.”

The gong rang to signal the start of Round Two. Cain stepped away from his corner, once again challenging his monstrous opponent alone. We saw off his back with worry-filled eyes.

The battle resumed.

“Yah! Hyah!”

“Hmph!”

Once again, their clash went far beyond human limits, each unleashing a plethora of techniques in a deadly blur of martial prowess. Cain fought well. It wasn’t just kickboxing—he mixed in taekwondo, capoeira, and every striking art imaginable, giving the

finest performance he could.

But Sylphie was right. Tsubaki was right. Little by little, the gap between them had begun to show.

"Gah!"

Demon-Deviler's fist collided with Cain's torso. He gritted his teeth and countered in a heartbeat, but the attack was easily dodged with a graceful sway.

"*Hff, hff*... Pheeeeeew."

Cain took a deep breath to steady himself. His breath was more ragged than it had been at any point I'd ever watched him fight. Whether out of confidence or calculation, Demon-Deviler didn't pursue him as he backed away.

Another round passed. But still, there were no opportunities for Cain. He threw out jabs, quick and small—trying to chip away—but Demon-Deviler took them all without flinching. Meanwhile, several of Demon-Deviler's attacks were getting through.

Another round passed. By then, Cain was completely drenched with sweat. Demon-Deviler, on the other hand, was completely untouched, neither sweating nor panting. Cain was drawing out every ounce of combat knowledge he'd gained in his battle with the demon army, trying every attack pattern he could conceive. But nothing worked on this opponent.

"Hah! Hah! Ngh! Hraaaaaaaaah...!"

Cain's breathing was all out of sorts. The longer the match dragged on, the more obvious the gap in their abilities became. Cain was starting to take more hits; the damage was accumulating. Demon-Deviler continued to deflect him effortlessly. He'd taken nearly no damage and hadn't broken a sweat. The announcer had long since stopped claiming the fight was in any way even.

"Gah!"

Demon-Deviler's fist smashed down from above, landing squarely on Cain's face. The force of the blow slammed him hard into the mat.

"Down! Cain is down for the first time! The ref has started the count!"

"One, two..." the count ticked on as the referee stood over him.

Cain tried to rise immediately. I didn't doubt that he would stand before the count reached ten, but his body was trembling. Clearly, the damage wasn't something he could just brush off.

"I never thought I'd see the day..." Rachel softly muttered.

The faces of Cain's comrades had turned grim, as if they couldn't believe what they were seeing. Those who had known him the longest looked the most shaken.

And I could understand how they felt. Cain was the strongest humanity had to offer. There existed no one stronger than him in all of humanland. No one understood that more intimately than his comrades who'd experienced his strength firsthand.

They had never once seen their leader so outmatched by an enemy. Even in the war with the demons, they'd rarely come across a foe who boasted greater individual strength. I'd heard that from them directly.

Ever-victorious, never defeated—that was the Hero of Humanity, Cain. Subconsciously, they all believed he would win again, just as he always did. It had become common sense to them, a fact that left no room for doubt. That was simply how many victories Cain had stacked up.

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

"He's up! Cain rises at the count of six! The match continues!"

But the reality before us was cruel. Our strongest, invincible, most victorious hero was in tatters. Once again, we were forced to realize where we were. This was Hell—a realm inhabited by beings of a higher plane of existence. Even someone considered overwhelmingly powerful among humanity was outmatched by what was merely a mid-tier warrior here.

"Heh heh, congratulations on getting up, Cain. But you shouldn't push yourself too hard."

"*Hff... Hff...* Cut the crap. I've got another hundred rounds in me."

"You're still talking tough in that condition? As expected of a hero! I can't afford to let my guard down with you!"

The match resumed.

"Showing respect to that superhuman spirit of yours, I'll crank it up a notch."

"Guh?!"

Demon-Deviler surged forward, launching a flurry of varied attacks. Cain was forced onto the defensive. With four arms, his foe had begun to unleash combinations impossible for a human. Jabs and hooks thrown simultaneously. His one-twos were strung into threes and fours.

"Urgh!"

Cain barely managed to withstand the barrage, each dodge and block bringing him to the brink of ruin. As each successive round passed, the damage continued to pile on his body. The number of knockdowns increased.

"Take this!"

"Nggh?!"

But, seizing on a minuscule opening, Cain delivered a flawless kick that landed square on Demon-Deviler's jaw. It was Cain's first real counterattack in a long while. Though it connected perfectly, there was no sign that Demon-Deviler had taken any damage. He didn't stagger, let alone appear to be in pain.

The kick had contained more than enough force. Under normal circumstances, it would have knocked out an opponent in a single blow. If only his enemy weren't a warrior of Hell...

"Still capable of counters? You're persistent."

"Gah!"

Demon-Deviler's counterpunch dug into Cain's stomach. The hero dropped to one knee before collapsing entirely. Another knockdown.

"Cain is down! He's down again!"

"One...! Two...!"

"A body shot! He might not get up from this one!"

Cain's body was in shambles. There wasn't a single part of him that hadn't taken a beating. He trembled as he tried to rise up, but I wasn't certain if he'd make it before the count struck ten. A dreadful thought occurred to me: *No—even if he does get up, he's got no chance of winning...*

Perhaps thinking the same, Sylphie turned to Melvy and gave the order.

"Melvy, get ready to throw in the towel. We can't let Cain get

broken here.”

“Y-Yes!”

The two of them began preparations to forfeit the match. No one voiced any objections.

“Cain is up! He’s up at the count of nine! What incredible determination!”

“Nghh...! *Hff*, nggh!”

By the time we realized it, the audience was clapping for him. Despite having passed his limits, he rose to face the enemy—the crowd honored his tenacity with applause. But it was applause steeped in cruelty. In pity. There was no path left for victory. They were simply paying respect to one man’s unrelenting spirit.

The match resumed. No matter what he did, the momentum wouldn’t swing in his favor. It had simply become a question of when Demon-Deviler would deliver the final blow.

“What’s this?! Cain clinches!”

Cain got in and clung to Demon-Deviler’s body—a clinch. He’d forced a stalemate to buy the time he needed to recover some stamina.

“Nggh...! *Hff*! *Hff*...!”

And then. A small, barely audible voice came from Demon-Deviler.

“You don’t need to keep forcing yourself. It’s fine. You’re meant to lose here—it’s all part of the script.”

“What?”

Their voices didn’t reach the microphone. Only those of us ringside could hear their exchange.

“It’s impossible for a human to defeat even a mid-rank resident of Hell...let alone a lieutenant colonel in the army. Everyone knows that. Of course, the humans are going to lose the first match. But that’s exactly how it’s supposed to go.”

Cain fell silent.

“What matters is what comes next. Starting tomorrow, a coach from Hell will train you. You’ll have access to machines and knowledge unavailable in the human realm. The challenger will burn with the flame of revenge and show off their rapid growth.”

"What the hell are you talking about?"

The two of them exchanged hushed whispers. The clinch dragged on longer than it should have, but the referee made no move to stop it. What Demon-Deviler was saying seemed to be common knowledge among the production staff.

"It's the growth of the human that makes for good drama. Those harsh—no, Hellish training scenes will be broadcast on TV, the challenger's struggle will tug on their heartstrings... Each week, the defeats will continue while the training ramps up. Growth, hardship, effort, grit—the sight of a man who never gives up, no matter how many times he's beaten black-and-blue. That's what'll get them right in the feels."

Silence.

"And in the end, the challenger, a completely changed man, defeats the overwhelming villain—me. A lower life-form defeating a higher being through sheer perseverance—the reversal will make for the best television we've had in years."

Demon-Deviler offered a warm smile. There was no malice or ill intent.

"That's the long-term script we're working with."

Silence still.

Even this loss was part of the entertainment. A scripted documentary of a single human's growth had already been written, and Demon-Deviler was just letting it play out.

"So you can rest easy and lose the first match. Your real beginning will come when your training with the coach kicks off," Demon-Deviler said with a gentle, persuasive tone. Then he, too, was silent. The conversation was over.

Cain released the clinch and stepped back.

We were left speechless by what we'd just heard.

Even Cain's overwhelming strength was being molded into entertainment by the world of television. Like training a pet to perform tricks, they would shape the challenger and mold him into a drama worth watching.

This was never a real fight from the start. It was a touching story of a lowly being's growth—a documentary. The result of the battle

was little more than an afterthought to the producers.

The gap between higher and lower beings...that overwhelming disparity left us feeling nothing short of despair. We'd come face-to-face with the cruel truth of existence.

But then...

"Pfft... Heh heh heh..."

"Hmm?"

"Ha ha ha ha! A-ha-ha-ha-h-ha!" Cain suddenly burst into laughter. "Ha ha ha! *Hff... Hff...* Seems like you're misunderstanding something?"

"And what is that, pray tell?"

"Say...*hff*... You called yourself a lieutenant colonel, right? What does that translate to in the human world?"

"Hm? Um, well...that depends on the country or military structure, but...yes, in the country you live in, I'd say it is about the same as a battalion commander," Demon-Deviler answered with a hint of confusion, caught off guard by the sudden question.

"Battalion commander class, huh... *Hff...* And yet...ha ha, you're *this* strong?"

"Cain?"

"Nice. That's Hell for you... You guys are the best!"

Cain laughed. He wasn't putting up a strong front—his smile came from the heart. His face was swollen. His body was covered in wounds, and he was clearly in terrible pain...yet that smile was no bluff. He was truly and genuinely delighted.

"I...see... I became a hero when I obtained the holy sword. The strongest of humankind...that's me. I couldn't find a single human who could match me," Cain began.

This time, it was loud enough for the microphone to pick up. For his voice to travel across the arena.

"And it was mostly the same for demons too. I'd swing the sword, day after day, winning easy victories... For humanity's sake, I kept defeating enemies weaker than me, protecting the defenseless... For better or worse, I was blessed with so many powerful allies."

Demon-Deviler cocked his head. He didn't seem to understand what Cain was trying to tell him.

"That's why...I've rarely had a real *challenge* on my journey. I can count those moments on one hand. Almost no one was stronger than me."

It was Demon-Deviler's turn to watch him silently.

"But now, here you are. Standing before me—someone stronger than me."

Cain pointed his finger at Demon-Deviler.

"A real challenge, right in front of me... Nothing more exhilarating than that. Nothing that makes me happier."

"The challenge is...fun?"

"I feel so damn good right now—why in all Hell would I wanna stop the match here?"

His body was in tatters. He swayed as if a single poke would knock him over, and to anyone watching, a comeback was completely impossible. And yet, Cain smiled. He was enjoying this to his very core. At that moment, his spirit alone seemed to overpower his opponent.

"Now, c'mon. Let's beat each other up, Demon-Deviler. Lemme savor the joy of facing someone stronger than me, for as long as I can..."

In that instant, Cain's body was dyed in red-and-black hues.

"What?!"

"Holy Sword Andros's super physical enhancement?!"

Sylphie and Melvy cried out in surprise. Cain wasn't even holding Holy Sword Andros—it was being guarded by Altina. Yet somehow, he had activated its power. This had never happened before. He had just broken through some unseen barrier.

"I will beat you, Demon-Deviler. I'll surpass my limits and defeat someone stronger than me... That's what martial pursuit is all about, right?"

"Tsk!"

At the end of those words, the battle resumed. Cain charged forward at breakneck speed, but his movements were straightforward to a foolish degree. He simply rushed and attacked.

It was a powerful elbow strike launched with tremendous speed and weight. Though Demon-Deviler caught it with an arm, it marked

the first attack Cain had gotten in after being on the defensive for so long.

"You little—!"

Even after playing his trump card and breaking through his limits, Cain's assault was deftly handled by Demon-Deviler. It wasn't so easy to surpass his opponent. Demon-Deviler adapted to his enhanced body and evaded his strike.

"You really are the best!"

"Dang it! What are you?!"

Even as his trump card failed to tilt the battle in his favor, and even as we grew anxious just watching him, Cain seemed to be reveling in the thrill of the fight.

"Don't get cocky!"

Demon-Deviler landed a hard counter, slamming Cain into the mat.

"Down! Even after using his trump card, Cain has been taken down!"

"One...!"

The referee's count went no further. Cain sprang to his feet and charged straight at Demon-Deviler.

"Graaaaaaaaa!"

"Guh?! What are you, a zombie?!"

Cain attacked without rest. Savage as a beast, ferocious as a devil. His tattered body couldn't keep up...but his expression was nothing but joy. Once again, Demon-Deviler struck back, and Cain was knocked down. But once more, he rose and threw his fist at the enemy before him. Again and again, he stood back up...his heart danced as he bared his fangs at a hellspawn of Hell.

"Hey...isn't something strange?"

"Y-Yes... Umm, err...it is *very* strange."

His comrades watched wide-eyed as the battle played out in the ring.

"Strange? What's so strange?"

"Umm, well...it's Cain. He's growing stronger the longer this drags on..."

"Huh?"

Hearing Melvy's reply, I narrowed my eyes and watched more closely.

"Hraaah!"

"Guh! Why you—!"

A fierce exchange was taking place... No, more than that, the fight was starting to even out. Just moments ago, even with his super physical enhancement active, Cain couldn't lay a finger on Demon-Deviler and kept getting knocked down in return. But gradually, he'd begun to adapt to his enemy's movements. Block for block, blow for blow. What had once been a one-sided defense had transformed considerably.

Cain was rapidly growing stronger in the midst of battle. Every second, every instant he was exposed to Demon-Deviler's strength and speed, he took another step forward. It was almost like the ring itself had become his training ground.

"Come to think of it... Back at the research lab. Didn't Lamilia say something?"

"Huh?"

I recalled what she'd said months ago, back when she'd studied the Holy Sword Andros.

"To strictly define Holy Sword Andros's ultimate technique, rather than a super physical enhancement closer to a boost to a human's latent abilities, right?"

"Then Cain's latent abilities...are being boosted as we speak?"

"I-I don't really get it, but..."

I didn't understand it either. But what was clear was that Cain was growing stronger; it was almost like he was being elevated by Demon-Deviler's strength.

"Dryaaaah!"

"Guh! Hah...! You're insane!"

Demon-Deviler's composure was starting to crack.

His breathing grew heavier, and sweat streamed down his brow. The difference in their power was shrinking. He'd likely never anticipated this development. Demon-Deviler looked bewildered as he gritted his teeth.

Then... *Clang!*

A dry sound filled the air.

"Three minutes are up. The round is over. You have a minute to rest."

Normally, Cain, in his battered state, would need every second of rest he could get. But now that he was in his time-limited super-enhanced state, he couldn't let a second go to waste. It would be disastrous if he ran out of time in the middle of his break.

Cain returned to his corner, and Sylphie immediately asked him, "Cain. How long until it ends?"

"Dunno... But I'll settle it in the next round."

"The moment the technique wears off, I will throw in the towel. Understood?"

"Don't."

Even surrounded by the concerned faces of his comrades, Cain looked like he was having the time of his life. His red and swollen face peeled back to show a toothy smile.

"I've never felt better. Don't ruin it for me."

"Cain..."

The gong rang. Break time was over. Cain walked to the center of the ring.

"A'ight! I'm off!"

"Be careful."

No one could stop him now. All we could do was call out toward a man who refused to slow down.

The battle resumed. A high-level exchange between Cain and Demon-Deviler began again...so it seemed. But...it was growing harder and harder for me to follow their movements with my eyes. The crowd—that had been cheering nonstop—had gone quiet some time ago. Perhaps they were the same as me. Their eyes could no longer keep up with the battle. Everyone was probably relying on Tsubaki's commentary just to comprehend what was happening.

But for me, that wasn't enough. I wanted to form an equal relationship with the members of the hero's party in the truest sense. It was unforgivable that I couldn't even follow the life-or-death struggle of our leader with my eyes. I desperately poured as much mana into my pupils as I could, whatever it took to perceive

just one more movement.

"Hrah! I'm not done yet!"

"Guh! Just go down already!"

"Over my dead body!"

Cain was growing stronger at a dizzying rate. But terrifyingly, Demon-Deviler was still stronger than him.

When I focused and watched closely, I saw that Demon-Deviler could manage five attacks in the span it took Cain to launch three. The back-and-forth seemed to be proceeding along that ratio.

Demon-Deviler was the one making more moves. Naturally, he was also taking less damage.

Both of their powerful kicks landed at the same time. They both stumbled back, but only Cain fell. Demon-Deviler was clearly hurt but remained firmly on both feet.

"Graaaaaaaaah!"

"Guh! You're not done yet?!"

Cain immediately rose again. Demon-Deviler, still maintaining his advantage, gritted his teeth.

How can Cain turn the situation around? I want to believe in the potential of Cain's rapid growth, but...how long will it last?

"Ah!"

Just then, the thing I'd been fearing the most happened.

The time limit on Holy Sword Andros ran out. The red and black hues faded from Cain's skin, and his power rapidly left him.

"Oh no!"

Once that happened, Cain wouldn't be able to fight a second more. Continuing the battle was out of the question—pain would shoot through his entire body, making even standing a challenge. This was no time for boxing.

"What's this?! Cain's reddish-black color is fading...the mana in his body is weakening too!"

"Not good!"

Sylphie was about to throw in the towel.

Seeing Cain's strength fail him, seeing him nearly keel over, Demon-Deviler reared his fist to strike. If that punch landed on Cain, it would surely be the end. There was no way for him to defend

himself now.

But Demon-Deviler's eyes were on us. He wasn't heartless—if the towel was thrown, the match would end without him needing to strike. He was waiting for that moment.

"I'm on it!" Sylphie wound up to throw the towel.

The match was over...that's what everyone thought.

"Urrgh..." A faint groan came from Cain.

That was a sign.

"Urrrroooooooooohh!"

"Wha—?!"

A powerful battle cry erupted from Cain when he shouldn't have had any strength left. An incredible amount of mana surged from within him.

"Huh?"

"What?"

"Wh-What the—?!"

Power was returning to Cain. I didn't understand why. I couldn't grasp what was happening. But the pressure coming from Cain had intensified, the strength of his presence growing stronger.

"Wh-What are those symbols...?"

Before I knew it, a reddish-black pattern had spread across Cain's body like a tattoo.





A pattern had etched itself across Cain's body like a Crest Bestowal spell on fabric. The reddish-black hue was the same color as the temporary superphysical enhancement that Andros provided.

"Wh-What's happening?"

"Is this...Andros's doing?"

Even our comrades were bewildered by this phenomenon, the likes of which they had never seen before. Sylphie's hand froze before she could throw in the towel and now, she was fretfully looking around, wondering what to do.

"Hsssssh!"

"Wha—?!"

With everyone else stunned, the first to make a move was Cain. He unleashed a ferocious flying knee into Demon Deviler—a faster and more powerful move than he'd ever performed before. The massive devil lurched back from the impact.

"Pfft... Ha ha! Ha ha ha ha ha!"

"Guh! He's gone crazy!"

Cain darted around with blood spewing from his mouth. His body must have been coursing with excruciating pain, but no matter how you sliced it, he was now faster, stronger, and more intense than he'd ever been.

Come to think of it...back at the lab, Lamilia said that Andros's spell sequences were incredibly complex, and that the sword possessed abilities that had still yet to be invoked.

The holy sword, Andros had saved humanity from peril for nearly eight hundred years—yet the power coursing through Cain was one that had never been recorded in any historical document. Our hero had unlocked a new facet of the blade. He had awakened a new power. At least...that was the only way that we could sanely interpret what was happening.

"Gwah hah! Ah ha ha ha ha ha hah!"

"Grnnnh! I'm not going down like this!"

Yet again, the intense clash resumed. Having broken through his limits and unleashed a new power, Cain was now an even match for Demon-Deviler. His foe could no longer maintain the composure he'd had at the start, and desperation now colored his face.

In fact, perhaps, we should have been praising Demon-Deviler for going blow-for-blow with a man who had already been heralded as humanity's strongest and who had now surpassed even that. Either way, there were two monsters exchanging a violent storm of punches and kicks in the ring.

"Gah hah! Gah ha ha ha hah!"

Each punch they threw sent out tangible shock waves. Cain continued to fight, spitting blood but still laughing all the way. Now, there was nothing we could do but watch. Sylphie's hand—still clutching the towel—hung limply by her side; her eyes were wide as she watched it play out.

"Hrrrrrrrrrrraaaaaaah!"

It was at that moment that Demon-Deviler played his ace in the hole. He channeled an immense amount of mana into his four fists and thrust them out simultaneously. All four of them dug into Cain's abdomen with a thunderous booming and a massive explosion. The magic he's imbued his fists with had been Hell Magic—a close-range spell that caused an explosion on impact. It was simple, yet effective.

"Gah!"

Rather, it was precisely the simplicity that made it all the more devastating. A foul, pitch-black smoke, almost like the condensed miasma of hell, rose. Cain had taken massive damage; the spell was so powerful, it would have obliterated any ordinary human, leaving not even ashes behind. Cain vomited a fresh batch of blood, his eyes rolling back as he lost consciousness. His body teetered and slowly began to tilt. Just a second more, and he would collapse onto the mat.

Everyone present was convinced of Cain's loss, and naturally so. He was clearly unconscious. The referee was already preparing to start the count, while Demon-Deviler lowered his guard and sighed.

But Cain's body didn't go down.

"What?"

He regained consciousness at the last possible moment. With his foot thrust forward, he forcibly propped up his collapsing body. He lifted his head... There was a fire in his eyes. He was like a hunter

eying his prey.

"Rah!"

"Guh?!"

Snapping back to full awareness in a split second, Cain charged at Demon-Deviler with explosive speed, launching a fiery assault, a wild flurry of punches. Demon-Deviler, having let down his guard for the briefest of moments, failed to defend himself in time and took the hits head-on. The mighty devil took blow after blow, and was forced instantly back into his corner of the ring.

"Hrrraaaaaaaaah!"

"Gwaaaaaaaaah!"

Cain screamed as if he were wringing out the very last bit of strength he had left, steadily hammering away at his foe, and Demon-Deviler could do nothing but turtle up to endure it.

"It's over!"

The reddish-black pattern had spread to Cain's boxing gloves. Whether that was the power of Andros or not, it hardly mattered. His gloved fists turned deadly weapons, and Cain struck his enemy with everything he had.

"Wha—?!"

There was a massive explosion, a spell that caused explosions on contact—exactly the spell the mighty Demon-Deviler had used moments before. But Cain had replicated it, giving it his own spin.

A powerful shock wave rippled through the arena. The corner post that had been supporting Demon-Deviler shattered as his body was flung out of the ring. As the ring broke apart, the ropes went slack, and the space that had once enclosed two fighters came undone.

Outside of the ring, Demon-Deviler lay sprawled on the floor. He didn't move. His eyes had rolled back, and he appeared to be unconscious. The referee rushed over to check on him. Then, after raising his arms above his head, he crossed them.

"Huh?"

"Does that mean...?"

The referee didn't start the count. He called the match right then and there.

“He...won?”

“Cain won...”

It was a technical knockout. The prolonged battle had come to an end. Cain’s come-from-behind victory had been confirmed.

“Wooooooooo-oooooooooo!!!”

“The referee has called the match?!” the announcer cried out. “I can hardly believe it myself! The winner is Cain! Cain is the victor! Despite being at such a disadvantage, he somehow...*somehow* turned it around!”

The cheers were so loud I feared they would level the arena.

“How could this be?! A human—yes, even if he’s the strongest hero of the human realm, he’s still just one human man! And that man has just defeated an active-duty lieutenant colonel, Demon-Deviler, in just one match!”

“Insane! The hero’s insane!”

“Have humans always been this strong?!”

Though I could make out some praise, most of the words I picked up were ones of utter disbelief. No one could process what they’d just witnessed, yet still, the wide-eyed denizens of Hell couldn’t stop themselves from roaring with excitement at the fierce, fiery battle they’d just seen. The energy in the arena refused to die down.

“Pheeeeeeeeeeeew...”

As cheers thundered from every direction, Cain collapsed on the ground with his arms and legs spread wide.

“Sir Cain!”

“Umm, err...! Are you okay?!”

We rushed over to him, Melvy immediately began to cast powerful healing magic, trying to restore the tattered remains of his body.

“What about the pain from the holy sword’s kickback?! You were in a state we’ve never seen you in before!”

“Ha ha ha, I don’t get it either. The pain? Yeah, well... My whole body hurts...it hurts so much it’s gone beyond hurting and I’m just totally numb. Hey, are my arms and legs still attached? Don’t tell me they got blown off without me even noticing?”

“You’ve still got them! You really...really pushed yourself!”

"Ha ha, then it all worked out."

The markings had faded from Cain's body. Whatever mysterious state he had been in had evidently been lifted. *But what exactly was it?* I wondered. *It's safe to assume that was a new power from Andros, but we don't know anything specific.*

One thing did bother me: The sword's super physical enhancement with recoil was already an extremely high-risk technique, but that new power had clearly surpassed even that. Didn't that make it incredibly dangerous? Could we really guarantee Cain's safety?

"Anyway...I won." Even lying on the ground, Cain raised his fist high in the air as if to sweep away our concerns. "I won. I really won... I surpassed a warrior of Hell."

His entire body was battered and bruised. He couldn't move a single step. But even so, as a proud warrior, his victory was the greatest badge of honor he could receive.

Cain...no, the entire hero party had just successfully conquered the dungeon.

"We shall now proceed with the awards ceremony. Hero Cain and party, please take the stage."

Some time had passed since the battle had ended. During that time, preparations for the dungeon completion award ceremony had been rushed through. Both Cain and Demon-Deviler had received medical treatment, but Cain was still unable to walk. He had to sit in a wheelchair with Sylphie pushing him around.

Demon-Deviler, on the other hand, had recovered almost entirely with only a few cold compresses stuck to his face. He'd changed into a white suit and reclaimed his role as the announcer. As expected of a warrior from Hell...his regenerative powers were just as overwhelming.

"Something about this is pissing me off... *I'm* the one who won."

"Now, now..."

Cain pushed out his lips in a pout. Sure enough—one look at both their conditions, and it would be easy to imagine the results reversed.

“Ahem, members of the hero party. We hereby commend you for facing and overcoming every trial of the Backdoor Dungeon and achieving a full completion. Congratulations.”

Cain accepted the certificate from Demon-Deviler. Applause echoed from the crowd as the entire arena was filled with praise and admiration.

“It’s a bit...odd. Being awarded like this at the innermost depths of a dungeon,” I whispered.

“Yeah,” Rachel whispered back. “This would never happen back home.”

We exchanged a sardonic smirk.

Making matters all the stranger still was the fact that the one handing out the award was the dungeon boss who we’d faced off against in such a fierce clash what seemed like moments ago. Something like this would have been unthinkable in humanland.

“And now, in recognition of your complete conquest of the ‘Excuse us, Coming in Through the Back! Humanity’s Backdoor Dungeon Challenge!’ program, we present you with our initially promised prize—the treasure to break the barrier on the demon lord’s castle.”

“Hell yeah!”

Cain clenched his fist in victory. It was a treasure he’d sought out long before discovering that the dungeon connected to Hell. And finally, it was going to be in his hands. Finally, he and his party could make progress. They would assault the demon lord’s castle and settle things with Demon Lord Barnghiner—or the revolutionary leader, as Kuon would have it.

Demon-Deviler held out a round, glowing orb. That had to be the treasure we were looking for. The treasure the heroes had sought for years. Everyone in the party eyed it, watching with bated breath. To receive that treasure would mean that the final battle was drawing near.

“Hero Cain...and your party members, congratulations.”

“Thanks.”

Demon-Deviler extended the treasure to Cain. Another wave of applause took over the crowd. And caught up in a maelstrom of

commendation, Cain reached out his hand...

"Now hold on a minute, hun!"

...when suddenly, a voice called out to stop him.

What? What now? The crowd was astir as a figure intruded between Cain and Demon-Deviler. They'd leaped through the air, landing between the two with a thud as if to put a stop to this fateful transaction.

"Huh?!"

"L-Lady Tsubaki...?"

It was her—the alluring hellspawn woman dressed in a kimono-like outfit, Tsubaki.

"I'll cut to the chase."

"What?"

"There ain't no way I'm lettin' y'all hand that over to Cain. Not right now."

"What?!"

Before anyone realized it, the treasure that had been in Demon-Deviler's hand was now resting in Tsubaki's palm. It wasn't just Cain—even Demon-Deviler looked startled. There was nothing playful or teasing about her demeanor. She wasn't joking. She meant it—she was seriously standing against Cain and his party, determined to keep the treasure from them.





At the end of the end, after everything was over...there was still someone standing in our way.

Epilogue

"What's going on here?"

"What is Lady Tsubaki doing?"

"Is this part of the production?"

The arena was abuzz.

Cain had defeated Demon-Deviler, the ninetieth-floor boss of the Backdoor Dungeon. The party had triumphed over the 'Excuse us, Coming in Through the Back! Humanity's Backdoor Dungeon Challenge!' program. All that awaited us was the ending, a grand finale where we received our well-deserved reward...or so everyone had assumed.

But Tsubaki had put a stop to that.

"L-Lady Tsubaki... This is very problematic. You shouldn't interrupt the program..."

With the treasure snatched straight from his hands, Demon-Deviler timidly tried to scold Tsubaki. Based on his reaction, this wasn't something staged by the television network. But Tsubaki ignored him, her harsh eyes remaining firmly on Cain.

"What's your game here?" Cain asked, despite his confusion.

"I meant it as I said it. You can't have this treasure, Cain—not the way you are right now."

Their sharp gazes collided. Tsubaki was a beautiful woman, and the first person we met upon coming to Hell. She seemed to know Lilith, and the two of them got along rather well. During the dungeon trials, she'd often appeared as a commentator, and apparently also as a cabaret girl to flirt with our boys. All in all, she seemed like a cheery and easygoing person—or rather, hellspawn. We hadn't known her for long, but the impression she left was bright and mellow. At least, that's what we'd thought.

But now, she was standing firm in Cain's path. She stood clearly opposed.

A surprising new boss had emerged at the final battle.

"I was watchin' that last battle, and it hit me," Tsubaki said, turning the treasure over in her hand. "You can't go fight the demon lord right now. You might beat him, sure. But winnin' and losin'—that ain't the issue here. If you go through with this, I reckon you'll lose somethin' you can't ever get back."

"Something I can't get back?" Cain furrowed his brow.

Pointing at the holy sword in its scabbard—now resting on his lap—Tsubaki went on, "You don't understand that 'holy sword' of yours. Not one bit. It's just a feelin' in my gut, but I just know that thing's gonna lead to one huge mistake."

Cain pursed his lips. Sure enough, his sword, Andros, was largely a mystery. It was Altina who had first raised her suspicions; then, Lilith confirmed it hadn't been forged in Celestia. Just moments ago, it had unleashed a power far beyond human limits to allow Cain to defeat a mighty foe from Hell.

Where did Holy Sword Andros even come from? No resident of Hell could answer that question, and even Lilith—an authority of Celestia—was in the dark. It was undeniably bizarre.

"That 'holy sword' is tied to your roots, ain't it, Cain? And if you don't know where you come from, then you got no business standin' on that final battlefield. That's all I'm sayin'."

Cain clenched his fist at Tsubaki's harsh words. But the flame in his eyes never wavered—he glared with just as much intensity. "Look, I appreciate the warning... But I'm not gonna just step aside because you told me to. Don't take this the wrong way, but this is none of your damn business."

"Right, I figured as much. You ain't the kind of man to turn tail on just a warnin'."

With a soft sigh, Tsubaki closed in on the hero. And then, she cast some powerful spell. Even with Sylphie and the others—all seasoned warriors—surrounding him, none were able to stop her in time. It was as if she'd slipped through a crack in their awareness; by the time anyone noticed, she was already beside him, already casting.

"Wha...?!"

“C-Cain?! Tsubaki! What are you doing?!”

“Don’t get your knickers in a twist. That there was a healin’ spell—and a mighty strong one at that.”

As we prepared for battle, Tsubaki waved us off as if it were nothing.

“Huh? Oh...”

Having taken the spell, Cain seemed perfectly fine. No, better than that. Every wound he’d taken in the last battle had vanished. He stood from his wheelchair and rolled his shoulders, startled by his own fully restored body.

“If talk ain’t enough to convince you, we’ll do it this way,” Tsubaki gave a clear ultimatum. “Pick up that holy sword of yours. Get yourself all geared up, and come at me. If you can so much as put a scratch on me, I’ll hand over the treasure right here and now.”

“Hmm... Nice and straightforward. Not bad—I don’t like how I’m being underestimated, though.”

Cain grinned. Claiming what he wanted through battle—that was exactly how he liked to do things. Tsubaki shot a sultry smile back.

But then, someone tried to put a stop to their battle.

“No, Cain! Bad boy! Don’t fall for her provocation! You too, Tsubaki! What kind of sick joke is this?!”

“Lilith...?”

It was my mentor, Lilith, shouting out from her seat in the audience. She was always such a laid-back person, and I’d never seen her yell like that before.

“Lilith? Sorry, but stay out of this. She’s picking a fight, and I don’t got much choice here. Especially not when the demon lord’s involved.”

“That’s right. Don’t go getting in the way, Lilith. Cain here’s got a harsh lesson he needs to learn.”

“Urk!”

The two of them ignored her entirely as they slipped into combat stances. Cain grabbed the holy sword firmly with both hands, while Tsubaki hoisted an enormous club over her shoulder—one I’d never even noticed her pulling out.

“What’s going on?”

“A fight? With Lady Tsubaki?”

The entire venue was filled with unrest. The production crew members, including Demon-Deviler, were visibly shaken. Even we didn’t know how to react to this sudden development. And in the midst of it all, only Cain and Tsubaki stood with unwavering resolve. Each had eyes for no one but the other as their fighting spirits surged, their concentration honed to the extreme.

There was no one left who could stop them.

Tsubaki introduced herself, “I am Tsubaki of Hell, Grand Duchess of the Kishin. I am Tsubaki, head of the Sakura Clan of the Great Prison of Shuri—and I accept your challenge!”

Those words kicked off the battle.

“Grrroooooooooh!”

Cain let out a manly roar that seemed to resonate from the depths of his being. At the same time, those reddish-black patterns again began to etch themselves into his body, his face, and even the sword in his hands. It was that mysterious technique he’d used at the end of his fight with Demon-Deviler...a technique to break through the limits of humanity. An overwhelming amount of mana surged from within him as he tilted his posture so very slightly forward. The sword gave a soft *chink*.

In the next instant... *He’s gone!* No, that wasn’t it! He had simply closed the distance with a charge that defied perception! Even such a basic action had transcended the limits of humanity to the point of making him seem like a monster.

“He’s too—”

Sylphie must have meant to say, “He’s too fast!”

But the fight was over in a heartbeat. It was settled before she could say the last word.

“Hmph!”

I heard a sharp, female grunt—followed immediately by a heavy impact. A dull thud, like a chunk of metal smashing into flesh.

“Huh?”

A moment later...for some reason, Cain’s body was soaring high through the sky. Blood was spraying from his mouth as he flew higher and higher before crashing into the furthest bleachers with a

massive boom.

"Wha—?!"

"Wh-What was that?!"

Tsubaki was the only one standing before us. At some point, she had swung her enormous club without moving a single step from where she had been.

Far, far in the distance was Cain. Tsubaki hadn't moved an inch, and hadn't taken a single scratch... The outcome of the battle was painfully clear.

Cain had lost. Even with the new powers he had gained, he couldn't even come close to Tsubaki's level. Tsubaki had deflected his ultra-high-speed charge and countered with a swing of her club, launching him into the crowd.

That was the only conclusion the scene allowed.

"Honestly, what did I tell you?! That was so childish, Tsubaki!"

As we stood there, dumbfounded, Lilith descended from the crowd carrying Cain in her arms. He was completely limp, unmoving. Completely knocked out.

"I know Cain's been growing superfast, but there's no way he could beat you! Not when you're as strong as me!"

"Well now, I'll admit it. That wasn't all that mature of me, but it was somethin' that had to be done."

"She's on the same level...as Lilith?!"

Lilith (apparently) held one of the highest positions in Celestia, both in status and in strength. If Tsubaki was on her level, that meant Tsubaki had to be one of the leading figures of Hell.

The way she'd introduced herself as Grand Duchess of the Kishin, and Head of the Sakura Clan in the Grand Prison of Shuri made sense. The title alone spoke of the immense power and authority she held in this world... She was a Grand Duchess, after all. She was someone of unbelievable standing...

"Maaan, what a disaster that was. You have it tough, Cain. *High God Heal*."

After a pause, "Huh?! Where am I?" Cain regained consciousness from Lilith's powerful, holy magic-based healing.

"Tsk!"

He looked around briefly, then instantly understood the situation. His face flushed as he glared bitterly at Tsubaki.

"You've got the wrong idea, darlin'. The one you ought to be pointing that sword at isn't me—and the thing you oughta be seekin'...well, it ain't the treasure that unlocks the demon lord's castle."

"Explain."

"Director? Could ya be a dear and pull up the news feed on that monitor?"

"Huh? Well..."

I heard a troubled voice from the staff.

"We're still live right now."

"Wouldn't it be a huge issue if we pulled up a rival station's feed during the broadcast...?"

They muttered in panic, but Tsubaki forced the matter through with a heavy hand.

As unfamiliar with television customs as we were, we didn't really understand how outrageous her demand was, but we could at least surmise she'd made an incredible ask.

But Tsubaki deemed it necessary. Here, and now.

It didn't take long to realize why. Hell's news report revealed something shocking.

"...I repeat, approximately thirty minutes ago, a large military force began marching from the Bordic Region of Demonland. They are currently advancing toward the human nation of Bahelgarn."

"Wha—?!"

"A demon invasion?!"

The large monitor displayed a scene of thousands of demons marching in formation. How exactly were they getting the footage? I couldn't say, but they seemed to be capturing it from high in the air above demonland. It had to be a technology unknown both in the realms of humans and demons.

However, the main point of the news wasn't the invasion itself—it was the shocking, almost unbelievable sight displayed on camera.

"And astonishingly, these thousands of demon soldiers are all equipped with Devil Blades! Is every single one of these soldiers an

Archfiend?! We will report more details as they come in!”

“Wh... What is...this...?”

“Umm, err... This can’t be real!”

In the human world, the wielder of a holy sword was called a hero and was tasked with defending humanity. By contrast, those who wielded devil swords in the demon world were known as archfiends and held overwhelming power. That was what the history texts laid out.

Both roles originated in the War of Heaven and Earth two thousand years ago, back when Celestia had granted the humans Holy Sword Ikryl, and Hell granted the demons Devil Sword Bellum.

According to the news report, the demon army’s soldiers were in possession of a great number of devil swords...but they were wrong. The swords held by the soldiers on the screen were neither Ikryl nor Bellum.

“That sword! It’s mine?!”

The shape of the sword, the size of the blade, even the finer details... They all bore a striking resemblance to Cain’s Holy Sword Andros.

But though Andros’s blade boasted a beautiful silver glow, the devil swords wielded by the demon soldiers on-screen seemed to gleam with a deep blackness as though they had been forged from darkness itself.

With that said, that was the only difference. Apart from color, every part of those swords was identical to Holy Sword Andros. It wasn’t an exaggeration to say that the demon army was wielding thousands of Holy Sword Androses.

“What’s going on here?”

“H-How... How in the Hell...”

Seasoned warriors who had overcome countless battlefields, the members of the hero’s party stood frozen, dumbfounded and wide-eyed at the scene unfolding before them.

Thousands of enemies equipped with Holy Sword Andros?

We didn’t know the details, but something abnormal was clearly happening on the surface. Something completely outside the realm of our understanding. But for now, we had to stop that army’s

advance or human territory would suffer devastating losses.

That was all we knew for sure.

"Oh... Oh no! We need to get back to the human realm immediately!"

"R-Right! We're just about the only ones who can stop that army!"

"Cain. Sweetie."

As Cain began to sweat and panic, Tsubaki called out to him.

"Put an end to this whole mess, uncover the truth behind that holy sword of yours, and find out where you really come from... Once you've done all that, I'll accept a rematch. I'll be waitin' for you on floor one hundred of the Backdoor Dungeon—right before the Grand King of Hell himself."

Cain gave her a slight nod. Then, he pointed at her and declared, "I'll take you down. Just you wait."

His words carried such a menacing intimidation that they alone would have any ordinary person buckling at the knees. But Tsubaki simply smiled. Fiercely, seductively...a smile that could have only come from Hell.

"He he, I'll look forward to it! ♪"

"Hmph."

With that, Cain turned his back on her. Their fight would have to wait. First, we needed to handle the absurdity of thousands of Holy Sword Androses being unleashed upon human lands. We returned to our realm as fast as we could.

What awaited us was a battle to uncover the true identity of Holy Sword Andros.

Cain had a hunch—that the holy sword's secret lay at the end of this battle, alongside the key to his origin. That this battle was his confrontation with himself.

Our bodies trembled with an overwhelming sense that something big was about to change.



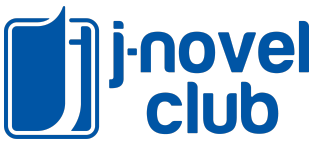












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I Could Never Be a Succubus! Volume 7
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