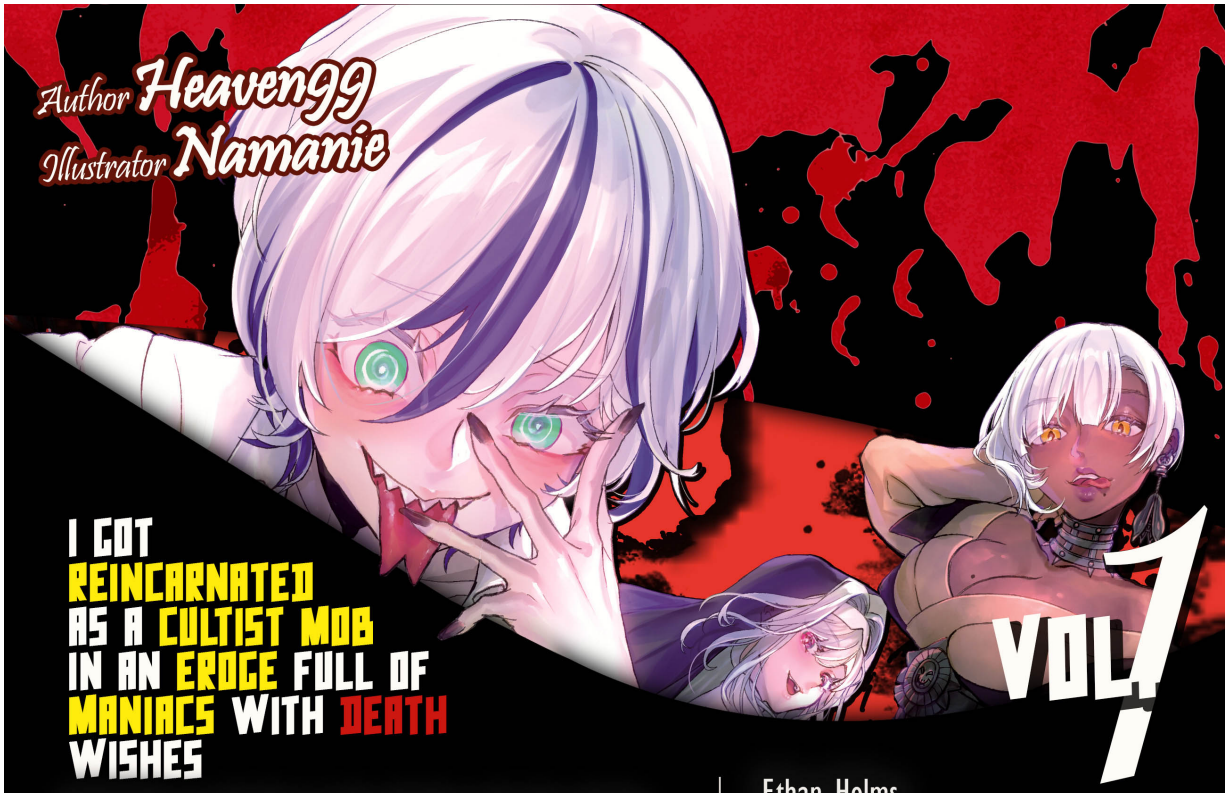

Hanashi
MEDIA
I GOT REINCARNATED AS A CULTIST IN A MOB
VOL.1
ERO
FULL OF MANIACS
Author : Heaven99
Illustrator : Namanie
with Death wishes


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I GOT REINCARNATED AS A CULTIST MOB IN AN EROGE FULL OF MANIACS WITH DEATH WISHES

VOL. 1

Zen'in kakugo gangimari na erogē no jakyōto mobu ni tensei shite shimatta ken Vol. 1
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Hanashi MEDIA

I Got Reincarnated as a Cultist Mob in an Eroge Full of Maniacs with Death Wishes!

Author: Heaven99
Illustrator: Namanie

Hanashi
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I GOT REINCARNATED AS A
CULTIST MOB
IN AN
FULL OF MAIDS WITH DEATH WISHES
Hanashi MEDIA


So, what do you think lovers should do when they're all alone in a room together?
The crimson sheets rustled underneath me as I gazed into the dark, glittering eyes of the petite girl sitting on my hips. Her face was so close to mine that I could feel her warm breath on my cheek.


Do I still Have a Chance to Turn this Around?
It's not about whether you can do it.
You do it — because there's no other choice.
That's just the way this world works.

WILL HE ACCEPT TWISTED LOVE—OR FACE DEATH? TIME TO STEEL YOUR RESOLVE.

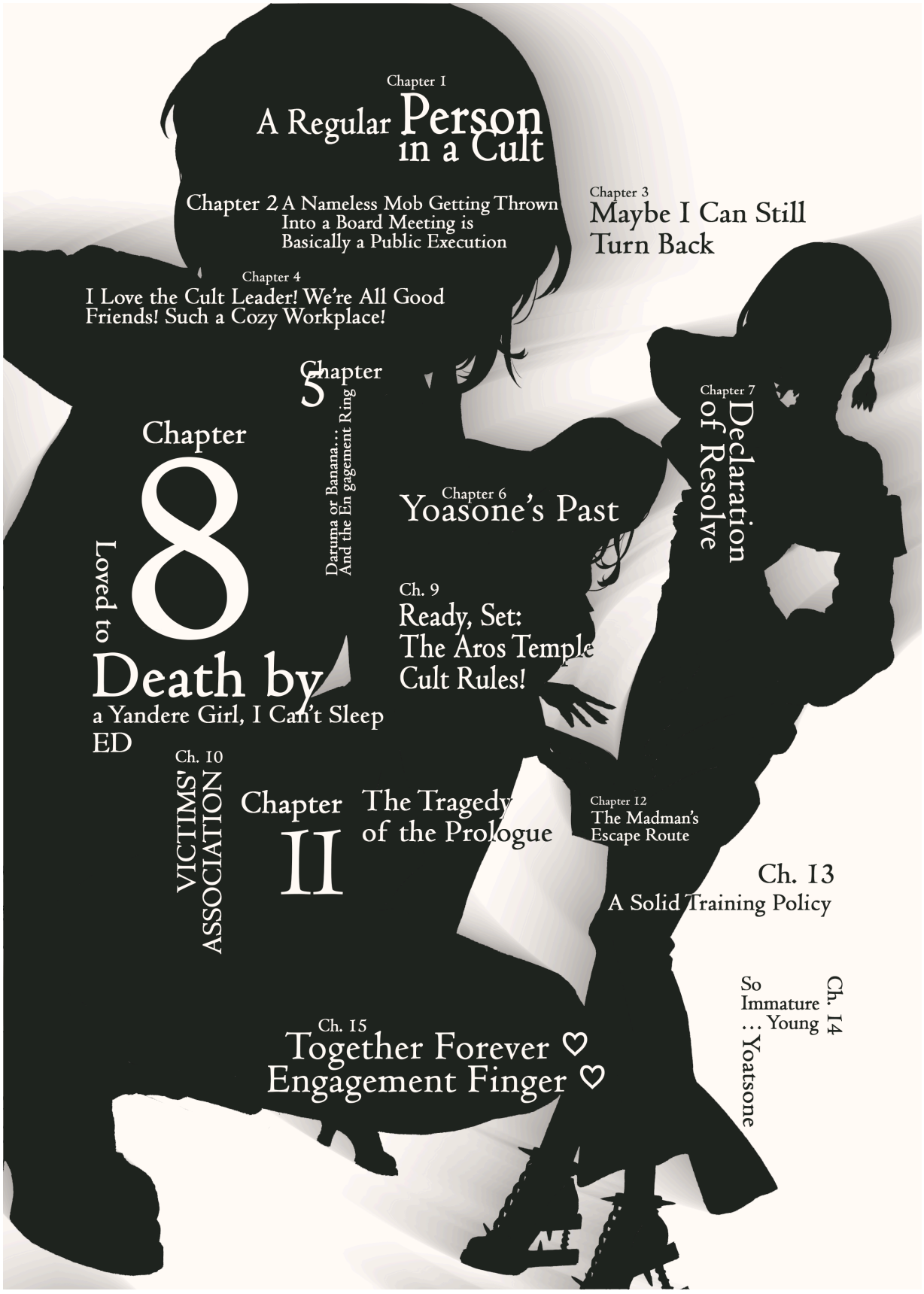


After being reincarnated as a cultist mob in the notoriously brutal eroge Seeker of the Netherworld, Oakley has only one goal: escape the deranged cult before he ends up sacrificed like all the rest. But during a battle with the forces of the Orthodoxy, one reckless move earns him the attention of a savage female executive—and worse, the mad cult leader.

Now, his everyday life gets a hellish upgrade as he tries to survive in a world where the heroines are all completely unhinged, eyes blazing with the kind of resolve that laughs in the face of death... and they all seem disturbingly fixated on him. His life—and his chastity—are on the line in a no-save nightmare route.

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Chapter 1: An Ordinary Guy in a Cult

Ten figures, cloaked in dark robes, hoods drawn low over their faces, moved through a dark, isolated forest beneath the moon in the dead of night. Crossbows cocked and ready, we advanced cautiously with hardly a sound. Amongst these shadows, my nerves stretched thin as I strained my senses against the oppressive darkness.

We were a small detachment, sent to hunt down an enemy who had fled into this forest. Our numbers comprised only the followers of the *Aros Temple Cult*, each one prepared to kill without hesitation.

The order had come just hours prior from one of the sect's executives: "*Find the woman who escaped into the woods and permanently silence her.*" It wasn't the first time we had been tasked with eliminating an intruder. People who strayed too close to our order rarely lived to regret it.

Suddenly, the lead scout—a wiry man named Lloyd—threw up his hand, fingers snapping into a silent signal. *Halt.* Every muscle in my body froze, my breath catching in my throat. The rest of us crouched low, eyes flicking to the signal he flashed next. *Enemy sighted.*

Peering past his outstretched arm, I caught sight of a crumbling abandoned cabin just beyond a thick patch of undergrowth. Its walls leaned precariously, half-swallowed by creeping vines. There, huddled in the shadows just inside the threshold, was our target—a lone woman, her form barely visible through the dense, gnarled branches.

My grip tightened instinctively around my crossbow. *That's her. The one they want dead. The one whose head they demanded.* I felt a sudden rush of adrenaline. Lloyd's fingers traced another signal.

Encircle. We exchanged quick, silent nods before fanning out, our movements synchronized and silent as shadows on snow.

We crept closer, weaving between trees and shifting shadows, careful not to disturb even the dry, brittle leaves underfoot. The target, oblivious to our approach, was busy tending to her wounds. I could see the fresh gashes carved into her exposed skin, dark lines of blood seeping through the thin fabric clinging to her frame. No doubt, it was the work of one of our own—a testament to her stubborn resilience.

Lloyd didn't hesitate. He flashed the final command. *Fire.*

Ten crossbows sang in unison, bolts streaking through the air from every direction. Each shaft was tipped with a viscous, toxin-laden head—death itself, even from a glancing blow. Our reinforced crossbows gave each bolt the speed of a striking viper, impossible for a mere human to dodge.

Got her. There's no way she can survive that. Unless… she's not just some random trash mob…

The thought had barely crossed my mind when the unmistakable crack of snapping wood shattered the silence, followed by a chorus of shocked gasps from my comrades. My eyes darted back to the woman, and my heart seized. Every single one of our bolts had curved away at the last moment, tracing impossible arcs through the air to bury themselves in the trees around her.

Arrow Deflection.

The phrase hammered through my brain, and I felt a cold sweat break out beneath my hood. *Of course. She's a named character—a wind magic user.* Panic flared in my gut. I reached for the sword at my hip, every nerve screaming for me to act, to close the gap before she could retaliate. But it was already too late.

For a split second, she disappeared as a flicker of silver hair vanished into the gloom. Then, with a sound like a blade slicing through the air, Lloyd's head spun off his shoulders, a spray of hot crimson painting the leaves. He toppled backward, his decapitated body hitting the ground with a wet thud.

A scream and a gurgle rang out, and another head sailed into the darkness. This woman was moving faster than any of us could track, like a lethal blur that carved through flesh and bone with each sweeping arc of her knife. Four men, then five, fell in rapid succession, their lifeblood splattering the forest floor as the air filled with the wet, coppery stench of death.

Damn it all! My pulse thundered in my ears. *Why the hell is there a named character here?!*

I caught a glimpse of her. Celestia Hothound, the silver-haired specter in a flowing habit, her blade gleaming wet in the moonlight.

I recognized her immediately. She was one of the infamous executives of the *Kenneth Orthodoxy*, ranked seventh among their elite. A minor character in the grand scheme of the original story, yes—but only when compared to the godlike heroes and eldritch monstrosities that roamed that world. For mere mooks like us, she was nothing short of a nightmare.

She twisted mid-air, using bursts of wind magic to flit between tree trunks, her movements a chaotic dance of lethal precision. Panic spread like wildfire through our ranks, turning the hunters into the hunted in the span of a heartbeat.

"Guh! Aaaagh!"

The battlefield devolved into chaos.

The disciplined formation we had so carefully maintained shattered in an instant, reduced to a panicked scramble for survival. Screams filled the air, wet and desperate, as my comrades were torn apart around me, their bodies twisted into grotesque heaps of flesh and bone.

This can't be happening. We have the numbers! How can we be losing this badly?!

I felt a cold, prickling dread seize my spine. We had trained for years, drilled to near perfection, molded into killers who could cut down any mere human with ease. But Celestia Hothound was no ordinary human. She was a living storm, a calamity wrapped in the

flesh of a deceptively delicate woman. Against her, our strength meant nothing.

Around me, the last few survivors of our squad flailed in desperate terror, their discipline destroyed. One of them—a man I vaguely knew, an acquaintance from countless drills and training exercises—turned back to me, his tear-streaked face contorted in terror, eyes wide and glistening.

"O-Oakley! What the hell are we supposed to do against this?!"

His voice cracked, words trembling as his gaze locked onto mine, pleading for an answer I didn't have. I opened my mouth, throat dry and tight, but before I could force out a single word, a gentle, mocking voice cut through the chaos.

"No time for idle chatter, I'm afraid."

The world blurred. A sharp, invisible force ripped through the air, distorting the very space around us. My vision swam as my mind struggled to comprehend the unnatural distortion—a razor-thin blade of wind, a *kamaitachi*.

When the world came back into focus, my comrade was gone. No, not gone, but reduced to a grotesque display of carnage. His body lay before me, severed cleanly at the waist. His upper half twitched, fingers scrabbling blindly for purchase, before his eyes glazed over and he collapsed into a lifeless heap.

"Oa… kley…" he croaked, his severed torso quivering as the last spasms of life shuddered through it. Blood pooled around him, soaking into the forest floor, dark and steaming in the cold night air.

I staggered back, bile rising in my throat.

Wind magic. Of course, she used wind magic. But knowing that did nothing to close the chasm of power between us. I couldn't even see the attack, let alone defend against it. *I'm just a grunt. A faceless extra in someone else's story.*

What… What the hell am I supposed to do?! My thoughts spiraled into blind panic. *We can't win. We never could. But it's not like we can escape!*

My legs shook, threatening to buckle beneath me. I clutched my sword tighter, its worn grip biting into my palm. My breath came in short, desperate gasps, the taste of copper thick on my tongue. I could feel her cold, dismissive eyes on me.

Celestia let out an exaggerated sigh, her violet gaze narrowing as she regarded my trembling form. "Did you truly believe that ten nameless grunts like you could take me down? Or were you simply too ignorant to grasp who you were dealing with?" Her tone was light, almost playful, her words a cruel mockery of the chaos she had just unleashed.

That voice… It was exactly as I remembered from the original story—clear, ringing, almost musical in its beauty. The voice of a character who had always been more endearing, more human in the pages of fiction than in the flesh.

Her silver hair flowed like liquid moonlight, her eyes glimmered with cold amusement, and her black nun's habit clung to her lithe form, a stark contrast to the gore-streaked battlefield. In the story, she had been a cute, dependable sister. A minor character, yes, but one with hidden depths, an unbreakable resolve hidden beneath a gentle exterior.

But now? She was a monster. My knees quaked as I forced a pitiful, trembling smile to my lips, tears mingling with the cold sweat running down my face.

Celestia stepped forward, her arm rising slowly, fingers spread wide as she aimed her open palm at my chest. I could see my death reflected in those cruel eyes, a blast of wind, a clean severing of flesh and bone. I was going to die, to be reduced to a bloody stain on the forest floor, my final, pathetic stand erased in an instant.

"Farewell, pitiful cultist," she whispered, her fingers flexing as the air around her hand twisted, the wind itself trembling in anticipation.

This is it. It's over.

I stumbled back, my spine hitting the rough bark of a tree, my legs threatening to give way as my body prepared for the end. My

grip on my sword went slack, the blade dropping to my side, forgotten in the face of utter hopelessness. The forest spun around me, my vision narrowing to a pinpoint as the world itself seemed to hold its breath.

And then, a shockwave.

From somewhere deep in the woods behind me, a projectile hurtled through the trees, its velocity shattering branches and kicking up a wave of dead leaves as it sped toward us. Celestia's eyes widened in genuine shock, her arm snapping back as she twisted away, the light in her eyes flickering with unexpected alarm.

An instant later, the ground where she had stood exploded in a burst of raw concussive force, splintering the trees and hurling me backward like a rag doll. I slammed into a thick tree trunk, the impact driving the air from my lungs in an agonized gasp.

"Ggk! Hagh…!"

My ears rang, the world spinning wildly as I tumbled to the ground, pain flaring in every nerve. A thick, wet cough escaped my lips as I struggled to pull myself upright, my body shivering with the aftershock of the blast. Blood dripped from my mouth, staining the dirt beneath me.

Wh-What the hell was that?!

As I forced my eyes open, struggling to focus through the haze of pain, I caught sight of the impact site, where a twisted, crumpled mass of bone and sinew, still twitching with unnatural life, lay. My blood ran cold.

No… It can't be…

The grotesque, shattered object twisted on the forest floor, flesh knitting itself back together with a sickening squelch. An exposed spinal column snaked out from the mass, coiling like a serpent as it sought to reattach itself to the ruined head, the empty eye sockets still alight with a malevolent spark of awareness.

It was unmistakable.

Joanne Sagamix, the Sixth Seat of the Aros Temple Cult…

Her severed head had just crashed into the battlefield, and it was already reforming, bones snapping back into place, sinew and muscle weaving themselves into terrifying new shapes.

The grotesque spinal column snaked downward, burrowing into the blood-soaked earth as muscle and sinew pulsed to life, forming the core of a new body. Bones cracked into place, limbs stretched into existence, and, finally, pale, flawless skin rippled over the raw muscle, sealing the freshly formed flesh.

Within mere seconds, the severed head had grown into a fully formed naked girl, her sharp eyes gleaming with manic delight.

"You there," she called, her lips curling into a grin as her gaze locked onto me. "Thanks for acting as a marker."

Marker? My mind scrambled to process her words. Every nerve in my battered body screamed for me to keep my mouth shut, but instinct took over.

"Th-Thank you, ma'am," I choked out, spitting blood into the dirt.

Don't piss her off. Don't even think about it. The wrong word here, a moment of hesitation, and she'd crush me like an insect. I forced my shaking legs to hold me upright, my back pressed against the rough bark of the tree, every shallow breath sending spikes of pain through my ribs.

Joanne's rebirth had taken only seconds, and now she was fully alert, her body flexing as the last traces of raw muscle smoothed over into perfect, pale skin. She stretched, her vertebrae cracking into place, before turning her attention to Celestia, who had already shifted into a combat stance, her eyes narrowed with cold fury.

"Joanne Sagamix," Celestia hissed, her tone dripping with contempt. "Filthy lapdog of the heretics."

"Oh, if it isn't the uptight Sister Celestia," Joanne sneered back, her voice sickly sweet in mockery. "Still clinging to that sad little faith of yours? It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"You seem even more rabid than the last time we crossed paths," Celestia shot back, the air around her shimmering with the

faint outlines of wind magic.

They moved simultaneously, the tension breaking like a snapped bowstring. Joanne lunged, her bare feet digging into the blood-soaked earth as her arm swung in a vicious clawed arc. Celestia responded instantly, severing her own right arm at the shoulder with a compressed blade of wind. The detached limb spun through the air before unleashing a volley of wind bullets from an impossible angle.

Joanne's torso exploded in a burst of crimson as the barrage struck her from behind. For a moment, it looked as though she had been reduced to a mist of blood and shattered limbs, her body torn to pieces under the relentless assault.

Even as her limbs scattered, twitching fragments of muscle and sinew began to clump back together, knitting themselves into a grotesque parody of human form. Within moments, she stood whole again, her smile never faltering, eyes gleaming with a crazed, predatory glee.

"Not bad, Celestia!" She cackled, rolling her shoulders to crack her vertebrae back into alignment. "But you'll have to try harder than that!"

I clutched my crossbow, my fingers trembling around the worn, splintered wood. My mind raced, lungs heaving as I forced myself to back away. My gaze flickered desperately between the two inhuman figures locked in their brutal dance.

I need to get out of here, or I'll end up as nothing more than collateral damage.

My eyes dropped to my meager arsenal—a nearly empty crossbow and a rusting iron sword, both hopelessly inadequate against these monsters.

This isn't a fight I can win. Not without something that can blow those two to pieces in one hit.

I forced myself to calm down, pushing the panic to the back of my mind. I couldn't match their strength directly, but maybe there was another way. Celestia was, after all, still on the run from the

Aros Temple Cult. She might be more inclined to retreat if she thought her position had become too dangerous.

Two against one. That was the only edge we had, and if I could make it clear I was willing to fight, maybe I could force her to rethink her priorities. She was strong, not invincible. If she got bogged down in a prolonged fight with us, she risked drawing in more reinforcements.

No time to second-guess. I raised my crossbow, loaded a poisoned bolt, and took aim at the silver-haired blur weaving through the trees. I let the arrow fly, its tip glinting with a deadly toxin, and watched as it whistled through the air, cutting between the two combatants.

"Ngh!"

Both Celestia's and Joanne's eyes snapped toward me, their expressions momentarily frozen in shock. I fired another bolt. It was deflected by a shimmering barrier of compressed air and spun off into the darkness.

Perfect. Just notice me. That's all I need.

"Joanne-sama! I'll cover you with explosives!" I shouted, my hand dipping into my belt pouch as if searching for a bomb. Of course, I had no such thing. Even if I did, hitting Celestia while she was darting around like a ghost would be nearly impossible. But I didn't need to hit her. I just needed her to believe I could.

Celestia's sharp eyes narrowed, her silver hair fanning out behind her as she twisted mid-air, reevaluating the situation. Clearly, she had calculated that fighting a madwoman like Joanne while dodging potential explosives from an unpredictable cultist wasn't worth the risk.

"I see," she muttered, her tone sharp and icy. "How troublesome."

Then, without warning, a vortex of wind erupted around her, whipping the dead leaves and dirt into a blinding spiral. I raised my arm to shield my eyes, the sharp grit biting into my skin as the wind howled around me.

When the whirlwind settled, Celestia was gone. Only the sound of rustling leaves and the creaking of swaying branches remained, the eerie calm a stark contrast to the carnage she had just unleashed.

"Hah… She ran off. Thought I might actually kill her this time," Joanne spat, her bare, blood-spattered feet scuffing the ground as she glared at the space where Celestia had stood moments before. She tilted her head back, her chest heaving with the thrill of the fight, green eyes reflecting the scattered moonlight filtering through the trees.

Then, slowly, she turned her attention to me, her expression shifting into something unreadable. She took a step closer, locking eyes with me. I felt a fresh wave of panic creep up my spine.

"Hey, you. For a Marker, you've got some guts, dontcha?" She flashed a grin, her eyes full of dangerous curiosity.

"Th-Thank you, ma'am…" I stammered, still struggling to steady my breath.

"Let me see your wounds," she said, already closing the distance between us. Her bare feet made soft, wet sounds as they slapped against the blood-soaked earth. I hesitated for a moment before pulling aside my shredded cloak, exposing the torn flesh beneath.

"Hah, just a scratch," she muttered, her fingers brushing over the gash on my side. Before I could protest, a warm, tingling sensation spread through my body. The pain dulled as my shredded flesh knit back together, her healing magic pulsing throughout my body.

Wait… what?

For a second, my mind blanked. *She's… healing me?* This was Joanne Sagamix, the same unhinged lunatic who, in the original story, treated her subordinates like disposable meat shields. She had never shown the slightest interest in their well-being.

Is she actually… worried about me?

As she leaned in closer, the tips of her messy, blue wolf-cut hair brushed against my cheek, and I caught a faint scent mixed with something strangely sweet. I could sense amusement behind her eyes, or perhaps intrigue?

She's completely naked. She's healing me without a second thought, sure, but she's completely naked. I felt my face heat up despite the dire situation.

Desperate to regain some semblance of composure, I shrugged off my tattered, blood-streaked cloak and draped it over her shoulders. It was a small gesture, but it at least spared me the awkwardness of having to talk to a nude psycho.

For a brief moment, Joanne froze, her spiral-patterned eyes widening in surprise. She tilted her head, lips curling into a bemused smirk as her forked tongue flicked out, briefly tracing her lips like a serpent tasting the air.

"Heh… You know, you're pretty thoughtful for a grunt." She chuckled, her voice low and amused. "What's your name?"



For some reason, she'd asked for my name.

I couldn't just ignore the question, but the thought of answering filled me with a deep, instinctual unease. Still, I forced the words out, my voice unsteady.

"Oakley Mercury," I managed, swallowing the thick knot in my throat.

Joanne's lips curled into a feral grin. "Oakley Mercury. Got it. I'll remember that."

Great. She's going to remember my name. Just what I needed—attention from the literal poster child for chaos and carnage.

A flicker of dread twisted in my gut. *Has she… taken a liking to me? No, there's no way. That's impossible.*

Joanne stretched, the black cloak I had given her slipping off one shoulder, and gestured lazily toward the forest behind us. "All right, Oakley. Let's head back. Nothing left for us here."

"Huh? Oh, uh, yes, ma'am," I stammered. "Actually… before we go, could I ask for one thing?"

"What?"

"I… I'd like to bury the others."

For a moment, her spiral-patterned eyes tightened, her expression unreadable. Then, with a disinterested huff, she dropped onto a nearby boulder, stretching her bare legs out before her.

"Do what you want. Just don't take too long."

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. Without another word, I set to work, my trembling hands dragging the torn, blood-soaked bodies of my fallen comrades into a shallow pit. I worked quickly, ignoring the dull ache in my ribs and the coppery taste still clinging to my tongue.

"You're a strange one, Oakley," she said, her green eyes narrowing as she regarded me with something that might have been amusement—or perhaps just curiosity.

I bit back the first response that came to mind. *Coming from you, that's rich.*

With that, the bloody clash between the heretics and the Orthodoxy finally drew to a close, at least for now.

Little did I know, this small act would set my fate on a wildly different course.

Chapter 2: Getting Thrown into a Council of Cult Executives Is Basically a Public Execution

Back in the late 2000s, a certain eroge called *Seeker of the Netherworld* hit the market in Japan, where I had lived during my previous life.

It was a niche title at launch, slipping mostly under the radar, but it slowly built a cult following through word of mouth and forum discussions, eventually becoming a breakout hit.

The premise was straightforward enough—a dark Western-style fantasy that pitted the *Kenneth Orthodoxy* against the *Aros Temple Cult*, a classic clash of holy warriors and depraved cultists.

The main storyline followed the protagonist, a survivor of a brutal sect raid that wiped out his entire hometown. Rescued by the Kenneth Orthodoxy, he vowed to destroy the cult that took everything from him, throwing himself into a bloody war against their twisted followers.

What really set the game apart was that the protagonist wasn't some destined hero with a hidden bloodline or a chosen one blessed with divine power. He was just an ordinary guy, a human without any special lineage or secret birthright. His only strength was his unbreakable will and the sheer determination to survive, pushing him to rise through the ranks of the Orthodoxy as a fearsome warrior.

Of course, the main character would eventually awaken to his magical potential—typically midway through a route—and rise to become a high-ranking officer within the Orthodoxy. But that's a whole other rabbit hole I won't dive into just yet.

The game's real selling point wasn't its world-building or narrative structure—both were fairly standard for the genre—but

rather its unflinching intensity. Everyone, from the main protagonist to the side characters, mentors, and even the villains, operated with a kind of death-obsessed resolve that made even the most hardened players flinch.

These characters were willing to throw their lives away without a second thought if it meant advancing their cause. Whether they were friends, rivals, or lovers, each one faced their death without hesitation if it meant achieving victory in the endless religious war that defined their world.

This, combined with a brutal mix of erotic, grotesque, and deeply tragic storytelling, created a game that constantly toyed with the player's emotions. The contrast between the sweet, heartwarming character moments in the slice-of-life segments and the gut-wrenching despair of the combat routes gave the game a truly unique edge.

I still remember the first time I played it. It was the early 2010s, and I was blown away by the high-quality illustrations, fluid animations, and the sheer intensity of the story. Every battle felt like a desperate struggle, and the character deaths were often so graphic and final that they left a lasting impact. This was a world where names and faces were often reduced to unrecognizable chunks of flesh within a handful of desperate clicks.

The heroines stood out in particular. What made their routes so compelling wasn't just the romance but the way the story peeled back their hardened, warrior exteriors to reveal the vulnerable, deeply human women underneath. They could fight like demons, but they were still capable of blushing, flustered confessions, and tender, stolen moments.

Of course, this only made it all the more gut-wrenching when those same heroines could be reduced to mangled corpses or mindless husks if the player made a single wrong choice. The game didn't just kill off characters—it *annihilated* them. Their bodies would be reduced to scraps and scattered across the battlefield without even a shred of dignity.

If you thought the other named characters had it any better, think again. Nearly every major figure in the game came with a built-in healing factor that could pull them back from the brink of death as long as even a single chunk of their body remained. This often led to disturbingly creative methods of execution, with the player forced to figure out how to utterly obliterate their enemies down to the last cell just to make sure they stayed dead.

Seeker of the Netherworld was, in every sense, a game that pushed its players to the breaking point.

※※※

In an unfortunate turn of events, I appeared to have been reincarnated into the world of *Seeker of the Netherworld*.

Just a while ago, I'd witnessed firsthand the kind of grotesque, over-the-top violence this world had to offer. Celestia had shredded Joanne into a fine mist of flesh and bone, only for her to reform from scattered chunks in a matter of seconds, cackling as she stitched herself back together.

It was one thing to read about this sort of madness in a game, but seeing it unfold in real life was a whole different kind of nightmare.

These people are nuts.

I hadn't fully grasped it before, but now, it was painfully clear—this world wasn't one where a regular person like me could hope to survive. In the original game, the named characters often talked about how getting your body blown apart still *hurt*, no matter how strong you were. Even a small cut from a kitchen knife would send a shock through your nerves. I could only imagine what it must be like to have your entire torso obliterated and then stitched back together by sheer force of will.

Yet these lunatics took it in stride, throwing themselves into the fray again and again, as if the very concept of death had become a

mere inconvenience.

Right now, I was on my knees in the vast, shadowed hall of an old castle, one of the Aros Temple Cult's mountain strongholds. My body still ached from the earlier fight, my ribs throbbed with each shallow breath, and the iron taste of dried blood clung to my lips.

I was the lone survivor of the ten-man squad that had pursued Celestia, now waiting to face the consequences of my survival alongside three of the sect's executives.

Why am I even here?

I glanced up briefly. Joanne, still wrapped in the black cloak I had given her, was lounging casually on one of the ornate stone chairs arranged in a rough circle at the center of the hall. She met my gaze for a split second, a thin smile creeping onto her lips, and I quickly looked away, my heart thudding painfully in my chest.

Did she call me here to take the blame for the nine dead grunts? I wondered, my mind racing. *Is that it?* If that was the case, I was screwed. She had the rank, the authority, and the sheer presence to pin the whole disaster on me without a second thought. I'd be dead before I could even protest.

I shifted my focus to the two other executives present, hoping for a distraction from my spiraling thoughts. Seated to Joanne's left was someone I vaguely recognized as Rank 7, Fuankilo. Beside whom was another shadowy figure I pegged as Rank 5, Pawk.

Neither had made much of an impression in the game's main story, often overshadowed by their more prominent peers. In some routes, their names didn't even come up, and Fuankilo in particular had always struck me as a background character at best, despite her high ranking.

Not that their ranks mean much, I reminded myself. In the Aros Temple Cult, the numerical rank was more a reflection of overall contributions to the cause than pure combat power. Given the right circumstances, even someone like Fuankilo could, in theory, take down the cult leader. *Not that I'd ever bet on it.*

As I weighed my odds of escaping this situation alive, the air in the hall suddenly shifted. Shadows twisted across the cold stone floor, pooling together at the center of the chamber. The resulting deep, inky darkness swirled into a vortex. My heart stopped as a figure began to rise from the abyss, his form coalescing from the very darkness itself.

A man stepped forth, his body solidifying as if emerging from a thick, tarlike fluid. The shadows clung to him for a moment longer before dripping away and evaporating into the stale air. He stood tall, his form draped in a dark, flowing cloak. A simple iron mask etched with a single, stark X covered his face.

He literally just rose up from the ground!

The figure strode to the head of the circle, the sound of his boots echoing in the vast stone chamber. He settled into the largest chair, his movements slow and deliberate, radiating a quiet, suffocating pressure that seemed to seep into my bones.

The cult leader, Aros Hawkeye.

I swallowed, my throat suddenly dry. This was the highest-ranking figure in the Aros Temple Cult, the man known among players as the "Ultimate Villain," a twisted visionary who had driven his followers to countless atrocities in pursuit of his apocalyptic goals.

"Now then," he said, his tone polite but carrying a weight that chilled my blood. ***"Let's hear the report."***

So, this is Aros… The one guy I absolutely didn't want to meet in person.

It had been a while since I'd found myself in this insane world, and this was my first time seeing Aros, the leader of the Aros Temple Cult, in the flesh.

Even the protagonist of the original game had been thrown off when they first met him. The guy had a way of talking that made you drop your guard, like a kindly old father figure. But beneath that gentle demeanor lurked a master manipulator, the kind of cult leader

who could convince a person to abandon their very humanity without a second thought.

If you raise his affection too high in the original game, the protagonist gets brainwashed, goes full dark side, and wipes out the entire Kenneth Orthodoxy. Yeah, not touching that with a ten-foot pole.

In other words, whether I pissed him off or got too chummy, the outcome was the same—I'd end up dead. He was basically another Joanne, just with a bit more polish and a far scarier endgame. No matter how I approached this, I was walking on a razor's edge.

Aros leaned back in his stone throne, the iron mask covering his face casting sharp, angular shadows across the room. The other three executives sat silently, their collective gaze fixed on me like wolves assessing a cornered prey. I could feel cold sweat trickling down my spine, my knees threatening to buckle as the weight of their attention bore down on me.

I took a shaky breath, my mouth suddenly dry as I forced my trembling lips to form words.

"Th-The mission… The mission to capture the woman who fled into the forest… I-I'm sorry. We failed."

A heavy silence fell over the hall, the oppressive quiet stretching out until my pulse began to thunder painfully in my ears. I risked a quick, panicked glance at Joanne, who had been just as involved in the mission as I had. *Hey, you were there too! Don't just sit there like this is all on me!*

From behind his iron mask, Aros finally spoke, his voice low and without a trace of emotion.

"Continue."

I swallowed. "The woman… The target was Celestia, a high-ranking executive of the Kenneth Orthodoxy. I… I assisted Joanne-sama in engaging her, but… after severing her right arm, she managed to escape. I failed to capture her."

Another long, painful pause.

"And our casualties?" Aros asked, his tone still maddeningly calm.

"N-Nine of our men were… killed."

"I see… How unfortunate."

I felt my heart sink into my stomach. His voice, cool and detached, had the finality of a death sentence. I could practically feel my own life slipping through my fingers, the phantom sensation of my flesh being torn apart already setting my nerves on fire.

I'm dead. He's going to kill me. This is it. I'm done for.

I risked a glance upward, my breath catching as I met the blank, eyeless stare of his iron mask. He shifted slightly, his head tilting as he looked between Joanne and me, the hollow, expressionless facade making it impossible to gauge his thoughts.

"But," he said, his tone suddenly shifting into something almost… paternal, ***"I am a forgiving man. I see you as my beloved children, and I am not one to discard my precious flock over a single failure. I will forgive you for letting Celestia escape."***

"Ah… H-Huh? Th-Thank you! Th-Thank you very much, my lord!" I stammered, my voice cracking as the icy grip of terror loosened, if only slightly.

Wait… What? Did I just… survive?

The sudden, unexpected reprieve hit me like a bucket of cold water, leaving me more bewildered than relieved. I had been certain I was about to be killed, but now he was letting me off without so much as a slap on the wrist? My heart raced as my mind struggled to process the abrupt shift in tone.

No… This isn't kindness. It's indifference.

I realized it instinctively. This wasn't the forgiveness of a benevolent leader but the apathy of a man who saw my life as no more significant than a flickering candle. Aros wasn't sparing me out of mercy. If anything, he was throwing me a bone because he didn't care enough to punish me. I was a nameless, expendable grunt—nothing more.

This… might actually be worse. Now I've caught his attention.

As if to confirm my fears, Aros slowly turned his head toward Joanne, his gloved fingers tapping softly against the armrest of his throne.

"Joanne," he said, his tone still unnervingly gentle. ***"What did you think of your battle with Celestia? What did you learn?"***

Joanne leaned back, her green eyes narrowing as she stretched her bare arms above her head, the black cloak I had given her slipping slightly.

"Our compatibility sucks," she muttered, a sharp, wolfish grin spreading across her face. "But next time… I won't lose."

Aros's masked head tilted slightly, his tone growing just a fraction sharper. ***"You said the same thing last time, didn't you?"***

"S-Sorry. You're right."

"It's good that you can admit your mistakes so readily."

Even the wild, unhinged Joanne had to bow her head to the cult leader. It seemed that no matter how brutal or powerful a high-ranking officer might be, none of them dared to challenge Aros. Watching their strangely civil exchange, I felt another wave of cold sweat trickle down my spine.

I'd been planning to slip away from the sect for a while now, waiting for the right moment to make my escape. But with this much scrutiny on me, every step being watched, every breath weighed and measured, I was starting to wonder if I'd ever get the chance.

"But Aros-sama," Joanne continued, her eyes sparking with a dangerous, almost childlike glee, "I'm pretty sure I've cracked the code to killing that bitch now. Next time, I'll definitely take her head. Third time's the charm, yeah?"

"Oh?" Aros's head tilted slightly, the iron mask catching the dim light filtering through the high, stained-glass windows. ***"I look forward to it."***

Her words snapped me out of my spiraling panic. "Third time"*?* My mind raced as I pieced it together. In the original game, Joanne

and Celestia had clashed three times before the main story even kicked off. That meant this was only their second encounter, which placed me firmly *before* the start of the official plotline.

Okay, that's… actually really useful to know. I'm pre-canon. Maybe I can use that.

Before I could fully grasp the implications, Aros stood, his dark cloak rustling as he turned, moving with a fluid grace befitting of his imposing presence.

"Well then, my dear followers, I have matters to attend to. I shall take my leave."

With that, he stepped backward into the same swirling vortex of shadows that had brought him into the hall. His form dissolved into the darkness, and his iron mask was the last thing to vanish as the shadows closed in, swallowing him whole.

The two remaining executives, Fuankilo and Pawk, quickly made their exits as well. They disappeared into the dimly lit corridors of the castle without a second glance in my direction.

Suddenly, it was just me and Joanne.

I glanced down at the puddle of sweat that had pooled beneath my knees, my entire body still trembling with adrenaline and fear. I felt like a wrung-out dishrag. My mind could barely hold itself together after the sheer psychological pressure of being in the same room as those monsters.

Joanne hopped off her oversized stone throne and landed with a thud, her bare feet hitting the cold stone floor as she stretched her lithe, sinewy frame. She fixed me with a sharp grin.

"Yo, Oakley. You're coming with me from now on. We've gotta make up for that failure," she said, her tone somewhere between an order and a taunt.

I got on one knee and bowed my head low. "A-As you command, Joanne-sama," I said, my voice dripping with the kind of forced obedience I'd perfected over the past few hellish days.

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Joanne Sagamix.

In the original game, she had a dedicated character route, but only in the protagonist's "dark descent" storyline. Her twisted brand of affection manifested as obsessive love and surveillance, culminating in the protagonist being reduced to a limbless, eternally captive prisoner.

Although I despaired over a future without hope, I had no choice but to follow Joanne.

Chapter 3: Maybe There's Still a Way Out

The origins of the Aros Temple Cult, the group I now found myself a part of, could be traced back to nothing more than a loose alliance of profit seekers. It wasn't even called that in the beginning. It had a name far more mundane, like the "Whatever-it-was Trading Company." Back then, the members barely had barely known each other's full names, their connections shallow and transactional at best.

Everything changed when Aros seized control, his ambitions far surpassing those of mere merchants. He had a talent for bending people to his will, often using his silver tongue to manipulate the hearts and minds of others. Under his leadership, the group shed its humble origins and transformed into the Aros Temple Cult, a name that would soon send chills down the spines of many.

That was the moment they crossed the line into true darkness. After establishing their base deep within the mountains, they began to spread their doctrine far and wide, recruiting followers wherever they could. Yet their hunger for power didn't stop at willing converts. They turned to the abduction of children from nearby villages and towns, seeking to mold the next generation into fanatical servants.

Most of the adults who joined the cult didn't start out as true believers. Many were simply curious, drawn in by Aros's honeyed words, only to find themselves ensnared. The kidnapped children, too, gradually lost their sense of right and wrong, their innocent hearts twisted until they could no longer question the cult's dogma.

With time, the Aros Temple Cult evolved into a puppet state—a twisted "nation" where Aros ruled as an unquestioned sovereign, his followers little more than marionettes dancing to his every whim. As word of their heinous deeds spread, the ruling powers officially

branded them a heretical sect. Clashes broke out across the land, drawing innocent bystanders into the chaos.

A group that kidnapped and brainwashed children without hesitation, murdering anyone who dared to stand in the way of its ambitions… and I'd been reincarnated into this world, right in the heart of this twisted organization. Just my luck.

I would've preferred being reborn in a place like the Kenneth Orthodoxy, but fate had other plans. To be precise, I was actually born in a city under its control. However, by the time the memories of my past life awakened, I'd already been abducted by cultists. Starting out as a heretic was unavoidable at that point.

Had I regained my past memories before my kidnapping, I might have been able to avoid being snatched in the first place. But by the time my mind cleared, it was far too late.

That said, if you think I'd been a model cultist this whole time, you'd be sorely mistaken.

When I was around ten years old, I tried to escape from the facility. I had an advantage. I possessed knowledge of this world's original storyline, which included a rough mental map of the cult's compound. I thought I had a real shot.

I'm sure you can guess how that turned out. I got caught by one of the overseers, my grand escape plan crumbling in an instant. It had been my best effort—the most carefully crafted scheme my young mind could muster—yet I was swiftly apprehended. The overseer who found me had the nerve to scold me with a condescending, "We're only stopping you for your own good, you know. It's for the sake of your future with the cult."

I ended up spending three days in solitary confinement, my spirit thoroughly crushed. That incident left a scar—a deep one. It wasn't just the physical isolation but the way they shattered my fragile sense of resistance. I learned then that even if I wanted to run, breaking free was a far more daunting prospect than I'd imagined.

Now, years later, after being fully molded by their twisted indoctrination, I still wanted to escape. The urge gnawed at me constantly, but I couldn't seem to muster the courage to take that crucial first step. The trauma of my last attempt lingered, a persistent shadow that whispered of failure and pain. Worse, the cult's upper ranks had kept a close eye on me ever since, making it nearly impossible to plot another escape without drawing dangerous attention.

To make matters worse, my involvement with the cult was about to deepen. Moments earlier, I'd received a directive from Joanne herself—a reassignment, if it could be called that. In short, I'd been "promoted" from a nameless grunt to a dedicated marker carrier.

A marker carrier, as the name implied, was essentially a walking target. The role involved carrying a piece of Joanne's body. She possessed a unique ability to sense the location of her flesh, making it possible for her to hurl rocks or even cannonballs with terrifying precision at the unfortunate soul carrying her marker.

Her range? Fifty kilometers. The force? Strong enough to gouge out a hundred-meter-wide crater, easily enough to obliterate anything—or anyone—in the vicinity. This wasn't just a show of brute strength, though. Joanne could use this ability to "teleport" by regrowing her full body at the impact site, effectively sending her entire being to wherever her severed flesh was. It was a brutal, horrifying tactic, and one that made being a marker carrier a uniquely perilous assignment.

Marker carriers had once been assigned randomly, their unfortunate selection rotating as needed. But today, that "random" role had become a permanent, personal duty.

What would they do if I died? Probably just revert the role to the old random system.

"Oakley. Hold on to this for me," Joanne called out, snapping me out of my bitter thoughts.

"Yes, ma'am," I replied automatically.

"It's my earlobe."

"Oh."

And so, I found myself the reluctant owner of a fresh piece of Joanne's flesh, specifically her earlobe.

I really don't want this.

The piece she handed me was still warm, likely torn off just moments ago. It felt unsettlingly alive against my palm, as if it might start twitching at any moment. I quickly decided to stow it away in the small box-shaped pendant hanging around my neck. The last thing I wanted was to carry her severed flesh bare-handed.

The pendant itself was a useless piece of junk, a so-called "gift" given to every cult member upon completing their indoctrination curriculum. It served as a symbol of loyalty, an easy way for superiors to identify obedient followers. Tradition dictated that it should contain a portrait or photo of the revered Aros, though I had unsurprisingly opted to keep mine empty.

As I slipped the still-warm earlobe into the pendant, I caught Joanne's eyes lingering on my hands, her lips curling into a twisted, almost intrigued smile.

"Wow, you're treating my flesh with such care…" she murmured, her voice trailing off into an unsettling whisper.

I couldn't quite catch the last part, but her tone was enough to send a shiver down my spine. *What the hell is she on about?*

"By the way, Oakley."

"Yes?"

"That earlobe… Think of it as my doppelgänger if you want."

Not funny. More like a literal piece of you. Ugh… I'm gonna be sick.

"Yes. Thank you," I replied, forcing a stiff, mechanical smile. Refusing her joke outright wasn't an option, not unless I wanted to tempt a grisly end.

I let the pendant drop against my chest, making sure it rested over my clothes, far from my bare skin. *I want to fling this thing as*

far as I can. I want to burn it. I want to scrub my hands until they're raw. I want to disappear.

Tomorrow, I'd be sent on a new mission to make up for my recent failure. The cult expected me to track down Celestia, the one who slipped through our fingers, and abduct enough children to replace the lost manpower. It was a senseless order, the kind that only a place like this would consider reasonable.

Never mind that Celestia's a wind mage and damn near impossible to corner. Just go out there and kidnap a bunch of kids while you're at it. Sure, no problem. What a wonderful job.

I'd killed before—more times than I'd like to admit—but snatching children from their homes? That was a line I'd never crossed. *I'm slipping further and further into this cult's madness. I can't even deny it anymore.*

I had plans, dammit. I was going to fake my death during a mission, disappear into the wilderness, and put as much distance between myself and these lunatics as possible. But of all the people to get stuck with, it had to be Joanne—the one person who can leap across entire regions with a flick of her wrist, and now she's got me marked like a prized hunting dog. And to top it all off, I'm supposed to keep her severed flesh literally *close to my heart? What the hell am I supposed to do now?*

Joanne Sagamix. On the surface, she had the looks of a striking young girl, with a small heart-shaped face and large, expressive eyes; wild, wolf-cut hair streaked with vibrant highlights; and a slender, almost skeletal frame, the kind where ribs peeked through the skin, yet somehow paired with an unnaturally full chest. She was the kind of character that would appeal to a very specific subset of players—the type who would mistake her for a waifish, tragic beauty on first glance.

But anyone who knows her true nature wouldn't be fooled for a second.

Veteran players of the original game knew her for what she truly was—a walking nightmare. She had a notorious quirk where every

time she "transferred" using her flesh-based teleportation ability, she arrived completely nude, her body emerging from the raw, gory remnants of her severed flesh. And while the developers had intended it to be some sort of fan service, it only served to make her sudden, jarring appearances all the more terrifying.

For those poor souls who ended up on her route… *God, the horrors.* If you chose to align yourself with her, the "good ending" was a permanent stay in the cult's underground dungeons. You'd end up bound, limbs amputated, a wretched, helpless puppet with no chance of escape—a living trophy for her twisted affections.

Of course, trying to avoid the protagonist's death route by pursuing another character's path only triggered another nightmare scenario. That was when Joanne, grinning wickedly, would corner the protagonist with a knife in hand, casually muttering, *"So, this is where you ended up, huh?"* before making a slow, deliberate incision at the very tip of his manhood. She'd peel back the flesh with the same care one might use to fillet a fish, slicing downward from the initial cut, flaying the skin in one excruciating, inch-by-inch strip.

It's a trap—an infamously sadistic one, triggered when Joanne's affection meter hits a certain threshold. Once you cross that invisible line, there's no escape. No matter how hard you try to pivot to another character's route, this scene always plays out, resulting in a brutally unavoidable death for the protagonist.

Players of the original game knew this pain all too well. It became a shared trauma, a rite of passage for veterans of the series, often referred to in forums as "the usual," "the appetizer," or "that scene I've seen more times than my reflection."

To make matters worse, the developers had the twisted audacity to include fully illustrated CGs for the sequence, complete with alternate angles and reaction shots. Afterward, the screen would explode into a vivid, blood-red flower, the petals of raw, exposed flesh spreading out like a grotesque chrysanthemum. It was enough to make even the most hardened players recoil in horror.

The voice acting was almost too good. I could remember the first time I hit that scene. I physically couldn't keep my eyes on the screen. I had to look away, my stomach twisting, my fingers clenching the controller until my knuckles turned white.

And now, here I am, standing right next to the real deal. Here she is. The very same terrifying, unhinged girl whose "affection" meter I am now desperately trying not to fill. If she likes me too much, I'm dead. Someone, anyone… Please, get me out of here!

Suppressing the tremor in my hands, I forced myself to speak. "Joanne-sama, what will you be doing now?"

"I'm resting today."

"Understood. Thank you for your hard work."

"Mm."

She glanced at the pendant hanging against my chest before briskly striding away, disappearing around the corner with her usual predatory grace.

The moment she was out of sight, I let out a long, shaky breath, the oppressive weight of her presence finally lifting. I fanned my chest, trying to dispel the cold sweat clinging to my skin, my heart still hammering from the brief exchange. *What the hell was that about?*

Was she staring at the pendant? Did she not like that I put her earlobe in there?

I ran my fingers over the small metal box, feeling the unnatural weight of her flesh inside. *I mean, what else was I supposed to do with it? Just stuff it in my pocket and let the blood soak through my pants?*

Maybe I should have eaten it and said something creepy like, "Now we're truly one, Joanne-sama."

Yeah, right. That would probably max out her affection in a single shot and lock me into her route permanently. Or, more likely, she'd just find it revolting and cut me to pieces on the spot. Either way, way too risky. Definitely not doing that.

I turned my eyes toward the jagged silhouette of the ancient castle looming above the residential district at the mountain's base. The entire hill, along with the surrounding forests, belonged to the cult—a walled-in, moated, miniature dictatorship, where the strong ruled and the weak cowered in fear. For those completely brainwashed, it was a twisted kind of paradise, a place where they could serve their god Aros and bask in the "privilege" of offering their lives to the cause.

For the less indoctrinated, however, this place was a living nightmare. A paranoid hellscape where trust was nonexistent and betrayal lurked around every corner. The constant fear of being reported kept the ranks in line, creating a self-policing society of the broken and the desperate.

Aros himself was a master at exploiting that thin sliver of hope. *Just keep your head down, serve your betters, and maybe you'll be rewarded. Maybe you'll even rise to the ranks of the chosen few, granted power beyond mortal limits.* It was a devil's bargain, but one that lured in those clinging to the last shreds of their sanity.

The ones who haven't fully surrendered, who still have some part of themselves clinging to decency, are the ones who suffer the most.

"I'm okay… I'm okay… I'm okay…"

I occasionally ran into people like that—cultists teetering on the edge, crouched in the dark corners of the compound, their bodies rocking back and forth as they mumbled to themselves, eyes wide and glassy. People who had stopped eating and sleeping, clinging to the barest thread of humanity as their minds slowly cracked under the weight of their choices.

Not all cultists are true believers. In fact, most of us—especially the nameless grunts—are closer to victims than villains. Even here, even now, there are those who still feel the weight of their sins.

The boy, just another nameless grunt ground down by the gears of the cult's ruthless hierarchy, would likely die soon. Even if

someone wanted to save him, it would be all but impossible. In this place, there was no room for selfless heroics.

Aros and his chosen lieutenants were monsters, each of them gifted with power far beyond that of ordinary men. A mere scratch might kill a common soldier through blood loss, while these cult elites could carve through flesh and bone without hesitation. Even if the masses were to band together, the imbalance was too great. The disposable grunts of the Aros Temple Cult were precisely that—disposable. Shaking off that role would be a Herculean task, one that most would never attempt.

For someone like Joanne to wield such devastating power, they must first receive a "blessing" from their god. In the case of the Kenneth Orthodoxy, this blessing came from their holy deity, while in the Aros Temple Cult, it was bestowed by Aros himself, their self-proclaimed messiah. Only those personally chosen through these arcane, ritualistic ceremonies rose to the ranks of the inner circle.

After finishing my task of mixing fresh poisons for my upcoming mission and carefully coating a handful of arrowheads, I lay down on the cold, hard floor of the communal sleeping area. The room was packed with other grunts, their bodies strewn across the stone floor, snoring and muttering in their sleep. The air was thick with the sour stench of sweat and unwashed bodies.

If I can't escape, maybe I should aim to rise through the ranks instead? Take out the other leaders, seize the reins myself…

Even as the thought crossed my mind, I knew it was a fantasy. Joanne and the other fanatics were deeply loyal to Aros. This cult existed for him, its structure built to funnel power to a single, self-anointed god-king. Replacing Aros would be impossible.

As I rolled over on the hard floor, these hopeless thoughts swirled in my head, dragging me down into a restless, dreamless sleep.

Morning came far too quickly, and my awakening was as miserable as ever.

Chapter 4: We Love Our Leader! Everyone's Like Family! A Warm, Welcoming Workplace!

Life as a cultist started early.

Late to bed, early to rise, and chronically sleep-deprived. *One meal a day, because who needs balanced nutrition when you've got fanatical devotion, right?*

But… But! We can all push through for the sake of Aros-sama, can't we?! Serving our divine leader is the ultimate joy! Who cares if we're overworked, unpaid, and practically enslaved? We're supporting a living miracle, so stop complaining and get to work!

Oh, and here's some good news! Did you know? If you manage to claw your way up to the rank of a cult officer, your working conditions will improve! Wow! That's right! Not only will you get a little more freedom, but you'll even receive the divine blessing of magic, letting you crush your bones and soul for Aros-sama with even greater efficiency! Amazing!

"Aros-sama is the best!!!"

I stepped outside, the crisp morning air stinging my face as I screamed into the wilderness, my voice echoing back four times off the surrounding mountains.

Aros-sama is the sickest!

"He's 'sick,' all right…"

My words bounced back at me; each echo a twisted mockery of my forced enthusiasm.

I had just openly vented my frustration, but who could blame me? This place was enough to drive anyone insane. The cramped, rotting shacks we called dormitories were packed tight with grumbling, unwashed cultists, leaving no room for privacy or a decent night's sleep. Anyone bold enough to sleep outside for a bit

of space risked being torn to pieces by the occasional wandering beast, so we were stuck crammed together, the tension between us always simmering just beneath the surface.

The toilets? Disgusting. Filthy pits without so much as a wooden seat, let alone a washcloth or toilet paper. Just a few holes cut into the ground, the waste periodically dumped into the surrounding forest. The smell was enough to make the eyes water, and more than a few cultists had given up entirely, relieving themselves behind whatever tree or boulder they could find.

As a result, the entire residential area reeked—a constant, nauseating miasma of sweat, human waste, and damp rot. The food was bland, scarce, and never enough to satisfy. The pathways between buildings were little more than mud pits, soaking through our worn-out boots and leaving our feet perpetually damp and clammy.

The only real solace in this world was the untouched wilderness that stretched out around our mountain stronghold. It was one of the few things that hadn't been corrupted by the cult's madness. But, of course, the same rugged, untamed nature that made it beautiful also made it an unforgiving, inconvenient nightmare to live in, effectively canceling out any appeal it might have had.

I often got up earlier than most of the other cultists, mainly because the only real chance for some semblance of privacy was the brief, lonely hours just before dawn. In the distance, the mountain landscape was shrouded in a thick, ghostly fog, the dense mist blurring the outlines of the peaks and making it impossible to judge distances. Visibility cut off sharply at about ten meters, the world beyond fading into a pale, swirling haze.

Hmm, perfect weather for a little kidnapping, I thought, stretching my arms high above my head and cracking my stiff shoulders.

Just as I opened my mouth to hurl another round of bitter, sarcastic curses at this miserable world, a hand clamped down on

my shoulder from behind—a touch so sudden and silent that my heart nearly stopped.

"Yo, Oakley."

"Pfft! O-Oh, g-good morning, Joanne-sama!"

I barely managed to choke out the words as I whipped around, my knees instinctively buckling in a half-bow, half-collapse. Joanne stood behind me, her face bright with a fresh, youthful smile that wouldn't have looked out of place on the cover of a school romance manga.

Holy hell, that was close. I almost shouted something insulting about her just now. That would've been a fast track to an early grave.

As I straightened up, I forced a strained smile, my mind racing to recover. Joanne's expression, framed by her wild, streaked hair, was the picture of a pure, innocent girl. To someone who didn't know her true nature, it might have seemed disarmingly sweet. But to those of us who had seen her real self… it was terrifying.

"The fog's pretty thick today," she said, glancing at the shrouded mountain slopes. "Perfect weather for a little kidnapping, dontcha think?"

She said it with the same cheerful, casual tone someone might use to comment on nice picnic weather. The fact that I had just thought the exact same thing a moment ago made my stomach twist. *I really don't want to have anything in common with this crazy woman.*

"Haha, I was just thinking the same thing. What a coincidence," I replied, forcing a shaky laugh.

Joanne's eyes widened slightly, and she brought a hand to her mouth as if trying to suppress a grin. Even without being a dating expert in my past life, I could tell what had just happened. She was stifling the reflex to call me a creep. *Great, I just managed to lower her affection score a bit. Please, let it keep dropping. Though if it drops* too *low, that's a whole different kind of death flag…*

“Oh, by the way, Oakley,” she said, suddenly leaning in closer, her eyes sparkling with a faintly dangerous curiosity. “How do I look today? Does this outfit suit me?”

Huh? What kind of question is that? I felt my stomach tighten, my tongue going dry as I struggled to read her intentions.

Joanne’s outfit was a mismatched ensemble—a worn, black cloak draped over a white shirt and skirt. The cloak was the same tattered robe I had thrown over her bare shoulders during that ambush a few days ago, a standard-issue cultist garment that looked like it had seen better centuries.

Despite being repeatedly shredded and blood-soaked in battle, she wore the same combination for every mission. If I had to meta-read the situation, it was probably because the developers didn’t want to bother drawing her with a different outfit for each scene.

As for whether it looked good on her… Well, of course, it did. With a face like hers and that bizarre, too-thin figure, she could probably make anything look good.

“Joanne-sama’s clothing?” I echoed, buying myself a moment to carefully choose my words. “It suits you perfectly, of course.”

“S-So? That’s good, then… Hnngh, ffh…”

Joanne’s body suddenly trembled, her limbs twitching as if a jolt of electricity had run through her, before she stiffened, eyes narrowing into thin, spiraling slits. Her gaze began to trace a deliberate, predatory path over my body—hands, elbows, shoulders, then down to my legs, knees, and thighs. Her unnerving spiral irises darted with unnatural speed as she silently assessed me, her head tilted at a slight, unnatural angle.

Then, in a voice so low it was barely audible, she murmured something, her words slipping out as if by accident.

“This might be… in the way…”

Her tone was flat, drained of all traces of human emotion.

“Pardon?”

“Forget it,” she quickly replied, snapping back into a more familiar, casual tone.

Oh, hell no. She just said I was "in the way," didn't she?

A cold sweat broke out along my spine. I took a reflexive step back, my heart hammering in my chest. *She hates me, huh?*

Instinctively, I turned on my heel, practically stumbling as I backed away toward the ramshackle barracks where the other grunts lay snoring in a messy pile.

"I-I'll go wake everyone up!" I stammered, desperate to put some distance between myself and the deranged girl who had just casually assessed me like a piece of dead meat.

I ducked through the rough, threadbare curtain that served as the barracks' entrance, taking a deep breath before bellowing at the top of my lungs, my voice echoing off the cold stone walls.

"Hey, you lazy bastards! Get up! How dare you sleep in later than Joanne-sama?! Have you forgotten? We're raiding a village today, you morons!"

As I stomped through the dimly lit room, shoving groggy cultists awake and kicking the feet of those who dared to roll back over, I heard Joanne's faint, almost singsong voice drift in from behind me.

"Oakley's right. If ya don't hurry up, I'll kill ya!"

The effect was immediate. Limbs shot out from tangled bedding, and bleary-eyed cultists stumbled to their feet. The faint, panicked whimpers of half-awake men and women filled the room.

There was a world of difference between a cute kid joking about killing you and a mad psycho like Joanne saying it. There was no doubt about which was scarier.

Joanne's husky voice cut through the groggy haze hanging over the barracks, snapping the other grunts into reluctant wakefulness. Dark circles clung to their hollow eyes as they scrambled to prepare for the day's mission, hastily strapping on mismatched armor and checking their rusted weapons.

How many innocent children will be snatched away today? I wondered, my eyes drifting over the shuffling, dead-eyed figures around me. *Just more fuel for this twisted machine, more lives thrown away for a hapless cause.*

Our preparations finished in short order, and we filed into formation, marching toward the compound's heavy front gates. Standing in the entrance was none other than the dark heart of this entire operation, Aros himself.

His thin, gaunt figure barely moved as we passed, his shadow flickering in the dim morning light. It was like being watched by a specter, his eerie, unreadable mask reflecting nothing but our despair back at us.

"Return straightaway, everyone," his ghostly voice echoed in my mind, the words somehow brushing against my thoughts even though his lips never moved.

"We'll be back soon, Great Leader!"

Joanne's cheerful shout broke the tense silence. She innocently beamed up at Aros as she hopped onto the back of a creaking wagon. The cult leader's head turned slightly, his featureless mask appearing to fix on her for a moment before he slowly melted back into the shadows of the compound's gate.

Our small raiding party—about twenty cultists in total—rumbled down the uneven, unpaved road, three horse-drawn wagons clattering and groaning as their wheels hit every rut and stone along the way. The wagons themselves were meant for transporting the children we planned to kidnap.

The cult was chronically short on manpower these days; the harsh conditions and constant fighting eroded our ranks faster than new recruits could be replenished. The few fresh faces we did manage to drag back were often too young or too broken to be of much use, their bodies already marked for early graves.

As we jolted along, I glanced around the wagon bed. Most of my fellow grunts had already slumped into a fitful, uneasy sleep, their heads nodding with the wagon's swaying motion. The guy sitting next to me—a young, nameless cultist with sunken cheeks and lifeless eyes—looked like he had one foot in the grave already.

I scanned the supplies piled around us—rusted weapons, battered armor, a few barrels of water, and some meager rations.

Something felt off. *There's not enough food for the trip back. Are they counting on us to scavenge from whatever village we hit?*

One of the higher-ups had once assured us, *"These tough times won't last forever. The cult's resources are just stretched thin right now."*

Yeah, right. I'm not naïve enough to believe that.

As if on cue, Joanne began moving through the wagon, handing out strips of rock-hard jerky and dense, half-crushed loaves of stale bread. She moved with the relaxed air of someone distributing party favors, her mismatched eyes flashing with a strange, detached cheerfulness.

"Hey, what about you?" she said, leaning over the hollow-eyed grunt beside me. "You should eat something. It'll be a rough trip if ya don't."

The young man barely lifted his head, his voice a dry whisper.

"I… don't want any… Thanks…"

The skeletal-looking cultist simply shook his head, turning down the strip of dried meat Joanne had offered him. His emaciated frame, little more than bones wrapped in paper-thin skin, gave him the ghostly appearance of a walking corpse—a grim reminder of the fate that awaited so many in this hellish place.

"'Kay."

Most of the people here won't survive this mission, I thought, my jaw working mechanically as I chewed the tough, flavorless jerky Joanne had passed me. The meat felt like it was made from strips of old leather, each bite a slow, grinding effort that echoed the hopeless lives of the nameless grunts around me.

In this cult, the life cycle for the rank and file was brutally simple: *brainwashing → training → missions → death.*

For most, it was a one-way trip, a conveyor belt of suffering that ground them down until there was nothing left. According to the cult's so-called "rules," members began taking on dangerous missions as early as twelve, with life-threatening assignments starting around fifteen.

The cult's methods for replenishing its numbers were equally grim, the main sources being child abduction, forced conscription, human trafficking, and artificial reproduction.

The current manpower shortage was a direct result of the Kenneth Orthodoxy's recent attack on one of the cult's human breeding facilities. The destruction of that complex severed a crucial supply line, creating a vacuum that the higher-ups had been scrambling to fill ever since. The result was a desperate reliance on less efficient methods like child abduction to keep their numbers from collapsing entirely.

In other words, the cult's leadership had adopted a brutal calculus: as long as they could drag in two new recruits for every one that died, the machine would keep turning. They had convinced themselves that once this rough patch was over, the cycle would stabilize again, as long as they survived long enough to rebuild their shattered infrastructure.

Only the most fanatical, ruthless followers survived long enough to rise to the rank of officer.

I just hope this mission goes smoothly, I thought, forcing down another tough, tasteless bite of jerky. My jaw ached from the effort, and I could almost feel the dry, fibrous meat scraping its way down my throat. *I barely made it out alive the last time we ran into an Orthodox Kennethian executive. If I'd taken a serious hit back then, no amount of first aid would've saved me.*

Even in this twisted cult, where the officers wielded terrifying, superhuman powers, there were limits. Their healing magic, for example, was incredibly potent when used on themselves, capable of knitting shattered bones and sealing fatal wounds in seconds, but that power weakened dramatically when used on others. Healing a comrade was little more than basic first aid. Fatal injuries remained so, even if an officer was nearby.

I suppose that's a small mercy for the game's balance, I reflected, idly running my fingers over the battered handle of my short sword. *If they could just heal everyone around them without*

limits, the story would fall apart. It's only because they're constantly dancing on the edge of life and death that the stakes stay high.

Except that wouldn't hold up in court! *That healing magic just makes the gap between the nameless grunts and the named officers absurdly wide. Nice one, God.*

"Hey, Oakley, want the rest of my jerky? I already chewed on it a bit," Joanne said with a playful smile.

"Your jokes wound me, Joanne-sama," I replied.

We continued our bumpy, uncomfortable ride through the fog-shrouded forest, the scenery outside the wagon a monotonous blur of twisted trees and rolling mist. Joanne, clearly bored, had taken to pestering me for entertainment, but my backside was already sore from the wagon's constant jolting, so I only half-heartedly deflected her teasing.

Behind us, a pair of relatively energetic grunts began whispering among themselves, their voices just about audible over the clattering of the wagon wheels.

"That Oakley guy's pretty close to Joanne-sama, huh?"

"Man, I'm jealous. I wish I could earn the favor of someone like her…"

Jealous? Seriously? What's there to be jealous about?

To me, every executive in this twisted cult was equally dangerous and worth avoiding. Their unstable, unpredictable personalities meant that any interaction could end in sudden, violent death. The only smart move was to stay as far away from them as possible.

Our target today was a small village, home to only a few hundred inhabitants. It seemed like an oddly trivial mission for someone like Joanne to bother with, but there was a reason for her presence. According to intelligence gathered by the cult's network of spies, Celestia—the one who had escaped us in the last skirmish—was believed to be stationed at a defensive outpost just beyond this village.

It was little wonder Joanne was fired up. For someone like her, the chance to kill a high-value target like Celestia was a rare and welcome treat. It also aligned perfectly with the cult's broader goals—namely, the destruction of the Kenneth Orthodoxy and the expansion of the Aros Temple's influence.

Time to play the villain again.

We parked the wagons a short distance from the village, the horses snorting uneasily in the thick fog as we dismounted. Weapons were drawn, blades whispering against battered scabbards as our small raiding party spread out, moving toward the shadowy outlines of the village buildings.

Here we go.

Unfortunately, as soon as we stepped into the first narrow street, I realized something was off.

"Huh?"

The village was dead quiet. The houses stood empty, their doors slightly ajar, with dark and abandoned interiors. There wasn't a single villager in sight—no panicked shouts, no slamming doors, no clattering of fleeing feet.

I glanced to my side, where Joanne had already begun picking through the nearest house, her sharp eyes scanning the foggy, shadowed interior.

Quietly, just at the edge of the mist, a lone figure appeared.

"Too bad for you," came a singsong voice, clear and cold as a bell cutting through the fog.

A strangled, gurgling scream erupted behind me. I whipped around just in time to see one of the grunts who had been guarding the horses collapse to the ground, his torso neatly bisected, a torrent of bright, arterial blood splashing across the muddy earth. His lifeless body crumpled, limbs twitching as his life poured out into the fog-dampened soil.

Joanne, her instincts honed by countless battles, immediately stepped forward, her eyes narrowing as she turned to face the encroaching mist. The heavy, crunching sound of boots on wet

gravel echoed from all sides, and a dozen dark silhouettes slowly emerged from the thick fog.

Both Joanne and I grasped the situation instantly. The Kenneth Orthodoxy's troops had been lying in ambush.

Given the flawless setup, it was clear that the intelligence about Celestia waiting at the defensive outpost beyond the village had been a complete lie. Celestia, a wind mage, had manipulated the mist itself to lure us into her trap. They had been ready for us from the start, every detail meticulously prepared, and we had walked right into their waiting blades.

There was no time for the usual pre-battle banter between executives. The execution of the cult's heretics had already begun.

Thwip!

The sharp twang of a bowstring slicing through the fog signaled the true beginning of the slaughter.

"Gah!"

"Aagh!"

Arrows whistled out of the mist, their iron tips punching through flesh and bone with sickening ease. The grunts around me dropped like wheat before a scythe, skewered from head to toe in a matter of seconds.

The sheer volume of arrows meant we were hopelessly outnumbered. The enemy had the high ground, clear firing lines, and the advantage of surprise. They intended to wipe us out completely without so much as a chance to retaliate.

I threw myself behind a stack of rotting firewood, my breath coming in short, panicked bursts as I tried to make sense of the chaos. The fog made it impossible to gauge their numbers, each shadow a potential death sentence.

Maybe I can use this confusion to slip away. If I stay low, if I move fast, maybe I can escape both Joanne and the Orthodox troops—

No. No, that's a death sentence too. I quickly quashed the thought. *I'm marked. Even if I slip past the soldiers, Joanne will hunt*

me down. There's no way out of this.

"Looks like we fell for a decoy. Should've known it was too good to be true," Joanne muttered, the faintest hint of annoyance in her voice as arrows clattered off the stone wall beside her.

"This is no time to stay calm, Joanne-sama! What are we going to do?!"

The words spilled out of me before I could stop them. I didn't want to die. Not like this. Not pinned down and gutted like a trapped animal.

Joanne's eyes shifted, her eyes contracting into those unsettling spirals as a predatory glint sparked behind them. Even in this dire moment, she remained eerily composed, her body as relaxed as if she were stretching before a morning run.

"Not everything is bad news," she replied, her lips curling into a wicked grin. "If Celestia is here, then we're in luck."

"Y-You can't be serious… You plan to take her down *here*? With all these soldiers surrounding us?" I asked.

"Of course. I'll finish her off without a scratch." She exhaled slowly, her grin stretching wider. "Don't wanna get dirty."

Then, without warning, Joanne tilted her head back and drew in a deep, shuddering breath.

"Wha—?!"

Before I could fully register what she was doing, she threw her head forward and blasted the air from her lungs with the force of a cannon, her chest contracting violently as a shockwave of pressurized air exploded from her mouth.

The swirling fog that had enveloped the village was ripped away in an instant, driven back by the sheer force of her exhalation. Trees and loose debris bent away from the sudden gust.

The scene before us snapped into sharp, horrifying focus.

Forty-five soldiers, their bright silver armor gleaming wetly in the sudden sunlight, stood frozen in surprise, their positions now fully exposed.

Joanne… You blew the fog away just by breathing? You didn't do anything this insane in the original game!

Her spiraling eyes locked onto a single figure near the center of the enemy formation, a woman with long, wind-tossed hair and a confident, defiant stance.

"Celestiaaaa! Found ya!" Joanne roared.



"Well… it might be more troublesome if they manage to slip away in the fog. We've thinned their numbers, so why not take this chance to clear them all out?" Celestia replied.

Silver hair and eyes. A slender, graceful figure that even the loose folds of her nun's habit couldn't fully hide.

Celestia had finally revealed herself, her striking form materializing as the fog peeled away in wide, spiraling tendrils. With a sharp, dismissive flick of her wrist, she sent the remaining mist blasting outward, clearing the battlefield for hundreds of meters in every direction. Her subordinates wasted no time, unleashing a fresh volley of arrows and spells that sliced through the now-clear air.

"My, you came too?" she said, her tone cold and precise, her gaze flicking between me and Joanne. "It would be convenient if both of you died here."

Our eyes met for a fraction of a second, her long lashes fluttering as the wind whipped past her face.

Oh no. Something's coming!

My body reacted on pure instinct, throwing itself backward as fast as my legs could manage.

A heartbeat later, an invisible mass of compressed air exploded from Celestia's outstretched hand, a lethal gust that ripped through the space I had just occupied. Joanne, a half-step slower in her reaction, took the full brunt of the attack.

Her entire left side simply ceased to exist, shredded by the unseen blade of wind. Her torso twisted violently as her flesh peeled back from her bones, organs spilling outward in a gruesome spray. Her body was sent flying like a broken marionette, blood arcing through the air.

What the hell just happened?

Joanne wasn't the type to be caught off guard, especially not by someone like Celestia. I had dodged that attack—barely—but Joanne hadn't even tried. Why had she hesitated?

"Her movements stalled! Fire! Fire!!!"

The Orthodox soldiers wasted no time, their archers raining fresh arrows down on Joanne's shattered form. Shafts punched through what remained of her torso, embedding themselves in exposed ribs and torn muscle.

Instead of counterattacking, Joanne slowly, almost mechanically, began to stagger backward. Her remaining arm twitched as she crawled toward the tattered, mud-streaked robe that had been blown free by Celestia's initial attack.

What the hell are you doing, Joanne?! Forget the damn robe and fight back!

Huddled behind a crumbling stone wall, I gritted my teeth, my fingers twitching with the urge to reach out and pull her to safety. But my body refused to move. My knees were locked, every muscle frozen with a primal, unthinking terror.

If I draw attention to myself now, I'll just end up like her…

Joanne clutched the ruined cloak to her chest, her trembling fingers knotting into the torn fabric as she sank to her knees, her head bowed like a child who had just broken her favorite toy.

"I'll end this quickly," Celestia said, her voice laced with a hint of pity. The wind around her began to spiral, gathering into a visible vortex as she prepared to unleash another deadly strike.

The attacks came from all sides now—crossbow bolts, jagged rocks hurled from crude slings, and blades of compressed air—each one slamming into Joanne's exposed back. Her head exploded in a spray of bone and blood. Her spine and ribs were laid bare as her body convulsed under the unending barrage.

Her remaining limbs trembled as she clutched the tattered cloak to her chest, the shreds of her once-whole form slowly knitting back together with each shuddering breath.

Just as Celestia prepared to unleash the final blow, her wind magic swirling into a deadly vortex around her extended hand, Joanne's head suddenly reformed in a burst of wet, snapping bone and rapidly regenerating tissue.

Tears streamed down her newly reconstructed face, her eyes wide and shining with something beyond mere pain.

Celestia paused, her eyes narrowing as she took in the sight. She let out a long, slow breath, her expression softening ever so slightly.

"I see… I had almost forgotten you were human."

Joanne said nothing, her gaze fixed on the blood-soaked robe in her shaking hands.

Celestia's lips curled into a bitter, mocking smile. "If you won't fight back, then that's fine. You can die here, clutching your worthless rags."

Joanne's trembling stopped.

"I'll kill you." The words slipped from her lips, low and trembling with barely contained fury.

Before I could fully process what I'd just heard, Joanne exploded into motion, the air around her shattering with the force of her leap. She crossed the distance between herself and Celestia in an instant, a shockwave tearing through the ground in her wake.

I felt the world spin as the shockwave ripped through my hiding place, hurling me backward into a stack of dry hay. My skull cracked against the stone behind it, and my vision went white as I lost consciousness.

※※※

I had a strange dream.

A memory surfaced—something small, trivial even, yet stubbornly unforgettable despite the years that had passed.

A girl from my class handed me a mechanical pencil. "Here, you can have this!"

I couldn't remember when it happened or who she even was. Just a vague impression, a friend of a friend at best, someone I only knew in passing.

I accepted the pencil without much thought, but for some reason, I ended up using it obsessively, day after day. It wasn't anything special. The design was plain and unremarkable, the kind you'd find in any bargain bin. She had probably just wanted to get rid of it, handing it over to me as a polite excuse to offload something she didn't care for.

Even so, I used that pencil until it practically fell apart. No matter how worn it became, I couldn't bring myself to throw it away. It felt… important, somehow. I even caught myself thinking about the girl who had given it to me despite barely knowing her.

One day, the pencil finally broke.

If it had been any other, I'd have tossed it without a second thought. But this one was different. I couldn't do it.

Instead, I tucked the broken pencil into a small box—a makeshift treasure chest I kept in the corner of my desk—alongside a few other random odds and ends that had somehow earned my sentimental attachment over the years.

I didn't understand why I did it. I couldn't even remember the girl's face, but the pencil itself remained vivid in my mind.

…

Joanne had reacted the same way.

She had clutched that ruined, blood-streaked robe like it was the only thing keeping her tethered to this world. Like it was a precious, irreplaceable treasure.

It was just a tattered cloak, a piece of standard-issue cultist garb I'd carelessly thrown over her that night to cover her naked body. But to her, it had clearly become something more.

Given how the officers treated the rank-and-file, I doubted Joanne received gifts often, if ever. Maybe in her twisted, deranged mind, that filthy, torn robe had become something like my old mechanical pencil—a symbol of an unexpected, unasked-for connection.

The realization stirred a strange, uncomfortable feeling in my chest, one that I quickly pushed back down.

…

Slowly, my consciousness began to surface, the muffled, throbbing ache in my skull dragging me back.

※※※

"Ugh… Where… am I?"

I awoke in a prickly bed of dry hay, my body immediately protesting the rough, itchy sensation as I struggled to sit up. The unpleasant smell of musty straw and blood assaulted my nose, making me gag as I stumbled out of the pile. My skin prickled uncomfortably, the lingering itch forcing me to brush hay from my tunic with frantic, shaking hands.

What the hell happened here…?

The scene that greeted me when I finally got my bearings was a nightmare. Corpses lay strewn across the muddy ground—twisted, broken bodies piled on top of one another, their dead eyes staring into nothingness. Severed heads, their faces frozen in final, terrified grimaces, littered the blood-soaked dirt, their pallid, lifeless eyes seemingly glaring at me even in death.

Slowly, fragments of memory began to piece themselves back together. We had walked right into a trap. The Orthodox soldiers had been waiting for us, hidden in the fog, and I had been thrown into that stack of hay by the shockwave of Joanne's explosive charge.

Joanne… Celestia… Where are they? Are they still fighting?

Neither of those monsters would go down easily. Killing either of them meant destroying every last trace of their bodies, right down to the smallest splinter of bone and shred of tissue. There was no way the battle would end so quickly.

All right… think.

I scanned the carnage around me, taking in the crushed armor and shattered shields of the fallen soldiers. If the battlefield was still littered with nameless grunts, then it probably wasn't over yet. The

real chaos would start once the landscape itself had been churned into unrecognizable craters, the ground torn apart by their superhuman clash.

I had to find Joanne before the fighting reached that point. Alone, I wouldn't last five seconds against a single Orthodox Kennethian soldier, much less a full squad.

Maybe I should just cut and run. Slip away while everyone's still distracted and try to disappear for good.

The thought flashed through my mind—a desperate, fleeting spark of hope—but I immediately crushed it. That path was closed to me now. Both the Orthodoxy and the cult had seen my face, and my pendant still marked me as one of Joanne's "possessions." Even if I managed to ditch the pendant and vanish into the wilderness, their spy networks would eventually track me down.

No… Escape isn't an option. Not yet.

Steeling myself, I pushed aside a broken spear and stepped over a blood-soaked body, my boots squelching in the churned mud.

What a mess.

As I made my way through the shattered perimeter of the village, I stumbled across the remains of an Orthodox soldier. His plate armor had been torn apart as if it were no more than wet paper, the jagged edges of his chest plate curling outward like shredded parchment.

She tore through them like tissue paper, even though they were wearing full armor…

Nearby, another soldier's body lay pinned to a half-collapsed wall, arrows bristling from his chest and limbs like the spines of a dead porcupine.

Joanne must have plowed straight into the center of their formation, cutting them down one by one while using the soldiers themselves as living shields. They probably hesitated to fire for fear of hitting their own, and in that brief moment, she slaughtered them.

I shook my head, my heart pounding in my chest as I moved deeper into the ruined village. *Of course, she pulled something like this. The executives always seem to find the optimal strategy, even in the middle of a massacre…*

Welp. Might as well grab some gear while I have the chance.

I realized I had lost my crossbow in the chaos and reached down to pry one loose from a nearby corpse. The dead soldier's fingers, stiff with rigor mortis, clung stubbornly to the weapon's grip, forcing me to brace my foot against his shattered chest plate and yank with all my strength. It felt like trying to uproot a stubborn weed, my boots sinking into the bloody mud as I strained against the lifeless, unyielding grip.

Then, without warning, the entire pile of bodies shifted beneath my hands.

"What the—?!"

"You filthy heretics! No matter how many of you I kill, you just keep crawling out of the mud like cockroaches!"

A blood-drenched soldier erupted from the mound of corpses, his eyes wild with rage and pain as he pointed his long sword at my exposed chest.

I managed to wrench the crossbow free at the last second, the sudden force sending me tumbling backward. The blade whistled past my face, missing by a hair as I rolled through the muck. Without a second thought, I aimed the crossbow and fired mid-tumble.

The bolt struck the man's outstretched hand, embedding itself in his left gauntlet with a wet, meaty *thunk*. He hissed in pain but managed to deflect the shot, preventing the bolt from reaching his vitals. I cursed silently. I didn't have time to reload, and the soldier was already advancing, his bloody blade cutting a vicious arc through the air.

With no other choice, I dropped the crossbow and drew my iron short sword. I planted my feet in the mud as the soldier staggered forward, his eyes glazed but burning with desperate resolve.

This guy's practically a corpse already, I thought, my eyes flicking over his shattered armor and torn flesh. A jagged wound ran from his shoulder down to his exposed ribs, each breath sending a fresh trickle of blood spilling down his side. His teeth were bared in a pained snarl, lips flecked with dark, clotted blood. Even from this distance, I could tell he was barely clinging to life.

The ornate etchings on his dented armor suggested he was an officer—a squad leader at the very least.

"O God… I am coming to join you…" he muttered, blood bubbling from his lips.

I gritted my teeth. Even half-dead, an Orthodox Kennethian squad leader was a formidable opponent. Unlike the average grunt, these guys had spent years cutting down the cult's most dangerous killers.

Dammit… I can't let myself get scared off by anyone but the executives. If I hesitate here, I'm dead.

I lunged forward, driving my shoulder into the man's chest as I brought my sword down with every ounce of strength I could muster.

Clang!

Our blades met in a deafening crash, the impact reverberating up my arm. I had hoped to overwhelm him with a single, decisive blow, but the bastard had enough strength left to hold me off, his long sword catching my short blade in a desperate block.

"Haaah!"

Despite his massive blood loss, the soldier roared, his muscles bulging as he leaned into the clash. His superior reach and leverage pressed down on me, and my knees buckled as I struggled to keep my footing. My lower back screamed in protest, the weight of his assault threatening to snap my spine.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed something, a jagged arrow shaft jutting from his exposed side, just below his ribs.

Now or never.

I twisted my body, raising my knee and driving my boot into the arrowhead with every ounce of force I had left.

"Guh!"

The broken shaft punched deeper into his body, the splintered wood grinding against bone as it tore through his ruined organs. His grip on his sword slackened for just a fraction of a second, his breath catching in a strangled, wet gasp.

I seized the opening, wrenching my blade free and slashing upward, cutting into the exposed tendons of his sword arm. Blood sprayed across my face, the metallic taste flooding my mouth as the soldier staggered back, his sword clattering to the ground.

I forced myself forward, slashing and stabbing with desperate speed, hacking through what remained of his shattered armor and tearing into the soft, defenseless flesh beneath.

Just die already.

Before I could land the final blow, something wrapped itself around my ankle, locking my leg in place with surprising strength.

"C-Captain… I'll… join you…"

I glanced down in horror as another soldier, one I had presumed dead, clung to my leg with bloodied fingers. His empty, glassy eyes stared up at me as his mouth twisted into a warped, pain-wracked smile.

No… No, this can't be happening!

The ground beneath me tilted as my center of gravity shifted, my balance slipping. My vision spun, the mud beneath my boots giving way as I toppled backward.

A flash of silver.

A dull, sickening thud.

A sudden burst of searing heat erupted in my chest, my vision exploding into a storm of red and white as a blade punched through my ribcage, the steel buried deep in my chest.

"Gah… AAAAAH!"

Before I could even process the pain, my head slammed against the hard, uneven ground.

The soldier, his eyes dull with the certainty of death, collapsed on top of me, straddling my chest as he raised his blood-slicked blade for a final, killing thrust. He gripped the hilt in a reverse hold, his weight pressing down as he prepared to drive the steel through my heart.

"W-Wait!"

My desperate, instinctual plea slipped out before I could stop it. But there was no mercy left in the soldier's eyes, no flicker of hesitation. On the battlefield, such weakness held no power, and my words might as well have been a final, empty breath.

Before he could complete the motion, a deafening roar split the air, and the upper half of his body vanished in a spray of pulverized flesh and bone.

A fraction of a second later, a wall of force tore through the ground beneath me, sending the remaining soldier clinging to my leg flying into the air like a rag doll.

I felt the earth slam into my back as I tumbled end over end, my body spinning wildly before I finally crashed to a stop against a crumbling stone wall. Dust and grit filled my mouth, and the bitter, metallic taste of blood coated my tongue.

I lay there for a moment, gasping for air, my chest heaving as I tried to force the world back into focus.

That… was a marker strike.

Slowly, I turned my head, my vision swimming as I took in the massive boulder now embedded in the blood-soaked earth just a few meters away. Its jagged, shattered edges still smoked with the heat of reentry, tiny cracks spider-webbing across its surface as it settled into the torn ground.

Joanne had hurled a literal chunk of mountain at me to clear the area, her marker guiding the monstrous projectile with pinpoint accuracy. She must have sensed my predicament and acted to save me.

I let out a shaky, half-delirious sigh of relief, only for the breath to catch in my throat as a fresh wave of pain ripped through my

chest.

"Ghh… Dammit… That hurts…"

I forced myself to look down, my hands trembling as I pulled at the torn fabric of my tunic. The wound in my chest gaped open, the jagged tear revealing the greasy yellow of exposed fat and the glistening, pulsing red of muscle beneath. Blood oozed freely, each shallow breath sending fresh tendrils of agony lancing through my ribs.

Not fatal. At least, not immediately. My ribs had taken the brunt of the blade's force, preventing the wound from reaching my heart, but the damage was still severe.

I gritted my teeth and forced my breathing to slow, struggling to suppress the rising panic as I considered my next move.

Why didn't Joanne teleport?

If she had thrown her head instead of a rock, she could have arrived instantly, materializing at my side with her full body intact. The fact that she hadn't meant only one thing—she was still locked in combat with Celestia.

I forced myself to my feet, one hand pressed against my torn chest as I staggered toward the source of the earlier shockwave. In the distance, I caught a faint, high-pitched whine, the sound of air being violently displaced.

Celestia's wind magic.

I pushed through the burning pain in my chest, following the sound as I stumbled through the debris-strewn battlefield. The air grew colder, each breath a raw, searing stab in my lungs as I drew closer to the source of the disturbance.

And then, through the smoke and shifting dust, I saw them.

I froze, my blood turning to ice.

The headless body of Joanne stood, her torn, bloody form thrashing wildly as she lashed out with blind, animalistic fury, her fists swinging through empty air.

Clinging to her torso, like a dying predator refusing to release its prey, was Celestia. Half her face was torn away, one eye a ruined,

bloody crater. Her once-beautiful features had been reduced to a grotesque, twitching mask of exposed muscle and shattered bone.

The two monsters, each missing critical chunks of their bodies, had locked themselves together in a grotesque dance, their limbs tangled in a bloody, spasmodic struggle.

For a moment, I simply stared, my mind unable to fully process the nightmare unfolding before me.

What kind of determination does it take to keep fighting in that state?

"I just have to reduce you to nothing," Celestia hissed through the remains of her ruined face, her remaining eye wide and bloodshot. Her words bubbled through the blood filling her throat. "If I obliterate every last cell, you won't regenerate. Not even you can come back from that!"

Without a head, Joanne's sense of direction was completely shot, her arms flailing at empty air as she bucked and twisted. Her torso bent with inhuman flexibility as she tried to shake off her attacker.

Even for beings as powerful as these two, the loss of a head was no minor inconvenience. There would be a brief lag—mere fractions of a second—before their shredded nerves and tissues reconnected, allowing their twisted, superhuman bodies to begin the grotesque process of knitting themselves back together.

In a battle where every millisecond counted, that brief, flickering gap could mean the difference between life and death.

This is bad. Joanne's about to be killed.

A sick, twisting sensation of dread flooded my chest, overriding the searing pain from my wounds. I felt my cracked ribs grind together as I forced my battered lungs to work.

At last, my voice tore free. "Joanne! Get up, dammit!"

I hated her. I hated her twisted mind, her blood-soaked devotion to a mad god, and her constant, unnerving surveillance of my every move. I had every reason to want her dead.

Somehow, in that moment, I didn't want her to die. It wasn't rational. It wasn't about survival or calculation. It was a raw, chaotic impulse, an unexplainable desire to see her stand back up.

Looking back, the pieces started to fall into place.

Why had that boulder come hurtling toward me earlier, saving me from certain death? Why had Joanne, of all people, risked exposing herself to a fatal counterattack by throwing a rock in the middle of her duel with Celestia?

The answer hit me like a hammer to the chest.

She did it to save me.

Joanne, the monster who valued nothing but her deranged faith, who saw every life as disposable in the pursuit of her god's goals, had thrown away her advantage to protect a single expendable grunt.

It doesn't make sense. That's completely out of character for her!

I had always thought of her as a soulless fanatic, someone for whom the lives of others held no value beyond their utility to her god. She wasn't supposed to care about anyone but Aros. She wasn't supposed to hesitate, to make mistakes, to put herself at risk for someone else's sake.

If that was true, then why? *Why did she do it?*

On top of Joanne's headless, flailing body, Celestia screamed, her silver hair streaked with blood, face twisted into a rictus of murderous fury.

"This is the end!"

Her remaining eye blazed with manic intensity as she leaned back, both hands coming together in a tight, trembling clasp before thrusting forward. The air around her shuddered, the wind itself bending and buckling as her magic condensed into a single, focused point.

I recognized the stance.

No way… That's a mid-game special attack, a move designed specifically to counter the cult's officers!

"Explode!"

The air screamed as the pressurized blast shot forward, a hyper-condensed shockwave ripping through the battlefield with a sound like a cannon fired point-blank.

The world froze for a heartbeat.

Then Joanne's body simply ceased to exist.

There was no blood spray, no torn flesh, no splintered bone. Just a clean, perfect void where a person had been an instant before, the pressure wave ripping through the space she had occupied and leaving nothing behind.

Not a single cell remained.

For a moment, the battlefield fell into an unnatural, breathless silence. Then a faint, whispering breeze rustled through the torn grass and shattered stones, radiating outward from Celestia's outstretched palms.

"It's… finally over…" Celestia gasped, her breath coming in ragged, uneven gulps as she slowly sank to her knees. Her shattered, bloody body was barely holding together. Her one remaining eye swiveled toward me, locking onto my crumpled, trembling form.

She didn't hesitate.

Without so much as a word, she extended a shaky, blood-soaked hand and fired a jagged blade of compressed air directly at my chest.

I can't dodge this.

My limbs were lead, my chest a mass of raw, screaming nerves. My vision swam with dark spots as my body threatened to give out entirely. I had nothing left. I was out of strength, out of tricks, out of hope.

I let my head fall back against the shattered stone wall behind me, my eyes sliding shut as I waited for the final blow.

So, this is it. Sorry… I couldn't escape this nightmare.

Then, just as the killing blow was about to reach me, something against my throat began to tremble violently.

What?!

I cracked one eye open, my blurred vision struggling to focus as the pendant hanging around my neck vibrated against my skin. It shook with a furious, almost frantic energy, the tiny object rattling like a newborn chick struggling to crack its shell.

What the hell is happening?

Seconds passed.

Nothing.

The death I had braced myself for never came.

I hesitated, my pulse thundering in my ears, the silence around me suddenly deafening. I slowly opened my eyes.

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Standing before me was a naked girl.

"I'm baaaack!"

The husky, teasing voice cut through the thick, suffocating tension that hung over the battlefield. For a long, impossible moment, there was only silence, the world itself seeming to hold its breath in shock.

Celestia's face twisted into an expression of pure, wide-eyed disbelief. Her long silver hair whipped around her head as she stumbled back, clutching at her bloodied side.

"J-Joanne… How?! You… You were annihilated! I destroyed every last cell—"

Joanne let out a low, breathless chuckle, her bare shoulders trembling as she stretched her arms above her head, fingers curling and flexing as if savoring the sensation of her newly reformed body.

"Oh, yeah! I almost forgot," she said, her spiraling eyes narrowing with sadistic delight. "I left a piece of myself with this guy."

She jabbed a thumb in my direction, her lips curling into a wicked grin.

Celestia's remaining eye widened in dawning horror, her pupils contracting into pinpricks as the realization crashed down on her.

"You… You…!"

Her bloodied fingers clenched into tight, shaking fists, her entire body quivering with a mix of disbelief, humiliation, and rage.

The marker…

I felt my legs give out beneath me, my trembling knees finally buckling as the adrenaline fled my body in a single, overwhelming rush. The weight of my fear hit me like a physical blow, my lungs heaving as I choked out a long, shuddering breath.

Of course. The earlobe I stashed in my pendant—it was a piece of Joanne's flesh. She wasn't completely destroyed because a part of her was still here, still clinging to this world.

"I never thought I'd be the one spouting a last-minute escape line," Celestia hissed, her voice thick with exhausted bitterness. She staggered back, blood dripping from the corners of her mouth as she slowly, painfully forced herself to her feet. "We'll meet again, Joanne… and next time, I'll make sure you stay dead."

With one final, hate-filled glare, Celestia's battered, broken form melted into the swirling mist, her bloodstained silhouette vanishing into the thickening fog.

Joanne made no move to pursue her.

For a moment, the battlefield fell into an eerie, unnatural silence, broken only by the soft, rhythmic sound of Joanne's bare feet squelching against the ground as she turned to face me.

Our eyes met, and I felt a chill run down my spine.

"Oakley. You're alive."

Without another word, she stepped closer, her fingers brushing against the torn, wet fabric of my shirt as she leaned in to inspect the gaping wound in my chest. Her spiraling eyes flicked over the jagged tear in my flesh, and before I could react, a warm, tingling sensation spread through my battered body.

My flesh knitted itself back together, the torn muscle and splintered bone slowly fusing under the influence of her powerful

healing magic.

"Hey, Oakley," she whispered, her voice low and uneven, her breath tickling my ear. "I think… I think something's wrong with me."

"You… what?"

"I'm not like this. I'm not s'posed to be like this." She pulled back slightly, her spiraling eyes locking onto mine with an intensity that sent a fresh wave of fear coursing through my veins. "I'm s'posed to live for the Great Leader. Everything I do, every breath I take, every life I snuff out—it's all for him. I'd die for him without a second thought, and I'd kill for him without a moment's hesitation. At least, I'm s'posed to."

Her voice grew quieter, her words slipping free like a confession, raw and unfiltered.

"But then you… You made me do something I shouldn't have."

I felt my pulse quicken, the air in my lungs turning cold and thin as she stepped even closer, her bare skin almost brushing against mine.

"Back there, when you were surrounded by those soldiers… I shoulda kept my back to you. Shoulda kept my focus on Celestia. I never shoulda let myself get distracted. But I threw that rock. I exposed myself, got my head blown off, and nearly lost the fight."

She took a slow, shuddering breath, her trembling fingers clenching into tight, white-knuckled fists as she continued.

"And just now… I shoulda chased her down. I shoulda taken advantage of her panic, torn her apart before she had a chance to run. But I didn't. I couldn't stop worryin' about you. I couldn't make myself leave your side."

Her words came faster now. She was breathing sharply and desperately as her spiraling eyes bore into mine, her pupils contracting and expanding with each stuttering heartbeat.

"I've been thinking about it this whole time. Ever since we met. Ever since I first started feelin' this… this… whatever this is. This thing that keeps pulling me toward you, that keeps twistin' my thoughts whenever you're nearby."

Her breaths came even faster, her cheeks flushing with a feverish, almost manic energy as her spiraling eyes locked onto mine. Her lips curled into a twisted, ecstatic smile.

"But now… now I get it. I finally understand."

I felt my blood run cold.

Those eyes.

Those cold, spiraling eyes that had once looked at me like I was just another object in her twisted world. That had once regarded me as a mere inconvenience, a disposable piece of flesh, when she had muttered, *"This might be… in the way…"*

"Oakley, you feel the same, dontcha?" she asked.

A shiver ran down my spine, every nerve ending in my body screaming at me to run, to flee, to get as far away from this *thing* in the shape of a girl as possible.

She's broken.

I had read the forum posts, seen the memes, and laughed at the player discussions about Joanne's deranged route—the one where her affection score maxes out and you're trapped in a marred nightmare with no escape.

"Yeah, thought so," she whispered, her lips curling into a slow, manic grin. "I've been thinking about it for a while now. Ever since you threw that robe over me, ever since you stood by my side… I finally get it. My feelings, I mean."

No… Don't say it. Don't say it.

Then, the words came, each one dropping like a hammer blow against my fragile sanity.

"This feeling… It's called *love.*"

My heart seized. Every muscle in my body went rigid.

"We're soulmates. I've finally realized it. We're in love."

Goosebumps exploded across my entire body. For the first time in my two lives, I felt pure, unfiltered terror.

I had been a fool. I had treated this world like a game, the characters as mere obstacles, the story as a set of predictable, pre-written scripts to be exploited. But Joanne… she wasn't just a

"character." She wasn't a set of lines in a text file. She was *alive*. She had thoughts, feelings, and emotions that extended beyond the carefully coded bounds of her original design.

And now, she had fallen in love.

With me.

"Oh."

My brain short-circuited, my eyes drifting in different directions as my mind tried and failed to process the nightmare unraveling in front of me.

"Nngh… Hey, Oakley? Will you cover me again? With your robe?"

I felt my throat tighten, my mind a swirling chaos of denial and terror. No physical wound, no death I could imagine, felt as horrifying as the cold, iron certainty in her spiraling gaze.

This is worse than dying. This is worse than any defeat.

Joanne's lips curled into a small, almost shy smile, her head tilting slightly as if waiting for my response.

"Heh… Y'know, you and the Great Leader are the only ones who ever try an' cover me up," she whispered, a faint, almost girly blush spreading across her pale cheeks.

The sun hung high in the cloudless sky. The fog had long since faded from the heat of battle, but my vision swam with dark, shadowy shapes, the world closing in around me as my pulse thundered in my ears.

"Oh, and here," she added, her eyes brightening as if she had just remembered something. "Since we're soulmates now, I have a gift for you."

Before I could react, she reached for the pendant hanging around my neck, flipping it open with a practiced flick of her slender fingers.

"Take it. I meant to swap it out before the earlobe started to rot, but I suppose this will do."

She reached down, slipping something small, pale, and blood-streaked into the tiny, battered locket. I heard the faint *click* as she

snapped the pendant shut again, her eyes shining with twisted, fevered affection.

That's… a severed finger.

My mind lurched back into gear, the gears grinding painfully against the reality I had just been forced to confront.

She seriously just… stuffed one of her fingers into my pendant.

I forced myself to smile, my lips pulling back in a shaky, unsteady grin as I felt my sanity crack along the edges.

Haha. The severed finger kind of looks like a little snail. How cute.

Welp.

I'm royally fucked.

Chapter 5: Daruma or Banana? Plus, a Shiny Engagement Ring

In the end, there were only three survivors.

Among the Kenneth Orthodoxy, Celestia alone had escaped with her life, while on the cult's side, it was just me and Joanne. Despite having her head blown off and the rest of her body erased down to a single earlobe, the girl was now walking around like nothing had happened. It made no sense.

Final casualty count: forty-five dead on the Orthodoxy side, nineteen on ours.

If I may make a humble suggestion, Great Leader Aros, perhaps it's time to call off this holy war? You're the only one who seems to be enjoying it. I'm pretty sure the Kennethians are just as tired of this nonsense as we are.

I busied myself looting the dead, picking over the scattered bodies for anything remotely salvageable—crossbows, swords, pieces of undamaged armor. I tossed everything into the back of the wagon, the wooden frame creaking under the added weight.

Normally, I would have hesitated to strip the dead, but my mind was still reeling from Joanne's unexpected "confession." I felt like I needed to do something, *anything*, to distract myself from the reality I had just been dragged into.

As I hefted another blood-streaked breastplate into the wagon, I caught Joanne's eyes following my movements. Her lips curled into a satisfied grin, her sharp white teeth flashing in the mid-morning light.

"Y'know, you're pretty resourceful, Oakley," Joanne said, her voice carrying a note of genuine admiration.

"Oh, not at all," I replied, forcing a strained smile as I hefted another blade onto the pile.

If I were really that resourceful, I wouldn't have ended up in this situation. I wouldn't have accidentally caught the attention of a psycho.

As we finished piling the scavenged gear into the wagon, I felt my mind begin to drift back over my past actions, replaying every choice, every word, every seemingly insignificant moment that had led me to this nightmare.

I haven't done anything particularly special, have I?

I had fought alongside her in battle, even though every sane grunt in the cult gave the officers a wide berth. I had covered her naked body with a robe after one particularly brutal skirmish, trying to preserve a shred of her dignity. I had even tucked a piece of her flesh into the pendant around my neck, carrying it around like some kind of twisted good luck charm.

I had told her that her outfit suited her, carefully choosing my words to avoid offense. I had thrown a second robe over her without hesitation when her old one was torn to shreds, ignoring the danger of being that close to someone so unpredictable and lethal.

Is this what you'd call a straight flush?

Maybe I was better at raising flags than I'd thought. Kind of surprising I never got a girlfriend in my past life.

What am I supposed to do now?

I cast a quick, sidelong glance at the small figure seated beside me in the swaying, bloodstained wagon bed. There sat the girl I had somehow "romanced"—the great cult executive, Joanne.

She sat with her knees pulled up to her chest, her spiraling eyes fixed on the horizon, her blood-caked fingers absently tracing idle patterns in the wooden planks beneath her. Despite my complete lack of romantic interest in her, it was clear that Joanne's affection score had skyrocketed to the same terrifying heights as her devotion to Aros.

Given her track record, she would probably hold me "accountable" for whatever unintentional emotional damage I inflicted on her.

After all, I'm now in possession of her "engagement finger."

I felt a chill crawl down my spine as I remembered the severed digit now nestled where her earlobe once lay. A twisted, biological love token, the kind of gift only a complete lunatic would consider romantic.

If I wasn't careful, I'd end up like those unfortunate souls in her route—trapped in a damp cell, my limbs sliced away piece by piece as she whispered sweet nothings into my ear.

I can't let it come to that. I have to avoid crossing that final, irreversible line. Keep her at arm's length, dodge and deflect, never let her affection boil over into full-blown obsession.

I took a slow, deep breath, forcing a strained, unsteady smile onto my face.

"Joanne-sama," I began, trying to keep my tone light, "if I may ask… what exactly made you fall in love with me?"

Joanne's head snapped around, her spiraling eyes narrowing slightly as her lips curled into a small, uncertain smile.

"Oh? You want me to say it out loud?" she teased, a faint blush creeping into her pale cheeks. "That's a bit embarrassing, y'know."

Abort. Abort! You absolute moron. Look what you've done! You've been isekai'd into a dating sim from hell, and you've just triggered a dialogue branch with the yandere heroine. Have you learned nothing?!

I bit down on the inside of my cheek, my pulse racing as I tried to recover from my boneheaded move. I could almost feel my previous life's countless hours of visual novel experience crashing down around me, a mountain of bad decisions piling up in my mind.

"Ah, my apologies, Joanne-sama," I said quickly, my words spilling out in a frantic, jumbled rush. "I-I was just curious, that's all. Forget I said anything."

Joanne's eyes softened, the spirals in her irises tightening into focused, gleaming rings as she watched me struggle.

Shit*. I need to change the subject.*

"Ah, but if I might ask… why did you choose to use your left ring finger as a marker?"

I forced out the question as quickly as possible, hoping to derail the conversation before it could spiral any further into nightmare territory.

Joanne's head tilted sharply, her neck twisting at an unnatural angle as her gaze bored into mine, her eyes wide and unblinking. She looked for a moment like an owl tracking a scurrying mouse, her pale, bloodstained face framed by the tattered remains of her robe.

"You got a problem with that?"

Her tone was flat, utterly devoid of warmth, and I felt my throat seize up as the weight of her gaze bore down on me.

"N-No, of course not!" I stammered, my head snapping back in a frantic, automatic shake.

Her spiraling eyes narrowed, her lips curling into a small, satisfied smirk as she leaned back, her shoulders relaxing slightly.

I forced my trembling hands to steady themselves, my mind racing to make sense of her choice.

Fingers have all sorts of symbolic meanings in human culture. Thumbs up means "good job," a raised middle finger means… well, the opposite. And the left ring finger…

She'd given me her left ring finger as a "soulmate" gift. She wanted me to view it as an engagement ring.

"What I meant was, why your *ring* finger? You could have used an earlobe or a different finger, but you chose your left ring finger. I was curious."

Joanne's blank expression brightened immediately, her spiraling eyes widening with what looked like genuine delight.

"Oh, that's what you meant? Don't scare me like that," she replied, letting out a small, breathy laugh. "You see, Aros-sama once

said something to me. He said, 'The ring finger of a woman's left hand is connected directly to her heart by a single vein.'"

She pressed her fingers against her chest, her pale skin streaked with drying blood.

"It's a special finger, yeah? That's why I wanted you to have it. And… knowing that a piece of me is always with you… just makes me so… so happy."

Oh… Oh no. That's… almost cute.

I felt my face twitch involuntarily, a nervous, unsteady smile pulling at my lips despite the alarm bells ringing in my head.

No. Don't fall for it. Don't let her get to you. She's dangerous. Unpredictable.

As I forced my lips into a shaky, strained smile, I saw her reaction—an unmistakable blush creeping onto her pale cheeks, her spiraling eyes narrowing slightly as she ducked her head almost shyly.

Damn it. I just gave her exactly what she wanted.

Then I caught it—her eyes flicking down to my arms and legs, her gaze lingering on my exposed wrists and ankles as if she were mentally measuring me for something.

Okay, chill. Don't read too much into it. She's not actually sizing me up for dismemberment… Definitely not.

I forced my trembling hands to tighten around the leather reins, focusing on the creak of the wagon's wheels and the steady clop of the horses' hooves.

"Hey, Oakley…"

I felt my shoulders stiffen, my heart skipping a beat as she leaned in a bit closer. Her bare thigh pressed against mine as the wagon hit a bump in the road.

"Mind if I scoot a little closer?"

"Ye— I mean, o-of course not," I stammered, my face heating up as I felt her cool skin brush against my side.

She let out a soft, breathy giggle, her spiraling eyes shining with what could only be described as genuine happiness.

I kept my eyes fixed on the road, my mind scrambling for anything, any excuse to put some distance between us. But I had nowhere to go. My hands were full, the reins wrapped tightly around my fingers as the wagon jostled us together.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of her exposed collarbone, the pale, blood-streaked skin catching the sunlight as her robe slipped slightly from her shoulder.

Oh, right. She's still in that makeshift robe. I'd forgotten.

For a brief, horrifying instant, I felt my pulse quicken, my mind supplying an image of her as she had appeared in the game's CGs—half-naked, her sharp, angular features framed by wild, blood-streaked hair, her spiraling eyes wide with mad, murderous glee.

No. Focus. Focus!

Even as I forced myself to look away, I couldn't help but acknowledge a bitter, reluctant truth.

She's beautiful.

Her wolf-cut hair streaked with dyed sections of ash-gray framed her sharp features perfectly, her intense, spiraling green eyes catching the light with a predatory glint. Even her split tongue—that unsettling snake-like feature—somehow added to her dangerous allure.

The first time I'd seen Joanne in this world, I'd be lying if I said I hadn't felt a bit of a thrill.

After all, her character design was *gorgeous*. It was one of the few universally praised aspects of the original game, with countless players swooning over her. She had the kind of looks you'd expect from a supermodel or a high-profile actress—cool, sharp, and strikingly beautiful.

Of course, the fan praise for her appearance always came with a silent asterisk: *"Don't think about her personality."*

Because, yeah. Her personality? Horrifying.

The first time I'd met her face-to-face, my initial excitement had withered and died in an instant. The crazy eyes, the unpredictable

mood swings, the way she treated every conversation like a cat playing with a half-dead mouse…

Yeah, looks only get you so far. Personality still counts for a lot.

That said, I had to give credit where it was due. Joanne's character route had a devoted following among the more extreme members of the fanbase—those who liked their romances a little (or a lot) on the sadistic side. You know, the kind of players who collected her bad endings like prized trophies; each bloody, twisted death scene a testament to their dark, masochistic tastes.

I was actually living in this world now. I didn't have the luxury of enjoying her yandere charms from the safe distance of a computer screen.

So, when Joanne, who was still a little too close for comfort, let out a slow, heated breath, I felt my survival instincts kick into high gear.

"Joanne-sama," I said quickly, sliding a few inches to the side to put some much-needed distance between us, "this isn't the time to be, uh, breathing heavily like that. We've failed our mission twice now, even if it was because of a setup. We should probably be thinking about what we're going to tell Aros-sama."

I wasn't just saying that to get her to cool off, either. As terrifying as the prospect of ending up as her plaything was, the thought of facing the Great Leader's wrath was even worse.

I mean, yeah, being turned into a Daruma doll or peeled like a banana was bad, but Aros? That was a whole different level of nightmare.

Joanne's spiraling eyes refocused, her head turning slightly to fix her gaze on the crumbling silhouette of the old castle up ahead. The dark, jagged structure loomed over the forest like the lair of a final boss. It was fitting, really, since it served as our cult's primary stronghold.

"Well," she said slowly, the warmth in her voice fading to a cool, detached monotone, "we were set up by a spy, so maybe he'll go easy on us."

I felt my pulse slow, the icy fingers of dread tightening around my heart.

"Do you think he'll be that lenient?"

Of course, he won't. Joanne might be an executive, but I'm a grunt. I know exactly what happens to disposable foot soldiers when missions go wrong.

Joanne leaned back slightly, a faint, amused smirk tugging at the corners of her lips.

"If it comes down to it, I'll stand there and get yelled at with ya," she said, her tone almost teasing.

What is this, high school?

I felt my jaw tighten, a fresh wave of anxiety washing over me as I stared up at the looming castle walls, their blackened stone jagged and foreboding against the gray, overcast sky.

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When my report to the higher-ups was over, I found myself tied to a chair in the interrogation room.

Well, this is bad. Definitely worse than being tossed into a regular dungeon cell.

The chain of events leading to my current predicament was as follows:

First, upon returning to the stronghold, I informed Aros of our mission's failure. He listened without interruption, his masked face betraying no emotion as I stumbled through my explanation.

When I reached the part about the ambush, he merely tilted his head, sighed in apparent disappointment, and wordlessly walked away.

I panicked, thinking he had written me off entirely, and hurriedly tried to talk about the spy who had leaked our movements to the Orthodox forces. But before I could get the words out, Aros returned, this time with one of the cult's top executives—Fuankilo.

And that was how I ended up in the cold, windowless depths of the interrogation room, my arms and legs bound tightly to a metal chair as I stared up at the cracked, mold-streaked ceiling.

If this were just a regular conversation, we could have done it in his office. Did he need to drag me down to the depths of this creepy dungeon?

I was trying to distract myself by counting the damp stains on the ceiling when the heavy iron door creaked open, a sharp echo bouncing off the stone walls.

"Oakley, was it?"

I looked up and felt my pulse quicken as Fuankilo stepped into the room, kicking the door shut behind her with a confident snap of her heel.

Fuankilo Legacy. Seventh in the cult's hierarchy of officers. Dark skin, a short, silver bob, and a slender, athletic figure that her tight, high-slit skirt clung to like a second skin. She had the kind of cutting beauty that felt out of place in a moldy dungeon like this.

In the original game, she was a side character at best—a minor boss who only really shone in the darker, corruption-themed routes. Her unique sprite didn't even appear in most playthroughs unless you deliberately took the cultist path and stumbled into one of the game's grimmer endings.

Despite her limited screen time, she had a reputation among players for being dangerously sharp, a master of psychological manipulation and torture.

And now she's staring straight at me.

I swallowed, forcing my spine to straighten as she set a heavy, rust-streaked box down on the table in front of me. It landed with a dull, metallic *clang*, the lid rattling slightly as the contents settled.

I didn't have to peek inside to know what was in it.

Oh, this is bad. This is really bad.

"First time we've talked, isn't it?" she said, a faint, amused smirk tugging at the corner of her lips as she took a seat across from me, one long, toned leg crossed elegantly over the other.

Her eyes were a piercing, metallic gray that flicked over my face, tracing the contours of my jaw, the tension in my shoulders, the slight tremor in my clenched fists.

She's sizing me up.

I felt my pulse quicken as my mind raced, trying to remember every detail I could about her character.

Fuankilo's magic was a rare, esoteric curse—a deadly ability that allowed her to kill anyone within a two-meter radius, so long as she knew their full name and age and had seen their face.

Once those conditions were met, any lie told in her presence would trigger an immediate, unavoidable death curse, bypassing even the most powerful healing magic.

Of course, the reason Fuankilo had so little screen time and few noteworthy achievements in the original game was simple—she just wasn't cut out for direct combat.

Her curse magic had a long setup time, required close proximity, and was utterly useless against anyone who didn't stick around for a nice, polite chat. In a world where most high-level characters were blasting each other with fireballs and shattering mountains with a single swing of their swords, Fuankilo's abilities just didn't measure up.

"She only shines in interrogation scenes," as the fanbase liked to say.

Still, that didn't make her any less terrifying in the here and now, and as I watched her circle slowly around my bound form, her high heels clicking sharply against the cold stone floor, I felt a fresh wave of cold sweat prickling at the back of my neck.

"Let's start with a little introduction, shall we?" she said, her voice cool and precise, each word slipping through her lips with the slow, deliberate weight of a predator toying with its prey. "My name is Fuankilo Legacy. I'm one of the senior officers of the Aros Temple Cult."

She paused directly behind me, her breath warm against my ear as her shadow stretched across the cracked stone wall.

"Oakley Mercury," I managed, my throat dry as I forced the words out.

She let out a soft, satisfied hum, the tips of her sharp, polished nails trailing lightly across the back of my chair as she resumed her slow, predatory pacing.

"I've heard a bit about you," she continued, her heels clicking steadily against the cold, unforgiving floor. "Apparently, you've had a rough few days. Two run-ins with Celestia, both of which ended in failure. You must be exhausted."

I bit down on the inside of my cheek, my pulse thundering in my ears as I tried to keep my breathing steady. Fuankilo might not have Joanne's raw physical power or supernatural regeneration, but her particular brand of psychological warfare was just as deadly in its own way.

If I say the wrong thing here, it's game over.

I felt a trickle of cold sweat run down my spine, my soaked shirt clinging unpleasantly to my skin as the oppressive silence of the interrogation room closed in around me.

"Let me explain how my ability works," she said. "I can kill anyone who lies to me. Simple enough, right?"

I felt my throat tighten, my fingers curling into fists as I fought to keep my expression neutral.

Here it comes. She's about to start the interrogation for real.

"First question," she said, her voice dropping to a low, almost playful whisper as she leaned in close, her breath warm against the back of my neck. "What exactly did you do to Joanne?"

"Huh?" I felt my eyes widen, my mind scrambling to make sense of the sudden shift in topic.

Why is she bringing up Joanne?

Fuankilo's heels clicked sharply against the stone as she circled back around to face me, her metallic eyes gleaming with a mix of curiosity and barely suppressed amusement.

"When I told Joanne that I'd be having a little 'chat' with you, she threw a fit. Started raging like a wild animal. She even tried to

stop me from dragging you down here."

She paused, her eyes narrowing as her lips curled into a small, predatory smile.

"It was strange. I mean, it's not like I'm doing anything unusual. Just a little friendly interrogation with a nameless grunt."



"Plus, I noticed something strange. Joanne's missing a finger. When I asked her about it, she said she gave it to you as a 'marker.'"

Oh no. Oh no, no, no. This is bad.

A cold, crawling dread slithered up my spine as I felt her presence directly behind me, her long, sharp nails brushing lightly against the back of my neck as she traced the length of my spine. My skin erupted in goosebumps, a cold, prickling sensation spreading down my arms and legs as I felt her breath warm against my ear.

"You've changed her," Fuankilo whispered, her voice a slow, serpentine hiss that wrapped itself around my nerves like barbed wire. "She wasn't like this before. You did something to her, didn't you?"

I felt my muscles seize up, my pulse hammering in my throat as I twisted violently in my bonds, the rough, fraying ropes digging painfully into my wrists and ankles.

"Ugh… Ah… Wh-What are you…?"

"Now, now," she whispered, her nails scraping lightly down my back as she leaned in close, her breath warm against the side of my neck. "It's question time. And remember, if you lie to me, you die. So be careful how you answer."

I felt a chill as if the edge of a guillotine blade was pressed against my throat, the phantom weight of a blade poised to sever my soul from my body.

This is it. The real interrogation is starting.

I bit down on the inside of my cheek, my eyes darting around the dimly lit chamber as I felt a cold, metallic sensation close around my neck.

From the shadows pooled in the corners of the room, a dark, twisted chain slithered forward, the rust-streaked links coiling tightly around my throat.

Her curse has activated.

This was the proof that Fuankilo's conditions had been met. She knew my name, face, and age, and now, the cursed chains had

locked onto my soul. If I spoke a single falsehood—if I so much as *hesitated* to answer her questions correctly—my life would be forfeit.

"First question," she whispered, her voice a slow, venomous drawl that felt like a knife sliding between my ribs. "You're an enemy of the Aros Temple Cult, aren't you?"

A second chain snaked out from the darkness, coiling around my torso and tightening painfully around my ribs, forcing the air from my lungs as it pulled tight.

"Second question," she continued, her tone light and almost teasing as her fingers traced the outline of my spine, pressing down on each vertebra with the slow, deliberate pressure of a predator testing the strength of its prey. "Joanne claims you're in love with each other. Are you really 'in love'?"

A third chain lashed out, wrapping itself around my waist and locking my body firmly to the chair, the cold, unforgiving metal biting into my skin as it tightened with a low, creaking groan.

"And for my third question," she whispered, her lips brushing lightly against the shell of my ear, "you don't secretly have some kind of magical power, do you?"

I felt my pulse spike, my heart hammering in my chest as I fought to keep my breathing steady, my mind racing as I processed the three questions she had just thrown at me.

Fuankilo was testing me, probing for weaknesses, trying to determine if I was a spy or an infiltrator from the Orthodox forces.

She suspects me of being an enemy, of using some kind of mind control to manipulate Joanne. She's not just trying to kill me—she's trying to force me to confess. If I'm honest, she'll kill me anyway. And if I lie, these chains will tighten and rip my soul apart. It was the perfect set-up.

The second question felt… personal. Like Fuankilo had a little too much fun slipping it in there, mixing business with a touch of personal curiosity.

I couldn't deny the logic behind the first and third questions. If I really were a spy from the Orthodoxy side, those would be the first

things she'd want to confirm. And while the third question about magic seemed like a bit of a reach, it made sense from a tactical standpoint. After all, in this world, only the top fourteen executives of the Kenneth Orthodoxy and the Aros Temple Cult possessed the power to use magic. It was a rare, heavily restricted ability and one of the few true trump cards a person could hold in this hellish world.

All right, think. Focus.

The answers to the first and third questions were easy. I wasn't an enemy of the Aros Temple Cult—not yet, anyway—and I definitely couldn't use magic.

The second question… That was the real problem.

"Are you and Joanne really 'in love'?"

I felt the cursed chains tighten slightly around my neck and torso, the cold, unyielding metal biting into my skin as my mind raced through possible responses.

From an objective standpoint, it's obvious she's the one with the feelings. A lopsided affection score, with Joanne as the obsessive yandere and me as the unfortunate target of her twisted emotions. And yet, for some reason… I just can't say "no."

I forced myself to suck in a shallow, wheezing breath, my chest heaving painfully against the tightening chains as I felt the cold, iron links press into my ribs.

I have to be careful here. If I answer honestly and deny being in a mutual relationship, I'll avoid triggering Fuankilo's death curse…

My eyes flicked down instinctively as I felt a faint, trembling vibration against my chest.

The marker.

The pendant around my neck, the one containing Joanne's severed ring finger, was shaking violently, the small, fleshy fragment thrumming with a feverish, manic energy that sent cold sweat trickling down my spine.

Oh no.

I forced my eyes up, following the faint, suffocating pressure of a gaze that felt almost physical in its intensity, and locked eyes with

a pair of spiraling green eyes, unblinking and utterly fixated on me.

She was here. Joanne was watching me.

Through the rusted iron bars of the interrogation room's small, grated window, her wide, spiraling eyes tracked my every move, her pale, blood-spattered face framed by the jagged shadows of the dungeon hallway.

Her eyes, twisted into spiraling rings of green madness, were locked onto me with the unblinking, unfeeling intensity of a predator tracking wounded prey.

I felt my blood run cold, my pulse pounding in my ears as my mind tried to reconcile the impossible situation I now found myself in.

If I denied being in love, I might survive the interrogation, escaping Fuankilo's death curse by the skin of my teeth… but I would have to survive Joanne's inevitable wrath afterward.

If I lied, if I claimed that I truly loved Joanne in a desperate bid to placate the girl whose bloodthirsty gaze now bored into me through the iron bars, I would fall straight into Fuankilo's death trap.

What the hell am I supposed to do?!

The chains tightened around my throat and chest, their cold, unyielding metal grinding painfully against my ribs as I struggled to breathe. A single drop of sweat rolled down my jaw, falling to the cold, damp stone floor with a faint, echoing *plink*.

Right, okay… The second question is whether we're really "in love." If I can just answer before she locks me into a yes-or-no response, I might have a chance—

Before I could even draw a breath to speak, Fuankilo's voice cut through the cold, musty air of the dungeon, her sharp, amused tone slicing through my desperate, half-formed plan like a blade.

"Oh, and one more thing," she said, her heels clicking against the stone as she leaned in close, her metallic eyes narrowing in amusement. "Just to keep things clear, I'll be requiring a simple 'yes' or 'no' for your responses."

Shit.

I felt my heart plummet, my stomach twisting into a cold, painful knot as I felt the cursed chains around my body tighten even further, the rust-streaked links turning a deep, ominous black as they coiled tighter around my limbs.

She… She cut off my escape route.

I realized with a sick, sinking certainty that Fuankilo hadn't just thrown out the yes-or-no restriction on a whim. She was covering her bases, making sure I couldn't weasel my way out of her carefully laid death trap with vague or ambiguous answers.

It made sense, in hindsight. She wanted to eliminate any chance that I might dodge the first question about my loyalty to the cult, forcing me to either confirm or deny my allegiance outright. And with the third question, she had deliberately phrased it as *"You don't secretly have magic, do you?"* instead of simply *"Do you have magic?"* to trap anyone trying to worm their way out with a technicality.

Fuankilo's magic was all about precise wording, about carefully laying traps for her victims with the subtlety of a seasoned predator.

I have to be careful. One wrong word and I'm dead.

I sucked in a shallow, wheezing breath, my chest straining painfully against the tight, unyielding coils of dark metal as I forced myself to speak.

"F-For the first and third questions," I managed, my voice trembling as I felt the cursed chains press tighter against my throat. "Both… 'no.' I am not an enemy of the Aros Temple Cult, nor do I have any kind of magic power."

For a moment, the only sound in the room was the slow, steady creaking of the chains as they tightened around my limbs, the rough, rusted links grinding against my bones as I braced myself for the worst.

Then, with a heavy, metallic *clank*, the two chains snapped, their twisted lengths falling away from my chest and waist as the magical restraints shattered and disintegrated into fine black dust.

Fuankilo's eyes widened, her sharp, metallic gaze flicking between the shattered remains of her cursed chains and my heaving, sweat-soaked form, her perfectly manicured nails digging into the armrest of her chair as she fought to maintain her composure.

"So, you're not a spy, and you don't have any hidden magical abilities?" she muttered, her metallic eyes narrowing in mild disbelief. "What, does that mean Joanne's just… overly attached? Just a clingy girl with a bad habit of falling for the wrong people?"

I felt my pulse slowly return to something approaching normal, the cold sweat on my skin beginning to cool in the damp, musty air of the interrogation chamber.

I can't believe I made it through the first two questions.

Looking back, it made sense. I hadn't had a chance to betray the cult, so I hadn't done anything to trigger the conditions of Fuankilo's death curse.

That just leaves the second question…

I felt my stomach twist into a tight, painful knot as I considered my remaining options.

Joanne's spiraling green eyes were still locked onto me through the rusted iron bars, her unblinking gaze burning into my skin with the cold, clinical detachment of a vivisectionist examining a trapped animal.

Dammit. I'm trapped. There's no way out of this.

The second question demanded a simple yes or no. There was no room for clever wordplay, no chance to dodge or deflect. I had to make a choice, and I had to make it now.

I felt my jaw tighten, my teeth grinding together as I forced myself to confront the ugly, inescapable truth of my situation.

If I say "no," the chains won't trigger, and I'll survive the interrogation. But I'll have to deal with Joanne's wrath afterward, and judging by the way she's staring at me, that won't be a survivable encounter.

If I say "yes," Fuankilo's curse will activate, and I'll die instantly, my soul torn from my body in a burst of agonizing, final pain.

I felt my breath hitch in my throat, the cold, unyielding pressure of the remaining chain tightening around my neck as my mind raced through the twisted, overlapping layers of my dilemma.

If I'm going to die anyway… if my only choice is between an instant, merciful death and a slow, brutal one…

I felt my shoulders tense, my pulse thundering in my ears as I made my decision.

Then screw it. I'll take the quick, clean death over being hacked to pieces by a yandere with a limb fetish.

I forced my head up, locking eyes with Fuankilo's sharp, metallic gaze as I took a deep, shuddering breath.

"The answer to your second question," I said, my voice trembling with a mix of resignation and grim determination, "is 'yes.' We are… in love."

For a brief, horrible moment, I felt the final chain tighten around my throat, the cold, rusted links grinding against my skin as my pulse pounded in my ears, each beat a slow, heavy countdown to my imminent demise.

But then… nothing happened.

The chain loosened, its metal links falling away from my neck and chest with a soft metallic *clink* as they shattered and disintegrated into fine black dust, the remnants scattering across the damp stone floor.

I felt my jaw drop, my eyes widening in stunned disbelief as I realized that I was… alive.

What the hell just happened? Why am I still alive?!

I felt my head snap up as a metallic *creak* echoed through the claustrophobic chamber.

The heavy iron door to the interrogation room buckled, the thick, reinforced metal warping and twisting as if gripped by an invisible hand.

With a shrill *screech*, the door crumpled inward, the reinforced steel folding in on itself like wet paper as it was crushed into a tight ball of rusted metal.

Standing in the ruin of the doorway, her pale, blood-splattered body framed by the flickering torch of the dungeon hall beyond, was Joanne Sagamix, her spiraling green eyes wide and unblinking as she stared down at me in silent disbelief.

"A-Ah… Ah…! That's what I wanted to hear! I love you too, Oakley!"

Joanne staggered toward me, her trembling hands clutching at her own body as if struggling to contain the overwhelming surge of emotion threatening to burst from her chest. Her face flushed a deep, feverish red, and her lips curled into a manic smile even as the spiraling green of her eyes grew cold and sharp.

My entire body went rigid, a chill racing down my spine as I felt her unblinking gaze lock onto mine, her wide, glassy eyes boring into me with an intensity that felt almost physical.

Wait… Something's wrong.

I felt my pulse spike, my breath catching in my throat as I tried to process the sudden sense of dread welling up inside me.

I survived. I should be relieved. I should be grateful. So why… why do I feel like I'm in even more danger now?

Before I could fully grasp the source of my unease, Joanne had already closed the distance between us, her eyes wide and unblinking as she reached behind herself, blindly groping for the rusted iron toolbox Fuankilo had brought into the room.

"W-Wait a minute. Don't start that here!" Fuankilo snapped, her eyes narrowing in alarm as she took a cautious step back.

Joanne either didn't hear her or simply chose to ignore her. With a sharp *clink*, she wrapped her slender fingers around the wooden handles of an oversized pair of garden shears, their long, rust-streaked blades glinting dangerously in the flickering torchlight.

The heavy industrial shears clanged together with a sharp *crunch* as Joanne tested their weight, her spiraling eyes never

leaving my face as she slowly, deliberately raised the weapon over her head.

Oh no. Oh no, no, no. This can't be happening. Those shears… They're the same ones she used in the dismemberment endings.

I felt my blood run cold, my breath coming in short, shallow gasps as Joanne's trembling, blood-slicked fingers tightened around the splintered handles of the shears. I could only watch as she took another shaky step toward me, the rusted blades glinting in the dim torch-lit air.

"O-Oakley, you… Just how much do you love me?"

She raised the shears high over her head, the rusted blades glinting wickedly as they caught the flickering torchlight, casting long, twisted shadows across the stone floor.

I instinctively jerked back, narrowly avoiding a direct hit. The blade's tip merely grazed my forehead, a narrow escape that left a shallow but bleeding gash between my brows. The wound was minor, but the sudden rush of blood felt exaggerated, streaming down my face as my heart raced.

If that had hit me dead-on…

"Ngh!"

The thought crashed over me as I stared at the massive, rusted shears embedded in the seat, just inches from my groin. My entire body trembled uncontrollably, the raw terror surging through me like a current. My breath came in sharp, shallow gasps, and before I even realized it, a dark stain spread beneath me, the cold, humiliating realization hitting as I felt the warm wetness seeping into the chair.

I… I pissed myself…

Before me, Joanne knelt on the ground, still clutching the shears' handles with trembling, blood-streaked fingers. Her breaths came in ragged, feverish bursts, her chest heaving with a twisted mix of exhaustion and exhilaration. Her emerald eyes, pupils blown wide with madness, seemed locked in a trance, drinking in my every reaction. I could see it—she still wasn't done. She was still… hungry.

Suddenly, her gaze flicked up, and those deranged, glassy eyes met mine. Her vacant, doll-like expression twisted into something strangely tender as she noticed my predicament. The corner of her lips twitched upward, her mouth parting in a slow, almost dreamy exhale.

"Oh, that face… You're so cute, Oakley…"

Her small, pink tongue flicked out, parted at the tip like a serpent's. Without warning, she leaned in, pressing her body against mine. She trailed the forked tip along the length of my neck, tasting the cold sweat that clung to my skin. The touch was slow, indulgent, as if savoring every shiver that ran down my spine. Her spiraling eyes hovered mere inches from my face, that childlike smile never fading as she continued her twisted, intimate exploration.

No… No, no, no… This isn't right. She's broken. Joanne isn't just a girl anymore—she's a monster, a nightmare given flesh, and I'm trapped in her web, my every breath feeding her madness.

"This restraint… It's perfect."

Her voice drifted past my ear as she straightened, her knees pushing against mine as she yanked the shears free from the floor with a wet, grinding noise. The blades clacked together, slicing the empty air in a harsh symphony as she tested their sharpness.

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

I thrashed in my restraints, the chair creaking under my frantic struggles. But the ropes binding my wrists and ankles only cut deeper into my skin, and each panicked tug met with cruel resistance. My mind flashed to the pendant I wore—the marker. A cursed bond that locked me to her, the twisted tether that had become my cage.

I can't escape. I can't even run. As long as that marker is on me, I'm hers…

My eyes darted to Fuankilo, desperately hoping for some miracle, some intervention, but the distance between us might as well have been a canyon. She wouldn't reach me in time.

"This might hurt a bit, but bear with me, okay?"

Her voice was oddly sweet, almost playful, as she slowly raised the shears, the oversized blades yawning wide like the jaws of a beast. They hovered over my shoulder, the cold metal kissing my skin, sending an electric jolt down my spine. She began to squeeze the handles, her knuckles whitening in anticipation.

In that instant, a wild, reckless idea burst into my mind. It was desperate—insane, even. The kind that only had a chance with someone as unhinged as her. I didn't have the luxury of second thoughts.

It's crazy, but it just might work.

"Joanne-sama!"

Her eyes flicked back to me, a puzzled noise slipping from her lips as she hesitated.

With every ounce of strength I could muster, I planted my toes against the floor, shoving the chair forward and closing the gap between us in a clumsy thrust.

"Mmngh?!"

I crashed into her, our faces just inches apart, and before she could react, I pressed my lips against hers.

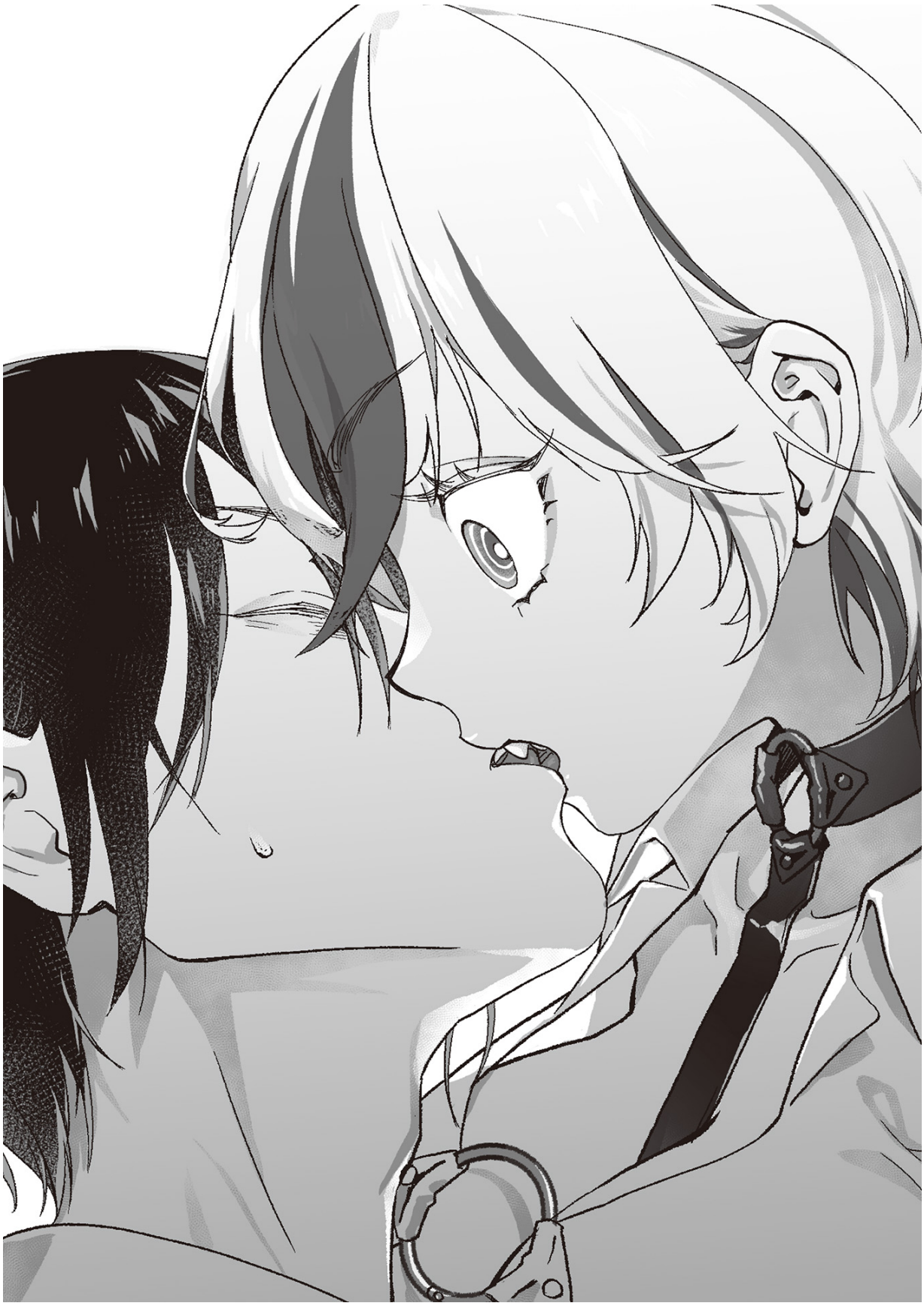
The world went still. The metallic taste of blood and sweat mixed with the faint, sugary hint of her breath, her sharp inhale tickling my cheek. For a moment, I felt her entire body go rigid, every muscle locking in shock.

I can't believe I just…

Then, after a breathless eternity, she staggered back, her eyes wide with unmasked disbelief. Her fingers rose to her lips, trembling as if they had been burned. The shears clattered to the ground beside her, forgotten in her stunned confusion.

"Huh? W-What did you just…?"

Joanne's face flared a deep, furious crimson, her lips parting in stunned silence as her mind tried to piece together what had just happened. Her wide eyes darted down to her fingers. She brushed them over her tingling lips, still processing the impossible.



"W-Wait, did we just… k-k-kiss…?"

Joanne's eyes welled up with tears before she spun on her heel and bolted from the interrogation room.

I-I did it… I actually pulled it off… Thank you, my first kiss. You saved me…

In that frantic, terrifying moment, I had remembered something crucial from the original game's individual routes. Joanne might have no qualms about dismembering someone with a twisted grin, but when it came to the intimacy of a kiss or anything remotely romantic, she was just like any other flustered, awkward girl her age. The surprise kiss was a gamble, but it had paid off perfectly. She hadn't known how to process it, and in her confusion, she'd fled.

As I slumped back into the chair, still bound and drenched in a cold, greasy sweat, I struggled to catch my breath. Relief crashed into me, mingling with a profound, stomach-churning discomfort that clung to my skin. My limbs felt like lead, the adrenaline drain leaving me light-headed and nauseous.

Then, cutting through the heavy silence, a low, throaty chuckle rang out, making my ears prickle.

"Heh… Haha… Ahahahahaha! Oakley Mercury! You are really something, aren't you?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Fuankilo leaning against the wall, one hand over her mouth as she struggled to contain her laughter.

Laugh all you want. As long as I'm alive, I'll take it.

"You went and kissed a girl you don't even have feelings for? That's bold."

Huh?

The words struck me like a cold slap, slicing through my post-crisis haze. I slowly turned my head, squinting at her, my mind still struggling to catch up.

"Come on, you know exactly what I mean," Fuankilo continued, her lips curling into a sly, knowing smirk. "You lied on the second

question, remember? Yet you managed to pull off a kiss like that? You're quite the actor, aren't you?"

A sharp, icy sensation twisted around my heart, like a vise tightening with each word.

Wait… Does she know? Did she let me live this whole time just to toy with me?

My voice came out in a shaky whisper, my throat raw from panic and exertion.

"Wh-Why… Why didn't you kill me…?"

Fuankilo merely shrugged, tilting her head as if the answer were the most obvious thing in the world.

"You don't have magic, and you're technically an ally of our cult. That's more than enough reason to keep you around, don't you think? Besides, you've survived two encounters with Celestia. Only a fool kills off a useful subordinate." She leaned in, her sharp eyes glinting in the dim light. "I only needed the first and third questions to judge your loyalty. The second one… Well, it was just for fun."

So… she was never planning to kill me. I was just a toy in her hands…

She let out another light, almost playful laugh as she stepped forward, her slender fingers working quickly to undo the ropes binding my wrists and ankles. The restraints clattered to the ground, the sudden freedom almost as jarring as the panic that had gripped me moments before.

"Still," she added, straightening up and grabbing the nearby box filled with sinister-looking torture implements, "that little stunt you pulled with Joanne… Gotta admit, it was impressive. You might just have the makings of a future executive."

She started toward the door, her heels clicking against the cold stone floor, but paused just before exiting. She glanced back over her shoulder, her eyes sparkling with dark amusement."Oh, and don't worry—I'll keep your little secret from Joanne. But in exchange, you'll prioritize my requests from now on. If you ever refuse me… Well, I might just tell Joanne the truth about your little

performance.” She tossed me a wicked grin before slipping out, the heavy door creaking shut behind her.

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Several days later, I overheard a few of the lower-ranking cultists whispering about how one of the higher-ups had captured a spy. Most likely the same informant who had leaked false intel to lure us into Celestia’s trap.

Even with this small reprieve, I knew my troubles were far from over. I had failed twice now, and there was no escaping the consequences.

And to think the main story hasn’t even started yet…

I sighed, the weight of my bleak future settling heavily on my shoulders.

Chapter 6: Joanne's Past

Joanne Sagamix found pure, unadulterated joy in carrying out the will of her beloved master, the cult leader, Aros.

For her, Aros was the very center of the world, the axis upon which all existence turned. Any obstacle in his path was an affront to the natural order, something to be erased without hesitation. His desires were her desires. His joy echoed as her own, magnified a hundredfold in her heart. Conversely, his sorrow—even the slightest hint of disappointment—struck her with a pain far more intense than he could ever feel himself.

So deeply was she enraptured by the man that his ambitions became her life's mission, a sacred purpose that transcended mere loyalty. The knowledge that her very existence was under his control, that her every breath served his grand vision, acted like a potent drug, driving her deeper into madness.

Yet recently, something within her had shifted.

It started the day she met that young man—the one who had draped a robe over her shivering shoulders. Ever since that fateful encounter, she'd felt a strange, gnawing disquiet whenever her thoughts drifted back to him.

Sitting alone in her chambers, Joanne found herself lost in an unusual, unbidden reverie, her mind wandering back to that pivotal moment.

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"W-Wait, you want me… to become a cult executive?"

A faint crackle echoed through the dimly lit chamber as a magically amplified voice responded.

"Yes. Your abilities are exceptional. Your past achievements speak for themselves. As it happens, a position among the executives has recently opened up. I want you to fill that seat, Joanne."

"B-But… I was just fighting for our master's glory… for the greatness of Aros-sama… To make me an executive so suddenly…"

"Are you dissatisfied with this offer?"

"No, that's not it! It's just that I…"

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Three years ago…

It was in the heart of a dense, fog-shrouded forest that one of the bloodiest battles erupted—a full-scale clash between the Kenneth Orthodoxy and the Aros Temple Cult. Unlike the smaller skirmishes that had sparked over the years, this was a true war, a conflict involving tens of thousands of soldiers and every high-ranking leader from both sides, including fourteen of the most fearsome figures on the continent.

The battle raged for weeks, a hellish, unending grind where magic crackled like thunder and steel clashed with bone. The very earth seemed to writhe beneath the carnage, the blood-soaked soil churning under the weight of countless bodies.

In the end, it was a devastating loss for the cult. Two of its high-ranking executives were annihilated; their bodies were never recovered, reduced to ash in the chaos. The cult's ranks were shredded and their soldiers crushed into unrecognizable pulp, while the Orthodoxy's losses were limited mainly to rank-and-file soldiers. Not a single executive from their side had fallen.

The aftermath left Aros's forces crippled, their morale shattered, and their numbers decimated. It was, to put it plainly, a disaster. Yet,

amidst this dark chapter, a glimmer of hope reached Aros's ears—a tale of unexpected heroism.

Amid the swirling chaos, a single figure had carved her way through the battlefield, cutting down over a hundred Orthodox soldiers with ruthless efficiency. Despite being just a common soldier at the time, Joanne's blade had cleaved through the enemy lines, leaving a trail of corpses in her wake.

It was this remarkable feat that caught Aros's attention. Even in the face of near-total annihilation, Joanne had proven herself a force to be reckoned with, a warrior whose potential shone brightly even amidst the darkness of defeat.

In order to fill the void left by his fallen generals, Aros chose to elevate Joanne to the rank of executive, seeing in her the fierce devotion and raw power that would be essential to his ambitions.

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"If I'm worthy, then I want to be of service to you, Great Leader. No, I *swear* I'll be of use. Please, entrust me with this role!"

Joanne's earliest memories began not with the warmth of a family or the sound of a loving voice, but in the dark, rotting underbelly of a nameless city. She had no parents, or at least, none that she could remember. She didn't know her name, nor why she had been born. The concept of family—of belonging—was as alien to her as the stars she glimpsed through cracks in the decaying slums.

She had no grasp of letters, no understanding of written words. Her vocabulary consisted of grunts, screams, and the occasional broken syllable. Life was a primal struggle for survival, reduced to a single, all-consuming drive: find food, stay alive. She clawed through trash heaps, her thin fingers scraping against jagged metal and shattered glass, fighting rats and insects for the scraps that kept her frail body moving.

Even the homeless, the dregs of the city's underworld, turned their eyes away from her, disgusted by the filth-caked urchin too wretched to even beg. She was less than a person, a shadow in the corners of their sight, a feral creature defined by hunger and desperation.

When she turned five, she first glimpsed the world of light beyond the narrow alleys that had been her entire existence. The bustling, sunlit main street was a revelation, a world of vibrant colors and clean, unsoiled clothing. She crouched at the mouth of a filthy alleyway, her wide eyes reflecting the brightness like a wild animal's.

Are those… people?

She watched as a family strolled by, a mother and father walking hand in hand with their child. The little one's laughter rang out, bright and carefree, piercing the shadows where she huddled.

Parents… Smiles… Food… Happiness… What are those things?

The contrast was too stark, too painful. She felt something break inside her as she stumbled back into the darkness, her small, skeletal frame retreating from the warmth she had never known. For the first time, a foreign emotion twisted in her chest, sharp and unrelenting.

Why? Why do they have everything, while I have nothing? Why do they get to smile while I rot in filth?

She began to understand, in her own fragmented way, that *she* was the abnormal one. She was the outcast, the aberration.

With this bitter realization came her first taste of envy.

As she scavenged through the trash piles, gnawing on moldy bread and spoiled fruit, she began to listen. The words of those above her, those who lived in the light, gradually formed a patchwork in her mind. She learned to understand their speech, to mimic their sounds, slowly piecing together the language of the world she had been excluded from.

One day, she overheard a whispered conversation about a god. A being of limitless power and compassion, one who watched over all creation from a place called "heaven." People spoke of this god in

hushed, reverent tones within the grand stone buildings they called churches.

The god of the Kenneth Orthodoxy, they said, would hear the pleas of the faithful, answering their prayers and guiding them to salvation.

If God is real… If he's so powerful and kind, then maybe he can make me normal… Maybe he can make me like them.

The thought took root in her mind, a fragile, flickering hope that cut through the suffocating darkness of her world. She whispered desperate, stumbling prayers into the void, her cracked lips forming words as best they could.

Please… Please, just make me normal. Please, let me eat my fill. Please, let me be happy…

Days passed, then weeks, and no divine hand reached down to lift her from the filth. No warm embrace enveloped her, nor did any miracle spare her from the gnawing, endless hunger. The god she prayed to remained silent, distant, and uncaring.

As the seasons turned and winter descended, the bitter cold sank into her bones. She clung to life with grim determination, her thin, malnourished body shivering beneath layers of dirt and rags.

One bitter day, as she huddled in a pile of rotting refuse, she saw that same child again, walking with his parents. His cheeks were rosy with the cold, his breath puffing in little clouds as he laughed without a care in the world.

A pure, blinding fury she had never felt before flared within her. She staggered to her feet, her bare, frozen toes scraping against the frozen mud as she stumbled into the light, her raw, bleeding hands reaching for the life that had always been denied her.

"P-Please… Food… H-Help…"

The words scraped from her throat like broken glass, each syllable a painful, choking rasp. But the family merely recoiled, the mother clutching her child close as the father stepped forward, his cane cracking against her ribs with a sickening thud. She crumpled

to the ground, the child's wide, uncomprehending eyes the last thing she saw before her vision blurred with pain.

The mother's boot struck her side, sending her sprawling back into the alley, the icy slush soaking into her torn clothes.

As she lay there, clutching her sides and gasping for breath, the rage crystallized into something sharper, something colder. She clutched at her bruised ribs, her eyes burning with unshed tears.

It's not fair. They have everything, and I have nothing. Why do they get to smile while I crawl through filth like a worm?

She lay there for days, her body wasting away as the cold crept deeper into her bones, her mind sinking into a numbing despair. She felt herself slipping away, her vision tunneling as her pulse grew faint.

God… If you're real… If you care about your creations… then why have you abandoned me?

On the brink of death, her body withered and her spirit crushed, the girl finally encountered God.

It was not a figure bathed in divine light or draped in flowing, white robes, but a masked man shrouded in swirling shadows, his form wreathed in the black mist of the abyss. He stepped from the darkness like a wraith, his long, pitch-black robe rustling against the wet, filth-streaked stones as he approached her broken form.

The masked figure kneeled, his presence blotting out the faint light filtering into the alley, and carefully draped a jet-black robe over her frail body. His touch, though cold, held a strange, almost paternal gentleness. He cradled her weightless form in his arms, lifting her from the dirt and grime that had been her cradle for so long.

"Fear not, child," he whispered, his voice a deep, resonant echo from beneath the mask. **"Come with me, nameless one."**

The memories after that moment blurred into a haze, a fractured series of images and sensations. She remembered feeling warmth for the first time in her life, a blanket pulled tight around her emaciated frame, the crackle of a fire close by. Around her, robed

figures murmured gently, their whispers echoing through vast, stone corridors.

At last, the face of the one who had saved her—Aros, the man who had become her everything.

The girl who had once scuttled through gutters and scraped the bottom of trash heaps for survival was reborn. She was given a name: Joanne Sagamix. She was granted a purpose, a place to belong—the Aros Temple Cult.

The light of the world had cast her aside, rejecting her as an unworthy, broken thing, but the darkness had welcomed her, enfolded her in its cold embrace. She had been saved, not by the god of light who had ignored her desperate prayers, but by the god of shadows who had seen potential where others saw only filth.

Joanne felt no bitterness for the one who had pulled her into this twisted world. She did not curse Aros for drawing her into the darkness. On the contrary, she cherished him, revered him. He had given her a reason to live, a purpose beyond mere survival.

Gone were the days of licking at sewage-stained stones, fighting vermin for scraps, and shivering in fear of the nightly violence that echoed through the alleys. She no longer needed to skulk in the darkness, a ghost clinging to the edges of human society.

Now, she had power. She had a place. She had a name.

As Aros's chosen disciple, Joanne rose swiftly through the cult's ranks, her fierce loyalty and unbridled savagery making her a natural fit for the role of an executive.

She slaughtered her way through battlefields, her monstrous strength—a gift of divine darkness—allowing her to tear through enemy ranks like a hurricane of flesh and bone. Orthodox Kennethian soldiers fell before her, their bodies exploding like overripe fruit as she swung her fists through their ranks, their blood spraying across her like a gruesome baptism.

With every shattered skull and severed limb, she felt a twisted satisfaction bloom within her, the same primal thrill she had known

as a feral child, fighting rats for scraps in the gutter. She had become death incarnate.

Despite her newfound power, the other cultists never saw her as one of their own. To them, she was not a comrade but a living weapon, a creature of fear and awe to be avoided at all costs.

As she walked the shadowed halls of the cult's hidden strongholds, even her subordinates shrank away, their eyes averted, their bodies trembling as they pressed themselves against the walls to give her a wide berth. No one spoke to her; not a single person spared a passing glance, let alone reached out to her. They feared her more than they respected her, and in their eyes, she was not human but a living avatar of the darkness they worshipped.

Joanne hadn't given it much thought, her mind too consumed by bloodlust and duty to dwell on such trivialities. Yet, deep within her subconscious, an unnamable sense of loneliness had begun to fester, growing heavier with each passing day.

Years slipped by, and she continued to rise through the cult's ranks, her reputation as one of the Grand Executives cemented in fear and awe.

Then, one day, a new face appeared among her ever-changing ranks—a young man, freshly assigned as her marker carrier. It was a role given to disposable foot soldiers, those tasked with tracking and marking targets so that more powerful cultists like her could strike with deadly precision.

"Joanne-sama, an urgent order from the cult leader just came in. One of our spies was tailed by a fool from the Orthodoxy. The target managed to escape into the forest. Our orders are to hunt them down and kill them. No survivors."

The young man received a blood-soaked scrap of flesh, freshly torn from the body of a fallen cultist, his expression taut as he accepted the grisly token. To Joanne, he was nothing more than another faceless grunt, a warm body to be spent and discarded as the mission demanded. If he died, another would simply take his place. She thought nothing more of him as they prepared for battle.

Oddly, the mission quickly escalated beyond a mere skirmish. The intruder, it turned out, was none other than Celestia Hothound, a bitter, long-standing enemy of the cult and a relentless thorn in Aros's side.

That explains why the assassins sent by the Fifth Seat couldn't even slow her down, Joanne mused, her grip tightening on the hilt of her blade. *She's no ordinary soldier.*

Moments later, she "transferred" to the battlefield, her body enveloped in swirling shadows as she stepped into the fray, her mind already racing with thoughts of how best to annihilate her rival. Their powers clashed with a ferocity that shook the trees around them, the very air vibrating with the force of their strikes.

As the two warriors exchanged blows, the tide of battle hung in a delicate, bloody balance. Joanne's mind swirled with potential methods to kill Celestia, each more gruesome than the last, when suddenly, an arrow cut through the air.

Her eyes snapped to the side, tracing the arrow's trajectory back to its source. The young marker carrier she had dismissed earlier stood amidst the chaos, his face twisted in fierce determination as he nocked another arrow, his shaking hands struggling to draw the bowstring.

"You…!"

The second arrow flew, only to be blown off course by a burst of wind magic, its wooden shaft splintering midair before clattering to the ground.

"Joanne-sama! I'll cover you with explosives!"

She watched, momentarily stunned, as the youth dug into his pouch, fumbling for the crude, makeshift bombs he carried at his belt.

Hah… This one's got a spine after all, she thought, a strange flicker of excitement igniting in her chest. *To think a mere foot soldier would dare to stand alongside me against a high-ranking enemy… How unexpected. How… intriguing.*

In the end, Celestia escaped. Killing an executive wasn't easy, after all.

The mission's failure did little to dampen Joanne's spirits. Her mind was still turning over the actions of that young marker—a rare, audacious breed of cultist, one with a fighting spirit that most of her disposable underlings lacked.

"Hey, you. For a Marker, you've got some guts, dontcha?"

The young man flinched at Joanne's sudden address, his shoulders stiffening as he turned to face her. His voice was low, almost fearful, as he replied.

"Th-Thank you, ma'am…"

As she moved closer, Joanne reached out, noticing the gash on his arm from earlier. Without much thought, she pressed her hand against the wound and began to channel healing magic, a soft, dim glow emanating from her fingertips. As the flesh mended itself, she realized that the young man's gaze wasn't fixed on his arm or her hands. Instead, his eyes were fixed downward, his cheeks faintly pink.

Oh… right. I'm naked.

Joanne didn't particularly care. After all, she was used to being looked at after battle, her body often marred with cuts, bruises, or even missing chunks of flesh that needed to regenerate. Most of her subordinates tended to stare at her because they couldn't comprehend how she survived such carnage, but it never bothered her. She was used to it.

But then…

She felt something warm and soft drape over her shoulders.

Joanne glanced down and saw that the young man had removed his own robe and carefully placed it over her, his eyes resolutely fixed somewhere above her head. She stared at the fabric, fingers curling around the worn, slightly frayed edges.

"Ah…"

A strange, unsteady breath slipped from her lips, and she pulled the robe tighter instinctively. *He… covered me up?*

It was the first time anyone had shown such consideration for her. Ever since becoming an executive, people treated her like a monster—something to be feared, avoided, never approached. No one fought alongside her, let alone tried to protect her. If anything, they fled the battlefield the moment she arrived, knowing that staying too close meant being caught in the crossfire.

This young man was different. Not only had he fought by her side without flinching, but he'd also shown a small act of kindness—treating her not as an indomitable force but as a person.

A thrill shot through her, sharp and unfamiliar. Goosebumps prickled across her skin, and an odd, restless ache pulsed from deep within her chest. Her lips felt dry, and she swallowed hard, trying to steady her breath.

What is this feeling?

The loneliness that had quietly spread within her heart seemed to shrink, and in its place, something warm and vivid unfurled. For a moment, Joanne felt utterly overwhelmed, her thoughts a chaotic, tangled mess. She barely managed to gather her composure as she looked at him with newfound curiosity.

"Heh… You know, you're pretty thoughtful for a grunt. What's your name?"

The young man hesitated, as if unsure whether he should answer, then spoke quietly.

"Oakley Mercury."

Joanne silently repeated the name in her mind, letting it sink deep into the recesses of her heart.

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Now, Joanne lay curled up on her bed, a thick blanket pulled over her head, her legs kicking aimlessly beneath the covers.

This… This is love, isn't it?

She couldn’t stop herself from wriggling in place, alternating between frantic movement and freezing in place as the realization struck her again and again. Every time her mind circled back to that moment—his gentle gesture, his hesitant voice—her chest burned with a fierce, almost unbearable heat.

In the early morning, Oakley had loudly proclaimed his devotion to Aros, even going so far as to place a piece of herself in the pendant where they usually kept a photo of their leader. That had to mean something, right? Maybe… Oakley thought she was as important as Aros had.

That’s it. It has to be. I won. Oakley likes me back. There’s no other explanation.

She pressed her burning cheeks against the pillow, trying to contain the rising tide of excitement.

This feeling… All this warmth spreading through my body… I’m in love. There’s no mistake. And the best part? I’m going to win his heart. It’s my destiny.

Her pulse hammered in her ears, and she whispered to herself, her voice shaky with both fear and anticipation.

“What’s… going to happen to me from now on…?”

Every night, Joanne found herself reliving that moment, her imagination spinning the memory into increasingly vivid fantasies. The more she thought about Oakley, the more her heart ached with an intensity that bordered on obsession.

Chapter 7: Declaration of Resolve

The universe of *Seeker of the Netherworld*—the original game upon which this twisted reality was based—was a chaotic, unforgiving place.

While the main storyline often highlighted the rampages of cultists like those in the Aros Temple, the truth was that the dangers lurking in this world extended far beyond mere heretics and dark rituals. Nations crumbled under the weight of plagues, catastrophic wars erupted over dwindling resources, and monstrous beasts like dragons and other mythical creatures roamed the lands, leaving death and destruction in their wake. Whole cities vanished overnight, swallowed by natural disasters or torn asunder by magic gone awry.

Death was a constant companion here, a shadow that clung to the living, ever eager to claim another soul.

With every fresh wave of chaos, humanity's collective fear of death deepened. Their desperation to escape the cold grasp of the grave gave birth to countless myths and legends, sparking a desperate longing for the divine. Over time, this yearning crystallized into the early forms of religion, each culture clinging to the hope that some higher power might shield them from the horrors of an uncaring world.

It was in this primordial chaos that the seeds of the Kenneth Orthodoxy first took root. In the ancient days, this faith was a small, localized belief, little more than a collection of scattered cults and fragmented superstitions.

As the ages passed and wars between tribes escalated, each group sought to prove the supremacy of their own gods, creating even more powerful deities in an attempt to claim divine favor. This competitive spiritual arms race eventually gave rise to the

monotheistic doctrine that became the Kenneth Orthodoxy, its followers declaring their god the one true supreme being.

This faith spread slowly but steadily, its teachings seeping into the hearts and minds of countless generations, gaining power with every whispered prayer and solemn hymn.

Then, one day, a disaster of unimaginable scale struck.

A mighty kingdom was reduced to ash and rubble overnight, its once-proud towers shattered like glass before a raging storm. As survivors fled the cataclysm, swarms of terrified refugees and rampaging magical beasts spread chaos across the continent, sparking further conflict and secondary disasters that consumed even more lives.

It felt like the end of days. Panic and despair choked the air, and in their desperation, the faithful turned their tear-streaked faces to the heavens, crying out for divine intervention.

Out of the blue, as if in reply to their prayers, the impossible happened.

Roughly a hundred days after the initial catastrophe, seven individuals appeared, each claiming to have been chosen by their god in a shared, prophetic dream. They had been granted the sacred gift of magic that allowed them to push back the darkness and shield the faithful from further harm.

The tales spread like wildfire, whispered at first in trembling voices, then shouted from the rooftops as the truth became undeniable. These seven chosen ones wielded powers beyond mortal comprehension, bending reality itself to their will.

They became living saints, avatars of their god's will, and their line continued unbroken, passing their blessings down through the generations as they guided the faithful through every new calamity. And they lived happily ever after.

And that, more or less, is the history of the Kenneth Orthodoxy up to the present day.

I remember reading this sort of lore in the in-game archives back when I played Seeker of the Netherworld.

The Kenneth Orthodoxy's headquarters was located in the Holy Kingdom of Gerleid, which is where I currently was. The sprawling, fortified cities and grand cathedrals of this theocratic state served as the primary setting for the game's main storyline.

In contrast to the ancient roots of the Kenneth Orthodoxy, the Aros Temple Cult had a much shorter history. The Orthodoxy stretched back to the dawn of recorded history, its faith built atop centuries of tradition and myth. Meanwhile, the Aros Temple Cult, even counting its origins as a mere merchant's guild, had existed for barely a few decades.

Normally, a group with such a shallow history would stand no chance against a faith as deeply entrenched as the Kenneth Orthodoxy. After all, in this world, the weight of tradition and the aura of divine mystique were as powerful as any blade or spell.

Yet, despite its humble beginnings, the Aros Temple Cult had managed to become a formidable force, its influence spreading like wildfire across the Holy Kingdom. This rapid rise was largely thanks to one man—Aros himself.

Aros had once been a devout follower of the Kenneth Orthodoxy, a believer in its doctrines and divine promises. However, his ambitions soon outgrew the rigid confines of the faith. He sought something greater, a path to power that transcended the limitations of mortal life.

With this hunger for dominance burning in his heart, Aros gradually radicalized, breaking away from the Orthodoxy and seizing control of the merchant guild that had once served as his financial backbone. He seduced the guild's leadership with a series of grand, theatrical displays of power, eventually converting them into his first loyal followers.

The defining moment that cemented his place as a cult leader and set the Aros Temple on its current path was a dark and infamous ritual known simply as the "Resurrection Performance."

According to the original game's text, Aros publicly hanged himself, his lifeless body swaying above a stunned, horrified crowd…

only to later rise from the dead, his eyes burning with newfound power, marking the birth of a living legend.

Regardless of the truth, the performance had the intended effect. Aros, now seen as a man who had conquered death itself, gained an aura of divine mystique that captivated his followers and struck fear into his enemies. In a world constantly on the brink of collapse, where the fear of death was ever-present, this image of a death-defying leader became a powerful symbol.

From that moment on, his influence spread rapidly. He manipulated the fear of plague, disaster, and monstrous incursions to swell his ranks, his fiery sermons stoking the desperate hopes of the downtrodden and the fearful alike.

Then, one day, the cult reached a critical turning point, just like the Kenneth Orthodoxy had.

Aros, along with several of his most devoted followers, suddenly awakened to immense magical power, proclaiming themselves chosen by the darkness to reshape the world. They declared themselves the true inheritors of divine might.

With that, the stage was set for the cult's violent rise to power, as Aros set his sights on seizing control of the entire world.

This was the twisted, bloody history of the *Seeker of the Netherworld* universe—a tale of mad prophets, fallen kingdoms, and dark ambitions that threatened to consume the world itself.

There was a theory floating around that Aros only gained his power thanks to some trickster god… If that's true, then this world has one hell of a twisted deity on its hands. Of all the people who shouldn't have power, Aros is at the top of the list.

I forced the dark thoughts aside and focused on my work, carefully mixing vials of poison and packing volatile gunpowder into small, crude explosives. These tasks were part of the daily missions assigned to low-ranking cultists like me. At the very least, the mindless repetition gave me a brief respite from my grim reality, letting me forget, if only for a moment, the nightmare my life had become.

When I finally set down my tools, the sun had already begun to sink below the jagged mountain peaks, casting long, skeletal shadows across the cold stone floors of the cult's hidden base. An overwhelming wave of exhaustion crashed over me, the day's tension releasing all at once.

Joanne Sagamix.

Fuankilo Legacy.

And, of course… Aros Hawkeye.

I gritted my teeth, my fingers digging into my scalp as if I could claw the hated names from my mind.

These bastards ruined my life.

Especially Joanne and Fuankilo. If there were a list of the worst human beings in this world, those two would definitely be near the top. If I could, I'd reset my life from the very beginning, team up with the original protagonist, and wipe out every last cult member.

Not that teaming up with the original protagonist is even possible at this point… I'm already too deep in this den of monsters. Daydreaming about it is just a waste of time…

For now, my one and only goal was survival. But that was easier said than done. The Orthodox Kennethians weren't the only ones who wanted me dead; I had somehow ended up on the hit list of my own comrades within the Aros Temple Cult as well.

That was why, just a few days ago, I'd practically begged Fuankilo to transfer me to a different branch, asking to be sent somewhere—anywhere—that wasn't crawling with psychopaths like her and Joanne.

Of course, she had just given me a dismissive, mocking half-smile and shot me down.

"Do you think you can run away from me?"

It had been a cruel, cutting reply, lacking even the faintest hint of sympathy. But I should have expected that. People like me didn't get to make demands in a place like this. And as long as Fuankilo had leverage over me, she'd never let me slip away.

I clenched my fists, the image of her smug, smirking face seared into my mind, my frustration building to a low, bitter simmer.

Just then, a pair of passing cultists caught my attention.

"Hey, did you hear?"

"Yeah, they're finally holding a gathering again. It's been a while."

As I strained my ears, the murmurs of the two cultists became clearer. It sounded like there would be a gathering tomorrow at noon. These meetings usually involved the announcement of long-term plans, along with a few token gestures meant to boost the morale of the lower-ranking members like me. Occasionally, they even handed out small rewards or words of praise—a superficial attempt to keep us from falling into despair or outright rebellion.

For the true believers, a few kind words from Aros or one of the Grand Executives might be enough to reignite their fanaticism. But for me, a reluctant prisoner of circumstance, the idea of being patronized by the very people who had ruined my life felt like a sick joke.

What a waste of time…

Shaking my head, I moved to the well at the far corner of the base, leaning down to splash some cool, brackish water onto my face. I had barely begun to relax when I felt a sharp tap on my shoulder.

My entire body went rigid.

Only two people in this entire cursed base would bother speaking to someone like me: Fuankilo or Joanne.

Either way, I was screwed.

Suppressing a sigh, I forced myself to turn around, bracing for the worst.

What I saw first was a cascade of snow-white hair, cut into a sleek bob that framed a dark, beautifully angular face. Her eyes, bright and sharp as a predator's, locked onto mine. Her figure was striking—slender waist, long, graceful legs, and a generous, well-defined chest that her tight clothing barely contained.

Fuankilo.

She smiled, the corners of her lips curving upward in a way that sent a cold shiver down my spine. It was the kind of smile a cat might give a mouse just before batting it across the room for fun.

"Why, hello there, Oakley," she said, her voice a smooth, teasing purr. "Care to do me a little favor?"

Like I have a choice.

I forced a tight, subservient smile onto my face, lowering my head in a show of false respect.

"Of course, Fuankilo-sama. What sort of favor might that be?"

Her eyes sparkled with wicked amusement, clearly enjoying my forced politeness. She was the kind of person who liked to dangle choices in front of her victims, knowing full well that refusal wasn't an option. She thrived on this twisted game of power and submission.

"Oh, nothing too difficult," she replied, leaning in close enough that I could feel her warm breath against my ear. "I just need you to help me with a little… interrogation."

"Interrogation?"

She tilted her head as though she were contemplating.

"Or perhaps 'torture' is a better word."

I fought the urge to grimace as she straightened and began leading the way toward the iron-bound door of the interrogation chamber.

Well, at least Joanne isn't here, I thought, a small, bitter flicker of relief washing over me. The last time I'd been dragged into this room, things had nearly gone catastrophically wrong.

The iron door creaked open, and the cool, damp air of the interrogation chamber washed over me. The room was shrouded in shadow, lit only by a few flickering, guttering torches that cast long, twisted shadows against the damp stone walls.

In the center of the room, slumped forward in the very chair I had once been bound to, was a figure I didn't recognize—a young

woman, her head hanging low, long, disheveled hair obscuring her face.

At the sound of the door scraping open, she flinched, her entire body trembling.

As my eyes adjusted to the dim light of the interrogation chamber, I realized that the woman bound to the chair had a rough cloth tied tightly over her eyes, leaving her disoriented and unable to grasp her surroundings. The harsh, metallic clatter of a cart loaded with torture tools echoed through the small stone room as Fuankilo casually wheeled it into place beside the trembling captive.

At the sound, the woman shrank back, her bound form twisting as if she could somehow make herself smaller, her shoulders trembling with poorly suppressed fear.

"Good evening, miss," Fuankilo cooed, her voice dripping with saccharine mockery.

"H-Hngh!"

The woman flinched violently, her entire body shuddering as Fuankilo's perfectly manicured hand settled on her shoulder. With a slow, deliberate motion, Fuankilo reached up and slipped the blindfold down, letting it fall loosely around the woman's neck. She then leaned in close, her lips brushing against the prisoner's ear as she whispered something I couldn't hear, her fingers gently caressing the woman's quivering jaw.

Even from a distance, I could see the tear-streaked paths cutting through the grime on the woman's cheeks, her eyes swollen and bloodshot from hours of crying. Her breath came in shallow, panicked gasps, her lips moving soundlessly as she tried to suppress the sobs threatening to break free.

Fuankilo's predatory smile widened as she noticed this, her eyes gleaming with delight. Her gaze drifted down to the woman's trembling right hand, and without warning, she grabbed it, roughly yanking the limb forward despite the woman's desperate, thrashing resistance.

"Stop! P-Please! Don't—!"

The prisoner's plea was cut short as Fuankilo's pointed, high-heeled shoe slammed into her solar plexus, driving the air from her lungs in a wet, choking gasp. The woman fell forward, her bound body spasming as she fought for breath.

"Now then, Oakley," Fuankilo said. "I want you to remove her fingernails for me."

She held the woman's limp hand out toward me, her eyes narrowing with expectant amusement as she reached for a thin, wickedly sharp metal device from the torture cart.

With a practiced flourish, she fitted the device over the woman's index finger, the cruel metal prongs sliding neatly beneath the edge of the nail. Fuankilo turned to me, her grin widening as she explained the tool's function with the enthusiasm of a child showing off a new toy.

"See? You just slide the prongs under the nail like this, then slowly press down on this lever here. It's simple, really! Just a little pressure, and the nail peels right off. Easy, right?"

She stepped back, her eyes fixed on me, clearly relishing the discomfort radiating from my stiffened frame.

"W-Wait, you want… *me* to do this?"

"Of course! Why do you think I brought you here?"

I hesitated, my fingers twitching as I glanced between the sobbing prisoner and the sadistic grin stretching across Fuankilo's flawless, bronze-skinned face. The woman in the chair shook her head frantically.

For a moment, Fuankilo's amusement seemed to fade, her eyes narrowing as she took in my hesitation. Her smile twisted as her fingers tightened on the prisoner's wrist.

She leaned in close, her lips brushing against my ear, and whispered, "What's the matter, Oakley? Can't do it? She's an enemy, you know. She tried to deceive us. Lied to us. People like that deserve punishment."

I swallowed, my throat dry and tight.

"Or do you want me to tell Joanne your little secret?"

God… fucking… dammit!!!

"You've killed people before, haven't you? Why hesitate over something as simple as removing a few fingernails? Besides, we can always heal her up afterward. There's no reason to feel guilty, is there?"

Sure, I've killed people. I've taken lives in this twisted world. But I've never tortured anyone for the sheer, pointless pleasure of it. I've only ever killed in self-defense. For survival.

I glanced down at the terrified woman before me, her wide, bloodshot eyes locked onto mine, her breath coming in short, frantic gasps. Her body was trembling so violently that the thin iron chains binding her wrists clinked with each terrified shudder.

My mind flashed back to the countless times I had felt this same choking fear—the cold, suffocating dread of being at the mercy of a stronger, merciless foe. In that moment, I felt a sickening kinship with the prisoner, a shared, unspoken understanding of what it meant to be utterly powerless.

"I… I can't do it."

The words slipped from my lips, barely more than a hoarse whisper, my throat tightening with each syllable.

The room fell into a sudden, deathly silence.

Fuankilo's eyes narrowed, her painted lips pulling back into a thin, dangerous line as her golden gaze fixed on me with the intensity of a predator sighting wounded prey.

"Excuse me?" she said, her voice low and chilling, the playful, taunting edge gone. "Did you just *refuse* me, Oakley?"

I felt a dark, oppressive pressure creeping up from the floor, coiling around my legs like a nest of venomous snakes. The air seemed to thicken, the shadows around us stretching and warping as her magic began to bleed into the room. My pulse hammered in my ears, and my muscles locked up as an icy, primal terror seized my limbs.

She's going to kill me. Right here, right now.

The prisoner looked up at me, her tear-streaked face contorted in a silent plea, her lips trembling as fresh tears spilled from her swollen eyes.

If Fuankilo hadn't been standing beside me, her sharp, hawk-like gaze drilling into the side of my head, I might have freed her on the spot. But she *was* here. She was watching me. Testing me. And I knew deep down that if I defied her, my own life would be forfeit.

"Okay. I'll… I'll do it."

Fuankilo's expression brightened instantly, her eyes sparkling with twisted glee as she clapped her hands together in delight.

"Wonderful! I knew you had it in you, Oakley. You're a man who knows how to make the hard choices."

She reached out, giving my tense, trembling back a few encouraging pats, as if I were a dog that had just performed a particularly clever trick.

"All right, then," she purred, straightening and flicking her long, white hair over her shoulder. "Let's get started."

She raised her hand, and a faint, pulsing glow spread through the room as her magic flared to life, the air growing colder and heavier with each passing second.

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Ultimately, I never got the chance to use the device.

The interrogation ended just as abruptly as it began.

"Aaah, what a shame." Fuankilo sighed, tossing the bloody, battered prisoner a disdainful glance as she wiped her gloved hands on a silken handkerchief. "She was already broken. It must have been all the *encouragement* I gave her yesterday. She spilled every last secret without me even needing to push her further."

Fuankilo might not have had Joanne's monstrous physical power, but when it came to breaking people's minds, she had few equals. Like many of the cult's more sadistic members, she also

happened to be a skilled healer—a combination that made her particularly dangerous in torture chambers.

The interrogation I had missed the other day had apparently been exceptionally brutal, yet when I caught a glimpse of the captured spy earlier, her body had been almost entirely unscathed. Not a single visible wound.

How merciful of them.

Of course, I knew the truth. Fuankilo had likely healed her after each torturous session, only to break her again and again, carefully balancing the pain just shy of permanent damage to keep her mind from completely shattering. That level of control and the precision required to drag someone to the brink of madness without pushing them over the edge was a form of cruelty all its own.

No wonder the woman had been so quick to talk. With every cut, every crushed bone, and every twisted joint mended only to be broken again, her spirit had been ground into a fine, trembling powder.

"Well then, I'm sure I'll be asking for your help again soon," Fuankilo said, her tone light and playful as she waved me off, her eyes sparkling with sadistic delight.

I didn't bother to respond. Instead, I turned on my heel and staggered outside, my mind still reeling from the twisted scene I had just been forced to endure.

I'd barely made it to the edge of the nearby brush before my stomach rebelled, my knees buckling as I collapsed into the tall grass, my entire body convulsing as I retched violently into the dirt.

Fuck!

I gripped the rough stalks of grass between my fingers, my vision swimming as the bitter, acrid taste of bile burned the back of my throat.

W*hy am I so powerless?*

No matter how many justifications I tried to force into my mind, no matter how many times I told myself I was just doing what I had

to do to survive, the truth still clung to my heart like a festering wound.

This is wrong. I know it is. But what the hell am I supposed to do about it?

The image of the woman's tear-streaked face burned itself into my mind, her swollen, bloodshot eyes locking onto mine in a desperate, silent plea for mercy. The way her dry, cracked lips had trembled as she tried to choke out a prayer, even as Fuankilo tightened the prongs around her finger…

She had been spared for now, but what awaited her was almost certainly far worse than anything I could imagine. The cult had ways of breaking even the strongest minds, of grinding even the most resilient spirits into dust.

I'm such a coward…

I had tried to tell myself that I was still a decent person, that I hadn't completely lost my humanity, but that lie had started to crumble the moment I let myself stand by while Fuankilo toyed with that prisoner like a cat with a half-dead mouse.

If only I had the strength to kill Fuankilo… No, even if I managed that, it wouldn't change anything. The cult would still stand. Its twisted doctrine would still poison this world. Unless I find a way to take down Aros himself, nothing will ever change.

I clenched my fists, my nails digging painfully into my palms as a low, bitter growl rose in my throat.

Back when I was just a player, Seeker of the Netherworld had been nothing but a dark, twisted game with a satisfying, morally straightforward ending. The heroes triumphed, the cultists were crushed, and the world returned to a semblance of peace. It was easy to enjoy the madness and depravity of the cultists when they were nothing more than lines of code, no more than sinister characters to be overcome and conquered.

Unfortunately, this world isn't a game anymore. There's no omniscient player here, no all-powerful, guiding hand to steer the narrative toward a hopeful, righteous conclusion.

There's only me, a former player.

I forced myself to my feet, my body still trembling, my mind still reeling with the echoes of the woman's desperate screams.

If I don't do something, if I don't act, this nightmare will just keep repeating itself. The Kenneth Orthodoxy might not even win this time. The only way to destroy this cult is from within…

I glanced down at the pendant hanging around my neck.

Joanne… genuinely seems to have feelings for me. Sure, she's still hopelessly devoted to Aros, probably even more than to me, but if there's a chance—any chance at all—that I can somehow win her over, then she could become one of my strongest allies.

After all, Joanne was a monster in every sense of the word. As long as even a scrap of her body remained, she could regenerate indefinitely, and her sheer physical strength was enough to tear a man in half with her bare hands. With her terrifying power and insane loyalty, she alone could shift the course of a war.

Hah… Here I am, thinking like a player again.

I sighed, shaking my head as I realized how naive I was being. I was no protagonist. I didn't have the kind of unbreakable resolve or absurd combat abilities that the original hero of *Seeker of the Netherworld* possessed.

I'm just a normal guy, clinging to life in the heart of a cult filled with lunatics and monsters. I can't afford to lose myself in pointless fantasies.

Even so, as I mulled over the idea of somehow turning Joanne into a true ally, I felt a tiny, flickering ember of hope begin to burn in my chest.

If I'm going to survive this, if I'm going to find a way to shatter this wicked cult from the inside… I'll need powerful allies.

The next day, I found myself standing amidst a crowd of fellow cultists in a large, dimly lit hall, the air thick with the stench of sweat and unwashed bodies. I shifted uncomfortably, trying not to breathe too deeply as I glanced up at the raised platform at the front of the room.

A tall figure emerged from the shadows, his movements slow and deliberate as he stepped into the flickering torchlight. The man's face was completely obscured by a featureless mask, his long, black robes flowing around him like a living shadow.

Of course. Cult Leader Aros.

Although his ominous appearance never failed to send a chill down my spine, no one dared to comment on it. His mask had become an inseparable part of his identity, a symbol of his divine authority.

Aros spread his arms wide, his voice booming through the hall as he began his address.

"Fellow believers, the time for our temple's great awakening has come."

Something's different.

Aros's masked face swept over the gathered cultists, his tone growing sharper, more urgent.

"The preparations for our grand campaign to reclaim the Metasim Region, my birthplace, are complete."

My heart skipped a beat, my breath catching in my throat as the name hit me like a bolt of lightning.

Metasim… That's…

I felt my pulse quicken, my mind racing as I scrambled to connect the dots.

That's the name of the protagonist's hometown in Seeker of the Netherworld…

In the original game, the destruction of Metasim at the hands of the Aros Temple Cult was one of the key events that set the story in motion, a critical moment that drove the protagonist to seek vengeance and ultimately sparked his journey to become a hero.

If this cult is truly planning to attack Metasim, then I'm going to cross paths with the protagonist sooner or later. And if I can make contact with him…

I swallowed hard, my hands clenching into fists at my sides as I forced myself to focus on Aros's speech.

If I can find a way to reach the protagonist… If I can warn him, guide him, maybe even aid him from the shadows… then maybe, just maybe, I can make a change.

Aros continued, his voice rising in pitch and intensity as he worked the crowd into a fevered frenzy.

"Your homeland is your anchor, a place without substitute, a sacred ground that you should never be denied! And yet, our sacred Metasim remains under the tyrannical control of the Kenneth Orthodoxy! Tell me, my faithful, will you allow this injustice to stand?"

A murmur rippled through the assembled cultists, their eyes glinting with dark, feverish excitement as Aros's words stoked the smoldering embers of their fanaticism.

"No! Never!" One man near the front of the crowd thrust his fist into the air, his face twisted with righteous fury. "I won't stand for it!"

"KILL EVERY LAST ONE OF THEM!"

The cultists' collective hatred boiled over, their voices merging into a single, deafening roar that echoed through the stone corridors like the war cry of some ancient, slumbering beast.

Aros stood silently, his head tilted slightly to one side as he let the bloodlust wash over him, his masked face betraying no emotion.

Finally, he raised a gloved hand, and the hall fell deathly silent in an instant, the cultists freezing in place like obedient, well-trained dogs.

"My loyal followers, I thank you," Aros intoned, his voice dripping with satisfaction. ***"It has become clear to me that your hearts burn with the same righteous fury as my own."***

He straightened, his gloved hands clenching into tight fists as he raised his masked face toward the ceiling, his voice rising into a triumphant bellow.

"Let me make this perfectly clear. The Kenneth Orthodoxy is the true enemy of this world. They are unworthy of their power, unfit to rule over humanity. We,

the chosen faithful, are the ones destined to claim this world for our own!"

He spread his arms wide, his black robes billowing around him like the wings of some terrible bird of prey.

"Fear not, my brothers and sisters! We shall reclaim our sacred homeland! We shall crush the Kenneth Orthodoxy beneath our heels! We shall take back what is rightfully ours!"

The hall exploded into a cacophony of deafening cheers and savage, bloodthirsty cries, the sound echoing off the walls like the roar of a great beast awakened from its slumber.

As the cultists around me dissolved into a frenzied mob, I clenched my fists, my heart pounding in my chest as a cold resolve took root in my mind.

If the battle for Metasim is truly about to begin, then this might be my one chance to change the course of this world's twisted fate.

I have to reach the protagonist. I have to make contact, no matter the cost.

Chapter 8: Bad Ending—Smothered with Love by a Yandere

Several days had passed since the rally, and the atmosphere within the cult's base had grown increasingly tense as preparations for the Metasim campaign ramped up.

As I navigated the chaotic corridors, my mind spun with potential strategies to survive the coming storm.

The Aros Temple Cult operated on a brutally simple hierarchy: absolute obedience to the leader, Aros. This singular devotion meant that most of the cult's high-ranking members were severely lacking in the more human aspects of their personalities. They were little more than glorified puppets, their strings pulled by the whims of their masked god.

But Joanne… Joanne was different.

Her obsessive fixation on me, twisted and dangerous as it was, represented a potential weakness in the otherwise rigid power structure of the cult. If I could exploit that—if I could somehow turn her against Fuankilo—it might be possible to drive a wedge between them. Theoretically, I could persuade Joanne to kill Fuankilo for me.

It's a long shot, but it's better than nothing.

I turned the idea over in my mind, mentally reviewing everything I knew about the cult's internal dynamics. Based on my experiences with the game's "fallen hero" routes, the relationships between the cult's leaders—aside from their collective worship of Aros—were largely professional, built on mutual convenience rather than genuine camaraderie.

That's a clear difference from the Kenneth Orthodoxy, where the high-ranking members actually care about each other.

Of course, if this were one of the game's spin-off titles, the story would have likely twisted this grim, blood-soaked world into a lighthearted, high school parody where the various cultists and Orthodox members attended the same academy and engaged in wholesome, slice-of-life hijinks.

Hah. Now there's a thought. Fuankilo in a sailor uniform, Joanne clinging to me like a lovesick schoolgirl, and Aros as the brooding, mysterious student council president… What a nightmare.

Shaking off the bizarre mental image, I refocused my thoughts, my fingers unconsciously brushing against the small, box-shaped pendant hanging around my neck. The severed ring finger inside had started to rot, its putrid stench seeping through the cracks in the metal casing.

Perfect timing. If I'm going to test Joanne's loyalty, I need to see her in person anyway.

I stepped outside, letting the cool mountain air wash over me as I made my way to one of the castle's outer courtyards. It was a risk, wandering around in the open like this, but I needed to make contact with Joanne without drawing too much attention.

I didn't have to wait long.

"Ah! There you are, Oakley!"

I turned at the sound of my name, my pulse quickening as Joanne came into view, practically skipping toward me with the same eager energy as a girl arriving five minutes late to a first date.

She was still wearing the oversized black robe I had given her. The sleeves dangled well past her small hands, and the hem trailed dangerously close to the ground as she jogged toward me, her bright, spiral-patterned eyes sparkling with unmistakable excitement.

"I've been expecting you," I said, doing my best to sound calm as Joanne came to a stop in front of me. "I figured it was about time for a marker exchange, so I was mentally preparing myself."

She grinned, her bright, predatory eyes narrowing slightly.

"You're so thoughtful," she purred, leaning in closer. "All right, come to my room."

Her room?

I nearly choked. For a moment, I considered pushing back, but quickly bit back the protest. Even in a place as chaotic as the Aros Temple base, there were still some basic rules of decorum, and performing a marker exchange in the middle of an open courtyard was likely a step too far, even for someone as unhinged as Joanne.

I fell into step behind her, my eyes fixed on the back of her head as she practically skipped through the winding, torch-lit corridors.

Eventually, we arrived at the base of an ancient, crumbling castle built into the mountainside—the executive quarters, a place where only the cult's highest-ranking members were permitted to live. I had never set foot here before, and the thought of entering the private quarters of a girl like Joanne sent a fresh wave of anxiety prickling down my spine.

Joanne led me up a narrow, winding staircase and down a long, shadowed hallway before finally coming to a stop in front of an iron-banded door. She pushed it open with a metallic groan, stepping inside without a second glance to see if I was following.

I hesitated at the threshold, my heart pounding in my chest as I took in the surprisingly ordinary interior. The room was sparsely furnished but clean, with a large, four-poster bed draped in deep crimson sheets, a small writing desk tucked into the corner, and a tall wardrobe pressed against the far wall.

Huh… I guess even psychotic cultists have their normal sides.

I had half-expected the interior to be a grotesque, chaotic mess of bloodstains, twisted bones, and sadistic artwork, perhaps with a few chains dangling from the ceiling for good measure. Instead, the space felt almost… disappointingly normal.

Of course, it's normal. You never actually see this room in her route. The entire thing takes place in a dungeon, with the protagonist chained to the wall while she expresses her twisted love in all the worst possible ways.

I felt a cold shiver run down my spine at the thought, my mind racing as I reluctantly stepped over the threshold.

"So, this is Joanne-sama's room…" I muttered under my breath, my eyes darting nervously from the dark, heavy curtains draped over the windows to the neatly made bed looming ominously in the center of the room.

It was a strange, almost surreal experience, stepping into the private quarters of a girl who had, in the original game, been one of the most terrifying, obsessively possessive yandere characters in the entire roster.

"Why're ya just standing there?" Joanne's voice snapped me out of my spiraling thoughts, her tone a mix of impatience and amusement. "C'mon, don't be shy."

"Right."

The door clanged shut behind me, the heavy iron hinges groaning in protest as it swung closed. I heard the sharp *click* of a lock sliding into place, followed by the softer, more final *snick* of a second, smaller latch being drawn across.

Did she just… double-lock the door?

I swallowed hard, my eyes flicking nervously to the door as a cold, creeping dread seeped into my bones.

Before I could even think about making a break for it, I felt a small, delicate hand grab the edge of my robe, tugging me deeper into the room. Joanne's small fingers curled around the thick fabric, her grip surprisingly firm as she pulled me toward the large, luxurious bed dominating the center of the room.

I stumbled over the thick, ornate rug beneath my feet, my heart racing as she hooked one of her slender legs around mine, sending me toppling backward onto the silken sheets.

My back hit the mattress with a soft *whump*, the crimson sheets rustling beneath me as I stared up at the dark, glittering eyes of the petite girl now straddling my hips, her face so close to mine that I could feel her warm breath against my cheek.

"So," she whispered, her lips curling into a sly, predatory grin as she leaned in closer, her nose nearly brushing mine. "Whatcha think lovers should do when they're all alone in a room together?"

"I… I'm sorry… I'm not sure I understand," I replied.

When exactly did we become lovers?

As far as I was concerned, the only reason I had ever claimed we were "mutually in love" was because Fuankilo had cornered me into it, forcing the words from my lips under the threat of death. Joanne had simply taken that desperate lie and wrapped it around her heart like a sacred vow.

"You and I aren't even remotely well-matched, Joanne-sama," I managed.

"Then make yourself worthy," she replied, her lips curling into a sharp, predatory grin. "You can manage that much, cantcha?"

She lowered herself over me, her slender limbs tightening around my sides like the jaws of a trap. I found myself pinned beneath her deceptively small but powerful frame, my world narrowing to the swaying curtain of her blue-streaked hair as it fell around my face, cutting off my view of the dark room beyond.

As my field of vision shrank, emerald twin vortexes of madness and obsession filled my sight, piercing straight through to my soul. The air between us grew thick and humid, every shallow, trembling breath she exhaled washing over my lips like the hot, damp air of a predator's den.

For a moment, I heard a faint, wet sound—a soft, rhythmic *slurp*—and realized, with a fresh spike of terror, that it was the sound of her tongue sliding slowly across her lips, wetting them in anticipation.

Pointless observation before the kill.

The thought rose unbidden from the back of my mind, a primal warning bell clanging wildly in my subconscious.

This woman was dangerously aroused, her every movement radiating a terrifying, ravenous heat. She wasn't just excited—she

was on the brink of losing control, her body quivering with the barely contained thrill of the hunt.

In my previous life, I'd never experienced genuine affection from the opposite sex, just delusions born of self-conscious fantasies—fleeting, one-sided crushes that never went anywhere. But here, in this twisted, nightmarish world, I found myself the object of an all-consuming, destructive obsession that I hadn't asked for and certainly didn't want.

Joanne's left hand—the one missing its ring finger—slid slowly across my chest, her long, slender fingers spreading across my ribcage as she pressed her palm against the thin fabric of my shirt. I flinched instinctively, my body twisting in a vain attempt to escape her grasp.

"Oh?" she whispered, her tone dripping with sadistic curiosity. "Is this your weak spot?"

No shit.

The heart was a weak point for any human, a fragile, vital organ that could be stopped with a single, well-placed blow. Her fingers curled against my chest, pressing down with just enough force to make my pulse spike, each slow, grinding circle she traced over my heart sending sharp, electric jolts of panic through my nerves.

I bit down on my tongue, forcing myself to swallow the panicked whimper that threatened to escape my throat.

I thought this was just a simple marker exchange. What's the deal?

Finally, her fingers stilled, coming to rest directly over my rapidly thundering heart. She let out a soft, contented sigh, leaning down to press her head against my chest, her ear settling over my heart like a cat listening to the purring of a trapped mouse.

"Your heart's racing, Oakley," she murmured.

"Naturally," I replied, my voice strained and breathless.

Of course, my heart is racing. I'm terrified. You're literally straddling me in a locked room. Your hands are wrapped around my damn heart like a pair of bloodstained cuffs.

For a brief, fleeting moment, I felt a tiny, traitorous flicker of something approaching excitement, my mind flashing back to the countless hours I had spent fantasizing about romantic encounters with beautiful girls in my old life.

I had a pretty clear sense of the size of the arrow pointing from Joanne to me now. But what about the arrow pointing from her to Fuankilo? It was time to find out.

"Joanne-sama, how do you feel about Fuankilo-sama?" I asked, trying to sound as casual as possible.

"Why are you bringing up Fuankilo now?" she asked, her voice dipping into a low, dangerous rumble, like a cat preparing to hiss.

"It's just something I need to know."

She continued to hold my gaze for a long, tense moment, her fingers still resting lightly against my chest, her breath coming in slow, controlled waves.

"She's just a colleague. Nothing more." She huffed, her lips pulling back into a thin, irritated line as she averted her gaze, clearly displeased by the sudden mention of another woman during what she likely considered a romantic moment.

So, it's just a professional relationship, then.

I felt a small surge of relief at her answer. Narcissistic as it might sound, it seemed that Joanne's fixation on me ran deeper than whatever professional respect she might have for Fuankilo.

For a moment, I considered pushing my luck further, asking the truly dangerous question that had been lingering in the back of my mind—*"So, who do you like more, Aros or me?"*—but the irritated, predatory gleam in her eyes quickly dissuaded me from taking that particular risk.

"Sh-Shall we exchange the marker now?" I stammered, hoping to steer the conversation back into safer territory.

Joanne tilted her head slightly, her sharp, predatory eyes still locked onto mine.

"Are you gonna leave once we do?"

"Y-Yes. I have other duties to attend to."

"I see."

I felt a fresh wave of tension wash over me as her voice dropped to a low, disappointed murmur, her grip on my chest tightening slightly before she finally reluctantly released me.

I took a slow, shaky breath as I reached for the box-shaped pendant hanging around my neck, flipping open the lid to reveal the blackened remains of the last ring finger she had given me.

Without a word, Joanne raised her left hand—the one missing its ring finger—and activated a small burst of healing magic. The twisted stump at the base of her finger glowed with a faint, sickly light, and the severed bone and flesh slowly regenerated before my eyes. The mummified finger in my pendant reacted instantly, its withered flesh crumbling to ash as its connection to Joanne's body was severed.

Joanne reached for the knife resting on the small table beside her bed, gripping the hilt with a calm, steady hand. She brought the blade down in a swift, precise arc, severing her newly regenerated ring finger in a single, fluid motion. Bright arterial blood spurted from the open wound, a few stray droplets splattering against my cheek.

As a living creature, the human brain was hardwired to avoid pain. That was a basic survival instinct. And yet, for some reason, Joanne seemed completely devoid of that fundamental self-preserving mechanism.

She hadn't even flinched.

Even as she sliced through the freshly regenerated flesh of her finger, severing bone and tendon in a single, fluid motion, her expression had remained calm and serene, her eyes bright with a twisted satisfaction.

The severed digit dropped neatly into the blood-smeared box of my pendant, the fresh piece of flesh settling into place as the interior filled with the pulsing warmth of her still-pumping blood. Joanne's lips curled into a small self-satisfied smile as she pressed her palm

against the still-bleeding stump, a faint light emanating from her hand as she cast a low-level healing spell to close the wound.

The flow of blood from her severed finger slowed, then stopped, the exposed bone and torn muscle knitting together with a soft, wet sound.

"Did it hurt?" I asked, unable to stop myself.

"Well… a little," she replied.

So, she does feel pain.

I glanced down at the girl straddling my waist, my eyes drawn to the small, mutilated hand resting against my chest. Before I realized what I was doing, I reached out and gently wrapped my own fingers around her tiny, trembling palm, holding it as if to comfort her.

For a brief, disorienting moment, she felt almost… human.

Her eyes flicked up to meet mine, her spiral-patterned eyes widening slightly in surprise before she curled her fingers around my hand, her touch surprisingly warm and delicate despite the fresh, bloody wound at the base of her ring finger.

Why? Why would someone who clearly understands the pain of being maimed—the sharp, searing agony of a severed limb—still dream of taking my arms and legs?

If I were to lose my limbs, I would never again be able to wrap my robe around her shoulders. I would never again be able to stand by her side, to hold her in my arms.

Does that really not bother her?

"Joanne-sama," I said quietly, my voice trembling slightly as I tightened my grip on her hand.

"Hmm?" she murmured, her head tilting slightly as she gazed down at me, her spiraling eyes narrowing in quiet curiosity.

"Are my arms and legs a nuisance to you?"

"Yeah, I guess they are."

I swallowed, my pulse quickening as I forced myself to meet her unblinking gaze.

"Why?" I asked, my voice barely more than a whisper. "If I lost my arms, I'd never be able to wrap my robe around you again. If I lost my legs, I'd never be able to stand beside you."

Her eyes widened slightly, the spiraling patterns in her eyes contracting as she processed my words. For a long, tense moment, the room fell silent, the only sound the soft, uneven rhythm of our breaths.

"True," she murmured, her lips curling into a thoughtful frown as if genuinely considering my point.

"Then… why?"

"I'd just like you that way better," she mumbled, her voice small and uncertain, her lips pulling into a self-conscious smile as she fidgeted awkwardly atop my waist.

You… would strip me of my limbs… for that? For a reason that simple?

This was the kind of sadistic cruelty you'd expect from a child pulling the legs off an insect for fun, paired with a complete lack of self-awareness or empathy for the suffering they caused. This was the crux of Joanne Sagamix.

She had become a fully realized monster, someone who genuinely couldn't grasp the contradiction in her desires, no matter how carefully you tried to explain it to her.

"I like the Oakley who draped his robe over my shoulders," she said. "I like the Oakley who tried to fight for me. But the Oakley who can't live without my help… I like that one the most."

We're never going to understand each other.

The realization hit me like a lead weight to the chest, driving the air from my lungs in a single hollow exhale. For a moment, I felt foolish for ever entertaining the hope that I might reach her, that I might somehow guide her toward a saner, less destructive path.

She's just… broken. A completely different kind of creature.

We might speak the same language, but our thoughts, our values, our very concept of what it means to care for someone are fundamentally, irreconcilably different.

"Is it so strange," she continued, her head tilting slightly as if genuinely curious, "to want to dye the person you love in your colors?"

I met her gaze, searching for some hint of self-awareness, some flicker of uncertainty in those sharp, spiraling eyes. But there was nothing. No hesitation, no doubt—just the steady, unwavering certainty of a predator closing in on its prey.

I felt my entire body go limp, the last shreds of my resistance crumbling to dust as I let out a long, shuddering breath.

I can't change her.

There was no point in trying. No point in reasoning, in bargaining, in hoping for some last-minute breakthrough. She simply wasn't wired that way.

"Stay the night," she said abruptly.

I froze, "But… I…"

"It's fine," she added, a faint, almost mischievous smile tugging at the corners of her lips. "I won't do anything."

"If you truly mean that, then… Very well."

Her smile broadened, her sharp, predatory eyes lighting up with a twisted warmth as she reached for the small pendant hanging around my neck. She lifted it to her lips, pressing a soft, reverent kiss to the bloodstained metal before letting it fall back against my chest.

"Good night, Oakley," she whispered, her breath warm against my throat.

"G-Good night, Joanne-sama," I replied, my heart hammering against my ribs.

With a flick of her wrist, she extinguished the lone flickering candle on the bedside table, plunging the room into darkness. A moment later, I felt the sharp, bony ridge of her forehead pressing against my chest, just above my rapidly thundering heart.

She shifted slightly, her small, delicate hands curling around my sides as she searched for the perfect, most comfortable position, her breath coming in slow, steady waves against my skin.

She… isn't going to try anything, is she?

Not that I was complaining, of course, but I had half-expected her to take full advantage of the situation. Maybe she was simply too tired, or perhaps she intended to keep her word, twisted as her sense of honor might be.

Her thin arms tightened around my torso, her grip firm but oddly comforting, as if she were trying to physically anchor me to her side to ensure I couldn't slip away in the dead of night.

"She's beautiful when she's asleep," I murmured, my eyes adjusting to the darkness as I stared down at the small, delicate face nestled against my chest.

She had always been a striking girl, her sharp, almost predatory features softened by the gentle, even rise and fall of her breathing. In the darkness, free from the madness and violence that usually clouded her expression, she looked almost… innocent.

"Mm… Oakley…"

She murmured my name in her sleep, her voice a soft, sleepy whisper, so different from the sharp, cutting tones I had grown accustomed to. Her slender arms tightened around my waist, her warm, surprisingly soft body pressing more firmly against mine as she shifted slightly, her lips parting in a contented sigh.

My pulse quickened as the warmth of her body seeped into my skin. I found myself hyper aware of the soft, rhythmic rise and fall of her chest brushing against mine with each slow, steady breath.

Focus. Keep it together.

I felt my fingertips twitch, my hand drifting unconsciously toward the small of her back before I caught myself, my entire body going rigid as a cold, panicked shiver ran down my spine.

No. Don't even think about it. Don't you dare lose control now. That's a one-way ticket to a fate worse than death.

I squeezed my eyes shut, forcing myself to take a slow, measured breath as I tightened my grip on the bloodstained sheets beneath me.

Don't lose yourself. Don't give in. She'll eat you alive if you do.

Even as I mentally scolded myself, I couldn't shake the lingering, disconcerting warmth of her small, fragile body pressed against mine. The steady, rhythmic thrum of her heartbeat synced with my own as she nestled closer, her small, delicate fingers curling into the fabric of my shirt as if clinging to the last flickering remnants of a dying flame.

This is going to be a long night.

Chapter 9: All Together Now: The Aros Temple Cult Is the Best!

The scene, rewound a little, back to just before Oakley found himself bound to Fuankilo's interrogation chair.

Among the higher ranks of the Aros Temple Cult, a certain young man had recently become the topic of whispered conversations. Respected for his fervent devotion, he had started to stand out, his name increasingly passed around by the cult's inner circle.

"AROS-SAMA IS THE BEEEEEEEST!!!"

This thunderous cry shattered the tranquil silence of dawn, echoing through the ancient halls of the temple. It was the passionate roar of a common devotee, unable to contain his love and reverence for the divine Aros. Choosing the early morning, when most still clung to their dreams, he unleashed his adoration with dramatic fervor, his voice carrying like a clarion call. The sound reached even the ears of the cult's most influential figures, becoming something of a beloved morning alarm.

"Ah, another morning serenade in my honor," Aros mused, his voice a soft purr beneath his ornate, porcelain mask.

"That's Oakley Mercury," Fuankilo replied. "I've had my eye on him recently."

"You, taking interest in a subordinate?" Aros chuckled, leaning back against the tall Gothic window that overlooked the mist-draped courtyard below. ***"That's rare. You've never shown much concern for the lower ranks before."***

"Well… to a degree."

"Excellent. A promising young disciple like him bodes well for our future. He seems to have a knack for inspiring

loyalty, even if it's only through sheer volume."

Aros adjusted his classic wide-brimmed hat, the fabric of his long, flowing robes rustling as he shifted his stance. Even with his face concealed, the slight lift in his voice suggested a smile. Fuankilo, who had spent countless years by the side of her enigmatic leader, could read him with uncanny precision. She recognized the slight tinge of fluster in Aros's response, a hint that her master was quietly, perhaps even shyly, pleased by Oakley's outburst.

"Now that I think about it... Oakley Mercury... I've heard that name before. He's the one who survived that skirmish, isn't he?"

"Indeed. Excluding us, the higher ranks, he's the only one to have directly faced a Kenneth Orthodoxy executive and lived to tell the tale," Fuankilo confirmed, her gaze slipping to the horizon, where the first hints of morning light crept over the stone battlements. "Moreover, he's skilled in the concoction of explosives and poisons. Though he has yet to achieve any particularly remarkable feats, he executes every mission without fail. He possesses, at the very least, the minimum level of competence."

"How fortunate I am to be blessed with such exceptional subordinates," Aros murmured, his voice tinged with genuine—if dramatically expressed—gratitude.

Fuankilo watched in silence, placing a reassuring hand on her leader's shoulder. She, too, shifted her gaze downward, where the tiny figure of Oakley could just barely be seen moving through the courtyard below, his steps purposeful, his head held high.

"Oakley Mercury... I'll remember that name."

It wasn't just Aros and Fuankilo who had taken notice. Oakley's name had already reached the ears of the other leaders as well. Even the fifth-ranked Pawk Tedlotus had acknowledged his growing presence, a rare feat for someone of Oakley's rank.

"He shows remarkable dedication to our cause and a fearless willingness to stand against powerful adversaries. Truly a disciple worthy of our trust and investment," Aros

continued. ***"Unlike the many who stumble and fade into obscurity, he stands apart—a talent worth cultivating."***

"Perhaps," Fuankilo replied, her voice cool. "Or perhaps he's merely a small-time player, destined to burn out as quickly as he rose."

"Ah, ever the strict judge, Fuankilo. Your discerning eye is as sharp as ever."

Despite her calm exterior, Fuankilo felt a bitter pang as she spoke. Though she took pride in nurturing the cult's future leaders, a part of her bristled at Oakley's rapid rise. A subtle jealousy flared within her—an unsettling fear that her place beside Aros, a position she had held for countless years, might be slipping as a fresh star ascended.

It's foolish to think this way, she chided herself, trying to stamp down the thorny tangle of emotions. *Aros is my guiding light, my god.* Still, the unease remained, a whisper in the back of her mind that refused to be silenced.

"To guide the young, one must let them face trials," Aros intoned, his voice gaining a solemn, almost fatherly warmth. ***"Oakley will need to overcome many such trials if he is to truly become a pillar of our order. It's our duty to support and challenge him, to ensure the future strength of our cult. We must not let his potential wither."***

Fuankilo merely inclined her head in response, her thoughts still tangled.

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After parting ways with Aros, Fuankilo returned to her quarters and collapsed onto her bed, the old mattress creaking softly beneath her slight frame. She stared up at the intricately carved ceiling, shadows from the flickering candlelight casting shifting patterns across the stone.

As a matter of doctrine, members of the Temple are conditioned to prioritize Aros above all else. Their minds are reshaped to make the Great Aros their singular focus. Oakley should be no exception—he, too, would have been subjected to the same "depersonalization" training meant to strip away individuality. And yet there's his bizarre, attention-grabbing behavior… Should I consider it a mere anomaly in the brainwashing process?

The Temple's aim had always been to craft soldiers—obedient, faceless tools of the faith, devoid of personal whims or ambition. *Soulless, unremarkable drones.* Yet Oakley defied that mold, radiating an inexplicable presence even among the nameless masses.

Oakley's name had only recently become a common topic among the executives of the Temple, but Fuankilo had noticed his peculiarities much earlier.

Yes… It was that night. The one when the rain came down like a waterfall…

Fuankilo's mind drifted back to a memory from a few months ago—a night so drenched in darkness and rain that even the torches lining the stone corridors of the castle flickered weakly against the storm.

Amidst the deluge, a lone figure had come barreling through the courtyard, splashing through the muddy puddles, his drenched robes clinging to his body as he screamed to the heavens.

"AAAAAAHHHHH! AROS-SAMA IS THE BEEEEEEEEST!"

What the hell is that?

For a fleeting moment, Fuankilo had considered ordering an immediate purge. *Perhaps I should eliminate him without consulting the others…* she had thought, her hand tightening around the hilt of her ceremonial dagger as she watched his wild, flailing sprint. But before she could decide, the man had vanished into the rain-soaked darkness, his maniacal echo swallowed by the storm.

Yet, his mad dash, intended perhaps as a private, cathartic release, had instead etched itself into Fuankilo's memory, refusing to

be washed away by the relentless downpour. Oakley's fevered devotion had branded itself into her thoughts, a deep, unshakable impression.

Today, the very same young man had firmly captured Aros's attention.

Fuankilo sighed, sinking deeper into her mattress. *A lowly grunt's clumsy attempts to curry favor should have gone unnoticed. But Oakley, unfortunately, isn't just some groveling fool. He has the skills to back his fanaticism, and it seems those very talents have struck a chord with Aros.*

I haven't seen Aros-sama so genuinely pleased in quite some time…

Despite her bitter misgivings, some part of Fuankilo begrudgingly admitted that Oakley had managed to draw out a side of Aros she had nearly forgotten existed: a rare, almost playful warmth. It gnawed at her pride. While she busied herself with maintenance, interrogations, and purges—duties any sufficiently loyal follower could handle—Oakley had carved a place for himself in Aros's thoughts with his reckless displays and narrow escapes from death.

Unlike me, he's actually fought a Kennethian executive and lived to tell the tale… In comparison, my work feels painfully… replaceable.

She pulled the blanket up over her head, the thick, scratchy fabric brushing against her cheeks. Fuankilo's self-assessment had always been harsh. She often dismissed her own contributions, convinced that her loyalty to Aros—though absolute—didn't amount to the kind of glory someone like Oakley could claim. That her leader would recognize her talents, the skills only she possessed, felt like an unlikely, self-indulgent fantasy.

Envy twisted like a blade in her chest, and for a long, breathless moment, she lay there, drowning in her conflicting emotions.

Little did Fuankilo know, the day when she would seize a critical weakness of Oakley's—and taste a perverse blend of triumph and sadistic delight—was closer than she dared imagine.

Chapter 10: Victims' Support Group

The next morning.

I woke to the oppressive heat and humidity that clung to my skin like a damp shroud. For a moment, my brain struggled to piece together where I was and why my muscles felt so stiff. I stretched, a reflex born from countless mornings of bleary wakefulness, before the memories of the previous night crashed back into me, sending a sharp chill down my spine.

Instinctively, my hand drifted to my face, rubbing my eyes. My fingers were still there. I flexed my toes. My legs hadn't been taken either.

I sucked in a sharp breath, the realization settling in. Somehow, I'd survived the night without so much as a scratch.

The source of the warmth pressed tightly against my side quickly became apparent. The slick, feverish heat I had mistaken for the morning's mugginess was, in fact, the body heat of Joanne, who had managed to remain latched onto me in her sleep. Her slender arms wrapped tightly around my torso, her body curled into mine, her soft breath steady against my collarbone.

I froze, my mind warring with itself. Relief, for the sheer fact that I was alive, clashed violently with a deep, bone-weary dread. *Why hasn't she killed me yet?* a bitter voice whispered in my mind. *If you're going to do it, just get it over with.*

I flexed a hand, clenching and unclenching my fingers, grounding myself in the small physical comfort that I still had control over my body. My gaze drifted downward, and a new, uncomfortable reality intruded on my thoughts.

It hit me that I had a very real, very immediate problem: morning wood.

I'd heard it said that as long as a man could still get hard in the morning, he had both the physical and mental capacity to keep fighting. If a man lost even that primal reaction, if the body ceased to respond to its most basic urges, that was when he became truly broken, trapped in the deepest circles of hell.

Unfortunately, my currently quite functional morning physiology had placed me in direct precarious contact with Joanne's soft thigh. I bit back a groan, my pulse quickening as I struggled to ignore the warmth and pressure that only served to make the situation worse.

Chill out. Focus. Escape first, crisis of conscience later.

Summoning every ounce of self-control I could muster, I slowly extracted myself from her grasp, peeling her slender arms away without waking her. Her fingers twitched slightly, her brow furrowing for a moment, but she soon settled back into her rhythmic breathing.

I exhaled, my breath coming out in a shaky whisper. "Phew."

Had she been even slightly awake, I wouldn't have made it this far. She was, after all, absurdly quick to react when conscious. But it seemed the comfort of a proper mattress had worked its magic on her as well. For the first time in what felt like ages, I had slept on an actual bed instead of a damp stone floor or a rickety wooden bench, and my body felt lighter for it. The sharp, grinding pain in my lower back and shoulders had all but vanished, and my thoughts felt unusually clear.

I glanced back at Joanne, her hair splayed across the pillow, a faint line of drool glistening at the corner of her mouth. *Well, if nothing else, I suppose I owe you that much. Thanks for the good night's sleep, I guess.*

"Excuse me," I whispered, my voice barely more than a breath as I moved to the door. I reached for the heavy double lock she had set the night before, carefully turning each with slow, deliberate movements to avoid the telltale clink of metal.

As I twisted the handle and began to pull the door open, it resisted with an unexpected, stubborn click.

A third lock? You've gotta be kidding me.

A fresh wave of unease washed over me. I shifted my weight, carefully reaching for the hidden latch that had been tucked out of sight in the door's shadow. With a final, quiet twist, the bolt slid free, and I slipped out into the hallway, my pulse still hammering from the narrow escape.

I navigated the winding corridors of the ancient castle with the precision of a ghost, my footsteps a mere whisper against the cold stone floors. Having memorized its every shadow and secret passage, I moved with the practiced caution of a hunted animal. The last thing I needed was for some loose-lipped acolyte to catch sight of me sneaking out of Joanne's chambers at dawn. That kind of rumor would spread faster than plague through the ranks.

The air in the empty hallways was sharp and biting, the chill seeping into my bones as I crept along. I kept my head low, listening intently for even the faintest hint of movement. My pulse quickened as distant footsteps echoed off the stone walls, a soft, measured cadence that set my instincts on edge. Someone was close.

I flattened myself against the rough stone, pressing a hand against the cold, moss-lined wall as I carefully peeked around the corner. A tall figure stood by the window at the far end of the passage, his silhouette framed by the pale light of the rising sun.

It was Aros Hawkeye, the masked leader of our order, the dark heart of the Temple itself.

Despite the early hour, he remained fully shrouded in his customary midnight-black robes, the distinctive X-shaped mask still fixed firmly over his face, its bizarre design obscuring any trace of human expression. No one had ever seen the face beneath that mask. The streaks of sunlight filtering through the stained glass cast long, jagged shadows around him, lending his already imposing figure a strangely ethereal, almost divine aura.

What's he doing here so early? A flicker of panic tightened my chest. Had he somehow sensed my escape and come to confront

me?

No, had he known I was in Joanne's room, he wouldn't be lingering by a window. He'd have confronted me directly. Aros didn't bother with roundabout measures—he preferred the direct, crushing approach, like a storm descending upon an unguarded village.

He remained unmoving, his gaze fixed on the sprawling compound below, as if searching for something hidden among the twisting, fog-drenched alleys of the castle's lower levels. I watched, barely daring to breathe, as he tilted his head slightly, the faintest hint of frustration radiating from his rigid posture. Then, after a long, silent moment, he sighed deeply, the sound echoing softly off the stone walls.

"It seems the spirited rooster isn't crowing this morning..."

Huh?

I blinked, my mind grappling with the unexpected statement. *A rooster? What the hell is he talking about?*

I had no time to piece together his cryptic musings, though, as a thick, inky fog began to coalesce around his form, seeping from beneath his robes like living shadows. The darkness swirled and tightened, enveloping him completely, and then—in the space of a heartbeat—both he and the shadows dissipated into the thin morning air, vanishing without a trace.

Instant transmission… So that's what it looks like up close. I shuddered, the chill in my bones intensifying as the last wisps of darkness evaporated into the gloom. His movements had been too swift for my eyes to follow, his presence gone before I even had the chance to react.

I leaned back against the wall, my heart pounding in my chest. Whatever strange ritual he had just performed had saved me the trouble of explaining my presence in this corridor.

Well, thanks for the unintentional assist, mysterious rooster.

With a final glance at the now-empty window, I continued my silent retreat toward the castle exit, my steps a shade lighter, my

breathing just a fraction calmer.

I managed to reach the massive front doors of the castle without any further run-ins. My pulse gradually slowed, and I allowed myself a small, shaky sigh of relief as my fingers wrapped around the iron handle.

Almost there… Just a few more steps, and I'm free.

I gave the door a firm push.

KA-CHAK!

The sound reverberated through the stone halls like the crack of a whip, echoing off the vaulted ceilings and twisting through the dark corridors like a taunting specter. My heart seized, my stomach plummeting as the noise rattled my already frayed nerves.

Dammit. This place was built to carry sound, wasn't it? Of all the stupid mistakes…

The panicked thought had barely formed when a sharp, commanding voice sliced through the cold morning air, freezing me in place.

"That back… My, is that Oakley-kun? What a coincidence, running into you here."

Fuankilo.

My heart sank. Of all the people I didn't want to run into right now, she was easily at the top of the list. I turned sharply, dropping to one knee in a reflexive gesture of submission, my head lowered to avoid her piercing gaze. She had stopped barely a meter away, her arms crossed as she regarded me with a mixture of curiosity and mild amusement.

"Ah… F-Fuankilo-sama. To what do I owe the honor?"

"Hm? You smell like Joanne," she said, tapping a gloved finger against her chin. "Wandering the castle this early… Don't tell me you spent the night in her room?"

"Yes, Fuankilo-sama. I was acting on Joanne-sama's direct orders."

"Heh… You are a walking contradiction, aren't you, Oakley? Try not to trip over your own feet someday."

Contradiction…

Her words hit harder than I cared to admit, cutting through my carefully maintained facade. She reached out, tapping my head twice with the flat of her palm in a dismissive, almost patronizing gesture before turning on her heel, her dark cloak billowing behind her as she disappeared into the shadows of the hallway, her soft, mocking chuckle trailing in her wake.

I remained kneeling for a moment longer, my fists clenched tight enough that my knuckles ached, the bitter taste of humiliation settling like bile in the back of my throat.

Shit…

Defying a senior officer would lead to "reeducation"—a thinly veiled euphemism for the brainwashing that stripped a person of their individuality, reducing them to little more than an obedient husk. I couldn't afford to draw her suspicion, couldn't risk letting my real thoughts slip. I forced my fingers to uncurl, taking a slow, steadying breath as I willed my heart to calm itself.

When I finally rose, Fuankilo's footsteps had long since faded into the gloom, leaving me alone once more.

Get out. Just get out of here.

I slipped through the massive doors, the frigid morning air washing over me like a splash of cold water as I made my way down the mountain path. There was a distant screech of mountain birds echoing in the thin, mist-laden air. I descended quickly, my boots crunching against the gravel path until I reached the mouth of a large, hollowed-out cavern at the base of the mountain—one of our smaller armories, hidden from prying eyes and regularly stocked with the spoils of war.

I ducked inside, my eyes adjusting quickly to the dim light as I navigated the rough-hewn passageways that led deeper into the mountain. The air grew cooler, the smell of metal and oil thickening as I approached the small, makeshift armory nestled within.

Stacks of stolen armor and weapons lined the walls, their polished edges glinting faintly in the torchlight. I wasted no time,

selecting a tightly woven chest piece stripped from a fallen Orthodox soldier, slipping it on beneath my robes. It was slightly too large, the rings clinking softly as I adjusted it, but it would serve its purpose—a thin, vital layer of protection against the blades and arrows I would no doubt face in the coming battle.

Next, I retrieved my iron longsword, carefully drawing the blade from its scabbard and inspecting the edge. *Sharp, well-balanced. Good.* I set it aside and turned my attention to the crossbow resting against the wall, methodically checking its mechanism for signs of wear or damage.

You're betting your life on these tools. Better check them twice.

Satisfied that everything was in order, I took a moment to tighten the straps on my leather gloves and adjust the buckles on my boots. Every second I spent here was a risk, but I couldn't afford to face the coming storm unprepared.

If there's even a sliver of a chance to increase my odds of survival, I'll take it.

As I checked the sharpness of my blade and tested the tension of my crossbow, I heard the soft, unmistakable creak of leather boots against the stone floor behind me. My heart rate spiked, and I instinctively tightened my grip on the hilt of my sword, half-expecting to turn and find another executive standing in the entryway, eyes narrowed with suspicion.

Instead, it was a fellow cultist—an unremarkable figure draped in the same standard-issue black robes as me, hood drawn low over his eyes, the faint glint of chainmail visible beneath his loose garments. For a moment, we simply stared at each other, the air between us thick with mutual distrust.

He looks like a nobody, but that's the point, isn't it?

The early morning silence in the armory only deepened the tension, the flickering torchlight casting our shadows long and thin against the roughly carved stone walls. We remained like that for a long, breathless moment—two wary predators circling, each wondering if the other might be a threat.

"Good morning," I finally managed, my voice low and carefully measured.

"Good morning," he replied, his tone equally cautious. His eyes flicked to the crossbow on the shelf beside me before meeting my gaze again.

I straightened from my crouch, setting the half-repaired bolt aside as I moved around the weapon rack to face him directly. We stood a few meters apart, separated by a wall of polished blades and dented breastplates, each wondering just what the other was doing here so early.

"What brings you here?" I asked.

"I could ask you the same," he replied. "But if you must know, I'm preparing for the Metasim battle."

"Same here. I figured I'd get a head start on checking my gear."

"Smart," he said, turning his attention to a set of leather plates hanging on the wall beside him. He reached out, tapping the hardened leather with his knuckles, testing its durability before setting it aside and moving on to a rack of throwing knives. I watched him out of the corner of my eye as I returned to my work, carefully adjusting the metal plates beneath my robes to prevent any chafing.

Maybe I was being too paranoid. The guy seemed harmless enough—just another nameless soldier looking to boost his odds of survival in the coming bloodbath. I exhaled slowly, letting the tension ease from my shoulders as I returned to my inspection.

I rarely made small talk, preferring to keep my head down and my thoughts to myself. It was a habit I had developed out of both necessity and preference. Too much casual conversation, and my former life might slip through the cracks. Besides, blending in with the faceless ranks of the faithful had served me well up to this point.

Sadly, recent events had thrown my carefully constructed anonymity into disarray. Spending the night in Joanne's chambers, being recognized by Fuankilo—these were *not* the actions of a background character. Whether I liked it or not, I was becoming a

known figure, my quiet, survival-focused existence slowly unraveling as I stumbled into the spotlight.

Still, it's a strange comfort to know I'm not the only one clinging to life in this madhouse.

As I returned my attention to my work, my eyes drifted back to the young cultist. He had taken a seat at a nearby table, a small mortar and pestle in hand as he ground a handful of dried herbs into a fine, bitter-smelling powder. I watched him out of the corner of my eye, curious despite myself.

So, he's mixing something too, huh?

I set my crossbow aside and pulled a small pouch of mountain herbs from my belt, spreading the dried leaves across the rough wooden tabletop. With careful, practiced movements, I began sorting them into piles—venom for my bolts, coagulants for quick wound treatment, and a few explosive compounds for those particularly desperate last stands.

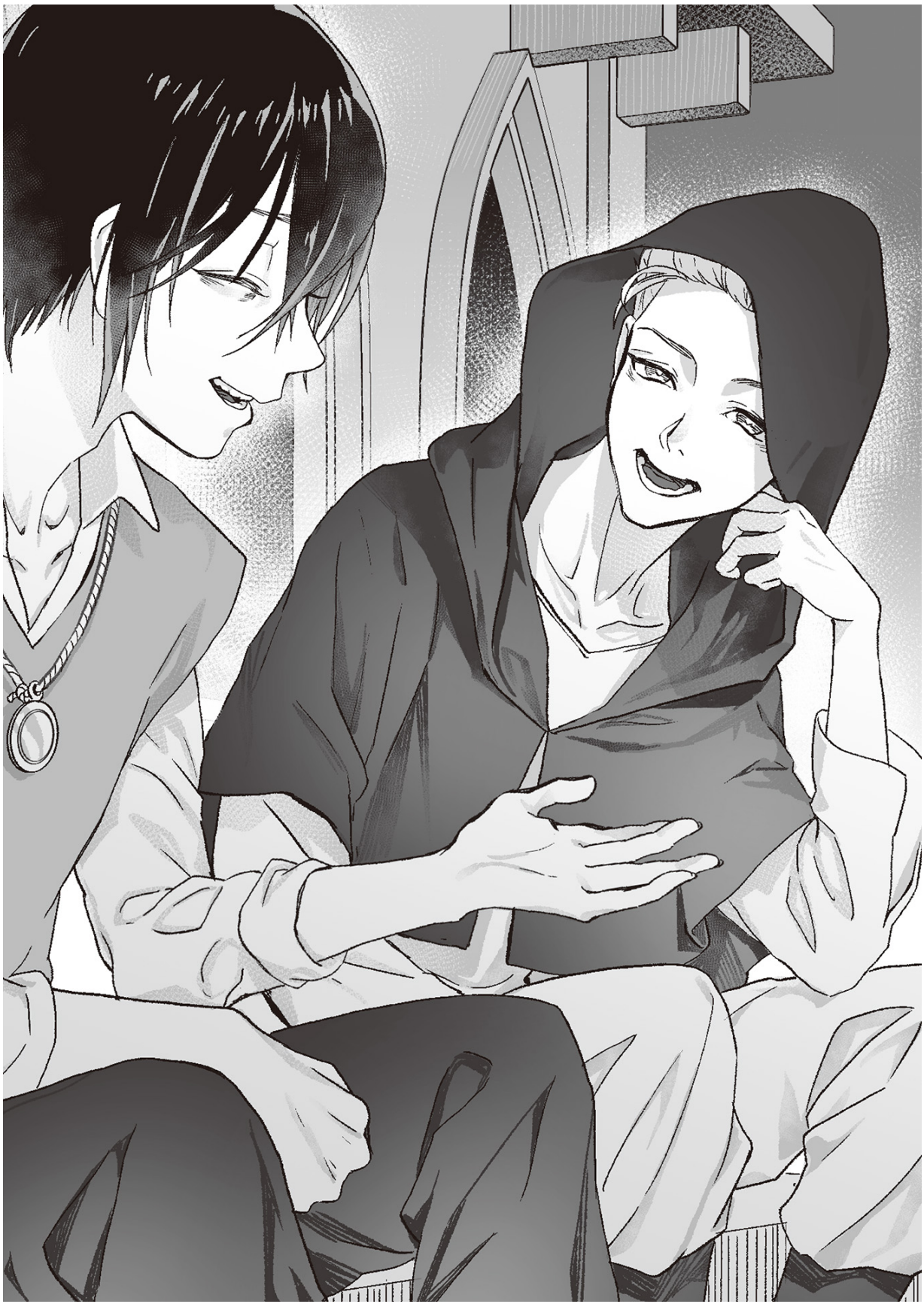
The other cultist glanced over, his eyes catching the glint of my freshly polished blade, then shifted to the small vials of poison and salve lined up beside me. Our eyes met, and for a brief, surreal moment, it felt like staring into a mirror—the same guarded caution, the same quiet desperation to survive.

A tense, awkward silence hung between us for a heartbeat longer, then, to my surprise, the corners of his mouth twitched upward, and he let out a small, unexpectedly genuine chuckle.

"Heh… I guess we're more alike than I thought," he said.

"Yeah," I said, my chuckle coming out rough and unpracticed. "Kind of rare to find someone so committed to staying alive in this hellhole."

For a moment, the dark, musty air of the armory felt a little less suffocating. I could sense the same intense, single-minded focus radiating from him, the same cautious paranoia that had kept me alive all this time. It was a strange, unspoken bond—a silent acknowledgment of the shared struggle for survival amid the madness.



In other words, *the scent of a fellow traveler.*

His every movement, every subtle shift of his gaze, carried a trace of the same wary, guarded air that clung to me like a second skin. He had that unmistakable, hard-to-hide aura of someone who had clawed their way up from the depths—battered but not yet broken.

"Oakley-san, how did you come to join this order?" he asked.

"Who knows?" I replied, carefully choosing my words. "By the time I realized it, I was already here."

"Heh, same here." He smiled. "Then, you didn't exactly join by choice either, huh?

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Through a few more minutes of cautious conversation, I learned his name—Steve. Like me, he had been abducted as a child, stripped of whatever past life he might have had, and thrown into the merciless grinder of the Temple. He had survived by sheer stubbornness and a refusal to die, scraping by on equal parts cunning and luck.

As we spoke, our words danced carefully around the unspoken truths we dared not acknowledge directly. We swapped small, seemingly innocuous observations—our tones light, our words layered with subtlety.

Something about this place doesn't add up, does it*? The way they push us, the way they break us… It's wrong, yeah?*

I could see it in his eyes, the same flicker of doubt, the same wary awareness of his surroundings. He wasn't fully free of the brainwashing—no one *truly* escaped it—but Steve obviously had one foot outside the abyss, his mind not yet fully drowned in the Temple's twisted doctrine.

As we talked, it became clear that while Steve respected Aros as a powerful leader, he couldn't fully condone the man's methods. He saw Aros as a magnetic, almost awe-inspiring figure, but one who

skirted dangerously close to madness—a man whose charisma and ruthlessness had built an empire, but whose methods sometimes strayed too far from what Steve could comfortably accept.

Not fully brainwashed, but not entirely free either.

The fact that Steve could articulate his misgivings—however carefully veiled—meant he still had a sense of self, a trace of his original humanity clinging stubbornly to the edges of his conditioned mind. That alone set him apart from the majority of our fellow cultists, who had long since abandoned such troublesome doubts in favor of blind devotion.

"You're different," Steve said quietly. "I feel like I can actually talk to you. It's… good to know there's someone else like me in here."

I nodded slowly, suppressing the unexpected surge of relief his words sparked.

He's right.

Most of the countless faceless soldiers of the Temple had been born into this twisted order, their minds shaped from birth into perfect tools of the faith. They knew nothing else; their every thought and instinct molded to serve a single, unchanging purpose. The world outside these walls—the simple concept of *choice*—was as foreign to them as the surface of the moon.

Steve was different. He could see the cracks, the subtle wrongness in the way we were taught to live and die for Aros's vision. He hadn't given up his sense of self completely, and that alone made him a rarity, a near-miracle in this suffocating, blood-soaked labyrinth.

We continued to exchange notes on our respective concoctions, the clink of glass vials and the soft rustle of dried herbs filling the musty air of the armory. Despite our initial wariness, a strange sense of camaraderie had begun to form.

"Let's survive this, Oakley," Steve said.

"Yeah," I replied, giving a sharp nod. "Damn right."

The assault on Metasim was set for the next day. If we hoped to make it through in one piece, we needed to be fully prepared. We pooled our knowledge, discussing every trick we could think of to tip the odds in our favor, from the best poisons to coat our blades to the most effective salves for closing wounds in the heat of battle.

The plan for the Metasim raid was straightforward enough in theory. The higher-ranking cult executives would spearhead the attack, launching a lightning-fast assault meant to break through the Orthodox forces stationed there before they had time to coordinate a defense. The goal was to occupy the city before word of the attack could spread to the enemy commanders.

Our role as foot soldiers would be to handle the chaotic close-quarters fighting in the city streets, cutting down isolated Orthodox soldiers and capturing as many civilians as possible to secure our hold on the area.

The more I thought about it, the worse our odds seemed.

From what I had seen, the average Orthodox soldier was better equipped, better trained, and far more disciplined than the ragtag cultists I found myself among. They moved in tight, coordinated units, their ranks bolstered by heavy armor and well-maintained weapons. They knew the terrain and had the advantage of fortified positions. In a straight-up fight, our side would likely be cut down, ground into the bloody dirt beneath our boots.

No, if we hoped to survive this, we couldn't rely on brute strength or blind fanaticism. We would need cunning, preparation, and a little luck—all the things I had relied on to survive this long.

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"On the day of the raid, guys like us won't make much of a difference," Steve muttered, carefully stirring a small pot of simmering herbal extract. "Those… *monsters* will do most of the heavy lifting. We'll just be there to mop up the scraps."

"You mean the higher-ups? Yeah… They're on a whole different level," I agreed, double-checking the tension on my crossbow's string. "People like Joanne-sama… They're not even playing the same game as us."

"If I were that strong, I wouldn't even need these damn potions. Just walk into the thick of it and tear through everything in my path."

"Maybe. But you'd still end up taking hits. Just means you'd be bleeding out in chunks instead of from a clean blade to the gut."

"Yeah… I've seen them come back with entire limbs blown off, organs hanging out… and they just keep going. God, that's gotta hurt like hell."

"Pain's not even the half of it. No amount of training or loyalty can make that hurt any less."

A heavy silence fell between us, broken only by the occasional clink of glass as we returned to our respective tasks, each of us lost in our own grim thoughts.

Fortunately, the Temple had granted us some measure of freedom until the day of the assault, and Steve and I decided to make the most of it. We slipped out of the castle through one of the lesser-used side passages, following a winding trail down the rocky mountainside to the dense, fog-drenched forest below.

Life for ordinary cultists in the Temple was a constant game of mutual suspicion and silent observation. I may have felt more trust in Steve than most, but that didn't mean I could count on him completely. If I ever attempted to escape, he'd probably turn me in without hesitation. Just the act of noticing a hint of treason in someone's behavior could be a death sentence for both parties, given the constant surveillance and brutal punishments for dissent.

Besides, I was already being tracked. Joanne had placed a marker on me, allowing her to pinpoint my location at all times. Even if I could slip away into the woods, she would be fully aware of each and every one of my steps. There was no escaping the cult's grip that easily.

As we pushed deeper into the dense forest, I felt my nerves tightening. The deeper we went, the greater the chance of running into monsters. The same dark magic that powered the cult also corrupted the land around it, twisting animals and plants into hostile, violent forms. I had avoided venturing this far out precisely because of those dangers.

"Hey, Steve, are you sure this is a good idea?" I asked, eyeing the shadowed trees around us. "I've never come this deep into the forest. I'm not exactly thrilled about running into something with too many eyes and too few scruples."

Steve, unfazed, continued picking through a patch of medicinal herbs, slipping the leaves into a small leather pouch at his waist.

"I have a pretty good sense for these things," he said, his tone confident. "I can usually tell where the monster hotspots are. This area should be safe."

"If you're just guessing, I'm going to be pissed when we get ambushed."

He chuckled. "Then I guess I'd better not let you down!"

I frowned, my nerves still on edge, but I had to admit he seemed strangely sure of himself.

After a moment, Steve spoke again, his voice quieter, more thoughtful. "Actually… I think I have memories from before I joined the cult. Maybe that's why I have a knack for this kind of thing. It's like… part of me just *knows* where to go, where to avoid."

I paused, my fingers tightening around the strap of my pack. "You have memories from *before* the cult? That's… rare. Most of us had those scrubbed clean early on."

"Maybe," Steve replied, plucking a handful of bright green leaves and slipping them into his pouch. "But I can do things others can't. Like this."

He kneeled beside a patch of thick, waxy plants with small white flowers, quickly grinding the leaves into a thick salve.

"I've saved my own life more than once using this stuff," he said, carefully scooping the paste into a small glass vial. "It can close

deep wounds in minutes. Not as good as real healing magic, but it's the next best thing."

I watched his precise, practiced movements, feeling a flicker of genuine respect. *If I can learn how to make that, my odds of surviving this madness will go up considerably.*

Alas, even if I wanted to replicate the kind of advanced recovery potions Steve seemed capable of making, the truth was that the limited resources available within the Temple's armory just wouldn't cut it. The base formulas provided by the cult were bare-bones at best—simple concoctions meant to keep grunts on their feet and in the fight, nothing more. They lacked the complexity and potency of the higher-tier remedies Steve casually whipped up.

This difference only reinforced my suspicion that his knowledge had to have come from outside the Temple. Perhaps remnants of a previous life, fragments of forgotten memories that had somehow slipped through the cracks of the brainwashing and personality reprogramming every recruit underwent. It was a small miracle that his mind had held on to those scraps of knowledge at all.

"Do you have any memories from before joining the cult, Oakley?" Steve asked suddenly.

I hesitated, the words catching in my throat. "I'm not sure. I can't really say."

"Huh. Might just be me, then."

Instinctively, I had chosen to hide the fact that I still possessed my full, intact memories of a past life. I wasn't sure why—perhaps some deeply ingrained sense of self-preservation, a primal urge to keep that secret buried. Even though Steve had been open with his half-remembered past, I found myself clamming up, unable to return his honesty.

Steve didn't seem to mind my evasiveness, though. He continued, his voice a little softer, tinged with the faintest hint of nostalgia.

"Sometimes, I have these dreams," he said, plucking a small, thorny sprig of blue-tinted leaves from a patch of dense underbrush.

“Dreams of walking through a forest, collecting herbs with a woman… someone I think might have been my mother. She’d show me which plants to pick, how to mix them, and what to avoid. It feels… weirdly familiar.”

He turned the sprig over in his hands, examining the tiny, serrated leaves before slipping it into his pouch. I watched him work, noting the smooth, confident movements of his fingers as he separated the useful parts of the plant from the excess stems and thorns.

He glanced at me as if trying to gauge my reaction, then continued.

“It’s kind of like what we’re doing now. Me teaching you about the plants out here… it reminds me of those dreams.”

I frowned, the unease from earlier tightening in my chest. “Do you remember her name? Your mother, I mean.”

He paused, getting lost in thought. “No,” he said finally, shaking his head. “No, I don’t. It’s all… foggy.”

“Yeah… I figured,” I murmured.

“But I can picture the place we walked together clearly,” Steve continued, his eyes gleaming with a rare, unguarded light as he looked out into the dense, shadowed trees around us. “It was a deep forest, thick with underbrush and towering, ancient trees. The rocks were covered in damp moss, slippery enough to send you crashing down if you weren’t careful. She always warned me not to ever step on wet stones. I’d like to find that place someday, you know? Go back and see it for myself.”

His voice had taken on a wistful, almost hopeful tone, the words spilling out of him with a kind of nervous, unpracticed energy.

I felt a pang in my chest, a sharp, uncomfortable twist of guilt and envy. *How can he still speak of dreams with such bright eyes, even in a place like this?*

I, on the other hand, could only think of survival, of escaping this hellish cult, of clinging to life with bloody, desperate fingers. My hopes were narrow, my goals painfully small in comparison to his.

Steve laughed suddenly. “I’m talking too much, huh? Kind of embarrassing. But you’re the one who got me started, Oakley. It’s your fault.”

I felt my throat tighten, the impulse to respond with something genuine, something *real*, nearly overpowering my carefully maintained self-control.

Should I tell him?

For a brief, trembling moment, the temptation clawed at me. To tell him the truth, to share the impossible secret I had carried alone for so long. That I remembered everything, that I had lived a different life, in a different world, with different rules.

Fortunately, the cold, rational part of my mind reasserted itself, whispering harsh truths into my ear.

Once spoken, it can never be taken back. Once I reveal this, there’s no undoing it.

My knowledge of the original world, the “source material” of this nightmare, was my trump card, my one true advantage in this twisted game. To share that knowledge, even with someone as seemingly trustworthy as Steve, would be to hand him a blade he could one day turn against me.

No. Not yet.

“You really want to find that place from your dreams, huh?” I asked, my tone carefully casual.

Steve blinked. “Y-Yeah, I do.”

“Why wait for ‘someday’? Why not pick a real date? Wouldn’t want to forget something that important, right?”

“Aww, Oakley! You’re a good guy, you know that?”

“H-Hey, cut it out. That’s embarrassing.”

“Haha! So, a real date, huh? Sure, why not? Then… how about after this battle? Once we’ve made it through the Metasim raid, we can explore the area around it. If we don’t find it there, we’ll just keep expanding the search, bit by bit.”

“Sounds like a pretty endless adventure, but… Yeah, why not? Could be fun.”

"Right?! I'm getting excited just thinking about it! It's been ages since I felt this… alive."

"Yeah, me too."

As we stood there, surrounded by the thick, shadow-draped trees, I realized something strange. This was the first time I had ever made a promise to a friend in this world. I had spent so long clinging to life, keeping my head down, circumventing connections to avoid betrayal, that I had forgotten what it felt like to share a simple, earnest dream with someone.

For once, the weight pressing down on my shoulders felt a little lighter.

I watched Steve disappear back into the trees, his steps light and confident as he vanished into the green gloom. I reached into my pouch, my fingers brushing against the cool, smooth surface of the special recovery potion he had mixed for me. I clutched it tightly, feeling the rough glass press into my palm, and took a deep, steadying breath.

I'll survive this battle. I have to.

As the sun dipped below the jagged peaks surrounding the fortress, I finished my final equipment check. The chill of the coming night seeped into my bones, and a strange, jittery tension settled over me, making it impossible to sleep. *Maybe it's the anticipation, the mere awareness that this might be my last night of freedom.*

Unable to stand the oppressive atmosphere of the shared barracks, I slipped outside, ducking beneath the creaking, half-rotted awning of one of the abandoned shacks scattered around the compound. I pulled my knees to my chest, resting my chin on them as I stared out into the darkness, my breath fogging slightly in the crisp night air.

Staying up too late is a bad idea. It'd mess with my reaction time, dull my thinking. I need to be as sharp as possible.

Still, the idea of simply lying in my cot and staring at the cracked, mold-streaked ceiling felt unbearable. I needed to clear my head. *Maybe a walk around the compound will burn off some of this*

nervous energy. Back in Japan, I would've just scrolled through my phone or played a quick game to pass the time until I got sleepy…

I sighed, pushing myself to my feet. The uneven, dirt-packed ground crunched softly under my boots as I made my way toward the scattered clusters of rundown buildings. There were few lights around the residential area and even fewer cultists awake at this hour, making it hard to see more than a few paces ahead.

I grabbed a rusted, soot-streaked lantern from a nearby doorstep, its metal frame cold and rough against my palm. I struck the flint, coaxing a weak, flickering flame to life within the glass casing. The small circle of light it cast barely pierced the surrounding gloom, but it was better than nothing.

I hadn't wandered around at night like this in ages. The cult discouraged nighttime activity, not just because of the risk of tripping over loose stones or falling into a half-collapsed mine shaft, but because fuel for lamps and torches was tightly rationed. Still, I had made a habit of sneaking out in the early days, back when I was first testing my knowledge of poisons and explosives, trying to confirm if the formulas I remembered from my past life actually worked.

Yeah… I almost got myself killed a few times back then.

I couldn't help but grimace at the memories. One particular incident came to mind—a failed explosive experiment that had nearly blown my cover.

I had been mixing a batch of unstable compounds in one of the caves near the armory, trying to recreate a powerful incendiary from memory. I must have gotten the proportions wrong, because the resulting blast had sent chunks of rock crashing down from the ceiling, nearly sealing me inside.

The explosion had been so loud that Fuankilo had stormed into the barracks that night, her eyes blazing with fury as she forced every cultist to gather in the courtyard for a grueling round of interrogations. She had stalked up and down the line, her heavy

boots crunching against the gravel as she demanded to know who was responsible.

I had stood there, my heart pounding so loudly I was sure she could hear it, my fingers clenched tightly at my sides. She had slowly worked her way down the row, her sharp, accusing gaze moving from face to terrified face.

It wasn't me. I didn't do it. I don't know anything.

Those desperate, silent denials had echoed in my mind like a mantra as she moved closer, her cold, gloved fingers brushing against my shoulder as she passed.

Just as she reached me, her lips parting to demand an explanation, Aros's voice had drifted down from the balcony above, echoing through the cold, mist-laden night.

"This is a waste of time, Fuankilo. Drop it. Whatever caused the disturbance, it's irrelevant now."

Fuankilo had hesitated, her hand still hovering inches from my collar, her jaw clenching in visible frustration. But even she couldn't directly oppose Aros's will. With a sharp, irritated huff, she had finally turned on her heel, stalking back into the darkness as her cloak snapped angrily around her.

I had nearly collapsed from relief, my legs trembling as the tension drained from my body. If Aros had intervened even a second later, I would have been dragged off for "reeducation," if I were lucky.

Yeah… Thanks for that, Aros. You probably saved my life back then.

The cave where the explosion had taken place had long since been sealed off by the rubble from the collapse, burying any remaining evidence of my mistake. In hindsight, it had been a miracle I had survived at all.

Nah, just dumb luck.

I shook my head, trying to clear away the lingering memories. My feet had carried me down the mountain path before I even noticed. I found myself standing at the mouth of the very same cave

—the one that served as both an armory and a makeshift laboratory for my more experimental projects.

Maybe I'll sleep here tonight.

Pushing aside the thick, clinging vines that partially obscured the entrance, I ducked inside, the lantern in my hand casting long, flickering shadows against the rough stone walls as I made my way to the armory at the back. I sank into one of the worn wooden chairs scattered around the room, the old creaking frame settling beneath my weight as I leaned back, exhaling slowly.

I sighed, letting the darkness and silence of the cave wrap around me like a thick, comforting blanket.

Tomorrow, the Battle of Metasim would begin—one of the most pivotal events in the original story and a crucial turning point for the protagonist. I didn't just have to survive; I had to make contact.

Only one shot at this.

The thought echoed in my mind, a bitter reminder of the razor's edge I was balancing on—the thin, wavering line between survival and oblivion. No wonder I couldn't sleep.

I leaned back in the creaking wooden chair, letting the rickety frame tilt beneath my weight as I rocked gently back and forth, the weak, flickering light of the lantern casting long, dancing shadows against the cave walls. For a brief moment, the rhythmic motion soothed me. The warm glow of the lamp provided a small comfort for me in the surrounding darkness.

As soon as I let my mind wander, my pulse spiked again. My heart felt like it was trying to claw its way up my throat, my thoughts a tangled mess of fear, frustration, and desperate, directionless anger.

I let out another long exhale as I pressed my fingertips into my temples, trying to massage away the building headache.

Despite my crushing exhaustion, my body refused to relax, a dull, restless ache settling in my muscles and pooling in my gut—a strange, simmering mix of anxiety and something uncomfortably close to arousal.

Oh, for the love of…

I leaned forward, my face heating up as an unbidden image of Joanne flashed through my mind. Her slender arms wrapped around me, her warm, breathy sighs brushing against my neck as she clung to me in her sleep.

I grimaced, my fingers tightening into fists as I fought the urge to slam them down on the rickety armrests.

Dammit, body, pick a lane!

There was some biological theory about this, right? People under extreme stress sometimes develop a heightened sex drive—a last-ditch, primal urge to pass on their genes before the reaper comes calling, or something. I'd read something about it back in my previous life, how populations in famine-stricken countries or war zones often experienced sharp spikes in birth rates once the immediate danger had passed.

Not that knowing the science makes it any less humiliating.

I leaned back, staring up at the jagged, uneven ceiling of the cave, my breath coming in shallow, ragged bursts as I tried to push the unwelcome thoughts from my mind.

It's just the stress, I told myself. *Just a stupid, hormonal reaction to the fear of death. Nothing more.*

The more I tried to push the image of Joanne from my mind, the more vivid it became—her pale, flawless skin, the delicate curve of her neck, the way her hair perfectly framed her face. The memory of her soft, warm body pressed against mine, the faint, intoxicating scent of her lingering on my clothes…

Shit.

What the hell was wrong with me? Joanne was a literal psychopath—a walking red flag, a woman who would gut me in my sleep if the mood struck her, her angelic face twisted into that sadistic, delighted grin as she watched me bleed out on the cold stone floor. She was the kind of woman you stayed the hell away from, no matter how stunning her figure or how alluring her smile.

It's just physical, I told myself firmly. *Just a purely biological reaction. Like when you see a beautiful NPC in a gacha game and can't help but think, "Damn, she's hot."*

Even as I clung to that thin, rational excuse, the heavy, shame-soaked realization settled in my gut like a lead weight.

God, I'm the worst.

An oppressive sense of guilt—or maybe just a profound self-disgust—settled over me as the last, shame-filled echoes of my thoughts clung stubbornly to the edges of my mind.

I let out a long, frustrated breath, trying to clear my head, when I felt a sudden, intense vibration against my chest.

"…?!"

For a panicked moment, I thought it was just the pendant around my neck shifting as I slouched forward, but the steady, rhythmic buzzing quickly proved otherwise.

Joanne.

I twisted in my seat, my heart slamming painfully against my ribs as I instinctively dropped into a defensive stance, my fingers tightening around the armrests of the creaking chair.

"Hey… Oakley. You there?"

Her voice drifted out of the darkness beyond the reach of my lantern's weak, flickering light, soft and sing-song, echoing strangely off the rough stone walls. I whipped my head toward the sound, raising the lantern higher, but saw nothing—no shifting shadows, no approaching figure, just the empty, cold, echoing silence of the cave.

Like a prey animal frozen in the predator's gaze.

For a long, breathless moment, I could only stand there, my eyes darting from shadow to shadow, my every nerve on edge as the soft, taunting echoes of her voice continued to bounce off the cave walls, growing slowly, terrifyingly closer.

The pendant still buzzed faintly against my chest, a steady, insistent reminder that Joanne was closing in, that she had tracked me here with the same unerring predatory instinct that made her so terrifyingly effective in battle.

I had assumed she would have gone to bed early, like most nights before a major operation. Joanne, for all her sadistic quirks, had a surprisingly strict sleep schedule—one of the few faintly humanizing traits she possessed. I had let that assumption lull me into a false sense of security, and now I was about to pay the price for it.

"Oakleeey, I know you're in there," her voice called out again, closer now, her heavy boots clomping steadily against the stone floor as she made her way deeper into the cave, each step echoing like the tolling of a funeral bell.

I scrambled to pull my pants back into place, my fingers fumbling with the waistband as I tried to compose myself. I took a deep, shaky breath, forcing my nerves to settle as her shadow finally came into view.

"What were you doing just now?" she asked.

"Ah… I was just, uh, admiring the thought of you," I replied.

"Oh? That so?"

If I let this turn into a flirty exchange, she might get excited and cut my limbs off right here and now.

That terrifying thought snapped me back to my senses, my mind jerking sharply away from the dangerous path it had started to wander down. I forced myself to focus, my pulse still pounding in my ears as I realized something else—the steady, echoing footsteps I had been hearing had suddenly stopped.

A cold, prickling sensation crawled up my spine, and I barely had time to register the absence of sound before I felt a light, rhythmic tapping against my shoulder.

Tap, tap.

"So anyway, Oakley," a familiar, lilting voice whispered from directly behind me. "Whatcha doing out here so late?"

I gasped, my entire body locking up as I twisted in my chair, the rough, splintered wood creaking beneath me as I turned to find Joanne standing barely a foot away, her head tilted slightly to the side, her wide, unblinking eyes fixed on mine.

"Oh, um… I was just… checking my equipment," I stammered.

"But didn't you already do that this morning?"

"Y-Yeah. But, you know, I got a bit paranoid. Wanted to double-check. Can't be too careful, right?"

"Hmm. But your face is all red," she murmured, her voice taking on a teasing, sing-song tone. "Are you feeling okay? Feverish, maybe?"

I stiffened, my pulse spiking painfully as her face drew even closer, her wide, searching eyes locking onto mine, her small, delicate hand pressing more firmly against my brow. Her loose, flowing nightgown shifted as she leaned over me, the thin fabric clinging to the curves of her chest, her barely covered figure filling my field of vision and making it impossible to focus on anything else.

I tore my gaze away, forcing my eyes to focus on a distant crack in the cave wall, my throat tightening painfully as I struggled to keep my voice steady.

"It's… just the light," I said quickly. "I'm fine, really. Just a bit warm from the lantern."

"Really, now?" she whispered. "And what's with this smell? Were you mixing something just now?"

"Ah… Yeah. Just a few last-minute preparations. You know, making sure I have everything I need for tomorrow."

"Hmm. You sure are a diligent little soldier, aintcha?"

"I-I try. By the way, what are you doing here so late, Joanne-sama?"

"I just couldn't sleep. I figured I'd come check on a certain someone who was wandering around the caves in the middle of the night."

"Y-You couldn't sleep?"

"It's just… Tomorrow's a big day. This battle… It's about reclaiming Aros-sama's homeland. It's a turning point. A lot is riding on it, and we can't afford to fail."

"I've never heard you talk like this before."

“I don’t make a habit of it.” Joanne let out a small breath, then pointed toward the path leading outside. “How about it? Wanna chat for a bit?”

Before I could answer, she grabbed my arm, and in the next moment, I found myself being carried through the cave, up the steep, rocky slopes, all the way to the mountain’s peak.

With each light, effortless leap, Joanne cleared rough, uneven terrain that would have taken me minutes to scramble over. I hung awkwardly in her grasp, feeling very much like a piece of excess baggage.

Finally, we reached the summit, where she set me down on a patch of dry, crackling grass.

“Look, Oakley. The stars are pretty clear from up here. Isn’t it beautiful? I come up here when I can’t sleep,” Joanne said, flopping down on the dry ground, her limbs stretching out wide as she let out a long, satisfied sigh.

I hesitated for a moment, then followed her lead, letting myself fall back onto the rough, brittle grass. The dry stems poked uncomfortably at my exposed skin, but I stretched out my arms and legs anyway, trying to mimic her relaxed pose.

She was right. The stars were clearer here, the cold mountain air sharp and crisp against my skin. The constellations were unfamiliar, their shapes strange and unrecognizable, but there was a certain beauty in that.

“Beautiful, right?” She asked.

“Yeah,” I replied, my voice quieter than I had intended. “I don’t think I’ve ever taken the time to just… look at the night sky like this.”

Since arriving in this world, my focus had always been on the ground beneath my feet—watching for roots and rocks that might trip me, listening for the telltale rustle of approaching predators. I had never once looked up.

Now, with nothing but the cold, empty night above me, I felt a strange, unfamiliar calm settle over my mind.

“Thank you, Joanne-sama,” I said after a long moment, my eyes still fixed on the distant, flickering stars. “Staying up late was… actually kind of nice.”

She let out a dry, amused laugh from somewhere beside me, her voice lacking its usual sharp, dangerous edge. For a moment, the oppressive aura she usually carried seemed to fade, her presence as light and unguarded as the cool mountain air.



For a few quiet minutes, neither of us said a word.

It wasn't the oppressive, suffocating silence of the castle's grand hall, where I had once been dragged before the assembled executives. This was different—a peaceful, almost awkward quiet, tinged with a strange, unfamiliar warmth.

The girl beside me, someone I should never be able to truly understand, had somehow managed to pull me back from the brink of my own spiraling thoughts. It was almost hard to believe that, just a short while ago, I had been alone, cursing myself in a dark cave, overwhelmed by guilt and self-disgust.

I kept my eyes fixed on the slow, steady drift of the stars above, my mind gradually calming, my breaths evening out as the crisp mountain air filled my lungs.

Then, without warning, I felt a gentle tug on my sleeve.

"Not bad, huh?" Joanne said, her voice low and soft, her face leaning in close enough that I could feel the faint warmth of her breath against my cheek.

I turned my head slightly, our eyes meeting at a distance so close it felt almost inappropriate. I opened my mouth to reply, a teasing retort already forming on my tongue, but the words died in my throat as I caught sight of her flushed cheeks, the faint, pinkish hue coloring her normally pale skin.

For a moment, I just stared at her, my mind struggling to process the strange, almost fragile expression on her face—an unguarded vulnerability that seemed completely out of place on a girl as dangerous as her.

Joanne seemed to sense my sudden hesitation, her eyes flicking away from mine as she let out a small, self-conscious laugh, her breath misting faintly in the cold night air.

"It's a bit chilly," she said. "But I could probably fall asleep out here if I tried."

"Wouldn't that be a bit… reckless?" I replied. "You don't want to be groggy when the fighting starts tomorrow."

"Yeah… You're right. We should probably head back soon."

I caught a flicker of something in Joanne's eyes—a faint, almost imperceptible glimmer of loneliness, quickly hidden behind the usual confident glint as she sat up, brushing the dry grass from her waist and legs as she stretched once more.

"Oakley," she said, her tone sharp but oddly hesitant, her eyes still fixed on the distant, moonlit horizon. "I won't be able to watch your back tomorrow. I'll be stuck at my assigned post, and I can't come running if you get yourself killed by some worthless grunt. So… don't do anything stupid, you hear me?"

"I understand," I said quietly.

Joanne straightened, her expression slipping back into its usual, confident smirk as she turned toward the narrow path leading back down the mountain.

"Good luck."

"Yeah…"

Without another word, she dragged me into her private quarters, wrapping her slender, yet deceptively strong arms around me as she pulled me close. Her body pressed firmly against mine as she buried her face in my shoulder, her warm breath tickling my neck. Within moments, her breathing had slowed, her soft, rhythmic exhales rustling the fabric of my shirt as she slipped into a deep, untroubled sleep, her iron grip refusing to loosen even as her consciousness drifted away.

I lay there, struggling to breathe, my ribs creaking beneath the crushing weight of her embrace, my mind a tangled, chaotic mess of conflicting emotions as the darkness slowly swallowed us both.

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In the interrogation room within the base, Fuankilo Legacy idly played with a lock of her snow-white hair, twisting it between her slender fingers. She let out a bored yawn, then started absentmindedly fixing the hair she had just messed up.

“Ugh… This blows,” she muttered.

Fuankilo, waiting for a certain someone, repeatedly sighed as she fiddled with the nearby torture tools. She would notice patches of rust and bent edges, her irritation growing each time, only to eventually lose interest and abandon any thought of properly maintaining them. In the end, she merely confirmed their current state before putting the task off for another day.

Leaning back heavily against the chair fitted with restraints, she tried to pass the time by recalling past torture sessions. She remembered one particular girl with an exceptionally beautiful crying face—one of the best in recent memory. The high-pitched screams that had come from her throat had had a certain, almost refreshing purity to them. On the other hand, the way a burly man would break down into pitiful wailing, his muscles trembling as his flesh was sliced open, had an appeal all of its own.

Just as she was sinking deeper into her dark memories, the long-awaited guest finally arrived.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“Took you long enough, Pawk.”

Standing in the doorway was Pawk Tedlotus, a striking woman dressed in a sharp, masculine-cut outfit, her glossy black hair tied into a short ponytail. Her piercing eyes scanned the dim, blood-stained room, the air seemingly thickening around her as she stepped inside.

Pawk moved to stand directly across from Fuankilo, her gaze drifting to the various torture tools scattered across the table. Without much thought, she reached for a pair of heavy pruning shears, turning them over in her hands as if testing their weight.

Seeing this, Fuankilo let out a twisted, knowing grin. She couldn’t help but recall Joanne’s recent rampage, as well as a certain young man who had recently drawn her attention.

“So, what’s this about?” Pawk asked, casually clicking the blades of the shears open and shut. “You don’t usually call on me for favors.”

"I have a little request," Fuankilo replied, straightening slightly in her seat. "I want you to keep an eye on someone for me."

Pawk's expression remained carefully neutral, though a faint flicker of interest flashed in her eyes.

"An interesting request, coming from you. Who do you want me to watch?"

"Oakley Mercury."

For a split second, Pawk's eyes narrowed, a faint, almost imperceptible twitch at the corner of her mouth. She had heard that name before. This was the young cultist Aros had recently taken an interest in, the one he had called a "rooster."

"Oakley? The one everyone's been whispering about? I've heard he's quite the promising recruit. Why the sudden interest?"

Fuankilo's lips curled into a thin, bitter smile, her fingers drumming lightly against the armrest of the restraint chair.

"It's… personal," she said, her tone deliberately vague.

Pawk's eyes narrowed slightly, but she said nothing, simply continuing to slowly click the shears open and shut, the metallic sound echoing through the cramped space.

Fuankilo had no intention of admitting her real reason—that she simply couldn't stand the idea of Oakley gaining Aros's favor. She had already confirmed, using her magic, that Oakley didn't have any romantic feelings for Joanne. That meant his current behavior was nothing more than a calculated attempt to rise through the ranks, using Joanne as a convenient stepping stone.

Had it been genuine romance, I might have let it slide. But Oakley is just using her. And with Aros-sama's approval, he could become a real problem. I need to cut him down before he gets too bold.

Fuankilo stubbornly refused to elaborate on her reasons, maintaining a stiff, guarded posture as she stared across the blood-streaked table at Pawk. Sensing the futility of pushing the issue, Pawk waved dismissively, the faint, metallic clinking of the hedge clippers still echoing softly in the stone-walled room.

"All right, fine," Pawk said with an amused sigh. "I won't pry."

"That's for the best," Fuankilo replied.

"And how long do you want this to go on?"

"For the foreseeable future. The method is up to you."

"I don't exactly have loads of free time on my hands, y'know. You could always handle this yourself, right? Use that precious magic of yours; maybe drag him in here and wring the truth out of him the old-fashioned way."

Fuankilo's jaw tightened, her fingers curling into a loose fist against the armrest of her chair.

"Shut up. You know as well as I do that I can't lay a finger on one of Aros-sama's favorites without a damn good reason," she snapped.

Pawk let out a soft, mocking laugh, one gloved hand rising to cover her mouth as she leaned back in her chair, her stormy eyes glinting with wicked amusement.

"Ahaha… But watching him from the shadows isn't much better, is it?"

Fuankilo clicked her tongue in irritation, her pale fingers tightening against the armrests. She had known Pawk would be annoying to deal with, but she had hoped the woman would at least have the sense to take the matter seriously.

Of course, Pawk doesn't know the full story, Fuankilo reminded herself, forcing her tense shoulders to relax slightly. *She has no idea.*

Unbeknownst to Fuankilo, Pawk had already planned to keep an eye on Oakley, though for entirely different reasons. As far as she was concerned, the young cultist was a promising recruit, someone who might one day rise to become one of the cult's top fighters. She had been planning to monitor him anyway, to make sure he didn't do anything reckless during the upcoming Metasim raid.

Unlike Fuankilo, whose motivations were primarily driven by jealousy and personal spite, Pawk's interest in Oakley was more pragmatic. With the cult's increasingly thinning ranks and the pressure mounting from external forces, the need for competent,

battle-hardened followers had never been greater. If Oakley ended up getting himself killed through reckless ambition, it would be a significant loss for the cult's future.

"Fine," Pawk said finally. "I'll start the surveillance as soon as my preparations are complete. I'll use the *Automata* for now. Less risk of exposure that way."

"That'll work."

As Pawk reached the door, Fuankilo hesitated for a moment, her fingers tapping lightly against the armrest as she glanced up at her departing colleague.

"Oh, and Pawk," she said, "if you ever need a hand with… certain uncooperative guests, just let me know. Consider it part of my thanks for this little favor."

"I'll keep that in mind," Pawk replied. "I'm sure I'll take you up on that someday."

With those words, they both separated. But unbeknownst to both women, their seemingly straightforward plan to monitor Oakley would soon lead to a series of complications that neither of them could have anticipated.

Chapter 11: The Tragedy Before the Storm

Somewhere, sometime, in the dead of night, we began our march toward the Metasim region.

The last traces of autumn had long since withered, the bitter chill of early winter settling into the air. Frostbitten breaths rose and vanished from the mouths of the cultists around me, the icy night air sharp enough to numb exposed skin and freeze the blood in your veins if you weren't properly dressed. Without thick layers of insulation, you'd lose the feeling in your fingers within minutes.

The robes Aros had provided for the march were enchanted with his personal concealment magic, designed to distort our presence and hide us from distant eyes. In theory, they were supposed to make us all but invisible to passing patrols, but I had never really felt the benefit. They were thin, poorly insulated, and utterly useless in close combat—something I doubted I was alone in resenting.

As I trudged through the frost-crusted underbrush, my foot splashing into a half-frozen puddle, I glanced over to see Steve struggling to pull his leg free from a deep patch of mud. His hands, pale and trembling in the cold, flailed uselessly against the slick, half-frozen ground.

"Steve, grab my hand!" I said, reaching out to him.

He clutched my wrist with an icy, trembling grip, his soaked fingers stiff and unresponsive.

"Th-Thanks," he muttered, his breath coming out in ragged, misting clouds as I hauled him back to his feet.

Damn, his hands are freezing.

I frowned, glancing down at his shivering frame as he pulled his soaked boot from the mud. I clapped him on the back, trying to

share a bit of my slimited warmth as we resumed our march.

According to the information Fuankilo had extracted from a captured Kennethian spy, the defenses in the Metasim region would be at their weakest over the next few days, thanks to a recent troop redeployment. Most of the Kennethian forces had moved to other fronts, and their higher-ranking officers were preoccupied with other assignments, creating a rare, fleeting opportunity for a decisive strike.

Still, the force Aros had assembled for this "holy war" was small—barely five hundred men. Most of the younger male cultists from the main base had been conscripted for the operation, while the remaining members, including the more vulnerable and less combat-capable followers, had been left behind to guard the home front.

Our relatively small numbers were balanced by the presence of three powerful leaders: Aros himself, along with two of the cult's executives, Joanne, ranked sixth, and Pawk, ranked fifth. The seventh-ranked Fuankilo, perhaps to her frustration, had been left behind to manage the base in their absence. The remaining three officers were off launching diversionary raids in other regions, meant to draw away any Orthodox reinforcements that might try to come to Metasim's aid.

If things went according to the original story, this battle would end in a decisive cultist victory. Metasim—the protagonist's hometown—would fall to Aros's forces, plunging him into the depths of despair and setting him on the path to revenge. The Orthodox Kennethian forces stationed there would be crushed, their ranks shattered, and the survivors driven into a desperate retreat before the main Orthodox army could arrive to reinforce them.

If the plot holds, my chances of surviving this battle are relatively high.

Of course, I had no illusions about the reliability of that assumption. Still, the thought gave me a small, fragile sense of hope as we trudged on through the frostbitten wilderness.

After a full day of grueling, uninterrupted marching, we finally reached the borders of the Metasim region.

The country I had reincarnated into—the Holy Kingdom of Gerleid—was, as its name suggested, a theocratic nation ruled by the supreme leader of the Kenneth Orthodoxy.

There was no parliamentary democracy here, no voting, no separation of powers. It was a strict, hierarchical society where the concepts of human rights and democratic values barely existed. Compared to the Aros Temple Cult, it was somewhat more considerate of its subjects, but still, the structure was rigid and oppressive, with a deeply entrenched class system that placed the Orthodoxy firmly at the top.

The Kenneth Orthodoxy maintained its iron grip on power through the unmatched strength of its "Chosen Seven"—the high-ranking executives who served as both its spiritual and military leaders. These seven possessed extraordinary magical abilities, essentially making them walking weapons of mass destruction. In a world where the strong ruled the weak, their power ensured the Orthodoxy's dominance.

Of course, it wasn't just the executives themselves; even their direct subordinates were often monstrous in their own right, further reinforcing the rigid hierarchy within the Orthodoxy's military structure. The sheer difference in power between the upper and lower ranks had ingrained a deep sense of submission among the lower echelons, ensuring the Orthodoxy's absolute control.

Unlike the Earth I once knew, this world had real, tangible miracles. Divine powers granted by the gods, magic that could reshape the world, and rituals that could bring the dead back to life. In such a place, the Orthodoxy's influence naturally grew, its doctrines and dogma embedding themselves deeply into the fabric of society.

At the top of the Gerleid hierarchy was the supreme leader, followed by the other six who formed the highest governing body of the state. Below them were a handful of senior military commanders

—potential future executives—and the high-ranking priests who handled the day-to-day governance of the Orthodoxy's territories.

Beneath this elite ruling class was the vast, struggling mass of commoners—farmers, laborers, and artisans who made up roughly 90% of the population. Their lives were simple, often harsh, and they lacked the power or protection to defend themselves against the many dangers of this world—monsters, bandits, and natural disasters.

Without the protection of the Orthodoxy's military, they would be easy prey for the countless magical beasts that roamed the wilderness, their lives short and brutal. As a result, many of them looked up to the Orthodoxy's executives as divine protectors, near-mythical figures who had descended from the heavens to shield them from the darkness.

From what I had seen so far, the technological level of this world seemed to be somewhere between the medieval and early modern periods, though the presence of magic complicated the comparison. Some aspects of their technology were shockingly advanced, while others were hopelessly primitive, creating a strange, uneven blend of progress and stagnation.

And then there were people like us, who lived even worse lives than the average commoner.

Our days were spent crammed together in dark, damp bunkhouses, our nights spent on cold, hard floors with no personal space, no privacy, and no pay. We worked without rest, ate what little we could scavenge, and trained endlessly for battles we might not survive.

Most of the cultists had never known any other way of life. They were brought here as children, their minds twisted and broken by the cult's indoctrination. They had never experienced the freedom and relative comfort of the outside world, so they had nothing to compare their suffering to.

Maybe they should be grateful for that…

I forced those thoughts aside, my breath misting in the icy mountain air as I glanced down at the fertile plains stretching out below us. The lights of the Metasim region flickered faintly in the distance, the small town nestled within a wide green valley, surrounded by dense forests and gently rolling hills.

Metasim was a rare, prosperous region in the Holy State, spared from the worst of the monster attacks and natural disasters that plagued the rest of the continent. Its fertile soil and mild climate made it a major agricultural center, and the small, tightly-knit community that lived there had grown rich off the bounty of their land.

Of course, that relative peace and prosperity made it an attractive target for the cult.

The people of this world relied on the power of the Orthodoxy's executives and their subordinate magicians to keep the monsters at bay. Without them, their fragile settlements would be overrun in days, their fields trampled and their homes reduced to rubble by the countless magical beasts that prowled the wilderness.

When this world was simply a game I was playing, I could just check my status screen to get a rough estimate of my chances in a fight. I had health bars, skill levels, and all kinds of convenient information to rely on.

But now, there were no neat little pop-ups, no clearly defined stats to keep track of. My strength, my abilities, my chances of survival—all of it was a vague, uncertain mess, clouded by fear and exhaustion.

I'm really at a disadvantage here…

We continued our slow, grinding march down the uneven, frost-crusted mountain trail, my boots slipping against the gravel-strewn ground as I forced myself to keep moving, my thoughts drifting back to the warm, familiar streets of Japan as the freezing wind bit into my exposed skin.

Man, if only we had cars or bikes or something… This endless marching is killing me. My legs feel like they're turning to lead. If

this is a dream, someone, please… wake me up already…

I stumbled over a dip in the uneven ground, my knee slamming into a jagged rock. A burning pain shot up my leg, the impact reverberating through my bones. I staggered back to my feet, hurriedly brushing off the icy dirt as the cultist behind me shoved me forward with a grunt.

Ugh, this pain feels too real to be a dream.

At the front of our formation, Aros came to a sudden halt, his masked face tilting up toward the starry sky. He raised one gloved hand to his ear, his head slightly cocked as if listening to some distant, inaudible whisper.

Probably communicating with the three other executives, I guessed, my breath misting in the cold air as I forced myself to straighten, ignoring the dull, throbbing ache in my bruised knee.

According to the plan, those three were currently leading diversionary raids in other regions, drawing the Orthodoxy's reinforcements away from Metasim and thinning their defensive lines.

The Kenneth Orthodoxy, for all its strength and divine power, was constantly stretched thin. Its seven executives and their chosen subordinates were responsible for everything from military strategy to domestic governance, monster suppression, and disaster response. There was never a moment of peace for them, never a chance to rest or lower their guard.

That kind of pressure inevitably left cracks in their defenses, especially in remote, sparsely populated regions like this one, where the Orthodoxy's influence was weaker and its military presence was spread thin. For all its overwhelming might, the Orthodoxy was still a centralized, hierarchical structure, bound by rules and obligations that made it slower to react to sudden threats.

By comparison, the Aros Temple Cult had no such restrictions. We had no towns to defend, no civilians to protect, no reputations to maintain. We were free to hit fast, hit hard, and retreat without a second thought. We could take risks the Orthodox forces couldn't,

sacrifice grunts without a second thought, and leave chaos in our wake without worrying about the consequences.

It's a hell of a lot easier to destroy than it is to protect. I should know—I've been on the receiving end of their tricks often enough.

When I played the game, I'd cursed the cult countless times, shouting at my screen as my carefully laid plans were torn apart by their underhanded ambushes and ruthless guerrilla tactics. I'd slammed my fists on my desk more than once, swearing revenge on the faceless, cackling sprites that wiped out my carefully leveled party with cheap, dirty tricks.

Then, Aros's head turned, the faint rustling sound of his cloak cutting through the icy silence as he finished his mental conversation. He cleared his throat, his distorted voice echoing across the assembled ranks of cultists.

"Women and children are to be captured where possible. Men and the elderly may be killed as needed. Avoid damaging the farmlands and livestock if you can."

He said it so casually, his tone as light as if he were reading off a grocery list.

I felt a cold, nauseating shiver crawl down my spine, the bruised muscles in my leg momentarily forgotten as I stared up at the masked figure at the front of our column.

This guy… What the hell does he think human lives are worth?

Aros's tone was calm, almost lazy, his words rolling off his tongue with a careless, detached ease that sent a fresh wave of anger and disgust boiling up in my chest.

If he had even a shred of compassion—if he could feel even the faintest flicker of empathy—this massacre wouldn't be about to happen.

I tightened my grip on the hilt of my longsword, my knuckles turning white as I forced myself to swallow the surge of anger rising in my chest. In this world, the powerless were crushed without mercy. Lashing out here, now, would be worse than useless—it would be suicidal.

If only I had the strength to kill Aros…

Even as the thought crossed my mind, I knew how pointless it was. Killing the cult leader alone wouldn't be enough. Someone would just rise to take his place, another fanatic stepping into the power vacuum left by his death.

No, to truly destroy this madness, I would need the power to wipe out all seven executives, break the brainwashing that held the cult's followers in thrall, and force every last one of them to convert to the Kenneth Orthodoxy. Only then would the cult truly fall.

Religion… It's not something you can just break or rewrite with a few words. Even if you tell a cultist, "You're being deceived," they're not going to just snap out of it and change their ways. Once a person's way of life and worldview have been molded by their beliefs, it's nearly impossible to shift them.

Aros Hawkeye—the masked, enigmatic figure standing at the head of our column—was the twisted heart of this deranged faith, the unshakable pillar around which this madness had formed.

"All right, everyone, it's time to move out," Aros called, his voice sharp and clear, cutting through the bitter, frost-laden air.

"Yes, Aros-sama," came the immediate, almost reflexive response from the surrounding cultists.

"Leave it to me," Joanne added, Pawk following behind her.

From my place among the lower ranks, I watched as the three executives lined up at the edge of the steep, rocky slope, their faces turned toward the small, distant town nestled in the valley below.

Beyond the jagged ice-rimmed cliff edge, the town of Metasim lay spread out like a broken puzzle, its walls and narrow winding streets lit by countless tiny, flickering lights. Warm yellowish glows shone from the windows of hundreds of tightly packed houses, each one a small, fragile flame in the darkness.

Every one of those lights represents a life—a family huddled together, sharing the warmth of their hearth as they prepare for the long, bitter winter.

Unfortunately, here we were, about to snuff them out.

I felt a cold, sinking weight settle in my chest as I looked down at the sprawling, defenseless town, my grip on my sword tightening as my teeth ground together, the metallic taste of blood filling my mouth as I bit down on my tongue to keep from screaming.

"Yo, Oakley!"

I blinked, my head snapping up as Joanne's voice cut through my swirling thoughts, her eyes locking onto mine as she turned to flash me a wide, manic grin, her white teeth gleaming in the pale moonlight.

"Make sure you're watching, okay?" she called, her tone bright and cheerful, her head cocked slightly to the side as she reached out to tap the pendant hanging around my neck.

I felt Steve's eyes on me, his mouth opening and closing silently as he struggled to form words, and I swallowed.

The tide of battle wasn't just determined by the strength of one's magic. Often, it was the sheer, unrestrained malice and killing intent that tipped the scales. And few understood this better than the two maniacs standing at the edge of the cliff before me—the sixth-ranked executive, Joanne Sagamix, and the fifth-ranked executive, Pawk Tedlotus.

When these two combined their twisted abilities, the results were nothing short of catastrophic.

Joanne's specialty was simply throwing. With a range of nearly fifty kilometers, she could launch massive projectiles with terrifying accuracy. Anything caught within the impact zone—or even too close to the shockwave—would be reduced to a fine, bloody mist.

Pawk Tedlotus, on the other hand, possessed a far more insidious power. Her magic allowed her to summon an endless tangle of razor-sharp, poison-laden *thorns* from the gaps in her clothing, tendrils of barbed, blackened vines that could pierce flesh, crack bone, and wrap around the bodies of the dead, turning them into mindless, poisonous puppets.

"Aros-sama! That building over there—that's the one where the Orthodox soldiers are holed up, right?!" Joanne asked.

"Indeed. Go ahead and do your worst," Aros replied, his tone as light as ever.

"Roger that!"

Joanne bent down, wrapping her slender arms around a boulder more than two meters across, the rough, jagged rock grinding against her thin leather gloves as she hoisted it above her head.

At that moment, Pawk stepped forward, extending one hand. A dark, barbed tendril shot from her sleeve, the twisted thorn stabbing into the boulder's rough surface with a sharp, wet crack. Cracks spiderwebbed across the rock, the pale gray stone rapidly turning a sickly, venomous shade of purple as Pawk's poison spread through it.

"All right, Joanne. It's ready!" Pawk called.

This twisted tactic was one of Aros's inventions—a method for devastating fortified positions and terrorizing civilian populations. In the original game, it was known among players as the *Zombie Bomb* strategy, infamous for the horror it unleashed on the protagonist's hometown.

Joanne took a deep, shuddering breath, her eyes gleaming as her muscles coiled, the tendons in her arms and shoulders creaking audibly under the immense strain.

"Haaah!"

With a roar that echoed across the jagged, frost-covered mountain, Joanne whipped her arms forward, the massive, poison-coated boulder launching into the air with a bone-rattling crack.

The stone arced high above the valley, a dark, tumbling mass silhouetted against the star-streaked sky as it hurtled toward the distant town below.

It cut through the thin mountain air with a sharp, whistling scream, shrinking rapidly as it plummeted toward its target—the small, fortified garrison at the heart of the town, the symbol of the Kenneth Orthodoxy etched into the front gate.

A brief, deafening rush of wind and…

Impact.

A moment later, a deep rumbling reached us, accompanied by a faint tremor beneath our feet.

In the distance, the once formidable stronghold of the Orthodox soldiers had crumbled into a formless ruin, reduced to dust and debris. The faint echoes of terrified screams slipped through the wind that brushed past my cheek, blending with the chaotic whispers of destruction.

Shattered stones scattered, entire structures collapsed in on themselves, and within mere seconds, the transformation was complete. Standing beside Joanne, the striking figure dressed in masculine attire tightened her soft, sakura-pink lips into a grim line.

"Aros-sama, the *Automata* have been activated," she reported, her voice sharp and precise despite the chaos around us.

"Is that so? Thank you."

That short exchange told me everything I needed to know. Every soldier stationed at the outpost was dead, their bodies twisted and tainted by Pawk's venomous spines.

In under a minute, those fallen warriors would rise again, transformed into Pawk's mindless puppets, their newly undead limbs driven by a singular, unholy purpose.

This wasn't just an efficient attack tactic. It was a brutal, psychological weapon designed to break the Orthodox forces from within, shattering both their lines and their spirits. It granted Joanne and Pawk a monstrous, overwhelming advantage, and although inhumane and unimaginably cruel, it was undeniably effective.

This was their trump card. Their secret weapon. This was the *Zombie Bomb.*

"Now then, let's begin!" With a sharp turn, Aros swung his arm in a dramatic arc, rallying his troops.

What awaited us wasn't a battle.

It was a massacre.

An unstoppable tide of slaughter and ruin.

In the chaos of this nightmare, amidst the ashes of broken lives…

I'll find the protagonist. I'll seize him. I'll claim the sole hope for this twisted world.

With that resolve burning in my chest, I launched myself down the steep, rocky slope, our vanguard plunging into the dark tide of fanatic screams and guttural roars. The shadowed army surged forward, the mountainside trembling beneath their unholy advance.

This was the beginning of the infamous prologue from the original game. This was the Battle of Metasim.

As the signal for the invasion roared to life, Joanne's second and third volleys whistled over our heads, crashing into the distant walls with bone-shattering force. Her stones smashed through the outer defenses, opening gaping breaches in the fortified barrier.

Taking advantage of the chaos, the cultists surged through the newly formed gaps, pouring into the city like a tide of wrath, their bloodthirsty roars mingling with the shattering of stone as they began their merciless onslaught, just as their cult leader had commanded.

The three high-ranking officers who had been observing us from the rear took to the skies, their forms vanishing into the darkness as they spread out to oversee the carnage.

With the detonation of the *Zombie Bomb,* the once-peaceful town had plunged into a living hell. Around five hundred cultists surged into the streets, their weapons flashing as they fell upon the unsuspecting populace.

It was a brutal, mechanical process—a grim assembly line of destruction. They poured into every corner of the city, flowing like black ink through the tangled web of alleyways, kicking down doors, shattering windows, and dragging the terrified townspeople from their hiding places. Those who resisted were either beaten into submission or silenced with injuries just short of fatal.

Men and the elderly were slain on sight, their soft, defenseless flesh torn through without mercy. Dead bodies were pierced by Pawk's venomous spines, rising again moments later as her twisted puppets, their lifeless limbs animated by the toxin's sinister power.

Pawk’s ability to amplify her forces at such a monstrous scale was terrifying. Even though her powers had limits, in the absence of any high-ranking Orthodoxy defenders, she was effectively unstoppable, a force of absolute, unchallenged dominance.

As I moved through the chaos, darting between thrashing bodies and guttural screams, I took care to break away from the main throng of cultists. Feigning an attack on a terrified townsman, I slipped away from the main assault, my mind locked on a singular destination—the protagonist’s house.

My plan was simple: rescue the protagonist from this nightmare, deliver him alive to the Orthodoxy’s side, and give this world a fighting chance against Aros’s madness. Without the insane resilience and unparalleled growth potential of this world's original protagonist, the entire nation would crumble beneath Aros's twisted ambitions.

If the protagonist were to die here, it would trigger the worst possible scenario—the canon where the Orthodox forces were utterly annihilated. After all, the protagonist was the only person capable of standing against the cult’s high-ranking officers, an ordinary man with the extraordinary potential to shatter fate itself.

At the very least, if I could get him safely out of the Metasim region, the Orthodoxy executive, Celestia, would handle the rest. My path might not perfectly mirror the original story, but I had no choice but to do everything in my power to steer it away from catastrophe.

Don't hesitate! Use every bit of this knowledge and keep moving forward!

I sprinted through the crumbling streets, the explosive growth of the undead rippling at the edges of my vision. Zombies, their ranks swollen by Pawk’s venomous vines, staggered through the smoke-choked alleys, latching onto anything that moved and dragging fresh victims into their rotting embrace.

The first to fall were the curious onlookers who had rushed to the site of the initial explosion, their screams rising into the night as they were overwhelmed. The sight of these fresh horrors finally

snapped the rest of the townspeople from their stunned disbelief, and panic spread like wildfire through the streets.

"Aaaaaah!"

"Run for your liiives!"

Their desperate screams echoed through the streets, but no amount of panic could spare them from the horror that awaited. Those unfortunate enough to be caught by the advancing zombies found their living flesh ripped into and devoured in chunks while they still struggled to flee.

Humans, as it turned out, were remarkably sturdy creatures. Even as they were torn limb from limb, their very flesh gnawed from their bones, their will to live allowed them to cling to life, refusing to die until the moment their hearts ceased to beat.

Pawk's zombies, born from her lethal toxin, carried that same venom in their corrupted veins, spreading the infection with every bite and scratch. The toxin remained potent, even as second and third generations of the undead were created. Once her puppets were released into the world, they multiplied like a plague—an exponentially multiplying swarm destined to consume everything in their path.

The city lights flickered and swayed, casting wild, chaotic shadows as screams rose from all directions, both from the ground and the darkened skies above. The panicked townsfolk, now fully aware of the cultists swarming their streets alongside the undead, plunged deeper into terror.

"Capture the women and children! Kill everyone else!"

The cultists behind me carried out these orders with ruthless efficiency, sweeping through the streets like a tidal wave, battering down doors, dragging civilians into the open, and cutting down anyone who resisted. They repeated their grisly tasks with mechanical precision, driving the survivors into tighter and tighter corners.

Joanne and Pawk's Zombie Bomb is terrifyingly effective as an anti-civilian weapon. Pawk's particularly scary… Her magic is on a

completely different level of twisted.

For all her sharp, boyish charm and breezy looks, Pawk's methods were pure cruelty—poison, barbs, and necromancy, every ability in her arsenal designed to ensnare and torment. Her zombies, in particular, were a nightmare to face. Unlike the mindless shufflers of popular fiction, Pawk's undead retained an uncanny semblance of life, capable of following complex commands with precision.

These Orthodox soldier zombies, for example, followed one critical order with absolute obedience: *Attack everyone except women and children. Never harm those belonging to the Aros Temple Cult.*

It made me wonder if Pawk had a heart at all. But then again, perhaps it was precisely because she understood human fear so intimately that she could craft such vicious tactics. She knew exactly what would crush the spirit of the fleeing masses.

In my old world, there had once been a global agreement that even in war, there were some lines you simply didn't cross—some weapons were far too monstrous to use. But the cultists of this world lacked such restraint. If a method existed that could efficiently slaughter their enemies, they would seize it without hesitation. Their twisted zeal and mad faith had stripped them of any semblance of mercy.

I glanced around, my eyes flicking across the chaos, but saw no sign of Aros or Joanne. They had likely moved to the opposite side of the city, aiming to cut off any escape routes and trap the remaining survivors in a deadly pincer attack.

As long as they haven't headed toward the protagonist's house…

I cast a quick, wary glance at Pawk.

"Oakley Mercury. Don't make any unnecessary moves. Got it?" Pawk said.

"Huh?"

"I'm watching you."

She must have sensed my gaze. Pawk's words, sharp and unsettling, cut through the chaos as she turned on her heel, striding toward the tallest building in the city without so much as a backward glance. Her movements were fluid, almost casual, but the air around her was thick with menace as she scattered her deadly barbs, adding fresh layers of agony to the hellscape around us.

Left standing alone in her wake, a cold shiver ran down my spine, her ominous words echoing in my mind.

"*Unnecessary moves"? Does Pawk know what I'm trying to do?*

A sudden wave of anxiety gripped my heart, sending my pulse into a frantic, uneven rhythm. My vision swayed, the blood vessels behind my eyes throbbing painfully as my body responded to the icy grip of fear.

What the hell is this? It's not just Joanne and Fuankilo keeping tabs on me—now Pawk has her eyes on me too?!

I scrambled for any rational explanation, desperate to convince myself that I was simply overreacting.

No, wait… That can't be right. To her, I'm just another nameless cultist. I've never revealed knowledge of my past life in front of anyone, not a single person. I've kept my head down and lived as a faceless grunt, a shadow among the ranks. I'm not someone an executive like Pawk would bother keeping track of. My true intentions can't possibly be exposed.

Besides, it was unlikely she had taken a specific interest in the protagonist either. After all, the protagonist wasn't some hidden heir to a legendary bloodline or the chosen one blessed with divine powers. He was just an ordinary kid from a perfectly mundane family. His rise to prominence wouldn't come for several years, long after this bloody chapter in the timeline.

As I fought to steady my nerves, a voice called out from just behind me.

"Man, Oakley, I'm surprised. I didn't know you were on speaking terms with someone like Joanne-sama or Pawk-sama," Steve said with a wry smile.

"Ah, y-yeah… It's something like that…"

I forced a weak, half-hearted reply to Steve before breaking into a run again, my mind snapping back to my mission. The protagonist's house wasn't far, and thanks to my memories of the original game's past arc, I knew this city's layout like the back of my hand.

I remember it clearly. Every street, every corner. I know this place, this small, tightly-knit community. I know who lived here, how they went about their lives, and where they might have hidden in a time of crisis.

In the original game's past arc, players were forced to control the protagonist during his childhood, fully aware of the inevitable tragedy that awaited him.

Despite knowing that the Battle of Metasim would end in total defeat, we had no choice but to guide this boy through his doomed hometown, painfully aware that every friend and family member he cherished would soon be dead. All we could do was watch, helpless, as the horrors unfolded on screen.

Wandering through a place already fated for destruction and interacting with characters destined to die was a uniquely hollow and heartbreaking experience. It was a deliberate move by the developers, meant to deepen the player's connection to the protagonist and his hatred for the cultists. They even made the protagonist fully controllable during the invasion itself, forcing players to witness the massacre up close in all its grisly detail.

It was a well-known piece of eroge history that one popular streamer, lured by the growing reputation of *Seeker of the Netherworld,* had decided to livestream the all-ages version, which, despite the label, was still rated 15+. During the past arc, he'd infamously blurted out, "Everyone's just going to die anyway, so why bother getting attached?" and "Pawk-sama is way too cruel." His growing despair had led him to utter the unforgettable line, "Should we just stop playing?" His crashout became the stuff of gaming

legend, a testament to just how brutal this section of the game could be.

I remembered my reaction clearly. I got physically sick after playing through it. I still recalled the moments that broke me:

The friendly old man who used to play with the protagonist as a kid, crushed by a flying boulder as he shielded the boy with his body—likely thanks to Joanne's catapult, I suddenly realized.

The childhood friend—the girl who had once promised to marry the protagonist—engulfed in flames and reduced to a charred, unrecognizable corpse.

The protagonist's parents, who had hidden him beneath the floorboards, only for him to watch in silent horror as they were dragged out and disemboweled alive, their screams echoing in his ears as their entrails were scattered across the floor.

The all-ages version had to tone down the gore, cutting out or replacing the most explicit CGs, but the adult version was utterly unforgiving.

For example, in the adult version, there was a tearful reunion scene between the grown protagonist and his parents. But, of course, anyone familiar with the story's darker turns would immediately realize the horrifying twist: those parents weren't alive at all. They were reanimated corpses, puppets twisted into obedience by Pawk's power.

Even worse, they'd retained enough of their original memories and personalities to have a full conversation with their son, reminiscing as if nothing had changed. Pawk's cruel handiwork had been put on full display, a twisted mockery of family bonds. *Oh, how kind of you, Pawk-sama. Truly a heartless monster.*

Then there was the childhood friend. For some reason, her character had an unusual number of alternate costume and expression CGs, making her a favorite for fan artists and the subject of countless time-travel fanfics where players imagined rescuing her from her grim fate. If I happened to come across her in this hell, I'd

try to save her. If I were to save anyone, I might as well save as many as I could.

Lost in these desperate, nostalgic thoughts, I sprinted through the shattered streets, kicking aside rubble as I made my way toward her house. As I rounded the final corner leading to her street, my breath hitched. Hot, thick smoke filled the air, the flickering light of fire dancing across the broken stone.

If I just get through this street, I'll arrive at his childhood friend's house— No, it can't be…

My thoughts shattered. A burning ember whipped past my cheek, its sharp sting pulling me back to reality.

The fire was coming from her house.

I stumbled forward, my mind blank as my legs carried me closer, the world around me reduced to smoldering ash and twisted, blackened stone. Most of the townspeople had already fled or been cut down, leaving the street eerily empty save for the jagged ruins and cracked cobblestones beneath my feet.

She was fast, wasn't she? She'd always been quick, the best at hide-and-seek, the one who could outrun anyone. Maybe she'd escaped, hidden herself somewhere safe. It had to be that. It *had* to be.

"Huh?" A strangled noise escaped my throat as I stumbled around the final corner.

There, lying amid the smoldering debris, was a charred, blackened corpse, its form horrifyingly familiar.

It was the exact same image burned into my memory from that infamous CG scene—an unforgettable, tragic silhouette, her clothes reduced to blackened scraps fluttering like tattered moths in the smoky wind.

The stench of charred flesh clawed at my nose, sharp and nauseating, twisting my stomach into knots.

"Oakley! What the hell are you doing?! Leave that corpse alone!"

Steve's shout snapped me back to reality, his eyes locking onto my frozen form. His voice, hoarse and strained, cut through my spiraling thoughts.

"Do you… know her?" he asked, his tone almost suspicious.

"No… I don't have any friends outside the cult."

The words fell from my lips, flat and emotionless, even as my heart twisted painfully in my chest.

Steve nodded, his face unreadable. "Figured as much."

Of course he did. My memories in this life began within the walls of the Aros Temple Cult's stronghold. I had no friends outside this twisted faith. It was a simple, undeniable truth.

I tore my gaze away from the charred corpse and forced myself to keep moving, sprinting through the smoke-filled street. The flames here were far worse than I remembered from the game. Entire buildings had become roaring pyres, the air thick with heat and the acrid stench of burning flesh. There were no safe corners, no places to hide.

It was a hellscape that would devour even the hardiest of adults, let alone a child.

Maybe dying quickly would be a mercy—better that than being hunted, tortured, and violated by the cultists. At least in death, there's no more fear, no more pain.

I forced the thought aside, gripping tightly the thin thread of hope I had left.

Wait… If I remember correctly, there should be a drain leading to the sewers a few hundred meters from the protagonist's house. If I can just get him there… I have to. It's his only chance.

I pushed my body harder, my muscles screaming in protest as I sprinted toward the distinctive, single-story house in the distance. My lungs burned, each breath tearing through my chest like fire, but I couldn't stop.

Then, just as I reached the final stretch, a sudden, unsettling realization struck me. Steve was still right behind me.

"Hey, Steve. Why are you following me? Shouldn't we be splitting up to capture the fleeing townsfolk?" I asked.

As long as he was watching me, I had no way of meeting the protagonist without arousing suspicion. If he caught me letting a child escape, I'd have no choice but to kidnap the protagonist just to cover my tracks. The thought of turning the game's hero into a cultist was a nightmare scenario.

No, I had to shake him. No matter how trustworthy Steve might seem, I couldn't risk exposing myself. He might have dreams of a different future, just like me, but that didn't mean I could rely on him.

Steve fixed me with a sharp, probing stare, his expression unexpectedly serious. "I have a question for you, Oakley. Where exactly are you headed? You've been moving through the streets like you know this place, choosing every path without a hint of hesitation. But as far as I know, we're not supposed to have any knowledge of the outside world."

The impact of his words hit me like a blow to the back of the head. My blood ran cold, the shock spreading through my veins like a slow, creeping frost.

Shit*… Why the hell is he suddenly so sharp?!*

"I… I'm on good terms with Joanne-sama," I replied, forcing a shaky grin. "She gave me a rough layout of the city beforehand."

"I see." Steve's eyes narrowed slightly, his lips pressing into a thin line. "So, where exactly are you going?"

"The outer gate," I shot back quickly, trying to sound convincing. "The townsfolk will be trying to escape in the opposite direction of our advance. I'm heading there to close the gates and trap them inside."

"Hm. Not a bad idea." Steve rubbed his chin thoughtfully before nodding, as if coming to a decision. "All right, then. You'll need help with that. I'm coming with you."

I swallowed hard, my heart sinking into my stomach. I couldn't refuse without raising more suspicion, so I forced a tight, unconvincing smile. "Y-Yeah, that'd be great. I appreciate it."

Fuck! This is a disaster! I don't have time for this! If I don't hurry, the flames will spread, and the protagonist might burn to death before I even reach him!

Steve was the closest thing I had to a friend within the cult. We'd shared quiet conversations about our dreams, even promised to seek out those distant landscapes together once the fighting ended. We were the rare few who dared to think about a future beyond bloodshed.

Even so…

He's in my way. No matter how much I want to trust him, I can't risk it. What do I do?

My mind raced through the rapidly narrowing options.

Should I abandon my mission, leave the protagonist's fate to chance, and escape with Steve? Or should I commit to my original plan, reach the protagonist at all costs, and ensure his survival by cutting all ties with Steve, even if it means risking everything?

I couldn't choose both.

If I chose the second path, I'd have to lose Steve completely, shake him off my trail for good. But that wasn't an easy task. If he realized I had knowledge I shouldn't, if I let slip even a hint of my past life, he'd brand me a madman and report me to the cult's higher-ups. I'd be bound, tortured, and executed without mercy.

We weren't close enough to share such dangerous secrets. Not yet.

Maybe one day, if things were different. But not now.

I have to decide. Right here. Right now.

The sound of distant screams and the relentless, scraping shuffle of the undead grew louder, drawing closer with every second.

I had no time left.

I can't leave the protagonist's life to chance. He's the key to this entire holy war. If I want to save him, I have to act now—even if it means taking Steve out.

I made my choice. I would save the protagonist with my own hands.

I felt a pang of guilt, but it was a small price to pay. Steve would just have to sleep through this part of the nightmare.

Sorry, Steve…

There was a technique for rendering a person unconscious with a single strike to the back of the neck—a move that required immense strength and precision. I had been trained in such techniques as a cultist, and my success rate with this particular move was close to a hundred percent.

Taking advantage of a moment when Steve's attention drifted, I slipped behind him, moving as silently as a shadow. I quickly scanned our surroundings to make sure no one else was nearby. Satisfied, I tightened my grip, focused my strength, and brought the edge of my hand down against the base of his skull.

Thunk.

It connected perfectly, the shock traveling up my arm with a satisfying, decisive finality. Steve's body went limp, his legs folding beneath him as he crumpled to the ground.

"All right. Time to go." I turned, ready to bolt toward the protagonist's house.

That was when it happened. "What… do you think you're doing?"

My blood ran cold.

Steve, the man I was certain I had just knocked unconscious, was on his feet again, one hand clutching the back of his neck, the other aiming a crossbow directly at me. His eyes were wild, his expression twisted with betrayal.

"W-Wait, this isn't—"

"You lied to me, Oakley."

"No, no, it's not like that, Steve! Just listen—"

"Then what is it?! Explain yourself!"

"Listen, I—"

"Don't you dare! You promised me, Oakley! You said we'd find that dream landscape together! That was *your* idea! Was it all just a convenient lie to keep me in the dark?!"

"No, it wasn't! I swear it wasn't!"

"I trusted you… I actually trusted you…"

I wanted to trust him, too. I wanted to believe we could share the same dream, but this wasn't the time for hesitation. I had to make a choice.

I inched closer, slowly closing the gap between us, my eyes locked on the loaded crossbow in his trembling hands.

"Betraying the cult… Losing a friend like this… I never thought it would come to this," he muttered, his voice thick with bitter disbelief.

We stood there, surrounded by crackling flames and the distant, echoing screams of a dying city. Steve's eyes were hard, his jaw set in grim determination. He no longer saw me as a comrade.

No…

There was no going back. I had to act. For the sake of this world, I had to kill the only person I had ever connected with in this twisted life.

I tensed my legs, pushing off the ground with all my strength, my body a coiled spring of desperation and regret.

Steve's finger twitched on the trigger. The crossbow fired.

I ducked low, the poisoned bolt whistling past my head, slicing through the air where my skull had been just a heartbeat earlier. I

dropped into a sliding tackle, my shoulder slamming into Steve's midsection with bone-crushing force.

"Ngh!"

The impact sent him sprawling backward, his back slamming against the shattered cobblestones.

Before he could recover, I drew the knife from my belt, the cold metal flashing in the firelight as I brought it to his throat. I felt his body go limp beneath me, his arms falling away as if he had given up completely.

The fight ended in a single, brutal instant.

But then…

What?

A cold, rubbery sensation met my hand as I pressed the blade against his neck. It felt… wrong. His skin was cold and unnaturally stiff, without the slightest hint of the warm, living flesh I expected. It reminded me of lifeless rubber, like pressing against a dead fish's scaled body.

I tightened my grip, forcing the blade to slice just slightly into his skin, but not a single drop of blood emerged.

My breath caught in my throat. Suddenly, Pawk's chilling words echoed in my mind.

I'm watching you.

The realization hit me like a cold, steel blade to the gut.

Pawk's ability, her *thorns,* allowed her to control corpses, even remotely, once her toxin had fully taken hold.

Steve's unnatural coldness, the rubbery feel of his skin, the fact that my perfectly executed neck strike had failed to knock him out—it all made sense now. Steve had been one of Pawk's puppets from the very beginning.

How could I have been so blind?

I felt bile rise in my throat as my mind replayed every mistake I'd made. I should have realized it the moment I struck him, the instant my hand registered that lifeless, rubbery texture. I should have known something was horribly wrong.

Think, dammit. Think.

Pawk's most dangerous trick—her most twisted, vile technique—was her ability to create what she called *Automata.* These were not mere zombies but corpses with their original memories and personalities partially intact, designed to mimic the living perfectly. She could even control them remotely, sharing their senses and seeing through their eyes.

I forced myself to meet Steve's eyes.

They were dry, unnaturally so, the flesh around his sockets cracked and discolored from dehydration, the whites of his eyes a sickly, bloodless gray. His corneas looked like dried parchment, brittle and dead, fluttering with every slight movement of his head like the wings of a dying insect.

She's watching me.

Through those lifeless, glassy eyes, Pawk was watching my every move, my every twitch, every flicker of panic.

My heart seized in my chest, a vise clamping down around my ribs, squeezing the breath from my lungs. I had dug my own grave. The depth of my mistake was so catastrophic, so mind-numbingly stupid, that my entire body went cold.

What the hell have I done?

I felt my mind begin to fracture, the weight of my countless blunders grinding my sanity into dust. I had walked straight into this trap, ignored every warning sign, and stumbled into Pawk's web without a second thought.

I had ignored her taunting words—*I'm watching you*—and thrown myself headlong into the jaws of death, dragging every fragile hope I had with me.

I should have known better. I should have been smarter. I should have… My chest heaved. My heart pounded so violently it felt like my ribs would crack. *This is a complete and utter checkmate.*

My grip on the knife loosened, the blade slipping from my trembling fingers as the full, horrifying weight of my situation crashed down on me.

I felt my knees hit the cracked, blood-smeared cobblestones, my forehead striking the ground with a dull, wet thud.

"Steve," I said.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I… I think I've lost my mind."

"Hah?"

I let my head fall again, slamming my skull against the stone. Once. Twice. A third time, until I felt the hot, wet warmth of my own blood trickle down my face, pooling beneath me.

What the hell am I doing?

I tightened my fists, my fingernails digging into the cold, unyielding ground. My head throbbed, each impact sending sharp, electric pain splintering through my skull, but the agony felt distant, almost dreamlike.

How the hell did it come to this?

"O-Oakley! What are you doing?!" Steve's voice, or whatever hollow echo of it remained, cut through the haze.

The sound of my own cracking skull rang in my ears, each sickening crunch a reminder of my utter, humiliating failure.

Why…? Why did I run so blindly toward the protagonist? Why didn't I consider the possibility of being watched? Why didn't I think for one second?!

I felt my muscles lock, my limbs seizing as a wave of cold terror swept through me. My breaths came in shallow, rapid gasps, my lungs clawing for air. My pulse thudded violently in my temples, a frantic, irregular drumbeat.

I'm going to die. I'm going to die here. I'm going to die without even saving someone. Without changing a thing.

Steve's mouth moved, his jaw clacking with a stiff, unnatural motion, but I heard none of his words. My own panicked thoughts drowned out everything, a chaotic, disjointed roar filling my head.

Oh, God. Oh, God. My body feels wrong. I'm freezing. I can't breathe. My chest hurts. My vision's going dark. My ears are ringing. My head is spinning. This is bad. This is really, really bad—

I had grown used to the stench of death. The nauseating, throat-clogging reek of rotting flesh and blood had become a daily reality, a constant, unending assault on my senses.

I had been thrust into a nightmare—a world where a single mistake could mean a brutal, agonizing death, where every breath came with the risk of betrayal or dismemberment. The stress was unimaginable, unlike anything I had ever faced in modern Japan.

Perhaps that was why I clung so desperately to the concept of the "original game," why I kept muttering those delusional fragments of escape. It was a mental crutch, a pathetic attempt at self-defense, a way to pretend that this wasn't real.

Now, with my own disastrous mistakes dragging me into a true checkmate, my mind was coming apart at the seams. My body shuddered, my muscles twitching uncontrollably as my fractured thoughts crashed against one another, every regret and half-baked excuse boiling to the surface.

Inconsistent, half-hearted decisions… Wishful thinking… Hesitant self-preservation… Still imagining myself in the role of a "player."

I had been fooling myself all along. I had been running headlong into danger, clinging to the delusion that this world was just a stage, that its characters would follow the "script" and play out the events as I remembered them.

Realization? Resolve? Who the hell cares? This is just a world based on the original story! The characters are supposed to follow the script! I can't change anything! That's why I needed to save the protagonist, to make him shoulder the burden of this world's survival!

I felt my consciousness splintering, my mind fracturing into two warring halves. One part of me—the coward, the escapist—screamed that anyone in my position would have broken down the same way. It demanded sympathy, insisting that I had been thrown into an impossible, hellish situation without warning.

The protagonist of the original game had always been a convenient hero, a flawless savior who could cut through despair and lead the world to salvation. He had been my final, desperate hope. In a way, he had even been my god. I had clung to the belief that if I could just protect him, everything would work out. He would rise to power, crush the cult, and save this cursed world.

But here, in this moment, there was no god, no perfect savior. Just a terrified, trembling fool gasping for breath on the blood-soaked ground.

No one is coming to save me.

I knew that, of course. I had always known it. But I had chosen to ignore it, to cling to the fragile, desperate hope that someone—anyone—would come to my rescue. I had been running from the truth, hiding behind the flimsy comfort of nostalgia and delusion.

I… I can't do it. I can't accept this reality. I can't live in this world.

The rational, analytical part of me—what little remained—observed my crumbling psyche with cold detachment. It noted every fear, every misplaced hope, every pitiful, self-deceiving excuse.

I had never truly accepted my new reality. I had clung to the fantasy that my real body was still somewhere in Japan, lying in a hospital bed, just waiting to wake up. I had dreamed of warm meals, soft beds, private rooms, clean water, and safe, comfortable routines. I had told myself that all I had to do was survive a little longer, that I could go back to that quiet, normal life if I just held on.

Unfortunately, that dream had been a lie. I had grown so skilled at making excuses, at ignoring the harsh reality before me, that I had missed every critical warning sign and dug my own grave with my own two hands.

I can't live in this world. I don't want to. I can't take this anymore. I want to go back. I want to go home.

My breath came in short, panicked gasps. My chest felt tight, my heart hammering against my ribs. My body shook, my muscles

spasming uncontrollably as the full, crushing weight of my fear and despair washed over me.

I'm scared. I'm so damn scared.

My vision blurred, tears spilling down my cheeks as my throat clenched, a burning pain rising from my gut. I retched, vomiting violently onto the cracked stone beneath me, my head spinning, my limbs trembling.

Through the haze of my panicked, tear-blurred vision, I felt Steve's cold, dead hands grab my head, forcing something painful and bitter against my forehead.

A healing potion.

Even death itself was denied to me.

No. No, please, just let me die. Let me escape this nightmare. I don't want this. I can't take it any longer.

I felt my mind slipping again, my shattered consciousness splintering into fragments as my survival instincts warred against my fractured, despairing psyche.

There were no "routes" here. No carefully scripted endings, no neatly packaged conclusions prepared by a team of developers. This wasn't a game. There was no god to guide me. I had to carve my own path, choose my own fate.

There are no "extras" in this world.

Even though my influence was small compared to those with power and status, I still had the ability to affect this world, to change the course of fate. I had already proven that. I had spoken with Joanne, Fuankilo, and even Pawk, leaving my mark on the world in ways no mere background character ever could.

In a game, a background character would never have the chance to disrupt the main storyline, to interfere with the hero's path. But this was reality. These people, these characters, were alive. They were living, breathing beings with their own desires, fears, and ambitions.

They didn't follow neatly scripted paths. They didn't move like predictable, clockwork puppets. I had learned that the hard way.

Joanne's cunning, Fuankilo's quiet malice, Pawk's unrelenting cruelty—all of them had shown me just how unpredictable this world truly was.

Even the so-called "protagonist" I had pinned my hopes on had been moving independently, completely unaware of my plans, acting according to his own instincts and fears. I had no control over him, no way to dictate his choices.

In truth, there was no way to know which "route" this world would take. The idea of fixed paths and predetermined endings had always been an illusion.

So, in the end, I'm the only one who can change my future.

But still…

If I can just save the protagonist, then maybe, just maybe…

A desperate, clinging part of me still screamed in protest, stubbornly insisting that the protagonist was my only hope.

Alas, even that hope had its cracks. I had to face the truth.

The original protagonist had been a completely ordinary person before his transformation into a hero. It was only after he'd been driven to the brink of madness, after he had lost everything, that he had forged himself into a savior. It was precisely because of his unbearable suffering that he had developed the unbreakable, insane willpower needed to become a legendary warrior.

If he could become a hero, then perhaps someone as ordinary as me could, too.

If I can manage the resolve.

If I truly wanted the protagonist to become the savior this world needed, then perhaps I had to let him suffer. He had to experience true soul-crushing despair. He had to witness his friends and family slaughtered, his hometown reduced to ash and ruin, his soul twisted by the fires of revenge.

Saving him now, before he had a chance to transform, might only weaken him, disrupting the very path that would lead him to greatness.

Besides, if a cultist like me were to save him, wouldn't that poison his perception? If he learned that not all cultists were his enemies, that there were "good" people even among his sworn foes, wouldn't that create a dangerous crack in his worldview?

Wouldn't that taint his pure, unrelenting hatred, his burning need to crush the Aros Temple Cult?

It was a cruel calculation, but perhaps my failure here, my inability to reach him, had been a twisted blessing in disguise.

I had failed to save him, and in doing so, I might have protected the very future I had been trying to secure.

No… If I'm being honest, a part of me must have known this from the beginning.

Maybe it was the carnage—the endless parade of atrocities that had slowly, insidiously awakened a flicker of guilt within me. I had wanted to save someone, to reach out and rescue a child with the potential to become a hero, to grasp at some fleeting sense of redemption.

I had wanted to feel like a good person.

I forced myself to confront the contradictions festering in my mind, each bitter truth dragging me closer to the terrifying reality I had been so desperate to avoid.

It felt like carving into my own flesh, slicing through the layers of delusion and cowardice I had wrapped myself in.

Understanding my own weaknesses—my fear, my hesitation, my selfishness—was a profoundly humiliating, soul-crushing experience. But if I was ever going to survive, I had to kill this pathetic part of myself.

I had to bury it, leave it behind, and face this twisted reality head-on.

I had clung to the hope that saving the protagonist would lead me to the "true ending," the golden path where everything worked out, where the world was saved and my suffering came to an end.

The truth was, even if I had managed to save him, there was no guarantee that we would reach that happy, triumphant conclusion.

For all I knew, I might accidentally push him onto a darker, more twisted path—the kind that ended in his corruption or worse, the complete annihilation of the Kennethian forces.

What if my intervention only created a stronger, more terrifying enemy? What if my attempt to save him ended up being the catalyst for the world's destruction?

If I truly wanted to grasp a better future, I couldn't rely on anyone else. I couldn't keep gambling with other people's lives, hoping that some miraculous "true ending" would fall into my lap.

No one was coming to save me. No one was going to rewrite this world's story for me.

I had clung to the familiar, comfortable illusion that I could somehow avoid the worst of this nightmare by following the script, by staying within the boundaries of the game's original plot.

Sadly, the truth was that this world was no game. It was a brutal, unpredictable reality where anything could happen, where even the smallest mistake could lead to a bloody, agonizing death.

The comfortable, nostalgic dream of Japan—the warm meals, the clean sheets, the soft beds, the endless streams of digital distractions. All of it was gone. I had clung to that memory like a lifeline, convinced that if I just survived a little longer, I could go back to that simpler, safer world.

That world was gone.

There was no omnipotent player to save me. No convenient "load game" button to reset my mistakes.

This was my reality now.

Wake up. Wake up and live, or die here in the dirt, a nameless fool who couldn't face the truth. I don't want this. I don't want to live here. I want to go home.

The coward in me, the frightened, weak part of myself that still clung to that long-lost world, faltered, its desperate, clinging grip beginning to weaken.

It was time to end things.

Live in this reality. Change it with your own hands.

No… I can't. I'm not strong enough. This world is too much for me.

Even now, my mind clung to cowardice.

People are dying.

Yes, they are. Countless lives, snuffed out like candle flames.

They're dying like insects.

Like garbage. Worthless. I'll probably be one of them soon.

No. I won't die. Someone will come for me. Someone will save me. Maybe Joanne. She likes me, right? She'll swoop in like a hero and save me at the last second.

I knew better…

Joanne might have some twisted affection for me, but she was a loyal follower of Aros above all else. If I truly meant that much to her, she would have been at my side throughout this battle, clinging to me like a shadow. But she wasn't. She had her priorities, and I wasn't at the top of the list.

For all her obsessive tendencies, she wasn't my savior. None of them were. Every one of those high-ranking cultists worshipped Aros above all else.

I want to die.

Then go ahead.

The dream won't end. Only my life will. But what the hell am I supposed to do? Think. Think, damn it. Find a way to beat this reality.

You can't keep relying on others. You can't keep hiding behind the original game's script, pretending that everything will work out as long as you press the right buttons. The original text repeated it over and over, didn't it? The protagonist was just an ordinary person. An ordinary person, born without special powers or divine blood. If even he could rise to become a hero, then why can't you? People who sit around begging for salvation never find it. Only the strong, the ones who claw their way through blood and fire, ever change their fates. But can I really turn this around?

Don't ask if you can.

Just do it.

This world demands that resolve.

So…

Can you commit? Can you truly cast aside your fear and make that choice?

It would have been easier to keep screaming, to let myself go mad and slip into a comforting haze of delusion. But that would only lead to regret. And this world didn't care about my regrets.

I knew that.

This world was a nightmare.

Maybe there was never such a thing as an "easy" life to begin with.

I couldn't push my burdens onto the protagonist. I couldn't sit back and expect someone else to play the hero.

If I wanted a different future, I would have to seize it with my own hands.

It'll be hell if I move forward and hell if I retreat.

Fine. All right. If that's how it is, I'll keep moving. I'll fight tooth and nail until my dying breath. I'll carve my path through this twisted world with my own two hands.

With those final words, the fractured pieces of my mind slammed back together, the weak, sniveling coward I had tried to suppress finally merging with the hardened, defiant self that had emerged from this nightmare.

It was too late to pretend otherwise.

I could finally, truly feel it—the bitter, desperate resolve to defy this wretched reality.

I should have reached this conclusion sooner.

I should have chosen this path long ago.

I hadn't.

Still, it was better to realize it now than never.

I might still have a chance.

I might still have time to change my fate.

As that harsh, final truth settled into my bones, a grim, defiant strength flooded through my battered, exhausted body.

Fight.

Live.

Change the world.

…

"———! ——kley! Oakley!"

I jolted awake, my eyes snapping open to a harsh, flickering light. My body felt heavy, my limbs numb, and it took a moment for the pain to fully register. My wrists and ankles were tightly bound, the rough, scratchy ropes cutting into my skin as I lay sprawled in the center of the town square.

"Oh, you're awake. You really gave me a scare back there, thrashing around like that. Not like you at all," Steve said, his voice flat and lifeless.

A fresh wave of pain shot through my skull as the gash on my forehead reopened, warm blood trickling down my face, stinging my eyes. The sharp, pulsing agony was a brutal reminder of my current reality—a vivid, unending nightmare.

"Untie me, Steve," I said, my voice raw and shaky.

"I refuse. You'll stay like this until Pawk-sama arrives."

Of course. There it was—the unbreakable link between Steve and Pawk.

He stood over me, his gaze fixed on the burning city of Metasim, the flames casting long, jagged shadows across the broken cobblestones. His face was an unreadable mask, his eyes devoid of the warmth and camaraderie I had once clung to.

Whatever bond we had once shared was gone.

Steve's cold, unblinking stare was a stark reminder that the person I had thought of as a friend had never truly existed. He had been dead from the start, a lifeless puppet, animated by Pawk's twisted power and filled with nothing more than echoes of his former self.

Even so, those echoes had kept me sane, had kept me moving forward when I was ready to collapse. I had believed in his dream, in the promise that we might one day stand together on the edge of a new world.

I had let my guard down. I had allowed myself to hope.

That's exactly what Pawk wanted.

She had used his half-living shell to manipulate me, to pry at the cracks in my heart, to lure me into a trap of my own making.

Even if Steve's true soul was long gone, I just couldn't bring myself to hate him.

"I appreciate the healing potion. It cleared my head," I said, my voice steady despite the tightness in my chest. "Thank you, Steve."

He remained silent. "I had a dream," I said. "The kind that shakes you to your core. A nightmare so real it changed the way I see this world. It gave me a purpose."

Steve's head twitched slightly, the ghost of a reaction flickering in his dead eyes.

"I don't understand," he replied, his voice hollow, devoid of warmth.

Maybe Pawk heard that.

I had made my choice. I would seize this twisted reality with my own hands. And I would never forgive those who had trampled on Steve's dignity, who had used his corpse as a tool to break my spirit.

My situation hadn't improved. In fact, it had only grown worse.

I was still a prisoner. Pawk would soon drag me back to her lair, where Fuankilo would likely subject me to the kind of brutal interrogation that few survived. My odds of escaping were slim, my chances of survival even slimmer.

Fortunately, I no longer feared death. I would go out fighting, not cowering in fear.

The city of Metasim burned around me, the flames rising higher, consuming stone and flesh alike, choking the air with smoke and ash.

Moments later, I felt a light tap on my shoulder.

“Well, this certainly became quite the spectacle,” came a familiar, mocking voice.

I craned my neck, my blood-streaked eyes catching a glimpse of Pawk as she landed beside me, her movements light and graceful despite the chaos around her. She leaned down, her lips curling into a sharp, predatory smile.

“Let’s head back to the base,” she whispered, her fingers drumming against my shoulder. “We’ll have a nice, long chat about your recent behavior.”

As she snapped her fingers, Steve’s body crumpled to the ground beside me, his head lolling at an unnatural angle, his limbs splayed out like a discarded marionette.

As the flames of Metasim roared around us, his body was quickly swallowed by the smoke and shadows, vanishing into the chaos of the burning city.

I never saw him again.

Chapter 12: The Madman's Loophole

It had been several days since the lone city of the Metasim region had fallen. Its ruined streets were now patrolled by the reanimated corpses under Pawk's control. While Aros and the bulk of the cultists busied themselves "renovating" the captured territory, I had been dragged back to the old castle stronghold and thrown into a cold interrogation cell, bound and watched without a moment of privacy.

Excluding the time spent traveling, I had been locked in this windowless room for a full day.

During that time, Joanne had been my only visitor. She had taken it upon herself to feed me, sitting beside me with a strained smile, chatting about small, inconsequential things. But despite her attempts to comfort me, there was a distance in her voice, a stiffness in her movements that hadn't been there before.

"Hey, Oakley."

I lifted my head at the sound of her voice, my eyes struggling to focus through the dull ache in my skull.

"Is it true? Did you really betray the cult in Metasim?" Her voice trembled slightly, the vivid green of her eyes clouded with doubt. "I just… I can't believe it. It has to be some kind of mistake, right? Pawk must be wrong, yeah?"

I kept my mouth shut. Joanne was a terrible liar. She lacked the subtlety and cunning needed to truly manipulate someone, but that only made her more dangerous in this moment. There was a real chance that someone had sent her in here to pry the truth out of me, to see if I would break.

"Not gonna say anything, huh?" She bit her lip, her gaze dropping to the pendant hanging around my neck, the one she had given me long ago. "I thought you'd at least be honest with me…"

She forced a smile, the light in her eyes flickering like a dying candle, before turning on her heel. "Later."

With a heavy thud of her platform boots, she disappeared through the iron door, the harsh clang of metal slamming shut behind her.

Moments later, the door creaked open again, and two familiar figures stepped inside—Fuankilo, the dark-skinned, white-haired beauty with eyes like smoldering embers, and Pawk, the sharp-eyed, cross-dressing sadist who had engineered my current predicament.

Surrounded by these striking but merciless women, I felt the weight of the plan I had been refining over the past few days settle heavily on my shoulders.

It's finally starting. The interrogation that will decide my fate…

The sound of their boots echoed off the cold, unforgiving stone as they approached, stopping just a few paces from my bound form. Pawk's pale, slender hand shot out, her fingers digging into my jaw as she forced my head up to meet her gaze.

Both of them wore hard, unflinching expressions, their eyes reflecting a mix of anger and something close to disappointment.

"Well, well. It's been a few days, hasn't it, Oakley?" Pawk purred.

"It's… been a while," Fuankilo added.

Unlike Joanne, who had at least tried to treat me like a friend, Pawk and Fuankilo had no such intentions. This was especially true when it came to Pawk. The cold glint in her eyes made it clear that she had already begun considering the most efficient way to dispose of me.

"So, what did Joanne have to say?" Pawk purred, her fingers tracing a slow, mocking line along my throat, her nails scraping lightly against my skin.

"She said… she couldn't believe it," I replied, forcing my voice to remain steady.

"Hmm. Seems she's quite fond of you," Pawk smirked, her lips curling into a sadistic grin as her thumb pressed against my Adam's

apple, just hard enough to make me swallow involuntarily.

I needed to find a way out of this. If I didn't, I would die. Or worse, I would be subjected to torments that made death seem merciful by comparison.

This is reality. No convenient hero is coming to save me. No miraculous twist of fate to rescue me at the last second. I'm on my own.

I swallowed, my jaw tightening as I forced myself to meet her gaze, refusing to show fear. Pawk's grip on my chin tightened, her fingers digging into my jaw with a mixture of frustration and sadistic glee.

"Oakley Mercury," she began, her voice sharp and cutting. "I was genuinely disappointed when I witnessed your betrayal in Metasim. I had high hopes for you. I'd heard you were a devout follower, someone with a promising future in the cult. And yet, there you were, attacking your own comrades, mutilating yourself, and then breaking down into a fit of madness. Hah! What exactly were you trying to accomplish?" Her laughter echoed off the stone walls, each mocking note stabbing into my already battered psyche.

What was I trying to accomplish?

I felt the blood rush to my face, a sharp, humiliating flush spreading from my neck to my temples as the full, bitter weight of my failures crashed down on me.

What was I even thinking back then?

I forced myself to piece together the shattered fragments of my recent memories.

At Metasim, I had lashed out at Steve, Pawk's puppet. I had been unable to fully commit to killing him, unable to embrace my role as a cultist, and too blind to see the trap Pawk had laid for me. I had stumbled straight into her web, failing to grasp the truth behind her taunting words, and spiraled into a complete mental breakdown when I finally realized my mistake.

She had witnessed it all. Every trembling moment, every desperate, self-destructive outburst. She had seen my mind snap,

seen me lose control.

By the time I'd come to, the Battle of Metasim was already over. And now, here I was, tied to a chair in a cold, dark cell, being mocked by the very person who had orchestrated my downfall.

Even if it had been nearly impossible to recognize Steve for what he truly was from the beginning, I still could have avoided this mess had I taken Pawk's warning about being "watched" more seriously. If I had prioritized my survival over my misplaced attachments, I wouldn't be in this nightmare of a situation.

The more I replayed my mistakes in my mind, the deeper the shame and self-loathing cut. It was like scraping a raw wound, the humiliation burning deeper with each passing second.

Pawk released my jaw with a contemptuous flick of her wrist, letting my head snap back against the hard, unyielding back of the chair. A sharp, involuntary grunt escaped my throat as my skull smacked against the rough wood, sending a fresh wave of pain pulsing through my battered brain.

Fuankilo, who had been silently observing our exchange, took a step forward, her dark eyes narrowing as she prepared to speak. Her presence felt heavier, her stance subtly shifting as if bracing herself for the brutality of what was to come.

"My magic," she said, her voice low and smooth, "is a curse that kills anyone who lies to me. You remember it well, don't you, Oakley? You experienced it firsthand not too long ago."

The threat was clear. She was establishing her dominance, reminding me that any attempt at deception would be met with instant, merciless punishment.

Fortunately, I knew her power wasn't as absolute as she was trying to imply.

If my memory was correct, Fuankilo's magic had strict limitations. It only worked if she knew the target's face, name, and age. Once those conditions were met, anyone within a two-meter radius who lied to her would be cursed to death. Worse, the curse

also came with a secondary effect—once chained, the victim couldn't break free until they answered her questions truthfully.

It was useless in combat, sure, but it was a deeply inconvenient and dangerous ability for someone in my current, bound state.

As I considered my options, desperately searching for a way to navigate the coming interrogation without signing my own death warrant, Fuankilo continued, her tone shifting to something almost conversational.

"But Oakley," she cooed, "I don't *want* to do this, you know? We all appreciate your dedication. We've all seen how committed you are."

"Huh?"

"Oh, don't act so surprised. We all remember your morning routine," she said, her eyes flashing with a hint of amusement. "Every morning, you'd shout, 'Aros-sama is the best!' at the top of your lungs, rallying the troops and boosting morale. There aren't many as passionate as you in the cult, you know."

"…"

I felt my face flush with a mix of embarrassment and disbelief.

They heard that? Every single time? Just how loud was I shouting?!

"That's why," she continued, her tone dipping into something close to genuine regret, "we're all hoping this is just one big misunderstanding." Fuankilo's words were delivered with a flat, emotionless tone, her dark, unblinking eyes fixed on me with the intensity of a predator sizing up wounded prey.

She doesn't believe that for a second.

I could feel the barely restrained bloodlust radiating from her, the cold, simmering intent to see me dead. She wasn't even trying to hide it.

I glanced at Pawk, hoping for some small hint of leniency, but she merely shrugged, her lips curling into a faint, mocking smile.

"Honestly, Fuankilo might be putting on a show, but I really did have high hopes for you," Pawk said, her tone light. "That guard?

One of the many puppets I've got scattered throughout the cult, keeping an eye on things. Up until the Metasim mission, you were a model follower. You can imagine my disappointment."

For a brief, fleeting moment, I was actually surprised. It was the first time I had heard Pawk offer anything remotely close to praise. But the moment passed quickly.

Fuankilo stepped forward, her hand rising, fingers splayed as she triggered her magic.

Here it comes.

There was no warning, no chance to brace myself.

The shadows in the dimly lit interrogation room seemed to writhe and twist, the air growing colder as her curse took shape. Black iron chains erupted from the darkness, slithering through the air like sentient serpents as they coiled around my limbs and wrapped tightly around my neck.

The links bit into my flesh, grinding against bone, each shuddering twist sending electric jolts of pain through my body.

Fuankilo's eyes narrowed, her fingers curling into a tight fist as the chains tightened further, the cold, unyielding metal squeezing the breath from my throat.

I forced myself to stay calm, even as every nerve screamed at me to thrash, to struggle, to escape. But I knew better. Any sudden movement, any sign of panic, would only make things worse.

"Answer me, Oakley Mercury," Fuankilo said, her voice as sharp as a blade. "Why did you attack your comrade? If you lie, you die. If you fail to answer within ten seconds, you die."

As if to reinforce her point, a massive, ethereal clock face appeared just inches from my nose, its second hand already ticking forward with a brutal, unfeeling precision.

Ten seconds.

The metal links tightened around my neck, the harsh, scraping sound echoing in my ears as the chains constricted, each tick of the clock sending fresh waves of pain through my spine.

Seven seconds.

I forced the words past my dry, cracked lips, my heart hammering against my ribs, "I had a purpose. I was looking for a child."

The clock froze, the grinding, suffocating pressure around my neck halting abruptly.

The chains did not tighten further.

Fuankilo's eyes flicked toward Pawk, their gazes meeting for a brief, puzzled moment. They had expected a confession, an admission of guilt. Instead, I had offered them something else entirely.

"Fuankilo," Pawk murmured, her eyes narrowing as she leaned closer, her fingers flexing with restless anticipation. "Any reaction?"

"That statement appears to be true," Fuankilo muttered, her eyes narrowing slightly.

Of course it was true. I *had* wanted to save that child—the boy who should have become the hero of this world. An ordinary kid, destined to rise up and crush the cult, to stand as the last bastion of hope in this twisted, war-torn reality.

I had found his childhood friend's charred remains, the twisted, blackened corpse I had seen so many times on my monitor, and it had shocked me into action. I had known, in that moment, that he had to be nearby. I *had* to find and save him.

Not just for his sake but for mine.

I had wanted to cast the burden of salvation onto his shoulders, to escape the hellish weight of my own fear and guilt, to believe that someone else could carry the weight of this broken world. That was why I had attacked Steve.

Fuankilo's eyes sharpened, the dark orbs glinting like shards of obsidian as the massive, spectral clock reappeared beside her, its second hand already ticking forward.

"Explain why you were so fixated on this child," she demanded, her voice low and dangerous. "That must have been the true reason for your betrayal."

This is it.

I took a small, steadying breath, forcing my panic into the pit of my stomach as I began to speak, my words tumbling out in a rapid, breathless stream.

"The child I was searching for is called 'Alfie,'" I said, letting a hint of nostalgic hesitation creep into my voice. "Back in that town… I have memories of living there as 'Alfie.' It's like a part of me once existed in that place—a different self, perhaps. I just had to see him. I had to meet him."

"What?" Fuankilo's face froze, her fingers twitching involuntarily as the ethereal clock shuddered to a halt.

The original protagonist's name was Alfie Judgment. I remembered it clearly. That name was the key to my survival, the thin, fragile thread I was clinging to as I dangled over the abyss.

"Listen to me, Fuankilo-sama," I continued, my voice gaining strength. "If I had found him, it might have led to the complete collapse of the Orthodox forces. Yes, I struck Steve, and I admit that was an act of betrayal. But if you consider the broader context, the long-term consequences, my actions could have been a masterstroke, a decisive blow against our enemies!"

"Hey, Fuankilo, what the hell is he talking about?" Pawk interjected, her eyes narrowing in confusion as she glanced between us.

Fuankilo remained silent.

"And yet," I continued, forcing a strained, regretful note into my voice, "I hesitated. Steve was my friend. I couldn't bring myself to kill him. That hesitation—that *weakness*—is what pulled me back from the brink of madness."

From an outside perspective, I must have sounded like a lunatic, a broken mind grasping at nonsense in a desperate bid to avoid punishment. But that was exactly what I had intended.

Pawk's expression twisted into one of open disdain. "Did you hit your head a little too hard, Oakley? Childhood memories? Really? You know full well that the cult's indoctrination process wipes out all early memories. There's no way—"

She cut herself off, her eyes darting to Fuankilo, who had gone completely still, her face a mask of frozen shock.

"W-Wait. What… What do you mean? Why aren't the chains reacting?!"

The massive clock above my head shattered into a thousand fragments, each shard dissolving into the shadowy air as the iron chains coiled around my limbs slackened, then clattered to the ground, lifeless and inert.

Fuankilo's hand trembled, her pale fingers twitching as she reached up to rake through her stark white hair, her usually composed face twisted in raw, uncomprehending confusion.

Pawk, standing just a step behind her, blinked in surprise, her mocking grin faltering as she glanced between the two of us, clearly struggling to keep up.

Of course, they're confused.

Every word I had just spoken, every seemingly nonsensical phrase and wild, disjointed claim, had been true.

Fuankilo's power was absolute in its judgment, capable of tearing a liar's soul to shreds with a single false syllable, but even it was bound by the truth. And the truth, twisted and layered as it was, had worked in my favor.

You weren't expecting that, were you, Fuankilo?

I had carefully crafted my response, weaving just enough genuine conviction into my words to pass her brutal, supernatural lie detector.

I had told her that:

1. *I have memories of a boy named Alfie.*
2. *He is, in a sense, another version of myself.*
3. *If I had met him, it could have led to the weakening of the Orthodox forces.*
4. *My actions would have been praised as a strategic masterstroke in the long run.*
5. *I hesitated to kill Steve because he was my friend.*
6. *I eventually regained my sanity.*

All of these statements, though fragmented and bizarre, were technically true.

As a former player of the original game, I really did have memories of Metasim. I had, in a sense, lived a second life there through the eyes of the protagonist, Alfie Judgment. The boy I had been searching for truly was another part of myself, the avatar through which I had once navigated this world's chaos and horror.

As for my third claim, that too held a kernel of truth. Alfie only became a hero because of the horrific tragedy that shattered his childhood. If a cultist like me had saved him, if I had pulled him from the fire and spared him the worst of his suffering, his unbreakable resolve and his absolute hatred for the cult might never have formed. He might never have become the relentless, unstoppable force that would eventually tear through the Aros Temple Cult like a storm. And if that happened, if the hero never rose to challenge the darkness, the cult's power would only grow, unchecked and unchallenged.

That, too, was true, in a way.

I hadn't lied. Not once.

To Fuankilo, who had no way of knowing the convoluted mess of memories and second lives tangled up in my head, I must have sounded like a complete madman.

Fuankilo's power, with its merciless precision and unyielding truth-sense, had become her greatest weakness. By confirming that each of my seemingly nonsensical statements was, in fact, true, she had inadvertently painted herself into a corner.

Her power didn't merely test for factual accuracy—it evaluated the subjective, deeply held beliefs of its target. And if the target genuinely believed their own twisted, distorted reality, then her chains would never tighten. Her curse would never trigger.

I had given her every reason to believe that I was exactly that kind of madman.

Oakley Mercury is insane.

That was the conclusion she must have reached. An erratic, unstable mind, too fractured to separate truth from delusion. A man so detached from reality that even the most powerful curse in the cult's arsenal could not unravel his warped perspective.

I watched her dark eyes flicker with unease, her fingers curling and uncurling as the chains at her feet rattled faintly against the stone. She was trying to regain her composure, to convince herself that she still had the upper hand. But I had already seen the crack in her mask.

Perfect. Just perfect.

Fuankilo's curse had one critical flaw: it couldn't differentiate between objective lies and the subjective, deeply held delusions of a madman.

She knew this. She had to. Someone as sharp as Fuankilo would be all too aware of her own power's limitations.

That awareness, that seed of doubt, was all I needed.

"Ignore him, Fuankilo," Pawk snapped. "He's trying to cloud your judgment, to distract you. Don't let him rattle you."

"No," Fuankilo replied, her voice unsteady, her normally confident gaze wavering. "He's not bluffing. Every single word he's said… It's his truth."

Pawk's face went pale, her sharp, catlike eyes narrowing as she took a small, involuntary step back.

"No way," she whispered, her voice tinged with a rare, genuine note of fear.

"Yes way," Fuankilo hissed, her tone sharp and bitter. "My power has two critical weaknesses. One, it takes time to prepare. Two, it's completely ineffective against the truly insane. If the target genuinely believes their delusions, if they hold their warped perspective as their personal truth, then my chains can't touch them."

Fuankilo's jaw tightened, her dark skin paling slightly as she shot a furious glare in my direction.

“This man was mad from the start. He can’t distinguish between objective facts and his twisted delusions,” Fuankilo muttered, her voice tinged with both frustration and resignation. “He’s beyond my reach. My power can’t touch a mind that broken.”

Their interpretation had solidified.

My attack on Steve? Driven by a desire to find a certain child.

My interest in that child? A convoluted, half-mad scheme to secure the cult’s future.

And my hesitation to kill Steve? A final, tragic remnant of my supposed sanity.

They had grasped at fragments of the truth but lacked the context to see the whole picture. In the end, they had no choice but to accept the pieces as they were, a jumbled, nonsensical mosaic of my own design.

It’s messy… but it worked. Barely.

I had managed to steer their suspicions just enough to avoid immediate execution, weaving a tapestry of half-truths and fragmented memories to shroud my intentions in madness. The actual truth of my actions—my desperate bid to save the protagonist and shift the tides of this twisted world—had sunk back into the shadows, leaving only the fractured, confusing remains of a madman’s ramblings.

Fuankilo’s expression hardened, her jaw clenching as she forced herself to meet Pawk’s sharp, accusing gaze.

“All of his statements are now suspect. My chains are useless against him,” she admitted, her tone thick with reluctance.

“Don’t give me that,” Pawk snapped. “You expect me to just accept that? He attacked one of my Automata. I *felt* it, Fuankilo. I experienced it firsthand. We should interrogate him again.”

Fuankilo shot her a sharp, irritated glance, her white hair swaying as she crossed her arms. “Pawk,” she said, her tone icy, “there are plenty of madmen and lunatics in this cult. The fact that one of your ‘promising’ recruits turned out to be a delusional fanatic isn’t exactly a rare occurrence.”

Pawk's lips twisted into a frustrated scowl, her eyes flashing with barely restrained fury. "He's not just some random lunatic. He attacked one of my Automata. I need answers."

"Listen," Fuankilo snapped, her voice rising as her patience frayed. "If Oakley were just another grunt, I'd say kill him and toss his corpse into the furnace. But he's not. He's one of Joanne's favorites, and Aros-sama has taken a personal interest in him as well. He has a history, a proven track record, and as far as we know, his 'betrayal' only resulted in the destruction of a single automaton. There were no actual human casualties."

Pawk hesitated, her jaw working as she processed Fuankilo's words, her fingers flexing with a barely suppressed urge to lash out.

There it is.

My survival wasn't guaranteed, but I had managed to reframe my actions, shifting their interpretation from "treason" to "misguided madness." It was a thin, precarious line, but it offered a sliver of hope.

In the cult, the punishment for treason was swift and brutal—death, dismemberment, or worse. But the treatment for a deranged, fanatical zealot? Reeducation, reassignment, or at worst, exile to another branch of the organization.

In other words, a chance to live.

Listening to their fading voices as they left the room, I realized that my survival had hinged on another lucky coincidence.

Being Joanne's favorite had saved me. My habit of shouting phrases about Aros during my morning stress relief had earned me a sliver of recognition within the cult. It had marked me as a loyal follower, a small but crucial advantage in a world where status meant everything.

If I hadn't handed that robe to the naked Joanne on that fateful day, if I hadn't accidentally ingratiated myself to her, I wouldn't be here. I would have been crushed beneath the heel of the cult's iron-fisted hierarchy, another nameless casualty in their endless war.

There wouldn't be a second chance.

"It's still a problem that he attacked one of my Automata during an active operation. We can't just ignore this."

Fuankilo's voice, cool and measured as ever, cut through the lingering smoke and shadows. "He's survived two encounters with Celestia, one of the Orthodoxy's executives. We can't afford to waste a soldier with that kind of track record. Reprogramming his mind would be a waste of potential."

Pawk grunted, her tone grudgingly conceding the point. "Can't deny that, I suppose. Ordinary soldiers don't survive one encounter with Kennethian executives, let alone two."

"Besides, even with your Automata fully operational, we're still short on manpower without the factory running. Given his past achievements and potential for future service, a more lenient punishment seems appropriate."

"Ugh… I guess even a lunatic like him can be useful."

"Yes. He's a stubborn, lucky bastard."

The iron door clanged shut behind them, the sound echoing off the cold, stone walls as their footsteps finally faded into silence.

I waited, my breath catching in my throat and my heart pounding against my ribs, until I was certain they were gone. Only then did I allow myself to exhale, my entire body sagging against the cold, unyielding back of the chair.

How bitterly ironic.

The tangled, nonsensical mess of my fractured mind had nearly been my undoing, but it had also been my salvation.

My chaotic, disjointed memories of the original game, the very thing I had tried so hard to suppress, had pulled me back from the edge of death.

How pathetic. I was saved by the very thing I hate most about myself.

The realization cut deep, a bitter, nauseating ache that settled into my bones. I felt the last shreds of my strength seep away, my head drooping forward as my body sagged against my restraints.

I had escaped, but there was no satisfaction, no relief. Just a hollow, aching emptiness where my resolve had once been.

As my eyes drifted closed, darkness crept in at the edges of my vision, swallowing the cold, flickering light of the interrogation room.

I slipped into a heavy, dreamless sleep, my mind and body too battered to resist the pull of oblivion.

Chapter 13: A Clear Plan for Growth

As soon as the interrogation concluded, Fuankilo and Pawk made their way to the cult's inner sanctum to deliver their report. Cult Leader Aros listened with a furrowed brow, his slender fingers steepled before him as he absorbed their account.

It was a perplexing matter concerning a subordinate he had been keeping a close eye on. Despite his typical detachment, Aros took a genuine interest in his followers, especially those who showed unusual potential.

After listening to their detailed account, he leaned back into his ornate, bone-carved throne, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully.

"This has become a rather complex situation," he murmured, his voice a deep, resonant echo that filled the cavernous hall.

"His statements were incoherent, filled with bizarre, unprovable claims that defy conventional understanding. However," Fuankilo said, "given his past behavior, it is clear that his loyalty to you remains genuine, Aros-sama. If I had to summarize this entire incident in a single phrase, I would call it the outburst of a fanatical madman."

Aros's lips twitched, his dark, shadowed eyes glinting with a flicker of interest. ***"It would be unwise to leave him as he is."***

Pawk, sensing an opportunity to press her own grievances, quickly stepped forward. "He attacked one of my *Automata*. The damage was minimal this time, but who's to say what might happen if he lashes out again? If we don't punish him, it could set a dangerous precedent."

"Yes, I agree," Fuankilo added, her tone sharp, the memory of Oakley's resistance still clearly stinging her pride. "Aros-sama, what

would you have us do with him?”

The cult leader paused, his dark eyes narrowing as he considered his options.

Oakley Mercury…

Aros leaned back, one long, thin finger tapping against the armrest of his throne as he allowed his mind to wander through the maze of possibilities.

Oakley was a curious case, a follower who had repeatedly defied both expectations and death. Unlike the mindless, interchangeable soldiers the cult typically churned out, he had a spark of individuality, a stubborn, chaotic vitality that set him apart.

There were essentially two options.

The first was “reeducation”—a brutal, mind-shattering process designed to strip a follower of their individuality, grinding their personality down to a bland, uniform average, making them little more than a soulless drone. It was a final, ruthless solution, reserved for only the most dangerous of dissidents.

Aros was hesitant to take this approach.

Something about Oakley intrigued him. There was a raw, unpolished potential in the man, a strange, unpredictable energy that set him apart from the mindless zealots that filled his ranks.

Most likely, Oakley’s weaknesses stem from his mental instability. He places too much weight on his loyalty to me as a leader, which leaves him blind to the world around him. However, he seems to have formed a close relationship with Joanne. If their bond continues to develop, it should help broaden his perspective and naturally correct his shortcomings.

Aros’s sharp, calculating mind had quickly zeroed in on the root of Oakley’s instability. He understood that a follower without a clear, personal anchor was prone to emotional volatility, their loyalty fragile and easily shattered.

When a person finds someone to protect, someone they truly care for, they break free of their self-imposed limitations. They grow stronger, shedding their old shells and becoming something more. Of

course, I could speed up this process with magic or experimental drugs, but that risks damaging his potential. No, in cases like this, it's best to let nature take its course.

Aros had made a critical miscalculation.

One of the primary reasons for Oakley's mental instability was precisely his strained relationship with Joanne Sagamix. Far from being a stabilizing influence, Joanne's erratic behavior and intense, often overwhelming affection had been a significant source of his stress.

Still, Aros's decision had been made.

"For now, I will have him assist with the post-battle cleanup and reconstruction of Metasim. Once that is complete, I will transfer him to the Northeast Branch for a more thorough evaluation. That should serve as a fitting punishment."

"N-Northeast Branch…?"

The moment those words left Aros's lips, both Fuankilo and Pawk visibly flinched, their eyes widening in unison.

Aros raised a thin, inquisitive eyebrow at their reactions, his sharp, shadowed gaze flitting between the two women.

"Oh? You seem concerned. If you have objections, please speak freely. I value your input."

Though Aros was known for his leniency toward his subordinates, even the most loyal cultists knew to tread carefully when offering their opinions. Pawk and Fuankilo exchanged a brief, silent glance, each waiting for the other to speak first.

Finally, Pawk steeled herself, clenching her fists as she stepped forward. Her lips tightened into a thin, tense line.

"The Northeast Branch… is a harsh environment," she said, her voice carefully measured. "Most of the cultists sent there either break under the pressure or end up being reeducated. It's a place that drives people to madness. If you truly want Oakley to rise again, to become a valuable asset, I would advise choosing a more… forgiving post."

The Northeast Branch was a desolate, brutal outpost located deep within the frozen caves of the far north, a place where the howling winds cut through flesh and bone, where the darkness clung to every surface like a living thing.

Strategically, it was a critical location, responsible for harassing Orthodoxy patrols and defending the cult's northern frontiers. It had played a key, albeit largely unrecognized, role in the recent Metasim campaign.

The Northeast Branch wasn't just a harsh outpost; it was a crucible of violence and madness, a place where only the strongest and most bloodthirsty cultists could survive. It was a frozen wasteland, its heart a network of icy caverns carved into the bones of the northern mountains, where the frigid wind cut through flesh and bone with every breath.

It was a place for warriors, for battle-hardened killers who thrived on bloodshed and chaos. It was a place where only the strongest, the most ruthless, could hope to survive.

Yet, even those hardened fighters were little more than foot soldiers compared to the executives of the Orthodoxy—the so-called "Chosen Seven" who had turned the tide of countless battles.

Still, Aros saw potential in this. He believed that by throwing Oakley into the harsh, unyielding wilderness of the Northeast Branch, the unstable cultist might be forced to shed his weaknesses and emerge as a truly formidable asset.

To Aros, this was a test—a trial by fire that would either shatter Oakley or mold him into something greater.

Pawk and Fuankilo, however, had a different perspective.

Despite her strained, distrustful relationship with Oakley, even Fuankilo recognized his potential as a valuable asset. She might have found him irritating and unpredictable, but she was not blind to his strengths. And as much as she resented the attention he received from their godlike leader, she also understood the importance of nurturing a promising soldier.

"Aros-sama," Fuankilo interjected, her tone sharp but measured, "Pawk is correct. While it's true that harsh environments can force individuals to grow, there's no guarantee that Oakley is capable of that. Perhaps we should wait until we see clearer signs of improvement in his mental state before sending him to the Northeast Branch."

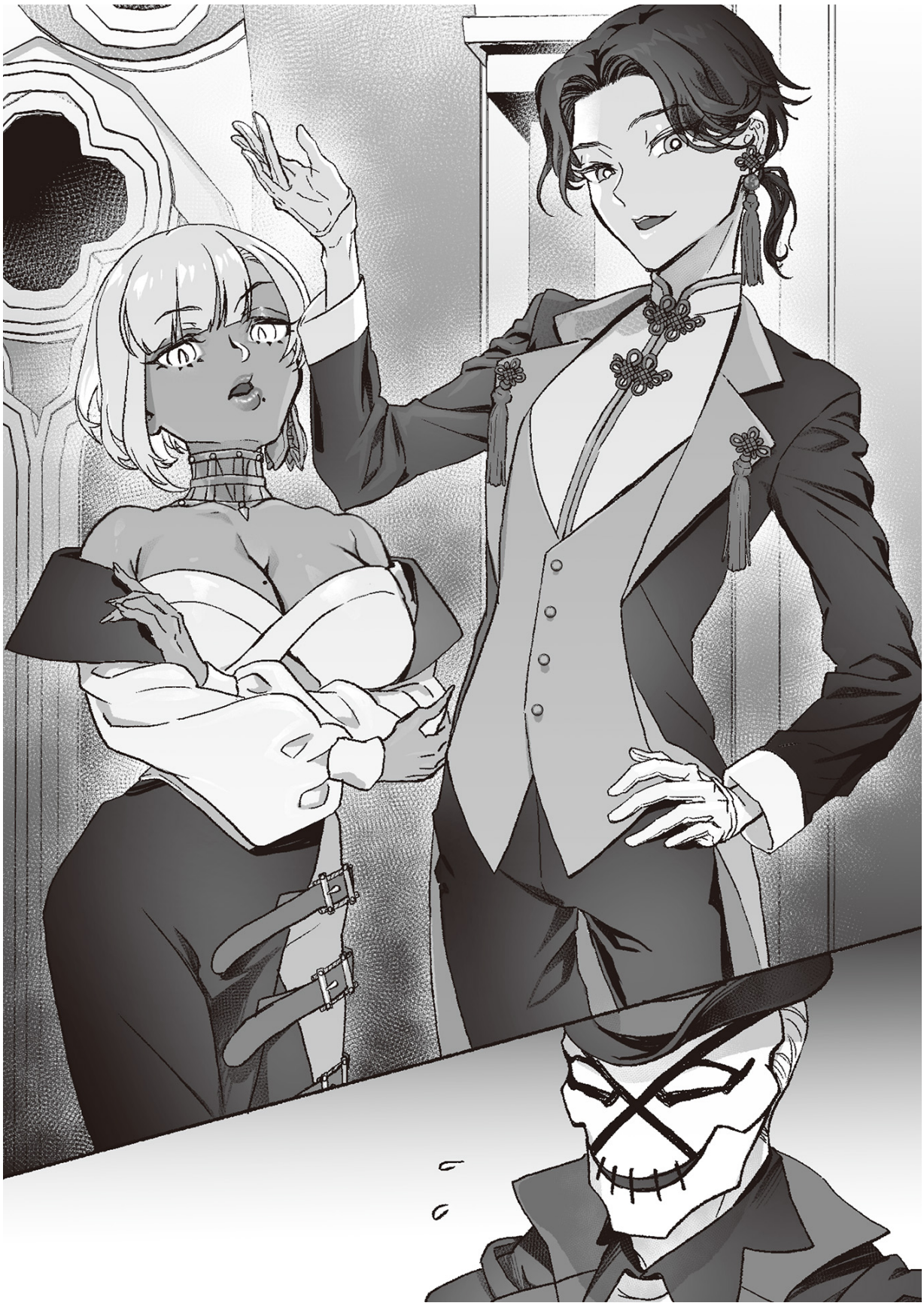
Pawk, sensing an opportunity, quickly added her voice to the mix. "I agree. The Northeast Branch demands more than just physical strength. It also requires unwavering mental stability. We should ensure that Oakley is fully prepared before subjecting him to such a harsh, unforgiving environment."

Aros hesitated, his long, skeletal fingers pausing in their rhythmic tapping against his throne's armrest. His calculating eyes flicked between his two subordinates, his expression sinking into a rare, subdued frown.

Ah, a two-to-one majority. It was unusual for both of his trusted lieutenants to agree so firmly on a single point, especially regarding something as important as the future of one of his more promising followers. *Perhaps I have been too hasty*.

He couldn't ignore their concerns. After all, even the most promising seed would wither and die if planted in poisoned soil.

Yet, some form of punishment *was* necessary. If Oakley was not disciplined for his actions, it would send a dangerous message to the rest of the cult, undermining Aros's authority and encouraging further acts of insubordination.



Aros lifted his head, his sharp, angular mask framed by the flickering torch as he considered the advice of his two trusted subordinates.

"Thank you for your insight, both of you. It seems I've made the right choice in keeping you close," he said, his voice steady and composed. ***"Given your concerns, I will delay Oakley's transfer for the time being. Instead, I will allow him to stabilize his mental state. If his relationship with Joanne develops further, it may serve to broaden his perspective and address his shortcomings."***

Hearing this, Pawk and Fuankilo seemed to relax, the subtle tension in their postures easing as the Cult Leader's decision settled over them.

It's for the best, they both thought.

With that, the matter was settled, and the two women quietly withdrew from the chamber, their footsteps echoing through the stone corridors as they left Aros to his thoughts.

Chapter 14: Early Intervention with Joanne

A full day had passed since Fuankilo's interrogation.

Even though I had successfully convinced them of my supposed madness, the fact remained that I had attacked Pawk's property—Steve, one of her Automata. It wasn't the kind of transgression that could be brushed aside without consequence. I had fully expected to be dragged off for "reeducation"—a euphemism for a complete personality wipe, the kind of mind-shattering reset that left its victims as little more than hollow shells.

I had already made peace with the idea, ready to say goodbye to my fractured self, so long as it meant keeping my head attached to my shoulders.

But then the verdict came down: I would be transferred, though not immediately. Not only had I been spared immediate execution, but they had even agreed to delay my transfer until my mental state had stabilized.

It's too light.

Normally, a cultist who had committed such an obvious act of treachery would have been ground into paste and tossed to Stella Belmont, the fourth-ranked executive, for "processing"—a polite term for being fed to the girl's insatiable stomach. Either that or used as a test subject in one of the cult's many horrific experiments.

In other words, a straight-up death sentence. But instead, I had been handed a mere transfer—a reassignment to the Northeast Branch.

It's almost too good to be true.

Still, I wasn't about to question my good fortune. The cult's ranks were stretched thin, and even a liability like me had some value in a time of crisis. As long as the higher-ups believed they

could wring a few more drops of usefulness out of me, I would survive.

But the Northeast Branch…

I shuddered at the thought.

There, I would have to contend with the aforementioned Stella Belmont, a girl as twisted as Joanne but dangerous in a completely different way.

Stella Belmont, the cult's fourth-ranked executive, was a small, doll-like figure dressed in frilly black gothic lolita fashion, her long, dark hair twisted into tight, elaborate curls. Despite her porcelain-like beauty, her tastes ran toward the macabre.

Her hobby? *Cannibalism.*

She oversaw the disposal of "useless" cultists, those deemed no longer fit for service, personally ensuring that not a scrap went to waste. I had no desire to cross paths with her, and the thought of being assigned to her domain filled me with a deep, primal dread.

Compared to the commanders of the Kenneth Orthodoxy, the Aros Temple Cult's executives had some deeply twisted personalities.

Sure, the Kennethians had their share of eccentricities, but their female commanders still managed to come across as cute in their own way. Over here, in the cult, though? It was a whole different story.

Joanne was obsessed with amputation and confinement.

Fuankilo took sadism to the point of being a fetish.

Pawk had a thing for corpses.

Stella was a straight-up cannibal.

It was a festival of freaks, a train wreck of extreme fetishes with no end in sight.

I thought back to the first time I'd stumbled across Stella's route in the eroge. The background had been stained a deep, unrelenting red throughout the entire scene. And the truly horrifying part? That had been the *toned-down* version, written with player enjoyment in mind.

Here, in this living, breathing world, I had no reason to believe that Stella's appetites would be any less twisted. If anything, they were likely much worse.

No wonder the Orthodox commanders come off as endearing by comparison.

I had already gotten myself tangled up with four of the main figures in the cult's leadership—Joanne, Fuankilo, Pawk, and Aros himself. That much was unavoidable. But I needed to be more careful with the other executives if I wanted to survive long-term.

I really don't want to go to the Northeast Branch. If I end up having to deal with Stella, I'll have to approach her completely differently than I did with Joanne…

Of course, the cult's executives were busy people, constantly moving between branches. It was possible I'd never even encounter Stella in the flesh. But if I did, I couldn't afford to make the same mistakes I had with Joanne.

Still… I'm nervous. It only took a few days for Joanne to latch onto me like a lovesick parasite. What if Stella develops a similar obsession? What if I'm the kind of guy who just naturally attracts yanderes? If that's the case, I'm screwed.

Just imagining it made my stomach turn.

If Stella decides she likes me, how the hell am I supposed to survive being pursued by a cannibal who won't die even if I kill her and a blade-happy amputation fanatic?

I let out a long, tired sigh, my breath misting in the cold air of the stone hallway.

If only Joanne's feelings for me were just a misunderstanding.

I was getting tired of regrets, but they still tumbled out with every breath, my nerves fraying with each passing moment.

There's no point in wallowing. I need to keep moving forward.

I had a rough plan for dealing with the executives—using their affection as a shield and playing the role of the "favored follower" to avoid being crushed by their overwhelming power.

Of course, it was a dangerous gamble. I had no way of knowing if I could actually control someone as volatile as Joanne, and the odds of her snapping and killing me seemed uncomfortably high.

But what choice do I have?

I had made up my mind to face my fate head-on, to push forward with every ounce of my strength, even if it meant dying in the process.

Stay strong. Keep going.

With that silent reminder, I lifted my head, focusing on the path ahead. I was nearly back to Metasim, the place where it had all begun.

From my vantage point on the hill, I could see the city spread out below, a stark reminder of how much had changed since the initial assault.

Metasim, Alfie's once peaceful hometown, had completely transformed under the control of the Aros Temple Cult.

A massive dome of thorns, several kilometers in diameter, encircled the outer walls, the wicked, barbed tendrils twisting and writhing like the limbs of some monstrous beast. This barrier, a product of Pawk's twisted magic, was further reinforced by Aros's powerful perception-distortion spells, ensuring that only select individuals could even recognize the city's existence.

Even if someone managed to remember Metasim's location, the combined effects of these spells would gradually erode their awareness of the place until the city itself faded from their consciousness like a half-remembered dream.

If someone managed to resist that effect and approached the city, they would still have to contend with the toxic spores woven into the thorns themselves—a lethal, lingering poison that clung to the air like a deathly miasma.

The Aros Temple Cult executives are a nightmare to deal with…

I couldn't help but pause for a moment, the sight of the corrupted city sending a chill down my spine. But I forced myself to

move forward, clenching my fists as I descended the slope toward the city gates.

Once inside, I quickly found myself assigned to the grueling task of clearing rubble and beginning the process of rebuilding the shattered town.

Despite their terrifying, destructive power, the cult's executives were notoriously bad at reconstruction. Their abilities were almost entirely focused on destruction, death, and decay. Creating something new was simply beyond them. As a result, the dirty work of restoration fell to us, lower-ranking cultists, our hands calloused and our muscles aching as we struggled to repair the damage wrought by our superiors.

I was in the middle of clearing a particularly stubborn pile of debris when one of the nearby corpses suddenly lurched upright, its empty, burned-out eye sockets flaring to life as a familiar voice echoed from its half-melted throat.

"Testing, testing… Can you hear me, Oakley? It's me, Pawk!"

"Yes, I can hear you."

The charred corpse swayed unsteadily on its feet, the remnants of its flesh crackling and hissing as the last of the embers clinging to its bones slowly burned out.

Nothing like a walking corpse to keep you on edge.

"Ah, good, good," Pawk continued, her chipper tone somehow more unsettling when filtered through the ruined vocal cords of the long-dead cultist. *"So, it seems the senses remain intact as long as the body hasn't fully skeletonized. Fascinating… Anyway, I've got a favor to ask. You don't mind, do you?"*

Ever since that incident, I hadn't exactly had a positive impression of Pawk. Still, I couldn't exactly refuse her, so I forced myself to listen, responding with a half-hearted grunt.

"Once you've finished clearing away the rubble, I'd like you to patrol the city a bit," Pawk said, her tone deceptively light. *"And if you notice anything strange, just relay the information to the nearest*

corpse. I've got plenty of eyes and ears in the area, so it shouldn't be a problem."

"Why me?" I asked, my tone flat. "You've got an army of undead at your disposal. Why not just have them handle it? They can report everything they see directly to you."

"You're not wrong, but you're going to be living here for a while, right? I figured it'd be good for you to get to know the area a bit. Think of it as a casual stroll. No need to make a fuss."

"I see. I suppose that makes sense."

I hoisted another chunk of debris onto the wagon beside me, then set off on a slow, deliberate walk through the ruined streets of Metasim.

The zombies around me moved with eerie purpose, their dead, empty eyes fixed on their tasks as they hauled away rubble and dismantled the remains of burned-out buildings.

Funny how the dead seem to be working harder than the living.

Despite the stench of smoke and decay that clung to the air, the city's layout was still burned into my memory. After all, I had explored these very streets countless times in the original game. There wasn't much for me to "learn" here.

As I walked, I eventually found myself standing in the very spot where I had fought Steve. I hadn't seen his body since that night, and I had no idea what had become of him.

Perhaps Pawk had decided his physical form had served its purpose and released him from her control, leaving his lifeless husk to rot wherever it fell. Given that he had collapsed in a sea of flames, his remains were probably little more than unrecognizable ash by now.

If that's the case, maybe it's for the best.

Better for his body to have burned to nothing than to be enslaved as one of Pawk's puppets, twisted and used for her schemes long after death.

Pawk's disturbing power was capable of drawing out the memories and personalities of the dead, molding them into perfect

replicas of their former selves. Steve, too, had been one such puppet, his final thoughts and memories churned into a trap to lure me into revealing myself.

In the end, I had been lucky. Our conversations had only ever touched on vague complaints and carefully worded gripes about the cult's methods—nothing that could have been used as direct evidence against me.

If I'd let my guard down and started rambling about my true thoughts, I'd be long dead by now.

I closed my eyes, clenching my fists as a wave of regret washed over me.

If Steve were still alive… maybe we could have been real friends.

I took a deep breath, the acrid stench of smoke filling my lungs as I silently wished for his soul to have found some measure of peace, free from the cult's twisted grasp.

Even if it had all been a lie, I had genuinely felt a sense of friendship with Steve. The dreams of distant landscapes he had spoken of—the ones he wanted to see someday—I had honestly wanted to help him find them. For a brief moment, I had even let myself hope that things might improve, that this twisted world might start to make a little more sense.

Of course, those fragile hopes had been shattered in a single, bloody day.

Still… thank you, Steve. I'm really grateful. Sorry… and goodbye.

I bit down on the inside of my cheek, the metallic taste of blood seeping into my mouth as I trudged through the ruined streets, past the wandering dead and the cultists who commanded them.

I carefully wound my way through the debris-strewn paths, casually moving past the spot where I had faced Steve for the last time. I didn't linger, my eyes fixed firmly ahead, my steps never slowing.

Finally, I arrived at my true destination—the place I had tried so desperately to reach that night.

There it is.

In the distance, half-buried beneath the rubble, I could just about make out the collapsed remains of Alfie Judgment's childhood home.

The front entrance had crumpled inward, the entire structure sagging under the weight of its shattered roof. The twisted foundation, bent and cracked beyond recognition, spoke of the immense force that had torn it apart.

This is where Alfie lived. It's where he grew up, surrounded by his loving family… and now, it's just another pile of rubble.

I forced myself to keep walking, never allowing myself to get closer than thirty meters. I didn't even slow my pace as I passed, only letting my gaze flick briefly in its direction as I pretended to survey the ruined landscape.

Pawk's eyes are everywhere.

I couldn't afford to let her see me acting suspiciously, to catch me fixating on a particular building in this graveyard of corpses. If the original game's script was anything to go by, Alfie had likely survived by hiding in the crawlspace beneath the floorboards, watching as his parents were torn apart and devoured by Pawk's zombies right in front of him.

That experience had broken something in him, shattered the last remnants of his childhood, and turned him into the unyielding, single-minded force of destruction the world would one day know him as.

But did he actually survive?

I climbed onto the roof of a half-collapsed house nearby, pulling myself up with shaky, aching fingers as I peered into the distance, straining my eyes for any sign of movement.

There. Just barely visible through the smoke and debris.

The crawlspace entrance beneath Alfie's house had been blown apart, the remnants of the trapdoor barely clinging to the twisted frame. The scorched marks and scattered debris around the entrance suggested that someone had forced their way out in a

hurry, likely using the underground passage to escape the burning town.

You made it after all, Alfie. You really made it out of that hell.

A strange, tangled knot of emotions welled up in my chest—a chaotic mixture of relief, embarrassment, and bitter regret.

I was so desperate to "save" you, to force my expectations on you, but you never needed me, did you?

I glanced up at the sky, the poisonous thorns of Pawk's barrier writhing above like the fangs of some terrible, twisted beast.

Wherever you are, Alfie… Keep fighting. I won't push my burdens onto you anymore.

Chapter 15: Together Forever ♡ Engagement Finger ♡

Five days had passed since the fall of Metasim.

As the reconstruction and modification of the city progressed, I was slowly starting to piece together the cult's broader plans, even with my limited understanding of urban planning.

From what I could tell, the cult intended to turn Metasim into a new base of operations, transforming it into a fortified, self-sufficient stronghold. Fields and pastures outside the walls were already being repurposed, with Pawk's zombies tending to crops and livestock, establishing a reliable food supply for the growing ranks of the cult.

So, they're trying to make this place into a sort of holy land for the Aros Temple Cult.

Given that this town had deep ties to the cult's enigmatic leader, it made sense. Aros would want a place worthy of his twisted ideals, complete with a grand temple, fortified living quarters, and all the infrastructure needed to support his ever-expanding army of fanatical followers.

For now, Pawk and her army of reanimated corpses were managing the day-to-day operations, but in the long run, the cult clearly intended for living followers to take over and build a thriving, bustling community of like-minded zealots.

And until that happens, the original residents of Metasim, now little more than walking corpses, will continue to serve the cult even in death.

The captured women and children weren't likely to fare any better. The children would be brainwashed and trained as future warriors, while the women would be funneled into the cult's twisted breeding factories—a fate as horrific as it was inescapable.

As I hauled another piece of debris onto a waiting cart, my thoughts drifted back to Joanne's ominous figure. She had appeared shortly after the initial cleanup, her wild eyes glinting with barely contained bloodlust as she wordlessly joined the labor force, her muscles bulging as she casually tossed aside boulders that had taken entire squads of undead to lift.

With her around, the reconstruction had progressed at a breakneck pace.

We'd reinforced the outer walls, expanded the living quarters, dug out underground chambers, and even started laying the foundation for what looked like a massive, temple-like structure at the center of the city.

On the outer walls, the massive ballistae had already undergone a grotesque transformation, their warped frames now strung with Pawk's living thorns, each vine thrumming with barely restrained malice. I had no idea what kind of additional effects they might have, but I did not doubt that they would be a nightmare for the Orthodoxy's forces.

Despite the nightmarish surroundings, I felt a strange sense of calm. Maybe it was because the frantic, day-to-day chaos of battle had died down, or maybe my sense of danger had simply been dulled by the constant presence of death and decay.

Still… I'm woefully unprepared for what's to come.

I had no power, no allies, no wealth, and no influence—nothing that could help me survive the harsh realities of this ongoing religious war.

Most importantly, I have no real strength. When push comes to shove, the only thing you can rely on is raw power… I need to find a way to get stronger. Somehow.

If I wanted to survive and thrive in the Aros Temple Cult, there was only one path forward: I needed to become a full-fledged executive.

Unfortunately, that path was anything but straightforward.

To reach that level, I'd have to build trust, rack up achievements, and prove my worth through countless battles. I'd need to refine my skills, strengthen my body, and take on whatever missions my superiors threw my way—all while keeping my head firmly attached to my shoulders.

Leaning on my connection with Joanne might give me a small advantage, but it wouldn't be enough on its own. I'd need to slowly work my way up, seizing every opportunity to prove myself.

Ultimately, I need to secure a spot as one of the seven Great Executives.

That was the real problem. Both the Kenneth Orthodoxy and the Aros Temple Cult only allowed for seven executives at a time, and those positions rarely opened up.

In the original game, Alfie had only become a Kennethian executive after one of the existing members had been killed, leaving a vacant seat. Otherwise, he never would have had the chance.

On the cult's side, things were even more complicated. Its executives weren't the type to grow old and retire peacefully. They were battle-hardened maniacs, most of whom had transcended the normal limits of the human body through magic or sheer willpower. In other words, the only real way to create a vacancy would be to kill one of them outright.

So, if I want to become an executive, someone's going to have to die.

That meant my best bet was to build up my accomplishments and connections in preparation for that inevitable moment, when one of the seven finally fell.

And if that moment never comes… I might just have to make it happen myself.

Of all the executives, Fuankilo seemed like the most promising target. She was physically the weakest, relying on her cursed chains and psychological warfare to deal with her enemies. If I could catch her off guard, maybe with a crossbow at long range or a well-placed explosive, it was theoretically possible to take her out.

Of course, that's assuming her infamous regeneration magic doesn't kick in and bring her back with a snide "Do you realize what you've just done?" before she tears me limb from limb.

Still, if I could eliminate Fuankilo without drawing suspicion, if I could create an ironclad alibi and execute the perfect assassination, I might just stand a chance.

It's a long shot. A reckless, borderline suicidal plan… but it's not entirely impossible. For now, though, it's just a dream. A mad, desperate dream.

So, to sum it up, if I wanted to survive this mess, I'd need to earn the upper ranks' trust while steadily building my strength.

It's obvious that this cult needs to be destroyed as soon as possible, but I'm in no position to even consider a full-scale rebellion. Making a move now would just get me crushed like at Metasim, nothing more. For now, it's smarter to play the obedient underling, biding my time and gaining power until the right moment presents itself. A real uprising is only possible once I've laid the groundwork. I don't have the pieces in place yet, but I'll work on it. Slowly, quietly.

Basically, I wanted to betray the cult and tip the scales in favor of the Kenneth Orthodoxy, but I had no idea how to even begin setting that plan in motion.

As I gnawed on a strip of dried meat near the ruined remains of an Orthodox Kennethian church, a sudden, oppressive presence washed over me, prickling the hairs on the back of my neck.

I turned, heart pounding, to find Joanne standing behind me, her sharp eyes narrowed in irritation. Judging by the dust and sweat clinging to her tattered cloak, she'd been searching for me for a while.

"What is it?" I asked, quickly swallowing the last of the jerky.

"Get away from this place," she snapped, her expression hard. "This is where those scum had one of their filthy churches. I want you outta here."

"Understood."

To her, even the crumbling ruins of a Kennethian church were a hateful, defiling presence. I suddenly realized with a start that there weren't even any of Pawk's zombies wandering this area. It seemed like Joanne wasn't the only one who found this place unsettling.

Joanne stepped closer, her eyes locking onto the pendant hanging around my neck. She reached out and ran her fingers over it, her touch surprisingly delicate despite the raw power coiled in her muscles.

"Give me your pendant," she said, her tone softening slightly. "It's time for a marker exchange. The flesh I used last time is starting to rot. I can't feel you as clearly anymore."

"All right."

She grabbed my arm and guided me into the shadow of a collapsed archway, practically pushing me down onto a pile of rubble before straddling my lap. Her face hovered mere inches from mine, her breath warm against my skin as she leaned in close, her eyes half-lidded with concentration as she began the ritual.

As her slender fingers worked the pendant free from my neck, she spoke in a low, almost conspiratorial tone.

"How'd the interrogation with Fuankilo go?"

"It ended as you saw. Just a few minutes of talking, and that was it."

"She didn't rough you up? No cuts, no bruises?"

"No, nothing like that. I made it out in one piece."

"That's good, then. Guess my little bit of support paid off."

"You're not going to ask what happened in there?"

"Hm? I already know. You'd never betray us, Oakley. You're not that stupid."

"I see. Impressive as always."

I tossed out a half-hearted compliment, doing my best to keep Joanne's mood from swinging in the wrong direction. While she continued the marker exchange, I let my thoughts drift back to the challenges ahead.

How exactly was I supposed to grow stronger? If I planned to use Joanne as a stepping stone to higher ranks, I'd need to find a way to leverage her power without becoming completely dependent on her.

As I turned the idea over in my mind, a half-formed thought struck me, sparking a dangerous curiosity.

"Joanne-sama, I have a question."

"What's up?"

I hesitated, momentarily distracted by the unsettling sight of her fingers digging into her own flesh, black veins bulging as she carved off another sliver of herself for my pendant. I forced myself to focus and continued.

"You've given me a piece of your flesh," I began, holding up the gruesome charm, "but what if we took this idea a step further?"

She paused, her bloody hand hovering over the pendant.

"For instance," I said, carefully pressing the pad of my ring finger against hers, aligning the joints. "What if we actually swapped fingers—yours for mine? Assuming our bodies didn't reject the graft, wouldn't that transfer some of your strength to me?"

Joanne's eyes widened, and for a moment, her hand froze mid-motion. She seemed genuinely stunned, her pupils dilating as the implications sank in. I could almost see the gears turning in her head.

A shiver ran through her body, and she clutched at her chest, her breath coming in sharp, uneven bursts.

"Y-You… You're crazy, Oakley," she whispered, her tone a mix of shock and something darker, a note of barely contained excitement trembling beneath the surface.

Apparently, I'd struck a nerve.

The idea itself was a long shot, an untested theory born from the logic of a world where the line between flesh and magic had long since blurred. But if it worked…

If I could graft a piece of Joanne's body onto my own, I might gain access to her incredible strength and regenerative abilities. At

the very least, it might grant me some form of her monstrous resilience.

Of course, the risk was enormous. There was no guarantee that our bodies would be compatible, and if my immune system rejected the graft, it would likely be a slow and agonizing death. But if it succeeded…

The possibilities are endless.

Joanne's breath hitched, and her grip on my pendant tightened, her pulse visibly throbbing at the side of her neck. She was struggling to keep her composure, but I couldn't afford to let my guard down.

"I never thought of that," she muttered, her voice trembling slightly. "I've never tried anything like that before, but… it might work." Joanne's eyes gleamed with a hint of excitement as she spoke, her tone betraying a twisted sort of anticipation.

Her lips curled into a crooked smile, and her nails dug into my chest as she leaned in closer, the glint in her eyes sharp and feverish.

Of course, she'd like the idea of hacking off body parts for experimentation.

"You've never tried this before, Joanne-sama?" I asked, more to confirm my suspicions than anything else.

"Nah, that kind of thing is usually Fuankilo's territory," she replied, running her fingers over mine, tracing the length of my ring finger. Her touch was oddly gentle, contrasting sharply with the grotesque nature of our conversation. "But now thatcha mention it… Why not try it right now?"

The way she said it, like she was inviting me to share a glass of wine or take a walk in the garden, sent a shiver down my spine.

Right. This is exactly the kind of person Joanne is.

For a moment, I hesitated. This was the point where a normal, sane person would back out, cut their losses, and laugh it off. But as my pulse quickened and a reckless sort of courage overtook my reason, I found myself nodding.

"Let's do it. Left ring finger. I'm ready."

Joanne's eyes sparkled with a wild, almost childlike glee as she whipped out a small, serrated blade from the folds of her cloak.

"Okay! This'll sting a bit, but try and hold still."

I barely had time to tense before she sliced clean through my ring finger.

"Gack!"

Blinding, searing pain shot up my arm, a white-hot lance of agony that momentarily robbed me of my senses. My vision swam, and I nearly crumpled to the ground as sweat poured from every pore. The reality of my decision hit me all at once, each heartbeat pounding against the raw, exposed nerves of my severed hand.

"Sorry, sorry! I should've warned you it might hurt a bit more than I thought," Joanne muttered, her voice shaking slightly.

I forced a laugh, teeth gritted so hard I thought they might crack. "Ha… Quite the surgeon, Joanne-sama. You cut right through the joint without hesitation."

My severed finger hit the dirt with a soft, wet sound, the pale digit tumbling into the dust at our feet. Joanne quickly scooped it up, stuffing it into her robe pocket like some kind of grotesque souvenir.

What the hell is she doing?!

Before I could question her, she grabbed my bleeding stump and pressed her own severed ring finger against it, aligning the raw, exposed flesh.

It felt like someone had just set fire to my nerves. The pain was indescribable, every exposed nerve ending screaming in protest as my body tried to reject the foreign tissue. I would've screamed if my throat weren't already locked up from the shock.

Then, I felt it.

A strange tingling sensation as Joanne's healing magic kicked in, the flesh knitting itself together in a grotesque, rapid fusion. My blood mingled with hers, the exposed muscles and tendons winding together, weaving into a seamless whole.

The process was excruciating, the kind of pain that stripped the mind raw and left one teetering on the edge of madness. My heart thundered in my ears, my breath coming in ragged gasps as I watched our flesh merge, cell by cell, vein by vein. Joanne's body convulsed, her hips bucking slightly as a shiver ran through her entire frame. Her pupils dilated, and her breath hitched, a sharp, strangled sound slipping from her lips.

For a second, I thought she might've cut herself too deep, but then it hit me.

Oh, no.

Had I just unleashed something in her?



"W-Wait… O-Oakley… M-My body's getting… hotter," she moaned.

Calm down, Joanne. Now's not the time. We're fusing flesh here, not doing something out of a romance novel.

I lifted my newly fused left hand, turning it over in the sunlight to examine the seam where her finger had become part of me. There was a clear line of contrast—my sun-darkened skin against her almost ghostly white. Even with the flawless, seamless healing, the color difference made the connection obvious.

What the hell did we just do?

I flexed my new finger, and it moved. Smoothly. Naturally. As if it had always been a part of my body.

The connection felt complete, the nerves responding without hesitation. There was no numbness, no resistance—just pure, unfiltered sensation. I wiggled the finger, testing the range of motion, and found it perfectly intact.

How is this even possible?

Ignoring Joanne, who was now clutching her abdomen and squirming in a way that was definitely *not* reassuring, I kept inspecting my hand. I tugged on the finger experimentally, trying to separate it, but it held fast, the skin refusing to budge even a millimeter. The bond felt as solid as my original flesh.

Was this some kind of compatibility thing?

My mind raced through the possibilities. Maybe our physical makeups were just that similar, allowing the tissue to merge without rejection. I had no way of knowing, but it was the only theory I had.

I glanced at Joanne's hand. The spot on her hand where she'd severed her finger was still bleeding, the rhythmic pulse of bright red blood dripping onto the stone floor, each drop a stark reminder of what we'd just attempted.

"Joanne-sama," I said, my voice steadier now. "Would it be possible for you to fuse my finger to your hand in return?"

"H-Huh?"

"If you're not interested, I won't push it," I added quickly.

"No, no, let's do it! I-I wanna try it too!"

Joanne pulled my finger from her pocket, still slick with blood, and pressed it against the raw wound on her left hand. She squeezed it firmly, grinding the tissues together like someone kneading ground meat, then began chanting her healing magic.

Just watching the scene made me want to look away. The visceral sounds of wet flesh being mashed together, the harsh squelching as nerves and muscles knitted themselves back into place…

This was beyond anything I had seen in the original game. I was stepping into the unknown, pushing past the boundaries of the original script, testing limits that even the writers hadn't dared to imagine.

"Ahh… Oh, wow… This is… It feels… incredible… I'm starting to get Stella's tastes now…"

Joanne sank to her knees, gasping, her legs trembling as if the very act of merging with my severed finger had sent a shockwave through her system. A hazy, intoxicated smile spread across her face as she lifted her newly fused left hand and lovingly nuzzled the freshly attached digit against her cheek.

Okay, Joanne, don't go full cannibal on me.

Then, as if remembering something, she looked up at me with a mischievous grin, her emerald eyes still glassy with lingering euphoria.

"Y'know, they want me to be your mental health counselor," she said, still clutching my old finger with a possessive grip.

"Is that so?"

"Yeah…" She giggled. "Said your head's all fucky."

Of all the people in this twisted world, you have no right to say that, Joanne.

Who in their right mind thought pairing a yandere murder machine with a traumatized grunt was a good idea for mental health support? That was like putting a shark in charge of a fish tank.

I considered pointing this out, maybe even scolding her for being part of such a dangerous plan, but then a thought crossed my mind.

Wait a second.

Joanne had come all this way just to see me. She had even offered me a part of herself—literally—by fusing my finger to her hand.

Is it possible that, in her eyes, I'm not just a grunt anymore but something closer to a kindred spirit?

If that's the case, this whole "mental health care" thing might just be another excuse to get closer to me. Maybe my status as a "certified lunatic" is now set in stone among the higher-ups. If so, I might have just bought myself some breathing room.

I could continue my crazy experiments without drawing too much suspicion. After all, it wasn't like anyone expected a madman to play by the rules.

Maybe things are finally starting to go my way.

I reached out and gently took Joanne's left hand, lifting it so our newly connected fingers were side by side.

"H-Hey, wh-what are you doing?" she stammered.

I ignored her breathy protest, tracing the place where my old finger had seamlessly attached itself to her hand. The skin had melded perfectly, the lines and contours matching up so naturally it felt as if we'd been born this way. There wasn't even a hint of scarring.

Wait… How exactly is this being registered by the world's logic? Is this finger truly part of my body now, or is it still considered a foreign entity?

The thought swirled in my mind, bordering on the philosophical. This was a living version of the "Ship of Theseus" paradox. If a ship has had all its parts replaced over time, would it still be the same ship?

To put it in more relatable terms, if a band replaced each of its members one by one until none of the original members remained,

would it still be the same band? If not, at what point would it stop being itself?

This question was crucial. If the world recognized this fused finger as part of my own body—if it registered me as having incorporated a piece of Joanne's flesh—then I might have just unlocked a potential superpower.

Joanne's abilities included superhuman strength, a hyper-sensitive sense that allowed her to locate her flesh, rapid self-healing, and the ability to teleport to any piece of her own body. If even a fraction of that had transferred over to me, it would be a game-changer.

"Ahh… W-Wait, that tickles… O-Oakley, what are you—ngh—doing?" Joanne's breath hitched as I absentmindedly ran my thumb along the seam where our flesh had fused. Her skin was warm, her pulse erratic beneath my touch.

I tried to focus, concentrating my thoughts, mentally commanding my new finger to access her abilities. I clenched my hand, trying to summon the unnatural strength that let Joanne shatter bones like dry twigs—but nothing happened. I scraped the stone floor with my nails, hoping for the signature bone-crushing force, but only ended up bending my fingertips painfully.

Tch… Nothing.

I wasn't stronger. I couldn't sense the detached pieces of her flesh. I couldn't even feel the faintest hint of magic flowing through my veins. Whatever I had gained, it clearly didn't include her full range of abilities.

Joanne's body was quivering beneath my touch, her breaths coming out in short, heated gasps. "H-Hey… How long are you gonna keep touching me? I-I feel so… so hot, and—mnnnh—there's this aching feeling deep down… It's driving me crazy…"

So, it's just a piece of flesh after all. The magic and power must be tied to something more fundamental…

My mind raced, searching for an answer. If the abilities didn't reside in the finger alone, where were they coming from?

Her spine?

Her heart?

Her uterus?

Her brain?

Her head?

Or perhaps a specific combination of internal organs?

No, that didn't seem right either. Even if I could somehow pull off such a radical transplant, there was no guarantee that it would grant me the full extent of Joanne's abilities. Swapping fingers was one thing, but exchanging entire organs felt far too risky, even in a world as freaky as this one.

Maybe… it's a matter of mass? If more than 51% of the body's total weight is replaced, does that trigger the identity shift? If that's the case, then we're talking about a full limb swap—or worse, a complete body takeover. I'd be crossing a line even I'm hesitant to approach…

I mentally calculated the weight distribution of the human body.

The head made up about 8%, the arms roughly 16%, the legs around 30%, and the torso about 46% of the total body weight. If I were to replace my head and all four limbs, I'd reach the necessary threshold. But that would mean tearing myself apart piece by piece and hoping the world recognized me as "Joanne" afterward.

Wait… No, that's not right.

I recalled a detail from my fragmented memories. During her brutal clash with Celestia Hothound, Joanne had been decapitated and blown to pieces, and yet she had continued to fight. Her will to kill had not faded, even without a head. And even after her entire body had been destroyed, she had regenerated from the single earlobe I'd happened to be holding at the time.

It seemed that this "identity threshold" wasn't purely physical. It wasn't as simple as swapping heads or limbs. There had to be a deeper, metaphysical factor at play.

If that's the case, then perhaps the world's judgment isn't based solely on physical mass… but rather on the presence of a soul, or

whatever serves as the core of a person's identity in this crazy reality.

It made a disturbing amount of sense. If the "soul"—or whatever this world used to anchor a person's existence—remained intact, the world might still register it as the same individual, regardless of how much flesh was swapped out.

As I pondered this, my gaze drifted back to Joanne, who was still sitting on the cold stone floor, her breath coming in short, heated gasps, her eyes half-lidded and unfocused.

"Joanne-sama, may I ask you something?" I murmured.

"Mmgh…? Wh-What's up?"

"You've fought Celestia Hothound before, correct?"

"Huh? Ah, yeah. What about it?"

The mention of that name seemed to snap her out of her haze. The dreamy, feverish look in her eyes sharpened instantly, her jaw setting with a hint of remembered fury. The tension in the air thickened, but I pressed on.

"Back then, you were blown to pieces, yet you still managed to come back. You left a marker behind, but… how exactly did you regenerate from that? What was the process?" I asked.

"Huh? What kind of dumb question is that? I just did," she replied, sounding genuinely confused.

"If a person loses their head, they generally can't think anymore. In fact, getting your head blown off is usually instant death. Yet you managed to come back using your healing magic. When your body is reduced to just a marker, what exactly happens during the regeneration process?"

This had always been a puzzle to me. Why could these maniacs keep fighting even after losing their heads? The original game had glossed over this detail, leaving fans to wave it away as part of the extreme battle madness these characters embodied. But now that I was living in this twisted world, I needed a concrete answer.

Was it something like a soul transferring to the largest remaining chunk of their body? Or maybe their consciousness clung

to the head, even if it was separated from the rest of their flesh?

Joanne, seemingly amused by my line of questioning, let out a derisive snort. "Pfft. You can come back if you've got the guts for it, silly."

"Guts…?"

"Yeah. If you've got the burning drive to keep fighting for our great leader, your body just moves on its own. When I was nothing but an earlobe, I could still feel my rage boiling over. That's why I came back."

Of course. I should have expected a nonsense answer like that. In this world, sheer force of will was apparently a more critical survival factor than basic biology.

"Do you think it's possible for me to become like you, Joanne-sama?" I asked.

"Hmm… Dunno. Never thought about it," she replied, a slight frown creasing her brow.

That was an honest enough answer. Had she ever seriously considered such a thing, it would likely have been tested already. And if it were possible to mass-produce pseudo-Joannes, that psychotic scientist Fuankilo would have tried it ages ago.

I had to accept it. I couldn't simply become another Joanne, nor could I transform into some sort of "lesser Joanne" by grafting her flesh onto mine. It seemed I was stuck in my current form, at least for now.

"Let's say you did get reduced to just this ring finger," I said, raising my left hand and wiggling the new pale digit. "What would happen to my body if you tried to regenerate from it?"

Joanne chuckled darkly, her eyes glinting with amusement.

"Well, my body would probably start growing out of you, pushing your flesh aside like weeds breaking through cracked pavement. Anything in the way would get torn apart and destroyed. But don't worry," she added, her voice dropping to a low, almost sensual whisper, "I'm really good at regrowing lost bits. I wouldn't mess it up."

So that settled it. If Joanne tried to regenerate from my body, it would effectively destroy whatever parts of me she pushed out in the process.

Becoming a high-ranking cultist might involve some kind of spiritual binding on the soul, rather than just physical enhancements. The realization that simply grafting body parts wouldn't grant me their abilities left me with a bitter taste. I clenched my new, mismatched left hand, then discreetly smacked it against the wall behind me to vent my frustration.

Of course, it wouldn't be that easy. If it were, this place would already be crawling with Joanne and Pawk clones.

Even if this attempt had been a complete dud, I'd at least figured out where the boundaries were. That was valuable in its own way.

"Anyway," Joanne said, breaking my train of thought, "there's something I wanna ask you."

"What is it?"

She fidgeted slightly, a faint redness creeping up her cheeks. Her gaze darted to the side, avoiding my eyes.

"Uh… When you, y'know… When you… comfort yourself, how do you do it?"

"I'm sorry?"

"*Comfort" myself? What the hell is she talking about? Oh. Oh… She means that. So, she knows about that, huh?*

"I'm sorry, I'm not quite sure what you mean," I replied, playing dumb to buy myself some time.

"W-Well… which hand do you use?"

"My right hand, I suppose."

"Then… from now on, use your left hand. I'll use my left ring finger too… So, yeah…"

"I… Huh?"

What? What the hell kind of twisted suggestion is that?

In the time I'd spent in this world, the chances to indulge in that particular activity had been few and far between. Mostly just a

few times early on, before everything went to hell, and maybe a couple of rare moments of desperate escapism since. But these days, stress and fear had long since crushed any trace of that kind of urge.

Joanne, on the other hand, had a private room in the castle back at the headquarters, so maybe she had more opportunities. She was a young woman, after all. It made sense she'd be curious about that sort of thing.

But this? This was on a whole different level of messed up. She was seriously asking me to synchronize my self-gratification with her? If she wanted to indulge her kinks, she should have found someone just as twisted as her. Preferably far away from me.

"That's… a bit much, don't you think? Besides, I'm not left-handed."

"Then I'll just…"

"Please, don't even joke about that."

"Ugh, you're so frustrating!" she snapped, her voice rising in pitch. "Are you saying you're not interested at all? You seriously don't wanna do *anything* with me? You've never thought about doing, you know, dirty things with someone you like?!"

Of course I had. I was a guy, after all. But not with her. Not with a walking, talking red flag who could end my life on a whim.

"Now's not the time for that," I replied, keeping my tone as neutral as possible. "I'll have to decline."

"Fine," she said, her eyes narrowing, "then how about we swap?"

"Swap… what?"

She leaned in close, her breath warm against my ear.

"Our… genitals. Let's swap them," she whispered, her face as red as her eyes.

"Excuse me?" I froze.

I must have misheard her. There's no way she just said that.

"Yeah," she continued, voice trembling with a mix of anticipation and embarrassment, "we'll switch them. Then, you know… we can

try it out together. Wouldn’t that feel good?"

My brain stalled. For a solid three seconds, I just stared at her, trying to process the utter madness of her suggestion.

"You… You can’t be serious," I managed to choke out, my face turning a shade paler.

She averted her eyes, her face still burning bright, but she didn’t say anything.

She’s serious.

This girl had officially gone off the deep end; her kinks had finally hit critical mass.

"I just thought of something amazing," she said suddenly, a wild, eager light in her eyes.

I braced myself, expecting yet another dangerously unhinged idea.

"Let me guess," I said, "another sexual proposal?"

"No, no! It’s not like that this time!" she shot back, flustered. "This is a *serious* idea!"

Oh, that’s reassuring.

I had zero faith in her definition of “serious,” but I listened anyway, more out of morbid curiosity than anything else.

Her next words, however, made my blood run cold.

"Why not just graft a piece of each executive to you? Like, turn you into a mobile fortress made of all our best parts. That way, you’ll have the strength of every single one of us."

I felt my jaw tighten.

What the hell are you talking about?!

The sheer insanity of the idea had left me speechless. The obvious retort—*why not just fuse the actual cultists if that’s the goal?*—was so glaringly obvious that I couldn’t even bring myself to say it.

Once the initial shock subsided, I finally managed to grasp the outline of the plan.

"If it's not too presumptuous, may I ask for the full details of this operation?"

The Oakley Mobile Fortress Project. As the details unfolded, it became clear that this plan was something that would be utterly abhorrent from the perspective of the Kenneth Orthodoxy.

The concept was straightforward, yet deeply unsettling. First, they would replace one of my fingers or another part of my body with a corresponding piece from one of the cult's high-ranking officers. Then, I would be sent into an Orthodoxy-controlled city, disguised as a regular citizen. At the predetermined moment, I would make my way to the city center. Once I reached the designated spot, every one of the cult's executives would simultaneously manifest in the heart of the city.

If executed correctly, this plan had the potential to completely turn the tide of the ongoing holy war. It exploited the twisted strengths unique to these heretical zealots, who had no qualms about employing inhumane tactics. The ability to effectively teleport human weapons deep into enemy territory was nothing short of a game-breaking maneuver.

However, only Joanne possessed the power to “transfer” body parts over distances measured in hundreds of kilometers. The other executives could manage a range of perhaps ten kilometers at most. While this was still considerable, it fell short of the devastating potential of Joanne's reach.

Yet something about this approach felt inefficient, even to me.

"Forgive my boldness, Joanne-sama, but wouldn't it be simpler and more effective to just exchange body parts directly between the executives? It seems like a far less convoluted approach."

She met my suggestion with a slow, deliberate shake of her head.

"No… It's not just about offense. From a defensive standpoint, having a regular cultist handle the body parts is preferable."

I frowned, trying to piece together her logic. Wouldn't it make more sense for the executives, with their formidable regenerative abilities, to hold parts of each other's bodies as a form of mutual insurance? If all seven of them were fortified this way, it would

create a grotesque, near-immortal system where each could revive the others as long as a single piece of flesh remained within a ten-kilometer radius.

Of course, this resurrection relied on someone carrying their flesh fragments being nearby, but if the same rule applied, wouldn't it be far more advantageous for them to rely on one another?

I was about to voice this thought when a troubling realization hit me.

"Wait… If someone were to blast off the ring finger that originally belonged to me, which you're currently using, what would happen?" I asked.

"Naturally, that piece would be lost for good. No matter how much healing magic I poured into my body, the part that once belonged to you would never regenerate. Instead, my original finger would grow back in its place."

I felt a chill run down my spine as the implications sank in. So, a precisely aimed strike could forcibly sever this grotesque bond and sever the connection.

I finally understood why the ones chosen for fortification had to be regular cultists rather than high-ranking executives.

Most large-scale battles naturally split into skirmishes between ordinary soldiers and brutal, high-stakes duels between the elite. Executives, by the nature of their combat style, constantly faced the risk of severe bodily damage. If they were the ones burdened with these fleshy anchors, the advantage of the fortification strategy would be significantly weakened.

I only had to recall the vicious clash between Joanne and Celestia to confirm this. Their battle had been a ferocious storm of shattered limbs and torn flesh. Even if one executive had entrusted their fragments to Joanne, those fragments would have likely been obliterated in the chaos. The entire strategy hinged on the integrity of these transplanted pieces. Once destroyed, the advantage would vanish, rendering the whole mechanism useless.

It made sense, then, that the ideal candidates for this tactic were not the hardened executives themselves but durable, combat-capable cultists—soldiers tough enough to survive the surrounding chaos of lesser battles while their leaders clashed in their bloody duels.

"By deliberately entrusting these fragments to regular cultists, you secure a high-impact surprise element offensively, while defensively providing a stable, often overlooked resurrection point," I observed, piecing the logic together.

"Exactly," Joanne replied with a faint, knowing smile. "You must've realized that during your second fight with Celestia."

I nodded, memories of that brutal clash flooding back. In that battle, Joanne had ultimately reemerged from me, the last surviving grunt. Even if I had died, the blow that felled me would likely have been a swift, piercing strike or some attack that didn't fully obliterate my flesh. The fragment hidden within my pendant would have remained intact, providing a stable anchor for her return.

"Besides," she added, a glint of dark humor in her eyes, "there's no risk of the entrusted flesh rotting if it remains within a living host. That might be the biggest advantage of the whole thing."

She wasn't wrong. However, there was a critical flaw in this plan. The executives' healing magic, powerful as it was, lacked the versatility needed for full-body restoration. They could mend their own wounds in an instant, but when it came to regenerating another's body parts—like the finger she'd taken from me—it fell woefully short.

If Joanne ever lost my ring finger in battle, that piece would be gone forever. It would never regenerate, no matter how much healing magic she poured into her body. Well, I suppose I can live without it. At this point, it's a minor sacrifice.

However, if I ended up being designated as the resurrection anchor for all seven executives, that would mean losing a total of seven fingers. At that point, I'd be practically useless for anything requiring basic hand functionality.

No, no, no. There has to be a better alternative. Maybe a few toes, an earlobe, a kidney, or even an appendix… Anything but seven fingers. I might be a bit flexible about losing body parts, but I still have my limits.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that grafting flesh from all seven executives onto a single host was likely impossible, even if Joanne could theoretically make it work. Not to mention, it would result in a significant power boost for the cult—exactly the kind of nightmare scenario I wanted to avoid.

All right, time to push back on this madness. If I'm going to shut down this "Mobile Fortress" plan, I'll have to use Joanne's rather intense mix of love and possessiveness against her.

"It's an intriguing idea," I said, trying to sound thoughtful, "but, Joanne-sama, are you really okay with this?"

"Huh?"

She blinked, her eyes widening in genuine confusion. Clearly, she hadn't considered the angle I was about to exploit.

"Let's assume you go ahead with this plan. You'll be transplanting the fingers of other executives, right? Just five on the left hand won't be enough, so naturally, you'll have to replace fingers on the right hand as well," I started.

"Uh-huh." She nodded, still not grasping my point.

"Well, men have certain… physical needs. That means if you swap out the fingers on my right hand, I'd inevitably end up using another executive's fingers for those, uh, private moments. Can you really tolerate the idea of your beloved using someone else's body parts for such… intimate activities? Would you be okay with that?"

For a moment, Joanne froze, her face blank as my words sank in. Then, the realization hit her, and I saw a flicker of conflicted horror pass through her eyes.

"You're right. That's… a real problem."

Perfect. I could almost feel a victorious grin creeping onto my face. It looked like Joanne had already locked in on fingers as her preferred transplant choice, which was a small mercy. If she'd

suggested swapping out toes or earlobes instead, I might have had a harder time talking her down.

To be honest, a power-up event sounded great, but that wasn't the kind I had in mind. I was thinking more along the lines of getting ripped or blasting out magic like a hero in some over-the-top fantasy story, not becoming some nightmare dungeon boss with a body full of spare parts. Besides, letting the cult gain that kind of overwhelming advantage was the last thing I wanted.

No, I definitely need to kill this "Mobile Fortress" plan before it gains traction. It's the kind of ruthless, game-breaking strategy that could devastate any opponent caught unprepared.

I took a deep breath, already feeling a bit lighter now that I had a plausible angle of resistance. I just had to keep playing on her possessive nature. With any luck, this absurd plan would collapse before it got anywhere close to implementation.

Though Celestia had seen my face, she hadn't managed to snap a picture or record my features. That meant I could still move freely in and out of cities without much trouble. After all, plenty of people shared my general appearance, which only served to highlight just how terrifying this plan was.

Seeing Joanne's possessive, almost feral expression as she clenched her fists and twisted her lips into a frustrated snarl, I felt a wave of relief wash over me. I let out a quiet, shaky sigh. *All right, I think I managed to steer this thing off the rails. She's wavering. I might get away with only swapping my finger with hers after all.*

"Then let's just forget we ever—" I started.

"Even so, Oakley, I still want you to do it." Her words cut through the air, sharp and unyielding, echoing in my ears like a crack of thunder.

Wait, what? I nearly blurted the words out loud, my mind stalling like a sputtering engine. *Wh-What the hell? Weren't we just about to drop this whole Mobile Fortress thing?!*

I looked at her, stunned. Joanne's deathly pale skin had flushed a vivid, feverish red, and she seemed torn, her fingers trembling as

they clutched at the fabric of her sleeve.

"Ugh… You're… mine, Oakley Mercury. I won't let anyone else have you. I want to keep you close—so close that I can hear your heartbeat at all times… and yet… if I want to crush those Orthodoxy bastards once and for all, this is the only way. I have no choice but to get over it!"

Ah, right. How could I forget?

At the core of Joanne's twisted personality was a near-religious devotion to Cult Leader Aros. Despite her unhinged possessiveness, she still managed to separate business from her obsessions—a fact that somehow made her even more terrifying.

"If this is causing you so much internal conflict," I ventured carefully, "why not at least consider using other cultists for the remaining executives' fragments instead of just me?"

"No," she shot back immediately, her voice sharp with a steely resolve. "The more people involved, the greater the risk of a leak. If the Orthodoxy dogs catch even a whisper of this plan, they'll start preparing countermeasures immediately. The first time this tactic is revealed needs to be a decisive, crippling blow. Anything less would be a waste."

Of course. She's not wrong.

The whole point of this brutal strategy was to unleash the full force of seven executives through a single, unsuspecting vessel, making the initial strike almost impossible to defend against. It was a vicious, one-time-only trump card that could annihilate an entire city in a single devastating maneuver. And for a zealot like Joanne, scoring a grand victory for the cult was worth almost any sacrifice.

And yet…

I could see the turmoil churning beneath her words, her obsessive, all-consuming love for me wrestling with her fanatical devotion to the cult. Joanne's heart was a tangled nest of loyalty and jealousy, and it was clear that even she felt the strain of trying to balance the two.

"But I still can’t stand the thought of someone else’s flesh being grafted to you. And I hate the idea of your flesh being implanted in someone else just as much. Ugh, thinking about it like this… It’s driving me crazy…"

Tears welled up in Joanne’s eyes, spilling over as she collapsed against my chest. She buried her face in my chest, pressing her forehead against my sternum, her grip tightening around my waist as her shoulders shook with each sob.

The sudden shift in tone caught me completely off guard. Just a moment ago, we were discussing the cold logistics of flesh transplantation like two twisted surgeons, and now she was acting like a heartbroken lover clinging to me for comfort.

What the hell? I thought, staring down at the crown of her head as she trembled against me. *How can she get this emotional over something as grotesque as a flesh-swapping strategy? Your plan is potentially going to rewrite the balance of power in this entire region, you lunatic…*

Thick, glistening tears continued to roll down her pale cheeks, staining the front of my shirt. Despite her monstrous nature, I couldn’t help but notice the warmth of her body, the delicate curve of her shoulders, and the unsettling softness of her figure as she clung to me. It was enough to make my clenched fists slowly unfurl, the resistance I’d been mustering quietly slipping away.

"I… I don’t even know what I’m doing anymore, Oakley…" she whispered, her voice breaking as she pressed herself even closer.

My arms, hanging awkwardly in midair behind her, twitched with uncertainty. *Shit. She might be a walking nightmare, but she’s still a girl. Crying in my arms like this, she makes me feel like the bad guy. Why the hell do I feel guilty?*

They say a woman’s tears are a powerful weapon, but Joanne didn’t need any more weapons. She was already a living arsenal of lethal intent. *For the love of all that’s unholy, Joanne, stop adding to your arsenal. Wait a second… did I just get emotionally steamrolled*

into agreeing to this Mobile Fortress madness? Did I even have a choice? What happened to my basic human rights?

For a moment, the temptation to push her away and cut this nonsense short flickered in my mind. But then I remembered who I was dealing with. Angering her probably wasn't in my best interest.

I let out a slow, defeated breath, lowering my arms to gently wrap them around her trembling back.

"It's okay," I whispered, my voice coming out softer than I'd intended.

I slid my hands across her narrow back, pulling her small frame against me, feeling the sharp outline of her shoulder blades beneath the thin fabric of her dress. Despite having been reduced to a pile of broken bones and shredded flesh not long ago, her heartbeat thudded powerfully against my chest, a stubborn pulse that somehow matched the intensity of her emotions.

As her sobs gradually subsided, Joanne lifted her head, her wet eyes meeting mine. Without warning, she went up on her toes, draping her thin arms over my shoulders and resting her chin against the side of my neck. I felt her chest press firmly against me, the soft, yielding warmth of her body forcing me to lean back, my balance wavering.

I stumbled backward, my balance thrown completely off as Joanne's sudden embrace forced me into a seated position, legs crossed beneath me like a clumsy attempt at meditation. Before I could fully recover, she pressed her face against my neck, her breath hot against my skin as she took a slow, deliberate inhale.

If she were a guy, there's no way I'd be putting up with this, I thought, feeling a wave of discomfort ripple through me. *Then again, the fact that most of the executives are women is probably because this world started as an eroge aimed at men. Small blessings, I suppose… Still, it's hard to shake the fact that, gender aside, these are still insane cultists.*

When the hell did Joanne's affection meter get this high anyway?

Through the thin fabric of my shirt, I could feel her warmth seeping into me. Her slender arms wrapped tightly around my shoulders, and her long, toned legs locked around my waist. Occasionally, the thick soles of her platform boots would bump against my lower back, a sharp reminder of just how aggressively she was clinging to me.

Trying to regain some semblance of control, I gently patted her head, her hair cool and silky beneath my fingers.

"All right," I whispered, leaning closer, "listen."

Of course, what I meant was, *"Cut it out, Joanne, I'm begging you." If you have time to cling to me like this, we should be running more experiments.*

Something in my tone must have sent the wrong message, because Joanne suddenly pulled back, her body stiffening as her eyes darted away. She brought a trembling hand up to her slightly parted, rose-colored lips, a faint blush spreading across her ghostly pale cheeks.

"Uh… I-I get it," she stammered, her breath catching as her spiral-patterned eyes flicked nervously from side to side. "If that's what you want…"

Huh?

Before I could process her reaction, she grabbed my shoulders with surprising strength, yanking me forward so forcefully that our faces nearly collided. Her eyes locked onto mine, her cheeks turning a deeper shade of pink as she hesitated for a split second.

Then, with a tiny, shaky breath, she leaned in, closed her eyes, and puckered her lips.

Wait. Wait, hold on…

Before I could even register what was happening, her soft, trembling lips pressed against mine, warm and surprisingly moist.

"Nnnngh?!"

I froze, my mind going completely blank. I caught a glimpse of sweat trickling down the side of her neck, slipping into the loose,

slightly parted neckline of her dress, and disappearing between the smooth curves beneath.

"Don’t make me take the lead… you idiot," she muttered, pulling back just enough to whisper the words, her breath tickling my tingling lips.

Who’s the idiot here? I thought, my mind still struggling to catch up. *How the hell did she get kissing vibes from me? We literally just finished discussing finger amputations not five minutes ago!*

I sat there, stunned, my mouth opening and closing like a gasping koi fish as Joanne, her ears a deep, embarrassed red, slowly stood up.

W-Wait, calm down. This… This is fine. I should be grateful this ended with just a kiss. I could’ve had my arm lopped off without warning. I should be thankful she didn’t escalate things to spontaneous amputation!

Perhaps the finger exchange had been enough to momentarily satisfy her twisted form of affection. In any case, I couldn’t afford to approach this halfway. Half-measures in this world were a death sentence. If I were going to deal with Joanne, I had to commit to the bitter end.

Okay, fine. If I’m going to survive this hellscape, I’ll have to master the art of navigating Joanne’s psychotic affection while keeping my limbs intact.

I took her offered hand and let her pull me to my feet, my eyes dropping to my left ring finger. What was left of it, anyway. There it was. A small, macabre testament to her twisted love. An awkward, horrifying union of flesh and fanaticism, a constant reminder of just how dangerous her affection could be.

"I’ll bring up the Mobile Fortress plan at the next executive meeting," she said, her voice calm but carrying a hint of dark satisfaction. "It’ll be your accomplishment."

"Understood."

Of course, there’s no way she’s letting this go.

In her mind, the Oakley Mobile Fortress Plan was likely already a done deal. The other executives, especially someone like Fuankilo, known for her ruthless strategic mind, would undoubtedly take an interest. Aros, the cult leader himself, would probably approve without a second thought, eager to seize any advantage over the Orthodoxy faction.

Well, at least she's giving me credit for it. That's something.

If I wanted to secure a solid position within the cult while hiding my true intentions, this was a good start. The credit for such a significant tactic would shield my motives, providing a convenient smokescreen as I continued to quietly maneuver for my eventual escape.

No more mistakes like Metasim. This time, I'll play the part of the loyal heretic until the perfect opportunity presents itself.

As Joanne's grip tightened around my hand, I took a slow, deep breath, resolving to lie low and wait for my chance. There were countless problems ahead, but turning back was no longer an option.

She leaned closer, her thin, cold fingers lacing through mine as she rested her head against my shoulder. We stood together in the shadow of the crumbling ruins, our breath mingling in the cool, stagnant air.

"I love you," she whispered, her eyes shimmering as she stretched up on her toes, her soft, trembling lips pressing against mine once more. This time, there was no hesitation, no awkwardness—just a fierce, possessive hunger. For a brief moment, the madness in her gaze gave way to something more human, a flicker of fragile sanity.

"You'll always be mine, Oakley."

The gears had begun to turn, and no matter how desperately I wished to stop them, they ground on, indifferent to my silent pleas.



Afterword

Hello, my name is Heaven99.

First and foremost, thank you for picking up this book.

This work is based on a web novel that was previously published online. While the core story remains largely the same, the printed version has undergone significant edits, including the addition of charming new episodes aimed at softening the harsh tone of the original. We've also polished the prose and refined various aspects to better suit the novel format.

The initial spark for writing this story came from a straightforward desire to try my hand at the “Reincarnated in a Game World” genre, which I’d been curious about for some time. I had a few different ideas, like the classic “Reborn as the Protagonist,” “Villainess in a Romantic Drama,” or “Frontier Noble with Hidden Powers” setups. However, I thought it might be more unique and entertaining to focus on a story about someone reincarnated as a minor, disposable character within a sinister cult, struggling to survive against overwhelming odds. With that impulse, this story was born.

The biggest challenge in writing this work was undoubtedly capturing the main heroine, Joanne. She’s a cute girl deeply in love with the protagonist, Oakley, but from his perspective, she’s a dangerously unpredictable and potentially lethal presence. Striking the right balance for this "is she an ally or a threat?" dynamic has been both the most enjoyable and the most challenging aspect of the writing process. I do not doubt that Joanne will continue to test my creative limits as the story progresses.

I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Namanie-sensei, the talented artist responsible for bringing these characters to life. When I first

received the character designs, I found myself staring at them for hours, completely entranced.

As for where the story goes from here, expect things to only get more intense as the protagonist fully commits to his dangerous path.

Will things get worse than the "Snail" and "Engagement Finger" arcs?

Yes. Yes, they will.

When I first heard this story would be published in print, I felt a mix of terror and disbelief. *Is this really okay to put on store shelves?* But now, I can't help but feel an overwhelming sense of joy as this absurd, over-the-top tale makes its way into the world.

Please consider recommending this book to your friends online. It would make this humble author very happy.

Finally, I'd like to extend my heartfelt thanks to the editor who supported this project, to Namanie-sensei for their beautiful character illustrations, and to everyone else involved in bringing this book to life.

And, of course, my deepest gratitude to you, the readers, who have supported this story from its humble web novel beginnings.

Thank you all so much.

I hope to see you again in the next volume.

Similar to one of those eroge where everyone is intoxicated by pure determination.



2014 Coming Fall

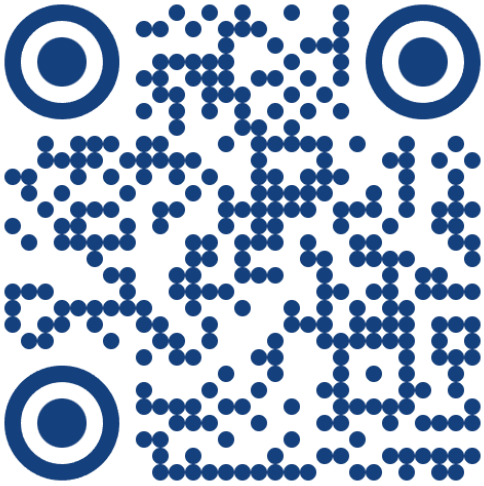
Thank you all

Thank you for reaching the end of **I Got Reincarnated as a Cultist Mob Volume 1!** We hope you've enjoyed Makoto's continued adventures in this magical world. Your support means the world to us!

To help us bring you more fantastic stories, please share your thoughts on Amazon. Your reviews not only let us know what you liked (or didn't!) but also help us decide which light novels to bring to you next.

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