

Mary Skelter

NIGHTMARES





CONTENTS

Story 1	02	Story 8	58
Story 2	10	Story 9	66
Story 3	18	Story 10	74
Story 4	26	Story 11	82
Story 5	34	Story 12	90
Story 6	42	Story 13	98
Story 7	50	Story 14	103

*This short novel contains spoilers. We recommend reading the booklet after clearing the game.

On that day, the seed of a nightmare fell to Earth.



“Look! A shooting star!”

A small child raised his finger to the night sky, smiling.

The people around him looked up. A large shooting star flew through the crisp, night air, vibrant against the glittering sky.

It was said that wishing upon a falling star three times before it disappeared would make the wish come true. Even rarer was one that would stay in sight for long enough. But on that night, the shooting star hung in the sky, and all the people of the city, young and old, clasped their hands together.

The star flew through the night for some time before it disappeared, as if bursting in midair.

“Aww... It’s gone.”

The child’s disappointed voice broke the silence, and the people returned their gazes back to the ground to live their lives as usual.

But their usual lives would prove to be short lived...



200 kilometers above ground, the shooting star crumbled. At least, that’s what the people thought it was. From inside something small fell out, something like a seed of a plant.

It dropped from the sky, dancing in midair, and it gently fell to the earth.

It landed in one particular city, and immediately its roots began to sprout.

The encroachment had begun.

The seed sent its roots across the land like a parasite, consuming and infecting all organic and inorganic things it came into contact with.

The roots took hold of everything they touched, and their structures began to change. Some things contorted, others cracked, and others melted. Everything infected was changed in form, and soon the very land began to warp. People who saw this tried to flee, but many could not, and soon they too were infected.

The land to which the seed was rooted began to rot, and the city began its descent into a deep chasm. Deep underground it fell. Unable to climb out, the people watched as their city became hellishly deformed.

High above, at the surface where the city once stood, a flesh-like membrane blocked not only the sunlight, but the people’s only chance of escape as well.

And so, the citizens were trapped deep underground.





As the encroachment spread, the city center warped into a terrifying nightmare. After some time, the spread of the infection slowed. Of course, that alone could not quell the fears of the people. With the city now deep underground, they were left with no other choice but to live in this newly created, underground hell. While those infected by the seed were transformed, the transformations stopped once the seed's roots slowed. The people, animals, and insects that were corrupted lost their intelligence. But none ever showed a threat of harm to the people, and instead, they simply lurked around the city. Despite their horror, the people considered it a form of disease or a phenomenon that would somehow disappear one day. With this fragile hope at heart, the people escaped from the center of the city, and looked for a place to live along the outskirts. But this was not the end for them. Only a year had passed before people discovered what true despair was... A high-rise located towards the city's center had, too, fallen victim to the seed's pervasive infestation, mutating into a twisted tower looming over the decaying city. From it came eerie sounds that resonated throughout the area. The sounds harked the nightmare that was to come.



The son of one family in particular had been infected as well. Seeing that their child hadn't been as badly deformed as the others, the parents decided to stay together as a family. Then one day, the eerie sounds began to ring out from the center of the city. As if being summoned, the infected son began to walk slowly toward it. Fearing that they, too, would be infected, the family was reluctant to follow after him. Perhaps he would be safer there, they thought. They forced themselves to place their hopes in such a thought, and waited for their son to return. And return he did. "It's so nice to see you back!" His younger sister ran toward him with joy. The son proceeded to grab the girl's head like a ball. "Oww! That hurts!" As if he couldn't hear her, he dragged her by the head toward his mother. He then grabbed his mother's arm and turned around, walking back into the city. "Wh-What are you doing?! Stop it!" The father, who had been stunned into stupor, snapped out of it and hurriedly grabbed his son's shoulder from behind. He had no choice. It was his duty as a father to protect his family. But, unbeknownst to him, his life would soon be approaching its end. The son turned around and opened his mouth wide. From inside, his tongue lashed out and pierced his father straight through his skull. "Aaaaaaaaah!" His mother screamed. The son's tongue retracted back into his mouth, and his father crumpled to the ground without a sound. "Y-You... No! Let go! Let me go!" "Mommy, what's happening?! Ouch! You're hurting me! Please let me go!" With his mother crying at the top of her lungs, and his younger sister shrieking in pain, the son quietly dragged them away, trudging along as if nothing happened.



As they came closer to the city center, the structures took on deformed shapes. Rotted buildings, twisted streetlights, flowers blooming from telephone poles. Their environment took on an even more terrifying form as they drew closer to the center.

Suddenly, the son finally stopped.

The drain along the road twisted into a gaping hole. His younger sister's leg got caught in it. "Wait... My foot..."

The younger sister's voice squaked softly.

Her brother turned around and seemed to understand what was happening. Unfortunately, his scattered cognition made it difficult for him to help her in her meek struggle.

The brother lifted his younger sister's head up, and pulled.

"Br...!"

Sounds of bone snapping and flesh tearing cracked through the night air.

The girl's head spewed blood over her body.

The brother lifted his hand to see her head. He tossed it away, and began to walk again, dragging his mother with him. His mother had long since lost consciousness, and had not seen what happened.

Soon, the son had led them to a twisting tower standing above the city center.

There were small rooms, many of which contained people already locked inside. Another infected person stood guarding these cells.

The guard noticed the son, and opened the door.

The son tossed his mother inside.

He then wandered out, looking for his next prey...



Acts of savagery like this occurred all throughout the city.

Those who transformed suddenly began their siege on the humans and captured them, dragging them to the cells. Anyone who resisted were killed.

On that day, the city became an underground jail, and the people its captives.



The fight between the two sides had begun.

The infected creatures all exhibited strength beyond normal expectations, and even the smallest creatures grew to a monstrous size. Normal humans stood no chance against any of them.

But the saving grace for humanity was the fight to preserve their consciousness.

"S-Stop! Don't come any closer!"

A man was running from a creature.

Behind him was a giant worm slithering at great speed, but the man was faster. He turned the

corner of the building and disappeared. Seconds later, the giant worm turned the same corner. It was met with a metal rod straight to the head.

Squish. The rod broke through its slimy flesh, and from it spewed pink blood. The creature squirmed madly, and the man was knocked back. He wasn't alone. Ten others stood nearby, each wielding a weapon, and began their attack on the creature.

"Damn it! You monster!"

"Die! Die! Die!"

Despite the multiple punctures through its skin, the creature still thrashed about, slamming its body down and biting at the people. Its attackers sustained several injuries, but they kept at it until the creature stopped moving.

The giant worm, now a lump of flesh and pink blood, was spat upon by the man in disgust.

"Serves you right, monster..."

"Hey. You okay?"

"Yeah... It's dead. What about the others?"

"I think someone over here's got a broken arm. We should take him to the doctor right away."

Helping the injured man, they all began to walk toward the perimeter of the city.

Though the people lacked the strength to fight alone, they proved that they could be victorious by setting traps and fighting in numbers. However, running was still the best course of action, and far less risky. Since the creatures did not travel very far, the people simply found shelter outside of the city center to live quietly along the perimeters.



Another year passed...

The people banded together to form a colony to survive the underground jail. Among them, former police officers, Self-Defense Forces officers, scientists, doctors, and other professionals, formed an organization to become a beacon of hope.

The Dawn Liberation Force, or the "Dawn" for short, took on various roles - defense, patrol, medicine, research, and more. They soon became a crucial part of the people's survival.

One of the core members of the Dawn was a professor.

The professor conducted research on the seed, its roots, the transformations, the creatures - everything related to the ongoing phenomenon, to find out what was truly going on.

After extensive study, he came up with a number of theories and a name for the phenomenon. He referred to the transformations in the city as "Mimicry."

He then named the mimicked creatures "Marchens." There was one other term the professor coined. The place they lived in, which had still been slowly growing into a living hell...

...was called "the Jail."



The sound of a stomach in hunger is a low-pitched growl.
 The sound of a cat in heat is like a high-pitched purr.
 The sound of wind passing through a cave is like a resonating bellow.
 And if all three came together as one, the sound would be in discord, beyond recognition.
 Only like this could one describe the sounds that came from this living world, the Jail.
 Here, in this giant prison of a city, wails and cries could be heard coming from the Jail. The horrific sounds brought disgust, hatred, and fear to the captives.
 But...
 Something that posed itself as a symbol of a nightmare for many was a siren that harked the beginning of the most enjoyable time of the day to play for others.



In the city were seven areas, with the tower standing at the center. Within each area were creatures created by the Jail, and cells where people were held captive.
 The prisoners went pale and huddled closely together in their cells each time they heard the Jail wailing. They knew what the wailing would bring.
 After the wail resonated through the area, horrifying creatures - Marchens - appeared from nowhere. They then selected a number of prisoners to take away.
 Those unlucky enough to be chosen writhed in fear, and cried desperately for help.
 “P-Please! S-Someone! Help! I don’t want to go there!”
 “Please, please, have mercy... Please...”
 “No! No! No! No! No!”
 The words all fell on the deaf ears of the Marchens.
 They didn’t understand what the prisoners were saying. Instead, it seemed as though they were guided by the simple, but cruel, satisfaction in dragging away the hapless humans from their cells.
 As the prisoners looked on in despair, watching their brethren being dragged away, they held themselves back from saving them. No... They looked on, not with despair, but with fear, sorrow, self-loathing, uselessness, and with... relief that they were not the ones who were chosen.
 Who could admonish them for thinking that way? No one could, as everyone knew where the chosen were being taken...



The torture chamber. A room where the Marchens used all means necessary to torture the captives.
 “Urrh... Aaaaaaah...”
 Some slowly inflicted a dull pain to induce the prisoners to moan in suffering.





“It hurts! Aaaaah!”

Some were made to bleed profusely from all parts of their bodies.

“Mmm... Aah... Mnn...”

And some were made to lick the walls as if to caress the Jail.

Why were the Marchens doing such things? No one knew. They continued to torture the people, grinding down their bodies and souls. Those who survived were taken back to the cell to live another day. Those who did not became the Marchens’ next meal. And so, as the number of prisoners dwindled, the Marchens went out into the city again to capture more humans.

An organization existed to save the people from the predatory Marchens.

The Dawn Liberation Force, also known as the “Dawn.”

They were the last hope for the people trapped in this hellish city.



“Sir! The Marchens are on the hunt again!”

“How many are we looking at?”

“According to reports, two mid-sized ones! The civilians are currently under attack!”

“Two mid-sized Marchens... We should be able to handle them. All available, follow me!”

The leader of the Dawn’s defense force immediately took action.

He had once been a Major of the Self-Defense Forces stationed in the city and was dedicated to protecting the people from the Marchens. When the Jail’s reach began to spread, he saw the chaos of the authorities’ units losing members one-by-one. He immediately gathered people who would take up arms, anticipating it would take a turn for the worse. That decisiveness led him to becoming a key member of the Dawn.

The leader and five of his men arrived on the scene. A handful of people were already fighting the two Marchens. Three were on the ground, their fates unknown.

“All you civilians! Go and take the injured to safety!”

“The Dawn! You’re here!”

“We’ll take care of them! Boys, count your bullets! It’s time to show them what we’ve got!”

After the city sunk underground, replenishing ammunition for their weapons had become impossible. Despite their limitations, the leader and his men headed in to face the Marchens, bayonet-equipped automatic rifles at the ready.

One of the Marchens was half-man, half-canine, its body covered in fur. The other was a manifestation of the playing card soldier from “Alice in Wonderland.” The only thing that could explain their existence was that all of this was a nightmare.

“I’ll take care of dog-face. You boys take care of the card.”

The leader charged toward the dog-faced Marchen. Using the bayonet to his advantage, he stabbed it repeatedly and put as much distance between them as possible.

“Grrraaayyyeeeh!”

The Marchen let out a sound unlike any the leader had heard from a man or a dog. The strength and resilience of most Marchens made it close to impossible for any mortal to face them. Their only weakness was their limited intelligence, which the humans exploited in order to defeat them.

But it was far from easy.

“Urgh!”

Despite the danger of the bayonet, the Marchen closed in. In his haste, the leader thrust forward too deeply, making it difficult to dislodge his weapon from the Marchen. It reached out, and the leader let go. After it pulled the weapon from its body, the Marchen tossed it away, turning the battle into a fistfight.

“Grrrr!”

The distance the leader placed between them had not been enough. The Marchen leapt into range, and opened its slimy mouth, exposing its fangs, and ready to bite.

(Shoot!)

The leader closed his eyes and knew it was over. A gunshot cracked through the air.

“Grrraaayyyeeeh!”

Blood spewed forth from the Marchen’s belly, and it fell to the ground with a thud.

“The leader looked toward the sound of the gunshot to see one of his men. The card Marchen lay on the ground next to him. The others came forward, and finished it off.

“Sir, are you all right?!”

“Yeah, thanks to you.”

“I’m sorry, sir. I wasted precious ammo there.”

“In exchange for my life? I’d say it was worth it.”

The leader spoke jokingly. When the man saw his smile, he let out a laugh in relief. But that laughter was short lived.

“What’s the report?”

“Sir. Three civilians in critical condition. Five sustained minor injuries. Two of our guys with minor injuries as well.

No deaths, sir.”

“Good. Go and get the civilians looked at. Tell the rest to keep their eyes open for any danger. Send in a requisition to dispatch the rescue unit.”

“Already done, sir. I believe they should be arriving shortly.”

“I see. Well then, I suppose I’ll make my rounds.”

There was no telling whether or not another Marchen was lurking in the shadows. The leader picked up his trusty rifle and headed out on full alert.



“All clear... Hm?”

The leader stopped, hearing something... Footsteps...

One person... Walking on twos... Small... Running...? No... Walking quickly...

Something was definitely closing in.

He hid in the shadows to see who or what it could be. Three... Two... One...

“Freeze!”

“Yikes!”

He jumped out of the shadows and pressed the barrel of his gun against the creature. Even if this Marchen couldn't understand what he was saying, he knew the loudness of his voice would startle it and stop it in its tracks. But he had worried in vain.



There, trembling with her hands up, stood a girl in white, with long, black hair. She turned around slowly.

“Oh, it's you, Doctor...”

“Urrh... Please don't scare me like that...”

The leader frowned at her teary-eyed face. She was the lead doctor and the head of the rescue unit. Despite being in her 20s, she had top-notch medical skills and the rare ability to calm others around her with just her presence. It was no wonder she was one of the key members of the Dawn.

“Did you come here alone? It's dangerous out here.”

“I could say the same to you. Even if you are strong, it doesn't mean you can defeat a Marchen by yourself. If I ever see you hurt because of something like this, I'm going to get really angry.”

Wiping the tears from her eyes, she suddenly glared at the leader. The intensity in her face was blunted by the fact that she needed to look up at him instead of down. Her kindness and her indignation at others for putting themselves in peril were the very reasons the leader found her irritating. But at the same time, he couldn't help but like her.

“Fine... I'll head back.”

“Good. Let's go back together.”

A smile came across her face, and she suggested returning via a different route so the leader could finish his rounds.

Corner after corner they turned, until one corner led them straight to a Marchen.

“Move back!”

The leader pulled the doctor behind him, drawing his weapon toward the Marchen. It was about ten meters away. In humanoid form... Just the kind he hated fighting. But for some reason, it was crouched on the ground. Was it... hurt?

What should I do, he thought. Fighting it alone would be too dangerous. If it was hurt, it could



prove to be a formidable opponent, like an injured animal lashing out. Maybe I should retreat and call for reinforcements...

Those thoughts disappeared immediately once he saw what lay on the ground near the Marchen.

“Is that...?”

A baby.

One year old? Two years old? In any case, it was an infant crying and naked on the ground.

The Marchen reached its arm out toward the baby...

The leader reacted immediately, removing the safety lock from his rifle. Now was the time to use the bullets he had kept so safe.

The automatic rifle fired a rain of bullets, piercing the Marchen. The Marchen, without any sound whatsoever, fell to the ground. Its pink blood splattered over the baby.

But it was still alive.

Right next to the Marchen’s head was the young infant.

The Marchen opened its mouth to bite. Was it... going to consume the baby?!

“Noooooooo!”

With a fierce scream, the leader ran toward the Marchen, but he was too far away.

Sensing danger, the baby began to cry out in a loud voice. Her arm rose toward the skies, and...

Splat.

The Marchen’s head was crushed.

The leader couldn’t believe his eyes.

Indeed, it had happened.

The Marchen’s head.

The baby simply swung its tiny fist down, crushing it.

The Marchen stopped moving. Stunned as he approached, the leader slowly came to and noticed that the baby’s cries had stopped. Instead, she gurgled with laughter.

“Um... Wh-What’s going on?”

The leader couldn’t answer the doctor’s trembling voice. How could he?

He slowly picked up the laughing baby, and wiped off the Marchen’s blood.

Maybe that felt good to the baby. The baby opened its eyes and stared at the leader.

“What the...?”

The baby’s eyes were emitting an eerie, pink glow.



The headquarters of the Dawn.

Inside the isolated city was a single structure that still had running power. Members of the Dawn from all walks of life resided there.

Indeed, this was the last fortress for the people of the city.

A meeting room was situated in a laboratory deep inside this huge structure where six key members of the Dawn converged.

“I’m quite busy. I’d appreciate it if we could end this quickly.”

He was the head of the research team, known as the “Professor.” In his mid-40s, his frail and tempered face was the perfect fit for just the type of genius who would remove himself from society to conduct research. No matter what, the Professor worked day in and day out to find the truth behind the Jail and the Marchens.

“Now, now, Professor... This is going to be a very important meeting.”

The Professor’s lead assistant was about 30 years of age. Though he looked far healthier than the Professor, he seemed just as far from reliable as his mentor. However, his sharp mind led him to becoming the Professor’s go-to person within a year of joining the Dawn.

“It’ll take a while, especially today.”

The leader of the defense force. Close to his 40s and very muscular, he not only looked hardy, but was incredibly reliable. He fought on the frontlines against the Marchens, defending the people as a leader. He could be considered the very person who brought the Dawn together.

“What? Ya got something neat to share?”

The head of the maintenance crew, known as “Chief.” In his late-50s, a brash, rude, and hard-headed leader of craftsmen. He was in charge of the technicians who maintained the buildings, power, water supply, and infrastructure to keep the city alive.

“I hope it isn’t bad news...”

The head of general commodities, rightfully known as “Mother.” She was in her late-20s, and had a gentle and nurturing air about her. In charge of handling provisions, general operations, and governance of the rules to ensure that all problems, both big and small, were handled properly to keep the people safe and happy.

“Casualties from the Marchens have been on a decline.”

The leader of the rescue unit, also known as “Doctor.” In her mid-20s, and a very skilled medical practitioner despite her youth. She was kind and loving, with a smile that could heal even the most wretched soul cut deep by the existence of Marchens. She was, indeed, the Nightingale of the Jail.

The Professor, the Assistant, the Leader, the Doctor, the Chief, and Mother.

They were the key members of the Dawn who worked to protect the lives of the people.





The six of them gathered periodically to report on activities and exchange information.

The reason their meetings were held so deep inside the Dawn was because of the Professor. In the most extreme sense, he was reclusive, only stepping out of his laboratory for research, such as when he would visit the Marchen's lair. He was acquainted with no one else besides the key members of the meeting, so it was only natural for everyone to converge in the laboratory.

"Now then, let's begin the reports."

The assistant went around the table, and each of the members' reports seemed to corroborate the Doctor's observation of decreasing casualties. It might also have been proof that the Dawn's activities were finally reaping the fruits of harvest they had planted.

But among the reports, the leader's was the most notable.

"I'm happy to report that we were successful in infiltrating the Jail Tower."

The tension in the air grew thick.

The tower in the middle of the Jail was surrounded by seven distinct areas. Each had been infected by the Jail, and were all Marchen lairs containing prison cells. The members of the Dawn collectively referred to these areas as "dungeons."

The assistant and the other members of the Dawn went to these dungeons to study the area, which was then reported back to the Professor to further his research. They would often retreat after encountering Marchens, but even so, the research was making progress.

And progress it was. They succeeded in infiltrating the Jail Tower after the professor finished evaluating all seven dungeons.

The chief spoke up, full of energy.

"So, how was it?! Was it like what ya thought?!"

"We were able to search up to the third floor, but... it was as expected. The tower may actually be deserted."

The Dawn positioned their members near key entrances to the Jail Tower and its surrounding dungeons so as to monitor the Marchens going in and out. They had used binoculars and other low-tech means, but...

It turned out that not a single Marchen had entered or exited the Jail Tower in over a year.

The absence of Marchens in the Tower had been suspected for some time, and so the place was closely monitored. But still, no Marchens were detected, and the search team was able to infiltrate the area.

"I recommend we officially put together a search team to climb the Tower."

It would be the most important subject they would discuss.

"Professor, the Tower is still growing, isn't it?"

The professor nodded in silence. His assistant spoke up.

"The growth has slowed, but it hasn't stopped."

According to their research, the city had sunk 600 meters below the surface, about the length of a skyscraper. The tower they spoke about had originally been a 250-meter-tall building, but ever since it was taken over by the Jail, the building twisted and grew to about 300 meters tall.

"Among all the buildings, that one seems to be special. I'm sure we can uncover new secrets by sending our troops in there."

The conviction in their leader's voice silenced everyone else in the room. They knew it had to be done sooner than later.

But...

"It's too dangerous."

Mother broke the silence.

"Even if there are no Marchens in there, there's no telling what lies in wait."

"I agree as well."

The Doctor gave her assent quietly. From her standpoint as a doctor, she couldn't recommend having anyone put themselves in harm's way.

"So, you're saying we should live here in constant peril with the Marchens on our tails? We're never going to be able to get out of here unless we take action."

The leader's words silenced Mother and the Doctor once more. What he said was true. They needed to take some form of action, and they knew it had to be done, but...

"What about you, Professor?"

"I agree with you. There's only so much I can accomplish with my current research. I already have all I need to know about the dungeons. If we can get any information from the inside, I'm sure it would help our research even further."

"I'm also in agreement. We already know that the Jail is like a plant. And I believe the Marchens are like the fruits of the plant. If so, we'll need to examine the trunk and its roots to find out more about the Jail."

"And you, Chief?"

"You gotta ask? If there ain't anything in there, just go on in. It's a hell of a lot better than having an all out war with them monsters."

The vote was 4 to 2 in agreement with going in. But the two girls were still unconvinced. However, they couldn't say anything more, and sat frowning in silence.

The leader spoke to them.

"Our objective is only to search the place. No aggressive action or battle at all. We'll select only our best to form three units within the group, and each will be led by a sub-leader. I'll oversee the mission, and we'll bring all the armaments and ammunition we got. The equipment will be updated by the Chief, and if things start to look shaky, we'll retreat. Sound like a deal?"

Stressing caution above all else, he hoped he could convince them. He would see to it himself that the right members were appointed into the units.

Soon enough, the Doctor raised her head with a gleam of resolve in her eyes.

“Understood. Then I’ll be joining the mission, as well.”

The leader looked perplexed.

“Wait... No. You’ll only get in the way.”

“That’s my goal. There’s no way for you to act out of line if you have to worry about someone like me.”



With that, she let out a grin.

“And even the Professor’s gone on missions to the dungeons before. I’m quite sure I’m in much better shape physically than he is.”

“Hm...”

The Professor frowned hearing that, while the Doctor’s grin widened.

“If you agree that you’ll put my safety first, then I’ll vote in agreement.”

After all, protecting the frailest of them all would make it easier for them to make the decision to retreat if necessary.

“Th-Then I’ll go, too! I can prepare the meals!”

“Hell, if that’s the case, we should just all go. Y’know, as leaders of the Dawn.”

“Mother... Chief...”

Slowly, everyone moved to agreement.

The leader crossed his arms and went deep into thought.

The Professor and his assistant were needed for the expedition. The Doctor and the Chief could help in case of emergency. With Mother around, everyone’s morale would get a healthy boost.

The leader himself had brought back many a mission without casualties, even with the somewhat frail Professor around.

Finally, the leader lowered his arms.

“Fine... We’ll all go, then, but we’re going to put extra time into making sure this all goes well. And only after we have final confirmation that there are no Marchens in there.”

Everyone agreed, and the expedition was made official.

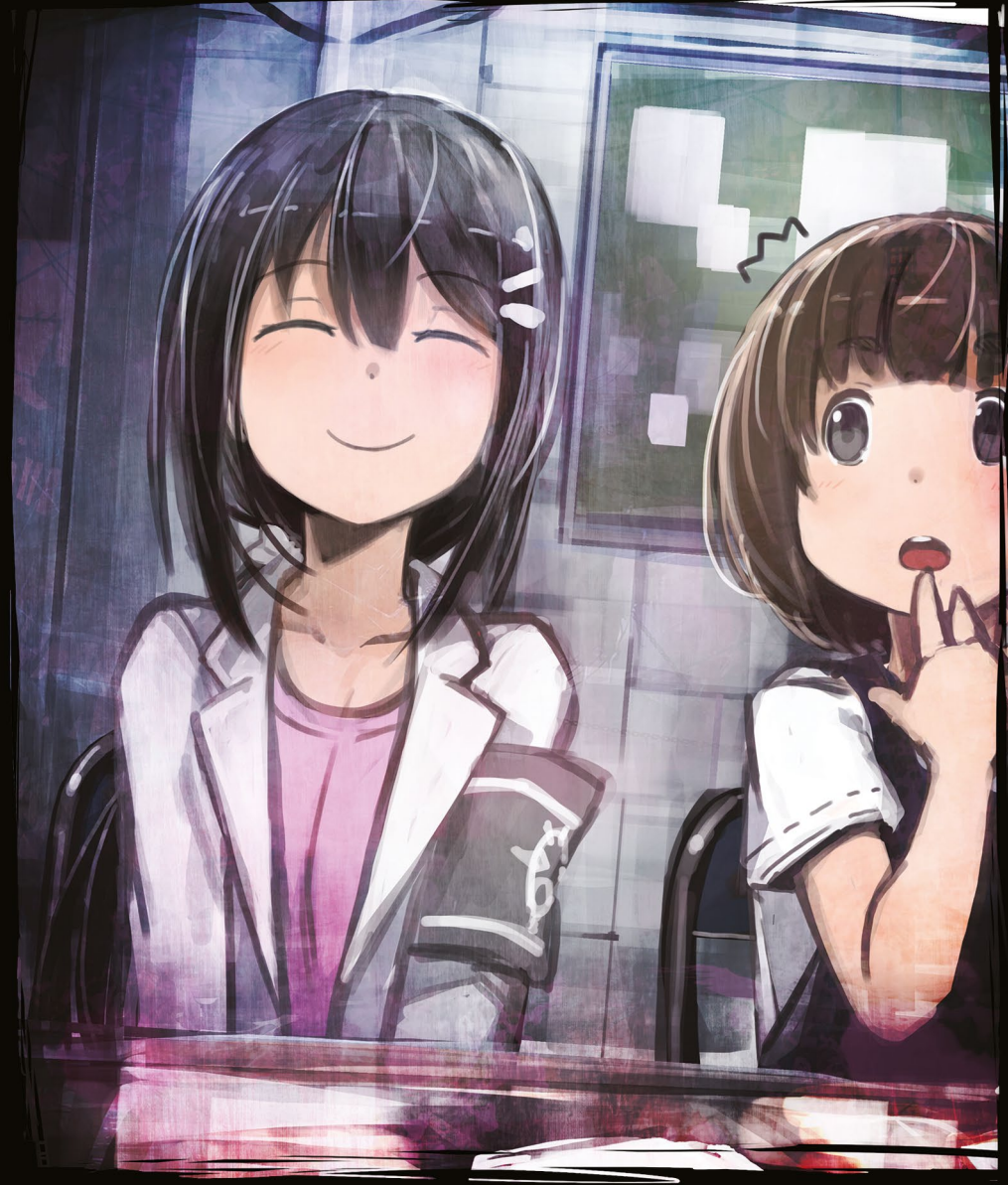
“Now, then...”

As the assistant began to speak...

The sound of a baby crying came from the other side of the door in the laboratory.

“Oh my, she’s awake.”

Mother stood up hurriedly and disappeared behind the door. Soon, the crying stopped, and a bright infant giggle could be heard.



“What timing. I suppose we should discuss a bit about that baby.”

There, past the door, was the baby whom the leader had found and brought back two years before. The very infant who crushed the Marchen’s head with her bare hands. The one with the glowing, pink eyes.

Various studies had been conducted since that time. They discovered that the baby’s physical prowess and her volatility increased exponentially when she was exposed to Marchen blood, and that it also turned her eyes pink. Why that happened was unknown, and all they could do was raise her like any other child.

“Did something happen?”

“No... Though, she did learn her first words just recently.”

“Really? What did she say?”

The Doctor clasped her hands together with joy. Ever since the city’s fall, hardly anyone bore any children, so it was rare to have conversations of this nature.

But the assistant’s expression didn’t reflect the joy the doctor was feeling.

“What did she say?”

The assistant didn’t answer, so the leader repeated the question.

Slowly, the assistant spoke.

“She said, ‘Granny, what big ears you have...’”





It had been five years since the city was devoured by the Jail. Some who had lived in the city were taken captive to be tortured for the rest of their lives. Others were simply lost to the tragedy of war. Since the conception of the liberation front - the Dawn - casualties had decreased, but they still had yet to rescue those taken captive, and to liberate the city they once knew.

But on that day...

The people took a step toward their escape from the Jail, hoping once again see to the light of the sun. To recapture the Jail Tower.

The Jail Tower was a twisted tower that rose high into the air, stretching out toward the heavens. Among all the unearthly structures and transformations in the city, the Tower stood far more ominously than the others.

After extensive monitoring of the Tower, the team discovered that no Marchens had been in the vicinity for a while. Members of the Dawn went in to confirm, exploring up to the third floor in search of any Marchens' existence, and just as suspected, none were found.

They decided to go higher into the Tower to explore and see what lay beyond. They monitored the area for a year. And even then, no Marchens were found, leading people to assume there were none inside.

And now...

With the Dawn assembling their forces into three units, each led by a sub-leader, they began their expedition into the Jail Tower.



"What's with these vines? Sir, we can't cut through them."

A member of the expedition sighed, turning around with his rifle in hand.

As expected, they hadn't encountered a single Marchen. Though, it didn't mean the expedition was going smoothly. There were a number of traps and gimmicks thwarting their progress.

And now, one unit was stopped at a door bound by vines. A unit member tried to slice through them with his bayonet, but it didn't even make a scratch.

"We should bring the professor here."

The leader used his transceiver to contact the unit waiting on the floor below. In this unit was the professor and the other key members, waiting for the leader's clearance.

Soon, the Professor made his way upstairs, and the leader gave a briefing on what was going on.

"And now we're stuck. So, you mind checking it out?"

"Hm... My dear assistant, would you do the honors?"

"Gladly."

The Professor and his assistant approached the vines to inspect them.

All the others could do was wait for the results, all the while keeping their minds sharp for any

dangers lurking nearby.

The leader brought out his transceiver again, and contacted the unit on the first floor.

"Status report."

"Sir! All is well."

Even without any Marchens in the Tower, it was possible that one could enter from outside.

The unit on the first floor kept watch, and so far it seemed everything was quiet.

"This is a lot safer than I thought it would be."

"Thank goodness. Now then, how about some snacks?"

The Doctor and Mother both breathed sighs of relief. With no signs of impending danger, it was hard to ask them to keep their guards up.

"You two..."

The leader approached them to ask that they stay cautious, when...

"It looks like the vines are fused with chains."

The Professor raised himself up from the door.

Many of the objects that were corrupted ended up merged with other objects. The reason the vine couldn't be cut was because it was fused with chains.

"Chains... Guess I'm up next."

Tired of waiting, the Chief got up and opened his toolbox. He pulled out a hydraulic metal cutter and began cutting through the vines. His expertise was by far the most useful in their expedition.

Soon, the vines made a snapping sound and fell off.

Non-combatant troops in the unit moved back as the others slowly opened the door. No Marchens could be seen.

"Good... Let's go."

With that said, everyone crossed the threshold.

Behind them, the Professor was writing something. As he crossed with the rest, the paper fell to the ground.

The Professor had been taking notes on the various gimmicks and traps they had encountered.

And as they found their way through, each scrap of paper drifted unceremoniously away from his attention.

It was hard to imagine that one day, a certain youth would come upon these memos left behind.

However, that's a story for another time.



The expedition unit found a room unlike the others.

The entrance bore a plate in the shape of a cherry blossom with the words

"Cherry Blossom Room" inscribed onto it. It seemed that this place used to be a preschool.

The members who went in immediately held their breath upon entering.

“What the...?”

Inside was a large object, a seed as large as a person. But it had a surface that was red, slimy, and flesh-like. Multiple ducts that looked like roots, or even veins, connected it to the floor and the walls.

“Is that... a heart? No... Maybe it’s a plant bulb...”

Even the Professor didn’t know what it was. His brows furrowing, he looked upon it, uncertain.

But even though no one knew what it was, the same thought went through everyone’s mind.

It must be something important to the Jail.

“My dear assistant, let us see what it truly is.”

“Why, of course!”

The assistant leapt up, and proceeded to bring out various tools of their trade. It seemed they were both intent on ensuring they knew exactly what it was.

“Will this take long, Professor?”

“I can’t say for sure, but it definitely won’t be short.”

“I figured as much. All right then, we’ll take a rest here.”

An air of relief spread throughout the room. Even without the Marchens, the constant worry of falling into traps and gimmicks as they climbed the Tower was more than enough to take its toll on the unit.

“Well then, I suppose I can finally make myself useful.”

Mother happily lowered her large backpack. Inside was a portable stove, a large pot, and a large container filled with water.

“I was wondering what you had in there.”

“Well now, it’s better to enjoy food warm than cold, yes?”



The leader let out a sigh, to which Mother returned a smile. The retort pouches and canned food were distributed around the room, and didn’t require any heating before consumption. Seeing this, the leader felt she had gone a bit too far in bringing supplies, but the fact that everyone could enjoy warm food with smiles on their faces was worth it.

“Unbelievable... Well, come on, everyone! Looks like our dear old mom here is going to warm us something nice!”

Everyone raised their voices in cheers. No one could argue against the chance to enjoy a hot meal.

“Now, now. You all just wait while I get the water warmed up.”

Mother placed the pot onto the portable stove, and poured the water inside.

She clicked the switch to light the fire, when all of a sudden... she felt a sharp pain.

“Hm...?”





The bulb-like thing that the Professor had been examining suddenly extended its ducts across the room like roots. Mother and a number of members hung in the air, impaled.

The leader froze, but immediately snapped out of it.

“R-Retreat! Retreat!”

The unit members hurriedly grabbed their weapons and ran out of the room. No one knew what was going on, but they all knew they needed to get out immediately.

Those near the non-combatants tried to protect them.

“W-Wait! I’m not done examining the...”

“Shut up and move! Do you want to die?!”

“Mother! We need to get her out of here!”

“It’s too late!”

The leader grabbed the Professor and dragged him and the Doctor out of the room.

And so...

The nightmare had begun.

“Sir! A Marchen!”

Ahead of them, deep in the darkness was a single creature - an enormous Marchen standing in their way.

It was far beyond the size of any human, with two terrifying horns growing from its head.

An exoskeleton covered its neckless body, and its knuckles brushed against the ground, dragging a chainsaw that looked like it was made from flesh and bone.

“Fire at will! Now!”

The leader yelled in a steady voice. Everyone in the unit pulled their triggers at once. It wasn’t the first time they had fought Marchens as large. They were formidable, but with the group’s numbers and the right weapons, they were able to defeat them all. But...

“You’ve got to be kidding me...”

The color drained out of everyone’s faces. They fired at its head, its chest, its abdomen, its arms, and its legs. They fired hundreds of rounds into it. All of them hit the target.

“Why...? Why isn’t it dead yet?!”

The giant Marchen crept closer, bringing with it a moving shroud of darkness.

They had encountered tough Marchens before, but all had died after a few rounds to the head. Yet this Marchen wasn’t showing any signs of damage. Instead, it lurched forward as if nothing was happening.

“Hold your fire! Everyone! Run, now!”

The leader immediately ordered the members to stop shooting, and to escape through a different route. A deep, primal instinct was telling him that they shouldn’t face it.

They ran, ran, ran... All the while, they were protecting the Professor, the Doctor, and the others.

All the running seemed to have made them out of luck.

Ahead of them, a horde of Marchens appeared.

“Impossible... What in the world is the ground unit doing?! Why didn’t they let us know?!”

The leader yelled at the top of his lungs, but to no avail. The ground unit on the first floor had been attacked by the Marchens and was completely obliterated.

“Tch... Fire!”

He had no other choice. The unit fired all their rounds. They feared their bullets wouldn’t have an effect, but fortunately their artillery was still working.

But this time, the Marchens kept coming. With each kill, the Marchens would take one down with them, and slowly the unit numbers dwindled.

“W-We need to save the injured members! Let me--!”

“What are you doing?! Stay put!”

The Doctor tried to move toward an injured member, and the leader grabbed her arm to stop her. The Doctor turned her head and looked into the leader’s eyes.



Just then, a Marchen bit the Doctor in half in front of the leader.

“Please...”

That was the last word the doctor uttered.

The leader’s mind went dark. Inside, he felt a burning anger rising, to the point where he felt as if he would burn to ashes.

He wanted to cry at the top of his lungs and shoot blindly into the crowd.

But his mission and his role as leader prevented him from doing so.

His mission - the Dawn’s mission - was to lead everyone out of the Jail, and to bring them out under the sun.

In order to do that, they needed to get out alive. Someone had to make it back.

His priority was to save the people. A quiet calm came over him as he forced himself to focus.

“Protect the Professor! Protect him with your life!”

The Professor was the one who had been conducting research on the Jail and the Marchens this whole time. His knowledge and wisdom were irreplaceable. In order to save the people, the Professor would need to be saved first.

Hearing their orders, the unit took action to save the Professor. The leader fired into the Marchens to secure an escape route. All the while gritting his teeth, with tears of blood rolling from his eyes.

“Save the Professor! Get him out of here alive!”



On that day..

All but one of the Dawn’s expedition members perished.





At the Dawn headquarters during this time were members who remained behind from the expedition. Everyone waited anxiously. Waiting, believing that good news would be brought back. But on that day, no one returned. They knew it wouldn't be a one-day journey, and they prayed that everyone would be safe.

But their prayers went unanswered.

The next evening, a man was brought into the Rescue Center. He had been badly injured, and had a huge gash across his right eye. The bandage wrapped around his face was covered in blood.

"This isn't good... We need to get you in a bed, now."

No one else was there, as the Doctor had gone with the others on the expedition. No one except a young girl, one who looked up to the Doctor and sought to become just like her. Though just a teenager, she had already learned basic medical procedures from her mentor.

As she began removing the man's bandages, he held her hand at bay, and began to speak in a weak voice.

"I'm fine... Can you please bring each substitute from all the divisions here, now?"

"Huh...?"

The aspiring nurse looked at him in bewilderment. When the leaders of the Dawn's division weren't present, these substitutes became the acting leaders. What did he mean by gathering them here?

"What are you talking about, mister? Who are you?"

The man spoke in a frail voice.

"I'm one of the key members of the Dawn - the Professor."

A surprised look appeared on her face. The professor was the primary member responsible for conducting extensive research on the Jail and the Marchens. A person who held an important role in providing information on how to defeat them and how to escape from the Jail. Being that the Professor never left his laboratory, this was the first time she had ever met him in person.

"You're the Professor...? What happened in the expedition? Where is everyone?"

If he was here, what about the others? Did they return already? The professor spoke, pained.

"The expedition failed... Everyone, myself excluded, has died..."

"What...?"

The girl couldn't process what he was saying.

"The leader, the Doctor, my assistant, Chief, and Mother... Everyone, died. Everyone put their lives in front of mine to let me escape..."

"You're lying..."

"If only it were a lie..."

"That can't be possible. The Doctor said that there were no Marchens in the Jail Tower. She said that everyone would come back safe. Mister, you must be lying. You're probably not even the Professor."

"I see. So you don't know me. I should have spent more time with everyone..."

With a deep sigh, the Professor shook his head. The girl wasn't sure whether he was speaking the truth or not, but in either case, she didn't want to believe what he said.

"Regardless, I need you to gather all the substitutes together. I'll explain more then, and I'm sure one of them can prove who I am for you..."

"Explain what?"

"Everything I saw inside that tower. How everyone was killed, and..."

The Professor clutched the bloody bandages wrapped around his right eye.

"About Snark..."





“Save the Professor! Get him out of here alive!”

The Professor could hear the leader’s voice. In front of him was a horde of Marchens. Behind them was an enormous Marchen covered in darkness. It only took a moment for the leader to decide where to head.

“Concentrate your fire on the smaller Marchens! Use all the ammo you’ve got! Secure an escape route!”

Following his orders, the unit proceeded to fire their bullets into the Marchens while protecting the Professor. The smaller Marchens fell easily. Soon, a path opened up through the horde.

“Path secured! Get the Professor out of the tower! I’ll man the rear!”

The unit followed his orders, and with that, the leader turned around.

Slowly, but surely, the giant Marchen closed in. The leader fired his rounds at the Marchen’s feet, looking to topple the Marchen over, as the base of its legs was much narrower than its body. As planned, the Marchen lost its balance and tumbled to the ground. It looked as if it was trying to get up, but the narrow corridor seemed to be making that difficult. Now was his chance. All he had to do was get rid of the other Marchens and make a run for it.

But then...

The darkness around the giant Marchen churned and headed toward the leader.

Sensing danger, he quickly turned and yelled at his men.

“Run! It’s coming!”

The darkness spread its arms immediately over the unit, consuming everyone whole.

“What the...?”

One of the unit member’s limbs were covered in the darkness, and then the limb vanished.

“No... Aaaaaaaah!”

The darkness covered various parts of the troops’ bodies, which vanished as well. Blood and innards began to fall out, spilling blood onto the ground. The screams of agony from the unit came from everywhere.

“What... What... What are you?!”

The leader let out a meaningless query into the darkness. No Marchen had ever responded back to humans.

Until now...

“My name is Snark... I am the Boojum.”

So answered the darkness.

And then the leader was consumed.



“And so, I and a few others somehow made it to the floor below. But more Marchens lay in wait there, and the remaining unit protected me and fought to let me escape. Unfortunately, none of them made it out except for me...”

After hearing the Professor’s story, the substitutes paled in fear and disbelief.

“But... if that monster is still out there, we’re all doomed.”

“What’s going on? What did we do to deserve this...?”

“So, what are we going to do now that everyone’s dead?”

Despair reigned over the room. The key members were the very hope of the Dawn, and the loss of them equated to losing any opportunity of escape, and from ever seeing the sun again.

Amidst the despair..

Only the Professor held his head up.

“We will rebuild the Dawn.”

Speechless, the substitutes looked up at him.

“We will select talent with exceptional prowess and skills. They will carry on the torch and continue what the key members have done for us. We will remake the Dawn anew.”

None said a word of agreement. Their bodies and hearts were heavy, and none had the will to face the Marchens again. Indeed, they were all without hope.

Still, the Professor continued.

“I underestimated the Marchens. We humans are not ready to face them yet. Understanding that, I will continue my research on them.”

The Professor reached inside his tattered robe, and drew out a bottle the size of his hand.

Inside was a flesh-like goo.

“This is a sample I was able to bring back from the tower. Analyzing this will surely push our studies to the next level. We will find a way to face the Marchens, and face the Jail Tower once again.”

The matter inside the bottle was a sample taken from the seed inside the preschool.

“In all honesty, I’ve had very little interest in others. My sole focus was the Jail and Marchens. And now, those who may not have had much interest in my research have given up their lives for me, so that I could help save humanity.”

The Professor bowed his head.

“I will build the Dawn again. I ask for your cooperation.”



A year passed, and the Professor did succeed in rebuilding the Dawn.

He sought out and brought together people with courage and resolve. Instead of closing himself off in the laboratory, he aggressively approached people like never before. His efforts paid off. The members of the Dawn were now equal to, or perhaps even stronger than, those before them. All the knowledge of the original members were utilized to improve the lives of the people. The will to live was also reborn among the citizens who had nearly given up after hearing about the expedition’s failure.

The Professor’s research had shown great progress, and brought about a significant number of new theories on the Jail and the Marchens.

One of them was in regards to the seed in the preschool classroom. The theory was that it was like the heart of the Jail and the Marchens, providing them with nourishment. It seemed as if there was at least one of them in each of the dungeons, and the assumption was that destroying them would prevent the generation of any further Marchens. The Professor called these seed-like objects “cores.”

Next, he theorized that the giant Marchen that appeared in the Tower was there to protect the core, and that it was also receiving nourishment from it. As such, the giant Marchen couldn’t be killed unless the core was destroyed first. The Professor called these giant Marchens, “Nightmares.”

And finally, he theorized that the Jail Tower fed off of the blood from the Marchens and the Nightmares. When their blood came in contact with the Jail Tower, the Tower grew... And hopefully it would keep growing until it broke through the membrane covering the city, so that the people could escape to the surface.

Of course, these were only theories, and the Professor knew that proving them would only be possible under one condition.

That condition?

Someone or something would need to be able to defeat the Marchens, destroy the cores, kill the Nightmares, and shed their blood.

The Professor knew too well that no normal human being could do so.

In that case...





The Dawn headquarters - inside the laboratory...

Inside the giant testing cage made from thick, strengthened acryl was a small-sized Marchen that had been caught by the Dawn. It looked very weak.

Outside the cage was the professor and a girl around the age of six. That girl was the baby whom the deceased leader found, and who had been raised by the Dawn.

"I'm ready, Dad!"

The girl raised her voice with spirit.

The Professor handed her a test tube. Inside was a pink liquid.

That liquid... a Marchen's blood.

The girl quickly drank it.

Her eyes then turned pink, and the corner of her mouth rose as she let out a wild laugh.

"Heh... Heh, heh... Ahahahaha!"

She felt power surge throughout her body.

"Good. You're ready."

The Professor opened the entrance chamber to the cage. Once she was inside, the Professor closed the door behind her, then opened the door to the Marchen.

The Marchen shifted, seeing her come in. Even if it was weakened, it still could kill a young girl without any effort.

As expected...

"Ahahahaha! Take this!"

The girl grabbed the Marchen with her bare hands and slammed it against the ground.

The Marchen twitched, to which the girl responded by stomping on it with all her might.

The Marchen splattered, flinging pink blood all over the cage.

"Dad, I did it! How'd I do?!"

"Hm... Well done."

The Professor smiled with warmth at the girl.

"You're a very good girl, Red Riding Hood."



Someone or something would need to be able to defeat the Marchens, destroy the cores, kill the Nightmares, and shed their blood.

The Professor called her a "Blood Maiden."





Red Riding Hood didn't know when or where she came from.

She had only ever known the Dawn, and that she was raised in the laboratory by the Professor and the other Dawn members. According to the Professor, she spoke her first words at the age of 4.

She said, "Granny, what big ears you have." Red Riding Hood had no memory of this at all.

But what was interesting was that, no matter who spoke to her, she never showed any signs of interest, that is until she called herself "Red Riding Hood," which remains her name to this day.

When Red Riding Hood was first found by the Dawn, she was about two years old.

The now deceased leader had made the day he found her Red Riding Hood's birthday.

From that day, 8 years had passed.



"Happy 10th birthday, Red Riding Hood!"

"Thanks, everyone!"

Red Riding Hood blew out the candles on her birthday cake. The adults around her started to clap.

"So, can I eat it?"

"Of course. We made it just for you."

"Yaay! Thanks, Miko! Time for din-din!"

Red Riding Hood happily bit into her pink cake. Of course, it wasn't a normal kind of cake. Eggs, sugar, and milk were all rare commodities now, so this cake was made of common ingredients, such as water and wheat, and this wheat only became common after years of agricultural research and hands-on cultivation.

"So sweet! It's delicious!"

Red Riding Hood let out a smile, tasting a sweetness that was quite rare at that point. Contrasting her bright smile, a frown came across the face of a person behind her.

The bespectacled female in a white robe was Miko. Despite being only 18, she was a highly talented Rescue Center staff member learning medical science under the tutelage of the Professor, and she also studied the Jail and the Marchens extensively.

The reason why Miko looked away from Red Riding Hood's smile was because she knew what else was used to make the cake. An obvious fact, as Miko was the one who baked it.

So the question was, how could the cake be sweet if sugar was a rarity?

The answer to that was the very reason why she couldn't look at Red Riding Hood's smile. As for the Professor, he gazed fondly at Red Riding Hood enjoying her cake. After waiting a bit, he began to speak.

"Red Riding Hood, we have something else for you today."

"Really?! What?!"

"Haru?"

"Yeah."

"Haru," as the Professor called him, was a man in his 30s with shaggy hair and an eyepatch over his right eye. Haru was brought onboard the Dawn during its rebuilding process. His technical skills placed him in the maintenance unit where he was in charge of general services and maintenance.

He had a very rough and unfriendly look on his face, but he was definitely not as he appeared.

"Here ya go."

"What's this?"

Haru handed a huge, wrapped package to Red Riding Hood. She tore it open excitedly, and...

"Whoa... Look at how big it is!"





Red Riding Hood held in her hands a pair of black scissors with white blades so large that they were as big as her body. She started to make cutting sounds with the blades.

“Red Riding Hood? Haru made that special weapon just for you. With it, you can kill more Marchens than ever before.”

Hearing the Professor’s words brought a glimmer to her eyes.

Marchens... Bad guys who capture and torture humans.

Enemies I have to kill.

“Dad! I wanna use this now!”

“Now, calm down. You don’t have to use it now, do you?”

“Nope! I wanna use it now! Today!”

The Professor had told Red Riding Hood what the Marchens were and why the people here were living deep underground. She was raised knowing what she had to do.

Her purpose was to kill the Marchens, and use their blood to make the Tower grow, so that it would break through to the surface for everyone to escape.

When Red Riding Hood first heard about this, she wholeheartedly accepted it. Yes, she was born to put an end to the Marchens. That was something that came to her very naturally.

“Take it down a notch, will ya? That’s still a prototype. I still need to make improvements on it after a few test runs.”

“Well then, all we have to do is use it, right?”

I can defeat more Marchens than ever before. The pounding of Red Riding Hood’s blood in her veins seemed to agree. It was no time to be enjoying cake. Red Riding Hood was ready to test the scissors out. Seeing her resolve, the professor sighed, then offered a suggestion.

“I suppose it can’t be helped. Maybe you can go to the aquarium, then. That area should be fine, so long as you don’t go in too deep.”

This city used to have an aquarium that had since been corrupted by the Jail. Inside were former exhibits now turned into Marchens. Most of the aquatic life there were small, and needed to remain inside the tanks to survive. The larger Marchens that could move outside the tanks were only confirmed deeper in the aquarium, so the Professor’s suggestion was fitting.

“Haru? Can you select a few from our force to accompany her?”

“Yeah, yeah...”

“I can go and test it out then?!”

“Why, yes. But...you need to listen to Haru. Don’t go too deep inside, and if you encounter any large Marchens or a Nightmare, run. Most of all...”

“Don’t try to face Snark, right? Got it!”

Snark... The unknown being that decimated the Dawn’s expedition team five years before. The Professor theorized that Snark was the leader of the Marchens. For as long as Red Riding Hood could remember, he had been telling her to never face Snark, saying that not even a Blood Maiden could beat whatever it was.

“Be careful out there. You are, of course, my precious daughter.”

“Yup! See you later!”

“Wait up, you red-hooded idiot. He just told you to listen to me.”

“I’m not an idiot! Lemme go!”

Haru dragged the excited Red Riding Hood by the collar out of the room and selected several members to accompany them.

After seeing them both leave, Miko spoke coldly to the professor.

“I believe it’s still too early for her to go. If she really is precious to you, then...”

“Say no more... It can’t be helped. We need her power in order for us humans to be truly liberated from the Jail.”

The Professor leaned on his cane, dragging his right leg and touching the hidden scar on his right eye behind his long hair.

“So after Red Riding Hood, the next one is...”

“Yes. I’m sure we will continue to find more, but for now...”

The Professor and Miko looked toward the door leading deeper into the laboratory.



“Eight... Nine... Ten!”

In the open area right inside the aquarium was Red Riding Hood, slicing away at the fish-shaped Marchens with her scissors.

“Heh, heh! Super!”

She could hardly feel any resistance as the scissors cut through their bodies. Blood splattered all over her, with each splash shining a flash of pink again in her eyes.

Red Riding Hood licked the pink blood off her cheeks, a mesmerized expression on her face.

Marchen blood was sweet.

“Hey, don’t go too far in.”

“I know, but... Hm?”

Hearing Haru’s voice from near the entrance, Red Riding Hood responded, but then stopped mid-sentence. She heard something down the hallway.

“Something’s there!”

With that, she ran towards the sound.

“Hey! Wait, Red Riding Hood! Come back!”

She ignored Haru’s voice, and ran deeper into the aquarium.

“I know I heard it... A person’s voice!”

After a few dark corners were turned...

She came across a room covered in pink Marchen blood.

Inside the room were ten or so medium-sized Marchens surrounding a girl on the ground, ready to attack.

“Hold it right there!”

Red Riding Hood charged into them, swinging her scissors along the way.

One... Two... Three... Red Riding Hood cut them down one-by-one, but there were too many, and



soon the tables turned. She wouldn't make it at this rate.

Then all of a sudden...large amounts of blood bursted out of the Marchen's neck, covering her completely.

"Aah..."

Blood surged into her heart with a pound. And then, the pink in Red Riding Hood's eyes intensified. Her hair slowly turned white, and from her head came wolf ears, and from her rear, a tail. They were glowing pink.

"Heh, heh... Ahahahaha! Hahahaha! Die! Die! Die!"

With a maddened expression, Red Riding Hood swung her scissors with brute force. Each swing lopped off the Marchens' limbs, sliced them in half from top to bottom, and spilled their insides all over the ground.

Soon, all the Marchens were dead, and her pink-colored ears and tail vanished, and her hair returned to normal.

After regaining her calm, Red Riding Hood ran toward the fallen girl.

"Hey! Are you all right?!", as she raised the girl from the ground.

"Hey! Are you all right?!"

She raised the girl from the ground.

"Huh?!"

Red Riding Hood was suddenly taken aback.

The girl was covered in blood, so there was no way to tell from afar, but...

The eyes looking back into Red Riding Hood's were glowing pink.

The girl's long hair was white, and out from her tattered clothes her legs showed, covered in what looked like pink scales.

"It hurts... It really hurts..."

The girl spoke softly in a weak voice. It looked like it wasn't only the Marchens' blood that was on her. She was bleeding badly from the attack as well.

"It's gonna be all right! We'll get you back and get Miko to patch you up!"

There were a lot of questions in Red Riding Hood's mind, but it wasn't the time to be asking them. She gently lifted the girl up, and began walking.

Wrapped in Red Riding Hood's arms, the girl asked timidly...

"Who are you...? Are you my dear sister...?"

"Me? I'm Red Riding Hood. And you?"

Being called "sister" made Red Riding Hood really happy. She responded with the brightest and kindest voice she could offer.

The girl tilted her head, almost as if she was unsure of the answer. But, a certain name came to mind.

"Me...? I'm... Little Mermaid..."



The walls were splattered with pink blood, which was slowly growing dull and being absorbed into the walls. Red Riding Hood carried the injured girl named “Little Mermaid,” walking out of the room covered in dead Marchens.

Her first priority was bringing Little Mermaid back to the Dawn to see the Professor and Miko. Her injuries needed to be taken care of, and maybe she could be...

Red Riding Hood looked at Little Mermaid, limp in her arms.

Her eyes were still glowing pink, and her long hair still remained white. The scales along her legs were still glowing pink, too. Red Riding Hood knew who she looked like.

Herself.

Every time Red Riding Hood drank Marchen blood or was covered in it, her eyes would turn pink, her hair would go white, and she would grow pink ears and a pink tail. After that, a growing power percolated from deep within. The Professor called this state an “awakening.” This was exactly how Little Mermaid looked at that moment.

“Say... Are you, by any chance, a Blood Maiden? Is that why you were fighting those Marchens?”

Little Mermaid blinked in bewilderment at Red Riding Hood’s question.

“Blood... Maiden...? Marchens...?”

“Marchens are those monsters that were back there. Weren’t you fighting them, too?”

“Everyone was bullying me, and I wanted it to stop... So I pushed one of them back, and it bumped into a spike. Pink blood came out, and some went on me... Next thing I knew, I was battling them...”

Red Riding Hood’s suspicions were confirmed. That was the awakening, all right.

“But, there were too many, and... they kept hurting me... I thought I should just let myself die, and then you came... dear sister...”

Little Mermaid curled closer to Red Riding Hood. Red Riding Hood blushed, knowing that she not only saved her, but she was also being relied upon like a sister.

“It’s fine now. Big sister is gonna get us out of here.”

“Okay... Thank you, dear sister.”

“Now then, let’s head on back to the Dawn.”

“The Dawn...?”

“It’s where I call home. There’s Dad and Miko and Haru and everyone! We’ll get you patched up in a jiffy!”

Red Riding Hood spoke in a gentle tone to keep Little Mermaid calm, but... she knew better than to let her guard down. A normal aquarium would be made to allow plenty of space for people to walk around, so it wouldn’t be very intricate.

However, the Jail’s infection of the aquarium had created a labyrinth with the corridors and hallways twisted, leading down various paths to dead ends.

When Red Riding Hood ran into the room where Little Mermaid was, she didn’t look carefully where she was going. And so she was unsure of exactly where she was. She was, in simple terms, lost.

“Heeey! Haruuu!”

“Red... Riding Hood... Where are you...?”

Deep from within the corridor, she heard Haru’s voice. But the walls echoed, making it difficult to tell where exactly it was coming from.

“Hmm... I guess this way...”



She felt like it was coming from one direction in particular, and headed deeper in.

“Fish monsters... Dangerous?”

“Don’t worry...”

The words Little Mermaid uttered were weak and frail. Her injuries might have been worse than expected. And her awakened state also bothered Red Riding Hood. Usually, all she had to do was kill Marchens to return back to normal.

Red Riding Hood’s hair wasn’t white, and her eyes lost their pink color. Her ears and tail were gone, too. So then, why wasn’t Little Mermaid back to her normal self? In any case, Red Riding Hood needed to find Haru and get Little Mermaid back to the Dawn as soon as possible.

With that thought in mind, she turned the corner, and all of a sudden...

“Agh!”

Someone punched her in the face, and Red Riding Hood fell to the ground with Little Mermaid in her arms.

She raised her head, only to meet face-to-face with a number of fish-like humanoid creatures.

“More of them...?! Sorry! Can you wait over here, Little Mermaid?”

“Ah... Dear sister...”

Red Riding Hood lowered Little Mermaid to the ground, then pulled out her scissors. That punch to the face had drawn red blood from her nose and mouth.

Red Riding Hood was still in shock from the sudden hit, and couldn’t face the Marchens as well as she normally did. They landed hit after hit on her, and soon, she was covered, not in pink Marchen blood, but her own.

“Aaaah... Dear sister!”

“I’m... okay! Let big sis’ here handle this!”

Hearing Red Riding Hood force herself to speak brought tears to Little Mermaid’s eyes. One of the Marchens slipped past Red Riding Hood, and charged toward Little Mermaid on the ground.

“Don’t touch her!”

Red Riding Hood spun around and impaled the Marchen with her scissors. She opened them with all her might to split the Marchen in two.

Just in the nick of time, the scissors broke through the Marchen from the inside, and blood gushed out, covering Little Mermaid’s body with pink blood.

Red Riding Hood immediately turned back to face the other Marchens...

And didn’t notice.

“Aah... Aah...”

Little Mermaid, now covered in Marchen blood, opened her eyes and started to convulse, letting out a shrill, pained cry.

“And that’s that!”

Having awakened a second time in battle from the Marchen blood, Red Riding Hood was able to kill the very last one with ease. She turned around.

“Little Mermaid, are you... all... right...?”

Red Riding Hood immediately noticed that something was wrong.

But, what was it? Little Mermaid still had her pink eyes, white hair, pale skin... Wait. Pale skin?

Earlier, Red Riding Hood could only see legs sticking out of those tattered clothes, but now, Little Mermaid’s upper torso was nearly naked, and her bottom half...

“Huh?”

Red Riding Hood couldn’t believe her eyes. Little Mermaid’s legs were still there...

Only now, they had merged into something like a fish’s tail.

Little Mermaid had taken on a form true to her name. And then it happened.

“Aaaaaaah!”

Little Mermaid leapt towards Red Riding Hood, and bit down on her leg.

“Ouch! What are you doing, Little Mermaid?!”

She tried to kick her off, but the power Little Mermaid exhibited was too much to handle. Little Mermaid grabbed Red Riding Hood’s waist, and brought her down. She removed her teeth from Red Riding Hood’s legs, then bit down onto her stomach.

“Aagh! S-Stop it! That hurts! Little Mermaid!”

Red Riding Hood’s pleas went unheard. Little Mermaid wouldn’t stop. She flapped her fish tail and leveraged herself to sink her nails into Red Riding Hood’s arm, then moved to bite into her neck. In Little Mermaid’s eyes, Red Riding Hood could see a genuine intention - to kill her.

“Noooooooo!”

It was simply impulse.

Red Riding Hood thrust the scissors out in front of her.

The blade impaled Little Mermaid’s chest.

“What...?”

Red Riding Hood started to tremble, seeing what she had done.

Little Mermaid opened her eyes wide, and looked down toward her chest.

“Dear... sister...?”

She mumbled in bewilderment, then looked straight into Red Riding Hood’s eyes.

And then, Little Mermaid died.



“She wasn’t a Marchen. She was definitely a Blood Maiden.”

Haru brought the dead body of Little Mermaid back to the Dawn for the Professor to examine.

“I can’t believe we were fortunate enough to find another Blood Maiden. Even more unbelievable is

that you let her die. I'm quite disappointed in you, Haru."

"Yeah, sorry 'bout that..."

The Dawn's priority was to find as many Blood Maidens similar to Red Riding Hood as possible. Haru accepted his failure, and made no excuses. Knowing it was meaningless to prattle on, the Professor took a deep sigh and changed the subject.

"Now then, what to do... According to Red Riding Hood, this girl, Little Mermaid, had an awakening we're not aware of."

"Yeah. I didn't actually see it myself, but from what I heard, despite the girl's fondness for Red, she still jumped her."

"Could it be that there's another level to the awakening? A true awakening, so to speak? I suppose I should conduct further research using Marchen blood to..."

The Professor continued to mumble, while Haru frowned at his words.

"Uh, that's important an' all, but what about Red Riding Hood?"

Haru had found Red Riding Hood crying, with Little Mermaid in her arms.

After she calmed down, she went blank. Even after returning, she barely acknowledged the Professor, and quietly went to her room. It was easy to see that what she just experienced was something that no one should go through.

She couldn't be left alone in that state.

"Red Riding Hood... I suppose it can't be helped. This may be a bit early, but..."

Still mumbling, the Professor headed to the door leading deeper into the laboratory.



"I'm coming in, Red Riding Hood."

The Professor knocked, and opened the door.

Red Riding Hood was on her bed, with her hood pulled down over her face.

Little Mermaid called me "dear sister," Red Riding Hood thought. She was my first younger sister. I killed her with my own hands. I don't want to talk. I want to be eaten by a wolf... Regret, remorse, and her own cursing were eating away at her mind.

"Red Riding Hood? I want you to meet someone."

The Professor's kind tone didn't make Red Riding Hood budge.

But...

"Come on in."

"Y-Yes..."

The voice that answered the Professor caused Red Riding Hood to look up.

There stood a young girl, a bit younger than Red Riding Hood. Just like Little Mermaid.

Red Riding Hood saw this girl standing near the door.



Her hair was blue and extended down to her waist. She wore a black ribbon on the side of her head. She was, by all standards, very cute.

“Now then, go ahead and introduce yourself.”

At the Professor’s words, she anxiously stepped in, and began to speak.

“M-My name is Cinderella...”

Red Riding Hood’s eyes widened. She looked toward the Professor as if asking who she was.

“She’s the same as you. A Blood Maiden. She’s also... your younger sister, Red Riding Hood.”

Younger sister..

That word melted away her frozen heart.

The girl called Cinderella continued toward her, blushing along the way.

“P-Pleased to meet you, dear sister...”

She called me “sister”...

With that, Red Riding Hood jumped off her bed, and ran toward Cinderella, embracing her with all she had.

“Yikes! Wh-What is it?!”

Red Riding Hood hugged the confused Cinderella even more tightly.



This time...

This time I’ll protect my younger sister. I’ll protect her like a sister would.



Cinderella has two different memories of her parents. One was a memory of always being called pretty, or beautiful. The other was a memory of being treated as a maid, to clean and be tasked with menial chores. Cinderella didn't know which of those memories was true. The only thing of which she was certain, once she had become self-aware, had been that she was already under the care of the Dawn. The Professor found Cinderella and brought her back during a dungeon expedition six years earlier, before tragedy struck at the Jail Tower. The Professor observed her physical growth and determined her age to be about 3 years old on the day she was discovered. Cinderella had never been tasked to do any chores since her arrival at the Dawn. Later, Cinderella asked the Professor about her parents. But the only answer the Professor gave was that her parents weren't around when she was found. If so, her memories could be something from before she was 3 years old, and the vestiges of those memories remained in her mind. But, would any parent command a toddler to handle such tasks? It was highly doubtful that a young child could do such chores. And so, Cinderella decided that her true memory was of being told she was pretty and beautiful, instead of her memory of being used to do chores. Convinced of it, she was inspired to become ever more beautiful, and began to adorn herself with accessories, ribbons, and beautiful dresses. In fact, when she was found by the Professor, she already had on a small shoe-shaped glass accessory. Cinderella's time was split between the pursuit of beauty and attending to chores. If she wasn't doing either, she felt anxious to the point that she would question her very existence.



The Professor knew that the memories Cinderella had matched the story from "Cinderella," but he decided to keep it a secret from her. In his previous research on the mysteriously named Red Riding Hood, he came to the conclusion that there were others like her out in the world. And so, after extensive searching, he found the second Blood Maiden - Cinderella. Both Red Riding Hood and Cinderella knew their names. Both acted and spoke similarly to the heroines that appeared in the storybooks. Red Riding Hood had the habit of constantly wearing her red hood, and Cinderella showed great attachment toward wearing beautiful dresses. He continued his research, thinking that the habits could somehow explain their existence. But all that time, he avoided having Red Riding Hood and Cinderella meet. They were given separate rooms and were strictly monitored. Their routines were managed so that they wouldn't meet each other. The mysteries behind the Blood Maidens were still unknown, and



the Professor feared something would happen if they met.

The Blood Maidens were essential in the plans to overtake the Jail Tower. They couldn't risk losing either of them. And so, the Professor took great care in preventing them from ever meeting.

But then, tragedy struck.

On Red Riding Hood's 10th birthday, she was given a new weapon, and went into the aquarium to test it out. Unbeknownst to the Professor, she met another Blood Maiden, whom she later killed.

Not only did the Professor lose the opportunity to bring in another Blood Maiden, but the event itself brought Red Riding Hood close to the brink of demise. The situation was critical.

And so the Professor decided to bring Red Riding Hood and Cinderella together.



"Cinderella? May I come in?"

"Professor? Why, please do."

The Professor opened the door and entered Cinderella's room. It was immaculately clean and tidy, with various cute adornments about.

"Cinderella, there's someone I'd like you to meet. She's your older sister."

"What...?"

Older sister... Hearing those words suddenly brought a frown to her face.

"She's not related to you by blood. She's your older sister in that she's a senior Blood Maiden."

Older sister, she thought. How odd... For some reason, I feel like I'm going to be bullied...

The Professor noticed Cinderella's expression, and gently patted her on the head with a kind smile on his face.

"Don't worry. Red Riding Hood is a very kind girl. She won't tease you or anything."

"Is... that so?"

"Why, yes. If anything, Red Riding Hood is... feeling a bit down right now."

"Hm?"

"She was traveling with a younger Blood Maiden, but that poor girl was killed by Marchens. Red Riding Hood is regretting how she couldn't protect her. She's locked herself in her room."

The Professor decided to add a lie. His thought was to use the opportunity to invoke Cinderella's hatred toward the Marchens. His plan worked very well.

Marchens... Enemies the Blood Maidens had to defeat. These very enemies killed one of her brethren.

As expected, Cinderella's hatred toward the Marchens intensified, and at the same time, she became worried of her older sister locked in her room after the death of another.

"So, Cinderella, do you mind meeting Red Riding Hood, and, perhaps, calling her your sister?"

Cinderella went into deep thought. She might not be able to replace the younger sister who died.

But, if she could be of use to someone, then...

"I understand. Please, let me meet her."

Cinderella overcame her doubts of what an older sister was, and answered the Professor in sincerity.



"P-Pleased to meet you, dear sister..."

Cinderella had met her older sister-to-be, when all of a sudden, Red Riding Hood jumped forward and embraced her.

"Yikes! Wh-What is it?!"

"Cinderella? You're my younger sister?! I'm Red Riding Hood! I'll protect you... I promise! Big sis' is gonna protect you!"

"Wh-What the...? Um, P-Professor, what should I...?"

Cinderella turned her head toward the Professor as if pleading to get help from Red Riding Hood, who was now embracing her and rubbing her cheeks against her. But all the Professor did was smile like a grandpa and nod his head in agreement.

"Cinderella! My younger sister! You're sooooo cute, Cinderella!"

"W-Wait... M-May I ask that you take your cheeks off me, and... Y-You're making me sweat!"

P-Please, let me go!"

"Nope! I won't let you go, ever!"

"Why, I don't! Fine! I won't run away or anything!"

Cinderella tried with all her might to pry herself away from Red Riding Hood.

Seeing Cinderella push herself away brought a sad puppy-dog look to Red Riding Hood's face.

"Really? You won't go away?"

"Unbelievable... You're making it seem like I'm the older sister here."

"Not true! I'm the big sis! So, say it again. You know? The 'dear sister' bit."

"Why, the nerve! Calling you by your name should be more than enough, Red Riding Hood!"

"Oh, c'mon... Call me 'dear sister' again."

Cinderella was trying to hide her embarrassment, and Red Riding Hood acted coy in response to Cinderella's harsh manner. The Professor couldn't help but smile at their interaction.

Seeing the two of them arguing made it look like they were real sisters. The Professor nodded his head in satisfaction, and then began to ponder the next step.

Little Mermaid. The Blood Maiden who was killed by Red Riding Hood.

According to reports, Little Mermaid awakened in a state that had never been seen.

There were still many mysteries surrounding the Blood Maidens. He needed to continue studying them.



Inside the testing cage was Cinderella, dressed in a flexible suit. The simple clothing gave her a bit of anxiety, but she held her precious shoe-shaped glass pendant tightly in her hand to calm down. “Let’s begin, Cinderella.”

“U-Understood...”

She proceeded to drink a vial of pink liquid.

“Aah!”

Her eyes began to glow pink almost immediately.

She continued to drink more and more, and a number of vials later, her appearance started to change. Her eyes remained pink, and her hair immediately turned white. A pink colored ribbon and accessories suddenly appeared on her.

“She’s awakened... Red Riding Hood? That was the state Little Mermaid was in, correct?”

“Yup. She did go through that, but then she changed again from there.”

This was an experiment to determine the cause behind the awakened state that forced Little Mermaid to attack Red Riding Hood.

“Were there any particular visual cues?”

“Hmm... Her clothes disappeared. Oh, and her legs came together and turned into a black fish tail.”

“Hm... A black fish tail...”

The Professor tried to recall the story of The Little Mermaid. A story that featured a heroine with a body of a female and a lower half of a fish.

“So that means she closed the gap toward her image in the story... Red Riding Hood? Can you describe the state Little Mermaid was in?”

“Um... She was wounded all over, so I had her stay on the ground so that I could protect her. I made sure she wasn’t injured by the Marchens. But, by the time I killed them all and turned back around...”

“Was Little Mermaid covered in Marchen blood during that time?”

“I’m not sure... I was focusing on the fight. But there was blood splattering all over the place, so maybe that did happen then.”

“Hm...”

The Professor went deep into thought.

(Could it be, perhaps, that the awakening entered a purer state when one was injured to a certain point, then covered with a greater amount of Marchen blood? It could be possible that, when in that pure state, they’d begin to attack anyone and anything within reach, Marchen or not.)

(If so, the risk was too great to pair any of the Blood Maidens together. I need to confirm the conditions of how they entered into that particular state. But, how should I test it? Perhaps... injure either of them and splatter them with Marchen blood? No... That goes beyond the moral concept of research. I’m quite sure Haru and Miko would intervene as well. If so, then...)

“Um... Dad?”

“Hm?”

Red Riding Hood’s voice brought the Professor back from his thought.

Red Riding Hood pointed to the cage. The Professor looked, and there inside was Cinderella in her awakened state, sitting on the ground with her legs tucked in, spiraling her finger on the floor.

“I suppose what you were looking for didn’t happen... I knew it... I’m just an ash-covered nobody...

I can’t even be of use, even as a test subject...”

Cinderella’s expression was dark and sullen, as if she had a peek into the abyss. She continued to mumble scathing words about herself.

“What happened to Cinderella?”

“Well, you know how you get happy and excited when you wake up? In Cinderella’s case, it’s the direct opposite.”

Cinderella started to pound her fist onto the ground.

“Fine... Everyone can just die already... This cruel world can end completely, for all I care...”

“Uh, are you sure she’s all right?”

“She’ll snap out of it after she kills a Marchen. Now then, is anyone around?”

As usual, the Professor called for someone to bring in a Marchen to be sacrificed.

Red Riding Hood looked on, thinking to herself that there was a lot more to Blood Maidens than she expected.





When a person encounters a crisis they cannot stop, they take one of three basic actions.

One, they hold their ground and face the crisis.

A person with a strong will and heart will often do this. They accept the situation they're in, and seek a solution within their capabilities to try and improve the situation.

Most of the members of the Dawn fall under this category. They all think of ways to escape the Jail. These very people give hope to everyone else.

Two, they give up and let fate take over.

This is what most people will do. They lose their strength against despair, and try to find a place to hide. Despite wanting to avoid the worst, they don't think of how exactly that can be done.

Most of the people under the Dawn's protection fall into this category. When their fears take hold, they don't allow anyone to sway them.

For example, they may worry about what would happen if the Dawn loses against the Marchens, or whether they would ever reach the surface again. They worry, but they don't take any action.

Third, they stop thinking.

Many more fall under this category. They can't bear the situation, and seek someone else to take responsibility. Once they find that person, they put themselves under their care. This thought process helps to keep their sanity in check.

These types of people won't cave from despair, so long as there are people who will carry the load for them. In that sense, they may look bright and happy, but in reality, they seek their salvation through others, whom they gather around like moths to a flame.

But there aren't many who can carry the emotional load of the masses.

So then who did these types of people rely on to bear that burden?

There was only one answer.

A person in the city named Lady Oohime served that very purpose.

Her hair and skin were pale, and her eyes of different colors were often fixed on the skies. A divine aura emanated from her, and this caught the attention of the people and earned her their affection. Her prophecy...

"Keep faith, as the Sun God will scorch the heavens to render salvation from the Jail."

These words were accepted as the prophecy on which the people put their reliance, and word of her existence spread like wildfire.

With Lady Oohime present, the people gathered around her, seeking salvation from the Sun God.

Soon, they grew into an organization as large as the Dawn.

The people called this organization the "Order of the Sun."

The Order of the Sun was originally a very small group of people who gathered together to help one another. Their establishment preceded the Dawn's, acting as an orphanage to care for children



who had lost their parents, and to offer their yields to those in need.

Since the creation of the Dawn, the two groups worked in cooperation, each handling specific roles, and becoming integral parts of the city's survival. While the Dawn had a strict top-to-bottom hierarchy, the Order of the Sun organized themselves as equals, merely helping each other out. The Dawn offered security. The Order of the Sun offered relief.

This is how each of them worked in the city.

In a time before the Order of the Sun, before Lady Oohime was Lady Oohime.

There was an orphanage where three particular children had just arrived to come under its care.



“My, oh my... So cute.”

Those at the orphanage gathered around the three children who were to become new members of their family.

It wasn't rare to find children in the streets like them. Their parents might have been taken away by the Marchens, and for better or worse, the children might have gotten away. Many of the orphans here had been through that and were now being cared for at the orphanage.

But, it was rare to find three of them at once.

They looked like they were 3 or 4 years old. All girls. They each had different hair colors, but they did look similar. Probably sisters.

“I found all three of them crying next to a dead Marchen. I couldn't find their parents, so I think they fought a number of Marchens, killed one of them, and were taken away by the others.”

So said the man who found the girls. Hearing that, the girls of the orphanage curled their lips down in sorrow.

“I see... I guess they at least protected their children. I'm sure they would be happy to know they're safe. Say, girls, this will be your new home, okay?”

The woman knelt down to their eye level, and smiled. The three girls didn't seem to understand what she was saying, and simply showed blank looks on their faces.

“I tried talking to them the whole time coming here, but it seems like they can't talk.”

“Really? They must have been through so much. Poor things...”

Children born after the city sank into the ground were often found with physical and learning disorders, possibly due to the lack of proper food supplies and sunlight.

Still, most children learn one thing before anything else...

“What are your names?”

Even if a child had a hard time speaking, they'd often know what their name was. After all, it was arguably the word they had heard most during childhood.



The smallest of the three girls - the girl with the red hair - spoke.

“Thumbelina...”

The adults looked at each other in confusion.

The other two spoke up.

“Snow White.”

The black-haired girl said.

“Sleeping Beauty...”

The girl with messy, green hair said.

The adults looked at each other again. Sure, they knew where those names came from, but they weren’t names many parents would give to their children.

“My, I see. All three of you must be princesses! No wonder you’re all so cute.”

The adults decided to brush off their doubts.

In this absurd world, nothing seemed impossible. Maybe it was just the world they were in, or maybe their names were meant to follow a theme. Who cared at that point?

“Thumbelina, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty... You’ll all stay with us from today. I hope we can be friends!”

The three didn’t seem to understand, and just stood there, their heads tilted in unison.

Their cute reactions, and how they all seemed to move together, brought smiles to the adults’ faces and warmth to their hearts.



The adults worried that the three sisters wouldn’t learn to speak, but after just two years, they were chatting away just like anyone else.

“Snow White! Sleepy! Over here!”

The oldest of the three, and the most energetic, was Thumbelina. She often put up a strong front against the adults, but she was as kind as she could be to her two younger sisters. Her short height deceived many of the adults into seeing her as the youngest, but once she learned to speak, she let the adults know that she was the oldest, surprising everyone.

“Please wait, dear sister Thumbelina.”

The second oldest was the shy Snow White. Soft-hearted and timid, she would always be found following her sister, Thumbelina. She cared for everyone around her, and would try to help the adults with their chores, so she was well liked by the adults.

“...”

The youngest was the quiet and slow-moving Sleeping Beauty. She rarely spoke, and it was hard to tell whether she was sleeping or awake. Her thoughts were a mystery, but she did respond to the adults with a “Yup,” so everyone assumed she understood what was going on.

The three sisters were very friendly, and soon became something akin to mascots of the orphanage. And there were two other children who seemed to get along well with the three sisters.

“Heeey... Thumbelinaaaa...”

“Michiru!”

Thumbelina stopped and turned around, hearing a lazy-sounding voice calling her name.

A girl stood there waving her hand. She looked a bit older than the three, and had pale skin and hair. Her heterochromia was obvious at first sight.

Next to the girl named Michiru was a boy with a similar skin and hair color.

The only difference was that his eyes were the same color as each other.

“Chii! Let’s play!”

“Okay.”

The boy named Chii nodded and smiled.

Michiru, Chii, and the three sisters were about the same age, so they all got along very well at the orphanage. They were often found stepping outside to play. Of course, it wasn’t ideal for them to go outside, but the adults didn’t make a big fuss about it so long as they knew where they were.

The five of them stepped outside again as usual and began thinking of what to do.

Michiru suddenly picked up a stick, and began to draw something on the ground, speaking in her dreamy way.



“This place here is the Land of Memory, and where Thumbby, Snowy, and Sleepy are at is the Palace of Night. Chii is at the Luxuries’ Graveyard, and...”

The three sisters didn’t know what she was talking about. Michiru always spoke in cryptic words, but to Chii, it wasn’t cryptic or odd at all. Despite not knowing what she was saying, the three sisters listened on, enjoying the atmosphere she created.

“We’re going to look for happiness. The sun will always rise, after all.”

Michiru always spoke about the sun.

The sun was supposedly large, bright, blinding, and warm.

But the children born in this city had never seen the “sun” before. And so, they didn’t believe such a thing existed.

But the adults who knew what it was would muster hope within themselves every time Michiru brought it up, rekindling a light in their eyes.



“Professor, do you have a moment?”

The Dawn headquarters... Miko, who was acting as both the head of the Rescue Center and as a guardian to Red Riding Hood and Cinderella, secretly entered the laboratory and spoke in a quiet tone.

“What is it, Miko?”

“I went to check on the orphanage and came across something interesting. It’s about the three sisters who were taken under their care two years ago. I met the man who found those three, and he wanted to bring something up to us.”

“Oh?”

“According to him, when the three were found, there was a dead Marchen next to them, and... the three were drinking the blood from the carcass.”

The Professor’s brow twitched.

“He said that he thought he saw their eyes glow pink for a moment.”

The Professor covered his mouth with his hand. To Miko it looked as if he was trying to hide his smile.

“All three of them?”

“From the sound of it, yes. Their names are Thumbelina, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty.”

“So you’re saying all three of them are Blood Maidens? If so, wonderful... Miko? Let’s go and greet them. I’ve never been to the orphanage before, so I’ll need you to lead the way.”

“Understood...”

Miko seemed to have wanted to say something, but she kept silent, and followed after the Professor.



And soon enough, the three sisters were taken to the Dawn, bringing the number of Blood Team members, comprised solely of Blood Maidens, to five.

It was soon after this that Michiru came to be called “Lady Oohime,” and became the founder of the Order of the Sun.



The girl had pure, white hair styled in pigtails. Each were tied with a glowing, pink flower ribbon. The girls looked down at the Marchen with a cold stare.

“Don’t get me wrong. All I want to do is kill you.”

Though she was in the habit of masking any embarrassment she felt with her harsh words, this time she said exactly what she meant.

Without hesitation, the girl proceeded to smash the Marchen into a pulp.

Next to her was a girl with the same pure, white hair cut in a bob. Her head was covered in a spiral of pink light that looked like an apple peel.

With dull eyes, she extended her hand out to another Marchen.

“Are you hurt? No? Really? Can you please get yourself injured then?”

Her interest in the creature bespoke her desire to care for others, and she sought out the wounded, even now, though she was the cause of injury.

And with that, the dull-eyed, bob-haired girl stepped on the Marchen, crushing it and spewing its insides all over the ground.

Next to her was yet another girl with messy, white hair. Her head was adorned with a pink vine with thorns and a beautiful flower.

With a mesmerized look on her face, she embraced yet another Marchen.

“I’m so thirsty! Blood! I need blood!”

Usually she kept quiet, seemingly awake and yet dreaming at the same time. But now she opened her mouth wide, pleading her desire at the top of her voice.

The messy-haired girl drooled from the corner of her mouth, and bit off a chunk of flesh from the Marchen’s neck.

What they shared between them were glowing, pink eyes.

“Good. That’s enough for now.”

Outside of the cage that the girls were in was an old man.

“Snow White, Sleeping Beauty... Look at Thumbelina’s body. She’s covered in Marchen blood. Go ahead and lick her clean.”

“Yes... Professor...”

“Mmm...”

Snow White and Sleeping Beauty followed the Professor’s commands, and proceeded to lick the pink blood off of Thumbelina’s soft skin.

“Ah...”

Thumbelina twitched ever so slightly. The sensation she felt was confusing to her, causing her to frown a bit.

Like hungry kittens, Snow White and Sleeping Beauty continued to lick the Marchen blood with



their tongues. It tasted strangely sweet, and the more they licked the blood, the more they felt a sense of satisfaction flow throughout their bodies.

Soon, all the blood on Thumbelina's body was licked clean. By then, the color of their hair returned normal.

"Snow White, Sleepy... I'm fine now. Thanks."

Thumbelina regained her composure, and thanked her younger sisters with a blush of embarrassment. At the same time, Thumbelina felt something like poison being purged from her body as they removed the blood.

"Come on out. Be sure you go and get yourselves checked by Miko."

The girls left the acrylic cage, and one of the patrol unit members went in to stuff the dead and nearly dead Marchens into a bag.

"Girls, come over here."

In the room next door was a girl wearing a white coat and glasses.

"Show me your arms."

The girls lined up, and Miko proceeded to draw their blood samples. They winced each time the needle was inserted into their arms, but it seemed as if they were already used to it.

Miko put a drop of blood onto a petri dish and looked at it through a microscope.

"So, how is it, Miko?"

"I will need to evaluate the samples to get accurate details, but it does seem as if the amount of blood platelets has increased. It's also quite obvious that their macrophages are much more active now."

"Hm... If it's already observable, I'll assume that theory is indeed a fact."

"So, then..."

"Yes. The Blood Maidens are able to alter the Marchen blood that goes on them, and when they orally take in the altered blood, it results in healing effects. Simply amazing..."

The three girls stood quietly, gazing at the Professor and Miko in deep discussion.

Thumbelina, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty.

The three sisters that joined the Dawn exponentially advanced the research on Blood Maidens. Until that time, the only Blood Maidens available were Red Riding Hood and Cinderella. There was no way the Dawn would ever be foolish enough to risk their last hope, which in turn made it difficult and time consuming to conduct experiments on them. But now, with three more Blood Maidens - though it sounded quite horrible - the Dawn was able to take more risks.

Not only were the Blood Maidens unique, but the girls, including Red Riding Hood and Cinderella, were still very young. As such, their mental state wasn't always stable, but the three sisters were able to maintain a higher level of stability when they were together as one.

To add, the three sisters seemed to be actual triplets. The three having been together since birth made it possible to conduct experiments at a more intricate level than could be done on Red Riding



Hood or Cinderella.

For example, one of them could be made to fight a Marchen so that she would awaken, while the other two girls could be analyzed to see how they reacted.

Another example would be observing the effects of licking the Marchen blood off of each other's bodies.

And yet another example would be where the three would fight together as one to see if any particular effect would occur.

Unlike Red Riding Hood and Cinderella, the three could fight together in unison, making it possible to battle for extensive periods of time. And as the Professor conducted these experiments, he noticed something.

When the Blood Maidens awakened, their physical prowess increased, and they became vicious and ruthless. But, their sanity was still intact, making it possible for them to listen to the Professor's words while awakened.

But the Professor also observed signs during extended battles when it seemed as though they would lose their sanity.

And each time, the Professor terminated the battle so that Miko could evaluate the girls. This led to the discovery of how the composition of the girls' blood was changing slightly. It seemed as if this change progressed as the girls took physical damage and became mentally unstable.

The Professor called this phenomena "Corruption," and theorized that this was the awakened state Little Mermaid was in.

The more this Corruption accrued, the more the girls would become closer to a Marchen.

The assumption was this caused the transformation that Red Riding Hood saw of Little Mermaid. The Professor named their early stage of awakening "Massacre," and their late stage of awakening "Blood Skelter."

But in order to confirm these theories, they needed to have the Blood Maidens actually enter the Blood Skelter state. But doing so would likely bring about the tragedy that befell Little Mermaid. This was the very reason why they could not confirm the theory behind Blood Skelter.



Similar to Red Riding Hood and Cinderella, the three sisters didn't know when or where they were born. In fact, many children in the city were just like them.

But the three sisters were lucky. They were found and taken under the care of the orphanage, and lived a poor, yet warm and happy life full of love.

What changed their fate was when the man who discovered them heard about the Dawn's Blood Maidens - special girls whose eyes turned pink from Marchen blood. Special, different girls.

The man recalled how he found the three sisters sipping on the dead Marchen's blood with their

eyes glowing.

He had convinced himself that it was a primal instinct found in babies seeking nourishment. As for the pink eyes, that was something he simply blocked out.

But learning about the Blood Maidens jogged his memory.

He decided to discuss what he remembered about the three sisters with the Rescue Center staff who came periodically to the orphanage to check on everyone's health. That person was Miko.

The information Miko learned was then relayed to the Professor, and soon enough, the Professor took the three sisters under the Dawn's custody.

And so, the three sisters became members of the Blood Team.

Despite the many things happening to them, they were surprisingly open in accepting what was going on.

They heard about the Blood Maidens from the Professor, and also heard that they were destined to fight the Marchens. They accepted that without doubt, as if they knew that was their fate.

This is why they had no issues with what was going on. Though they didn't like the experiments they had to undergo, they didn't complain, thinking that this would, in the end, help those who raised them back at the orphanage.

That said, there was just one thing they didn't like about their situation.



One day, the three sisters went to the Order of the Sun to play.

Even after the Order of the Sun was formed, and even after Michiru came to be known as the Lady Oohime, it didn't change the way they saw her. All they thought was that they were going to play with their friend.

"We're back!"

"Sorry to be late."

"Yup..."

"Hey, welcome back."

"Why yes, welcome back."

Red Riding Hood and Cinderella appeared from nowhere to greet the three sisters.

At first, Thumbelina kept her guard up to protect her younger sisters, but she now had an older sister, and that brought her joy. Of course, she could never say that to anyone.

Snow White was simply happy that she had more friends now. She was flustered when she learned that she was a Blood Maiden, but now she felt connected to everyone, beyond the concept of siblings.

As for Sleeping Beauty, she was simply sleepy.

"Oh? Welcome back. Where did you girls run off to?"

The Rescue Center's kind older sister, Miko, approached them with a smile. The three sisters also

liked Miko, with how attentive and caring she was toward them.
“We went to the Order of the Sun to play with Michiru and Chii!”
“I see... There again...”
The three sisters didn’t notice Miko’s eyes narrow, hearing where they went.



That night...
Snow White woke up in the middle of the night to use the restroom. On her way back, she noticed light coming out of the laboratory. Curious, she crept near the door in silence.
She didn’t have the courage to look inside, so instead, she listened from the shadows. She heard the Professor and Miko talking.
“Speaking of which, the three sisters went to the Order of the Sun to play again.”
“Hm, is that so?”
“May I ask that you please stop them from going? There seems to be something suspicious about them ever since they became a cult.”
“I understand where you’re coming from, but...”
Snow White was in shock. She slowly and quietly went back to her room.
The next day, she told Thumbelina and Sleeping Beauty what she heard. Depression struck the both of them. They couldn’t believe how the home they were raised in was considered suspicious by the Dawn.
“Does that mean we shouldn’t go there to play?”
“No ways! All we’re doing is going there to play with our friends!”
“Yup... Yup...”
Since then, the three sisters moved in secrecy when they went to play at the Order of the Sun. The fact that they couldn’t be open about it was the one and only thing they didn’t like about their situation.



Now then, what happened to Michiru that made her become known as Lady Oohime?
The three sisters would find out much, much later.





Kaguya used to get a lot of attention from the boys her age back when she was a kid.

“Kaguya, will you marry me when we’re adults?”

“Hey, no fair! Kaguya’s gonna marry me!”

Kaguya was beautiful. Her soft skin was like fine porcelain, and her hair was jet black. A light blush along her cheeks brought out her youth.

Kaguya was pleased at seeing her young suitors, but because she wouldn’t choose any of them, she would often just give them impossible tasks to mask her refusal.

“Let me see... Then why don’t you bring me a piece of cloth that will never burn? And you... You bring me a golden branch that grows pearls. Whoever brings what I ask can marry me.”

“Really?! Okay! I’m gonna go and find it!”

“Me too!”

The boys were in love with Kaguya, and would do anything she asked for to win her over. Kaguya’s requests ranged from the impossible to the menial, requesting others to fetch her this and that, which gave her the knowledge of how to use others at such a young age.

But she wasn’t haughty or lazy.

She would never forget what others had done for her, and would lend a hand to those in need. Just as the boys liked her, she too liked the boys and everyone around her.

Overall, Kaguya’s life during her youth was relatively calm in a hellish world.



But then, a few years passed...

“A Marchen! Everyone, run!”

A Marchen appeared in the village in which Kaguya lived.

The people ran in circles, trying to save the elders and their children.

“Kaguya! Come here! We have to run!”

Her parents were in panic, trying to get Kaguya to safety. Kaguya felt anger bubbling from inside her, seeing her parents needing to risk their lives.

She turned around to see some of the village boys picking up weapons to face the Marchen so as to buy time for the women, children, and the elderly.

“...!”

“Wha-?! Kaguya! Come back!”

Kaguya disregarded her father’s command. She picked up a rock near her, and headed toward the Marchen.

Her small size helped to get her near the Marchen’s legs without notice. She then swung the rock with all her might at the Marchen’s frail leg.



The Marchen stopped for a moment, and the boys proceeded to stab it with their farming tools.

“Aaaaggggaaahh!”

The Marchen squirmed in pain.

Spewing from the gash came pink blood, which splattered onto Kaguya.

“Aah!”

Suddenly, Kaguya felt her heart pound.

Blood rushed to her head, and her body grew hot. She felt a surge of power and emotion she had never felt before.

I need to defeat the Marchen... That was the only thing in Kaguya’s mind.

“Hmph!”

She breathed in and leapt high above the large Marchen.

“Aaaaah!”

She slammed the stone in her hand right onto the Marchen’s head.

Out came a shrill cry and the sound of cracking skull.

The Marchen gushed pink blood and brain fluids from its head, then died.

Huff *Huff* “Is everyone all right?”

Kaguya turned around with her eyes glowing pink.

“K-Kaguya... Y-You...”

Kaguya took a step toward the people, and they stepped back. Kaguya tilted her head in bewilderment.

The adults were about to say something when suddenly loud voices could be heard.

“Whoa! I didn’t know you were that strong, Kaguya!”

“Where’d you learn to do that?!”

“Oh, come now. That was no big deal. Now then, I’m quite tired, so please get me off my feet.”

Despite Kaguya’s supernatural actions, the boys only saw that as something to be praised. The anxiety the adults had toward Kaguya vanished, and soon they saw her as before - as a lazy princess.

The boys all carried Kaguya away excited and happy, while the adults watched them carrying off something they couldn’t entirely comprehend.



The doubt the adults felt quickly turned into hatred and fear.

At first, they continued to treat her as usual, especially after she had saved them from the Marchen.

But the following year, when multiple Marchens appeared in the village, Kaguya killed every last one of them, and the adults saw her in a different light.

Kaguya might have been young, but she could tell something changed. Soon, she too started to fear the adults and the way they looked at her. She started to stay inside more often, and would only walk outside in secrecy.

Then one day, Kaguya heard someone whisper the word “monster” behind her back.

She ran home in tears.

I can’t take this anymore... I don’t want to go outside... My parents are the only ones who love me...



Kaguya became reclusive, and would from then on never leave her home. Kaguya's state worried the boys in the village. They went to her house everyday, and called her from outside her room.

"C'mon, Kaguya! Let's go out and play!"

"I found a really pretty stone! I want you to have it, Kaguya!"

Even the boys' calls couldn't open Kaguya's closed heart.

"Please leave... I'm not leaving here, ever again..."

The boys kept coming, and each time Kaguya would chase them away. Slowly, the boys stopped coming. Despite knowing this would happen, it still made her feel lonely.

Then one day, people Kaguya had never met before came to see her.

Curious, she peeked through the door to see her parents speaking with them.

One of the guests was an old man with white hair and a huge scar across his right eye, and the other was a lady wearing glasses.

Kaguya listened in on her father speaking to the old man.

"She's a monster! She's in her room now, but there's no telling when she's going to turn on us! Everyone is calling us monsters too, now! If only we hadn't brought Kaguya in..."

Hearing her father's words froze her.

"Hm... Now calm down. Do you mind describing to me, in detail, where you found Kaguya?"

"W-Well, it was..."

She kept listening with a blank look on her face, to the words of those whom she once called her parents.

She felt no suffering. Not a bit of anger or sorrow. All that came into her mind was one word.

"Monster."



After speaking with Kaguya's so-called parents, the two visitors were now standing in front of her directly. The white-haired old man gently smiled and patted Kaguya on the head.

"Nice to meet you, Kaguya."

It had been so long since she felt the warmth of another's hand.

Wasn't this person scared of the "monster"?

Next, the lady with the glasses lowered herself to Kaguya's eye level, then smiled.

"Nice to meet you, Kaguya. My name is Miko. We came for you."

"For me...?"

"Yes. We're from an organization called the 'Dawn.' We're fighting the Marchens, and came to ask for your help. Why, we have many like you with us now."

"What...?"

Kaguya had a surprised look on her face. There were others like her?

"I'd like to ask for your help, too. Will you please come with us, Kaguya?"

Kaguya pondered for a moment... 'What should I do?' she thought. 'They don't seem to be scared of me. But...'

Seeking guidance, she looked toward her "father."

Suddenly, the person who Kaguya thought was her father looked away in fear.

It was then that Kaguya realized.

I see...

They don't want me anymore...

"Understood... I will go with you to the Dawn."

There was nothing to keep her there anymore.



The first thing Kaguya did at the Dawn was undergo a medical check, and then went straight into an experiment.

She entered a transparent, acrylic cage, and was given a number of test tubes with some kind of red liquid inside.

"Now then, go ahead and drink them one-by-one, Kaguya. Don't worry. It's nice and sweet."

The old man known as the "Professor" here smiled warmly at Kaguya. She picked up a tube and drank the liquid inside.

Suddenly, she felt hot. She knew this feeling. It was the same as when the Marchen's blood went on her.

"Go ahead, drink one more. Good... Now, another..."

She drank a second, then a third, and when she drank from her fourth test tube...

"Aah... Urrh!"

Kaguya felt her heart beat more strongly than ever before.

Her black hair immediately changed into a silver white color, and from her head, pink lights sprang from her in the shape of rabbit ears.

"Aah!"

The changes occurring in her body made her go blank.

"Kaguya... Do you know what you need to do?"

She raised her head at the Professor's words. In front of her was a Marchen. It looked weakened, and was panting heavily on the ground.

Kaguya looked down at it, then suddenly felt a cold sensation surge through her head.

"So, do you need me to kill it?"

"Exactly. Show me your power."

Now I understand... I have the power to kill Marchens, and I know I should be killing them.

But, why is it that it feels...

“So bothersome.”

Kaguya mumbled as she approached the Marchen calmly, with a chilling look on her face.

“Why do I have to move? You should be the one coming to me to get killed. If not, you should just kill yourself.”

As if the Marchen knew its fate, it mustered enough strength to move away. But the acrylic wall prevented it from escape.

Kaguya showed no remorse toward the struggling Marchen.

“How useless you are. Just die already.”

And just like that, as if stepping on a bug, Kaguya killed the Marchen.



After the experiment, Kaguya was given her own room, into which she immediately entered, locking the door behind her. Since then, she rarely, if ever, stepped out of her room. Maybe it was that she was unstable over the change in environment. She was already in shock from learning that her mother and father weren't her real parents. In any case, Miko suggested to the Professor to let her be for awhile, to which the Professor agreed. He agreed because he had more pressing things on his mind. (Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, Thumbelina, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and now, Kaguya... That makes six Blood Maidens... But, there are seven dungeons here... I should find at least one more before I can take action... Hm... Where can I find one more...?)



The seventh Blood Maiden.
Her discovery would finally set the story in motion.





Every day, Jack would climb up to the roof to take a good look at the tower far on the horizon. The Jail Tower was a twisted tower located in the middle of the city that looked as if it were rising to the white moon in the sky. It was over 100 meters tall, and growing slowly, but surely. Looking at that tower stirred up a strange urge within Jack.

I want to climb that tower to the very top...

Why? He didn't know. Maybe it was just curiosity, but in any case, ever since Jack was little, he had a strong desire to climb as high as he could.

He leaned over the edge of the roof, and stretched his hands toward the finger-sized tower. A wind blew, pushing Jack's body. He wobbled, and...

"Watch out!"

Jack felt someone grab him, and he fell back onto the rooftop.

Jack opened his eyes to see a young girl with black hair looking at him with an angry expression. Her name was Alice.

"Jack... Were you daydreaming again? You should really watch out."

"Oh, um... S-Sorry, Alice..."

Alice let out a sigh, then sat next to Jack.

"You were looking at the tower again, weren't you?"

"Yeah... I was just thinking about climbing it."

"That doesn't mean you can get there by falling off this building. You should really be careful."

"Yeah, sorry..."

Jack lowered his head in apology toward Alice's sincere concern. Alice had always helped and looked after Jack.

"Oh, that's right. Um, Alice?"

Jack pulled something out of his pocket and gave it to Alice.

"What is this?"

"It's a hairpin."

In Jack's hand was a hairpin shaped like a cross.

"I found it during the excavations. I thought it would look good on you."

There were many twisted buildings that had been infected by the Jail. Within those buildings were some where going in was relatively safe. The people would go into those buildings to look for anything of use. Jack called these "excavations."

Anything found during an excavation was put under the adults' care, but sometimes people would find items they liked, and took them without turning them in. If the item wasn't too important, then for the most part, the adults simply turned a blind eye to it.

"You found it? More like you took it. You should really give that to the adults."

"Don't worry about it. Here, let me put it on for you."



Jack smiled, hearing Alice's words of concern, and combed her hair toward the front. He then snapped the hairpin on.

"Yeah... You look good with it, Alice."

"Um, well..."

Jack's smile was met with Alice's mumble and a blush.

"Th-Thank you..."

Her quiet words of appreciation made Jack happier than ever before.



Jack and Alice's situations were very similar.

Both of them were orphans, and both possessed vague memories of their parents being killed by Marchens. This wasn't very rare, as many children had shared this experience.

At first, Alice kept to herself. When she was found, her eyes were glowing pink, and the rumor spread, making all the kids treat her like a monster, and isolating her.

It was none other than Jack, who also was found and brought back to the village, that approached her.

"Hey, Alice, Let's play!"

"No. Go away."

"Okay, well... I'll come back later, then."

"Don't..."



At first, Alice was irritated at how Jack would approach her, no matter how coldly she tried to treat him. But soon, that became the norm, and she began to eagerly await his arrival. Alice was, without any doubt, lonely.

"Alice? You wanna play?"

"Don't you have anyone better to ask?"

"Well yeah, but I want to play with you, Alice."

"Just this once..."

"Really? Super!"

"I don't see why you should be so happy..."

"Well, of course I'm happy! I've always wanted to play with you!"

"Sure..."

It wasn't like Jack did anything special. He didn't want to leave her alone by herself, so he kept approaching her, which led to Alice opening up her heart.

They had gotten so close now that she would show the sweetest of smiles from just a simple hairpin. And just as Jack felt for Alice, Alice did for Jack. They became inseparable, and precious friends for life. In a world untouched by sunlight, hope could simply be something as simple as joining together with another.

Many in this world died without hope. Some were taken away by the Marchens. Some had their health deteriorate until death. Some killed themselves from despair. But in this world, Jack and Alice found strength by not giving in. Being together was a big part of how they were able to survive. Then one day...

The peace they enjoyed was suddenly lost.

A band of Marchens laid siege against their village. Some were captured, and many others were killed. Amidst the sound of crackling flames was the sound of homes crumbling and their residents screaming.

And within this tragic symphony was Jack, mustering all his courage, facing a Marchen to protect Alice.

"Alice! Get away from me! Run!"

Alice didn't move.

"Alice!"

"There's no meaning in life if I'm not next to you..."

Her words gave Jack the courage he needed.

He wanted to honor them. He wanted to protect Alice. No, he would protect Alice. Shaking, he grabbed a large stick and charged toward the Marchen.

However, courage without strength was reckless.

The Marchen swung its arm right against Jack.

“Aaaaah!”

The Marchen’s power easily slammed him into the wall.

“Jack! Jack!”

Alice’s desperate voice fell on Jack’s ears as his consciousness slowly faded.



By the time Jack woke up, both he and Alice were prisoners in a cell.

Within the eerie, flesh-like walls of the cell were others who were also captured, huddling together in fear and despair.

When the Jail wailed, Marchens appeared to take a number of them away.

Those taken away were tortured.

Some would have pain inflicted upon them so that they would scream in agony.

Some would be cut so that their blood would flow.

Some would be forced to lick the walls without rest.

Many lost their lives from the pain, suffering, and humiliation. With the death of the prisoners, the Marchens went out to find more.

Somehow, Jack and Alice were able to survive. Jack always seemed to heal very quickly, and Alice was surprisingly resilient. It seemed as though she was a bit... different.

Alice would sometimes come back to the cell in a peculiar state.

“Alice? Are you okay?”

Jack supported the limping Alice, and carried her to the corner of the cell.

Huff *Huff* “Jack...”

Alice closed her eyes in pain, and breathed in heavily. Jack gently stroked her face so that he could hide it from the other prisoners’ view.

Slowly Alice opened her eyes again.

They were glowing pink.

“Jack... Jack!”

Alice grabbed Jack’s hand as if asking for something.

“It’s okay, Alice. Here...”

Jack brought his finger to Alice’s mouth.

“Aah... Aaaaah...”

As if she was waiting for it, Alice bit onto Jack’s finger.

Jack’s skin broke, and his blood flowed in a gentle stream. Alice put Jack’s finger into her mouth to drink every last drop.

“Mmm...”



Alice gulped at Jack’s blood like it was water.

After a while, feeling satisfied, she let go of his hand and her eyes were pink no more.

“Ah... I-I’m sorry, Jack... Did I...?”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry, Alice.”

Jack gave a gentle smile to help Alice fight her feelings of guilt.

From a while back, Alice had developed the habit of licking Jack’s blood whenever she felt her emotions getting the better of her. At first, it just so happened that Alice licked one of Jack’s wounds, but since then, she had become attached to Jack’s blood like an infant wanting her mother’s breasts.

If that’s what it took to calm Alice down, so be it, Jack thought. Sometimes, he would even cut himself to give Alice his blood.

Why his blood calmed her was unknown. But to Jack, if he could help in some way, then cutting himself was nothing. It was about the only way he could do to repay Alice for all she did for him. Alice thought of it differently.

Alice believed that the only reason she was able to survive all the torture and to persevere without losing hope was because of Jack.

“It’ll be fine, Alice. I’m sure we’ll get out of here one day.”

“Yes, and until then we’ll both do our best to survive.”

The two supported each other in this way to endure their captivity.



And then a few years passed.

“Red Riding Hood?”

At the Dawn headquarters, the Professor called for one of the Blood Maidens.

“What’s up, Dad?”

The now grown Red Riding Hood answered while fidgeting with her hood.

“We received new reports from the expedition who went to the City Streets area. It seems there is a possibility that a Blood Maiden was captured.”

“Really?!”

Red Riding Hood’s eyes widened.

A Blood Maiden. Someone who could help them defeat Marchens. Someone who could become her younger sister.

“We’re not exactly sure, but would you be able to go and find out?”

“Sure thing!”

“Take these with you. It has Marchen blood in them, so pour it on anyone suspicious. You’ll be able to tell if they’re a Blood Maiden if their eyes turn pink.”

“And, what if I do find a Blood Maiden?”

“Why, bring the person back, of course.”

“Got it!”

Red Riding Hood answered chipperly. She stashed the vials of Marchen blood, grabbed her large pair of scissors, and ran off.



After watching her leave, the Professor climbed up onto the roof.

He gazed at the Jail Tower hovering on the horizon. Then he turned his eyes toward the heavens and the white moon in the sky.

(Seven Blood Maidens, and seven dungeons... I suppose the time has come. The time to kill all the Marchens, destroy the cores, kill all the Nightmares, and... for the tower to break through to the surface.)

That was the goal the Professor had been seeking for years.

(Fly, my dear Blood Maidens, to where the sun shines.)

The Professor raised his arms high, and clasped his hands around the white moon as if to crush it.



It had been 20 years since the city was infected by the Jail, and sank deep into the ground where the sun couldn’t reach.

And now, finally, the story of the Blood Maidens’ escape from the Jail would begin.





“Unknown Tales from Prison” - Rapunzel -



That particular Marchen possessed many human features.

At first glance, she was a woman in her late 20s or early 30s. The city had been infected by the Jail's roots five years earlier. Back then, she ran for her life, but tripped on some potted plants. There, she was caught and fused with the plants. As a result, there were vines and leaves extending from her head and body, but aside from that, she kept her normal human appearance.

Most Marchens were created from a random mix of humans, animals, plants, and objects, so to have plant parts growing out from one's body wasn't very unusual for the Marchens.

That wasn't what made this particular Marchen special.

A month passed. Half a year passed. Then a year. Then two.

In time, that particular Marchen's stomach began to bloat.

Now, the Marchen's stomach was so bloated that it couldn't move as well. But Marchens never thought much about things like that. After all, most were hardly intelligent enough to care. To add, there were many more Marchens that took even odder forms, so this one was simply considered slow-moving.

The Marchens would go out to capture humans as if running errands, and then bring them back to torture them. During this activity, that particular Marchen was treated as a nuisance, and slowly it became secluded. The Marchens didn't comprehend the human nature of bullying, and it was simply brushed aside because it got in the way. Regardless, it was left alone.



Another day came when the Jail's wail could be heard across the dungeons, and the Marchens would begin their daily routine again.

The Marchen with the bloated stomach couldn't even stand properly, and by the time it got up by using the objects around it, the Marchens were all gone.

Still, the Marchen went out to run its daily errands.

It was then, while walking down the now quiet and dark corridor...

That something unexpected happened.

The Marchen fell onto the ground, feeling something pushing inside it.

It felt like it was coming out of its stomach. Something inside was moving about wildly.

This happened before, too. It would usually die down after a short while, but something was different this time. The push was stronger than ever, and was only gaining momentum.

“Aaah... Aaaah...”

The Marchen lets out a moan in pain. It rolled onto its side, holding its stomach as if it were trying to tame it.



The next moment...

“Aaaaaaaah!”

There was no telling whether the Marchen could tell there was a human foot emerging from it.

The small human foot, covered in pink blood, protruded out of the Marchen's stomach.

“Aaaaagh! Aaaaaah!”

Next, hands...

Where the foot stuck out came two hands, trying to force the hole open.

The Marchen's stomach split as easily as paper, and from inside, a slimy object of sorts came drooping out, rolling onto the ground.

It was a human.

It was much larger than an infant, at just about a meter in height, perhaps the size of a 3- or 4-year-old girl. Despite being covered in wet blood, one could easily see that she had very long, golden hair.

“Aah... Aaah...? Mmm...?”

The Marchen lay dead by the time the girl could utter a sound.

That Marchen couldn't remember, until its very end, that when it was human, she had within her a long-awaited first child-to-be.



The girl thus born couldn't understand what was going on.

Next to her was her dead mother. But she couldn't understand that it was her mother, or that it was dead. All she did was sit there with a blank stare. It was fortunate that there were no other Marchens around.

As time passed, she slowly felt her stomach growl.

She knew by instinct that she needed to eat. But what?

The girl looked around. Something caught her attention.

Next to her was the dead Marchen, with plants growing from its head and body.

I think I can eat that, she thought to herself in far fewer words. She reached out to grab the plants, tore them off and tossed them into her mouth.

The sweet Marchen blood acted as a salad dressing, and she ate them in delight.

The plants were originally edible potted plants called various names, such as corn salad, lamb's lettuce, and mâche. These were sold in stores and used commonly for salads.

The official Japanese name for them was “Nojisha,” and was an annual plant of the Caprifoliaceae family. Originally from Europe, the plant was brought in during the Edo period and grown in the Nagasaki prefecture. Since then, it had become wild, spreading across Japan.



In Europe, this same plant is also called a “rapunzel.”

Now that her stomach was settled, she thought about going someplace else. She began to walk on all fours, and disappeared deep into the dungeon.

The girl wandered around inside until she came to a room that looked different from others.

There, in the room, were cells with prisoners inside, humans whom the Marchens had captured.

Of course, she didn't know they were humans. But, being that they looked like her, she instinctively felt they were the same, and went close on all fours.

Then, from inside the cell, a girl noticed her approaching.

“Aaah!”

The girl in the cell let out a shrill of fear.

Who could blame her? She was crawling toward her, covered in pink blood, and her face and body were hidden by her golden hair. Someone would be hard pressed to assume that it was a human.

That prisoner had also felt at ease for not being taken away to be tortured earlier. So seeing this mysterious hairball appearing without notice caught her off-guard, and made her believe they came back to torture her as well.

“P-Please... Please have mercy... Please!”

The prisoner begged in a sad voice.

This was the first time she heard “words.” She then tried to mimic what she heard.

“P... Pl... Plea...se...? Pl... Please...”

The other prisoners start to notice that the hairball in front of them was trying to mimic what was said.

“It... It can speak?”

“Sp...? Spea... Spea... Speaaak...?”

The prisoners thought that it was impossible to communicate with Marchens. But, being that they thought the hairball in front of them was a Marchen made them think that maybe it is possible to communicate with them.

“...?!”

Suddenly, the girl raised her head.

She felt an eerie presence closing in. A Marchen was coming to pick another as prey.

The girl ran out and turned the corner, barely making it before the Marchen appeared. After the

Marchen went in, she slowly drew closer and peeked in to see what was going on.

The Marchen opened the cell door, and was choosing which prisoner to take. Though technically, the Marchen didn't have the intelligence to “choose.” Instead, it was simply eyeing the prisoners and picking anyone who caught its attention first.

The prisoners huddled toward the corner in silence.

“Uh... Um...”

One of the prisoners who briefly spoke to the hairball spoke to the Marchen.

“Do you... understand what we're saying?”

His voice was shaky with fear.

The Marchen, however, was incapable of understanding him.

It grabbed the prisoner's arm, and dragged him toward the cell door.

“What...? H-Hey, wait! You understand what I'm saying, right?! C'mon, stop it already! Why are you doing this?! C'mon, let me go! Someone! Help!”

The Marchen didn't understand. All it knew was that the prisoner it was dragging had been screaming in despair.

Of course, no one helped. The Marchen dragged the struggling man away.

The girl stealthily followed after them.



The Marchen pulled the prisoner along the dark, narrow corridor.

Though the prisoner had initially struggled, he had since lost his will, and was now following along in silence.

Far behind was the girl in pursuit.

“Urrh...”

The girl was gritting her teeth, bearing whatever odd sensation she was feeling.

That unsettling feeling she had earlier when she ran away was still with her.

But she felt a different sensation percolating inside as she continued watching the human being pulled by the Marchen.

The sensation brought a sense of discomfort, anger, and hatred.

She wanted to jump the Marchen dragging the prisoner.

She didn't know why, but a primal urge began to consume her.

To kill the Marchen.

The Marchen tried to turn the corner, only to have the prisoner get caught along the edges.

The Marchen continued to pull the prisoner's arm without concern.

With a disturbing crack, the prisoner's arm broke.

“Aaaaaaaah!”

With the prisoner's wail, the girl leapt forward.

"Grrr!"

With a roar, she clawed herself onto the Marchen's body. Her fingers cut deep into the Marchen's flesh, and pink blood splattered all over the area.

The blood further covered the blood that was already caking onto her from her mother's body.

Her eyes began to glow pink.

"Aaaaaaaah!"

She impulsively swung her fist onto the Marchen's head. It crushed easily, and its blood splattered against the dungeon walls.

"Aaaaah!"

The prisoner let out a cry, and fell to the ground. But the girl wasn't concerned about the prisoner.

The girl was thirsty.

Seeing the blood splatter across the walls jogged her memory of the sweet blood she tasted earlier.

She started licking the blood.

"Aaaaaah!"

The prisoner crawled his way out of the area. The girl didn't notice him as she was captivated by the sweetness of the blood.

The girl then noticed something after licking the blood on the wall.

The wall was soft.

That was all she needed to know. She proceeded to bite into it.

She tore a piece off, then another, chewing and swallowing until she was full.



Five years later, she came to be known as "Rapunzel."

"Unknown Tales from Prison"

- Gretel -



The areas that were infected by the Jail each housed something called a "core."

This "core" was the Jail's reproductive organ, used to create and supply sustenance to the Marchens.

There was one core in each area, and it mimicked various living things within the area, and distributed human blood as nutrients to the Marchens.

The core was a very important part of the Jail, never to be destroyed. As such, the Jail used large amounts of nutrients in creating a very powerful Marchen to watch over the core.

These powerful Marchens, better known as Nightmares, would never die as long as the core stayed alive.

Marchens didn't have the intelligence to understand human speech, but Nightmares were able to speak a little. Their range of communication was closer to an infant's, and sounded more like a moan, but they held vague traces of intelligence back when they were still humans.

As such, things which Marchens normally wouldn't concern themselves over might, at times, catch a Nightmare's attention.

Let's look at an example.

In this particular dungeon was a Marchen with a bloated stomach. Its stomach kept growing, and after a number of years, burst.

From inside came a human child.

The Marchen that bore the child died instantly, but there were other Marchens around the area.

These Marchens didn't show any signs of interest, and continued on their way as usual.

And then the Nightmare of that dungeon passed by.

This giant Nightmare was fused with various sweets. Perhaps it was the reason that this Nightmare found an interest in children.

It was only natural that the Nightmare ended up raising the human child that came from the Marchen.

That child grew into a beautiful girl. She then learned how to speak through the prisoners in the dungeon, and soon enough, began speaking eloquently.

One day, the girl asked the Nightmare...

"Dear brother, what is your name?"

"Na...m...e...?"

The moaning was far from what a human sounded like, but to her it was no different than normal speech.

“Yes, your name. All the prisoners in the dungeon have a name.”

“No... na...m...e...”

“I see...”

Hearing what the Nightmare said, she put her palm to her mouth and thought.

“Well then, I’ll give you a name. How about ‘Hansel,’ dear brother?”

“H...a...?”

“That’s ‘Hansel.’ Han-sel.”

“Han...sel...”

“Very good, dear brother.”

This was more an experiment to see whether someone with limited intelligence could remember names. Seeing it go well brought a satisfied smile to her face.

“Na...me...”

“Hm?”

“Na...me... Yo...ur...”

Hansel repeated, pointing to the girl.

“Ah, my name? My name is...”

Of course, she had no name, being that she was born from a Marchen and raised by a Nightmare.

But for some reason, she knew what her name was.

“Gretel... My name is Gretel, dear brother Hansel.”

“Gre...t...el...”

For a while afterward, they kept repeating each other’s names - Hansel and Gretel.

This marked the birth of a peculiar pair of siblings.



Hansel cared for Gretel in every way possible. He took the clothes off of the prisoners to give to Gretel. He ordered the Marchens to procure food that the humans ate. Hansel probably knew that Gretel was different from them.

But that didn’t mean Hansel had an affinity for humans. In fact, every so often, Hansel would show Gretel what he and the Marchens did.

The Nightmare’s job was to protect the core, and to give orders to the Marchens to capture humans for torture. Gretel was very inquisitive, but not inquisitive enough to learn more about the torturing. Instead, she could be found speaking with the prisoners time and again.

Then one day, Gretel met a scientist who was brought to the dungeon.

Gretel asks Hansel to have a chance to meet this scientist in a separate room.

The scientist in the room was surprised to see Gretel enter.

“You’re... a human?! How dare they capture young children such as yourself!”

Gretel physically looked like a girl in elementary school. It seemed as if the scientist thought she was captured by the Marchens.

Instead of correcting the scientist, she decided to let her curiosity get the better of her.

“Do you mind telling me what’s inside that box?”

Gretel pointed to the briefcase the scientist was holding close to him. Almost all of the prisoners were brought in without any belongings, so Gretel found interest in what the scientist held onto, even after being dragged in by Marchens.

“Box? Oh, you mean this? I have all my tools in here for research.”

“Research? Tools? That sounds interesting. Do you mind showing them to me?”

“N-Never mind that! We need to get out of here! There are no Marchens around, so now’s our chance. I’ll help get you back to safety, so...”

The scientist stood up and grabbed Gretel’s arm.

He tried to pull her out of the room when...

“Aaaaaooooooooh!”

Suddenly the room resonated with a fierce, angry roar.

The scientist didn’t notice, but deep in the corner of the room was a pit of darkness. In that darkness was the Nightmare - Hansel.

Hansel thought the scientist was going to take Gretel away. He appeared from the dark in sheer anger.

“Wh-What?! A N-Nightmare!”

The scientist fell to the ground in fear. A frown came across Gretel’s face.

“My brother, Hansel... I thought I told you to stay put?”

“Aah... I...m... so...rry...”

Seeing the girl scold the Nightmare into apologizing frightened the scientist.

“Wh-Who are you?”

“That isn’t important now. I’m simply interested in your tools for research. Do you mind showing me how to use them?”

There was no way the scientist could refuse the request of a girl who could tame a Nightmare.



After some time, Gretel learned how to use the scientist’s research tools.

This inquisitive girl was getting a bit bored with what was in the dungeon, so utilizing these research tools were more than enough to entertain her.

The time spent here with Gretel was very fulfilling to the scientist.

He kept quiet, but he was actually a member of the research unit at the Dawn. If he could somehow become friends with Gretel, he could not only be saved, but also bring back new data with him.

With that in mind, the scientist did his very best to keep Gretel happy.

But Hansel was not happy with what he was seeing.

Gretel was his younger sister. Hansel felt like she was going to be taken away, bringing about an emotion in him similar to jealousy.

Of course, Hansel wasn't intelligent enough to understand things such as emotions. All he knew was that he didn't like seeing the scientist getting along with Gretel.

So, on a later day...

Hansel ordered that the scientist be tortured.

The scientist thought he was going to see Gretel like any other day. He entered the room, and suddenly went pale.

There, inside, was a number of prisoners being tortured, bleeding, and screaming for their lives. The scientist also screamed for his life.

"N-No! I don't want to go in! Why?! I gave all the information I had to Gretel like she wanted!"

"Ooaaah!"

As if saying the scientist was noisy, Hansel grabbed the scientist's hand and crushed it.

"Aaaaaah!"

Hansel left the rest to the Marchens, and looked on as the scientist was chained and lifted into the air.

"The pain... Why...? Why...? Blood..."

The scientist looked at his mutilated hand, and mumbled words of despair.

"Gretel... Bring Gretel here... I want to speak with Gretel..."

The darkness that shrouded Hansel got thicker each time the scientist muttered Gretel's name.

"Please... Gretel..."

Five times was more than enough for Hansel to stomach.

"No... use... na...me!"

The scientist couldn't understand what Hansel said.

It was because the voice sounded far from human, and more like a roar. More importantly, he couldn't understand because, before he knew it, Hansel crushed him.

Afterwards, Hansel went to report to Gretel what happened.

"He... di...ed..."

"I see..."

Gretel closed her eyes for a moment.

"Well, I did learn how to use the tools, so I suppose that's fine."

Since that day, Gretel never spoke a single word about the scientist.



Another day arrived.

Hansel helped Gretel up after she tripped in the dungeon.

Gretel had a tendency of tripping. Hansel noticed that, unlike him, she had a hard time seeing things. But, he didn't know what to do about it.

He didn't understand the exact differences between Marchens and humans, but he could at least tell that Gretel was closer in form to the prisoners than to him.

So Hansel secretly came in contact with the prisoners.

"Eye... Eye... no... see..."

At first the prisoners thought they were going to be killed, but the torturing didn't start. Instead, they noticed Hansel pointing to his eye, trying to relay something to them. The prisoners then figured that it was trying to say that its eyesight wasn't very good.

Thinking that they could be saved, one of the prisoners wearing glasses gave them to Hansel, and tried to explain how to use them with gestures.

Hansel immediately took the glasses to Gretel.

"What's that?"

"Eye... gla...sse...s..."

Hansel copied the prisoner's gestures. Gretel looked and immediately knew what Hansel was trying to relay.

"Like this?"

The moment the glasses went on...

"Wha-?!"

The blurry world she was living in all of a sudden took on a sharp, vibrant form.

"Amazing..."

"Eye... gla...sse...s..."

Gretel learned quickly that what she had on were eyeglasses, a tool used in correcting the wearer's vision. At the same time, she learned that Hansel went to the trouble of getting them for her.

"Thank you, dear brother Hansel."

With these, she could learn more about the world.

Inquisitive and filled with joy, Gretel brought a stiff smile to her face.

Hansel, being a Nightmare, couldn't express the joy he felt in seeing Gretel happy.



If only Hansel were able to teach Gretel what a true smile was like...

Then maybe their parting might have come in a different form.



!f IDEA FACTORY

COMPILE HEART

PlayStation

電撃文庫

©2017 IDEA FACTORY / COMPILE HEART All rights reserved. Mary Skelter is a trademark of IDEA FACTORY.
Licensed to and published by Idea Factory International, Inc. Mary Skelter™: Nightmares Novel Book is exclusively provided by Iffy's Online Store.