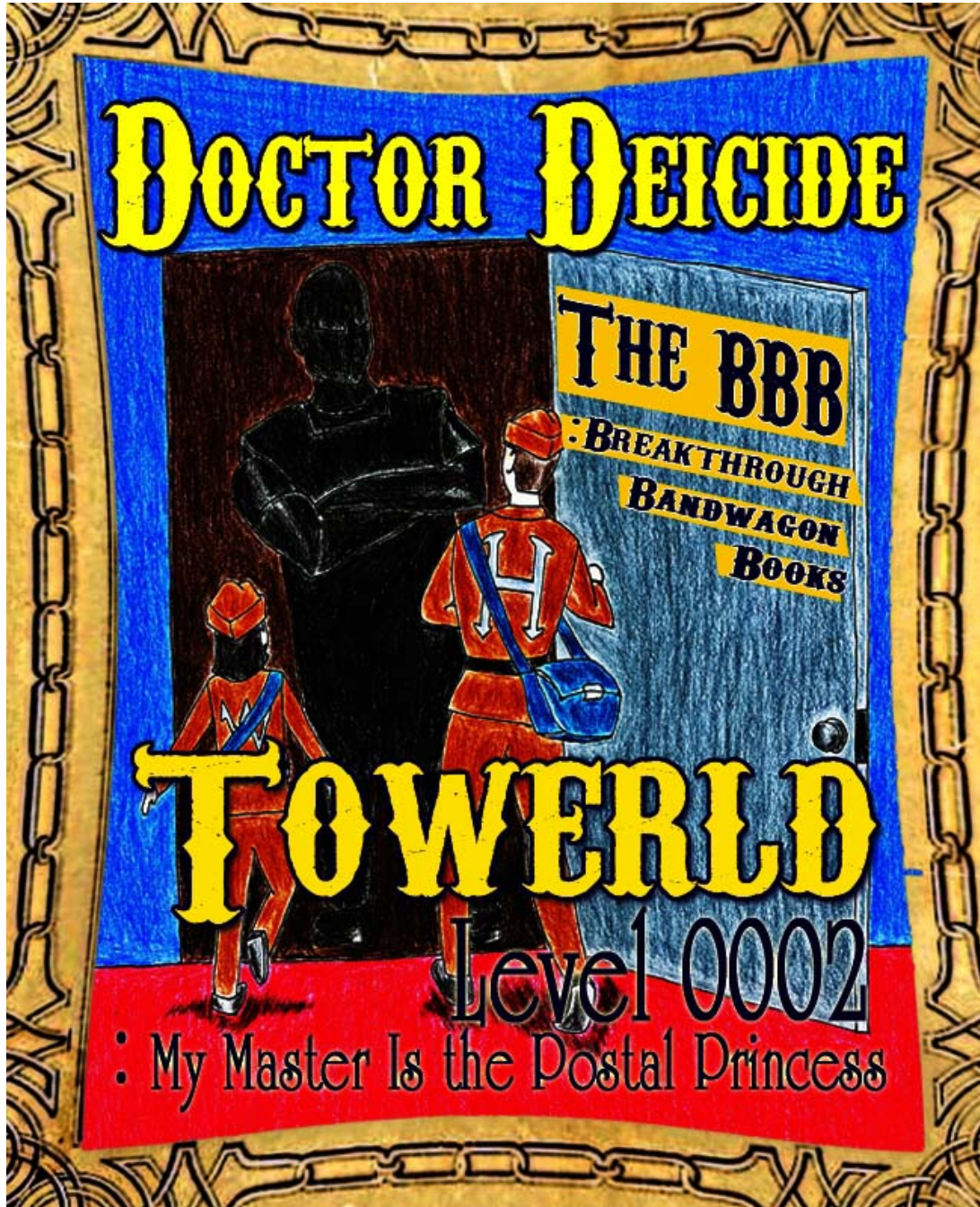


Towerld Level 0002: My Master Is the Postal Princess



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Cover illustration by Polka D

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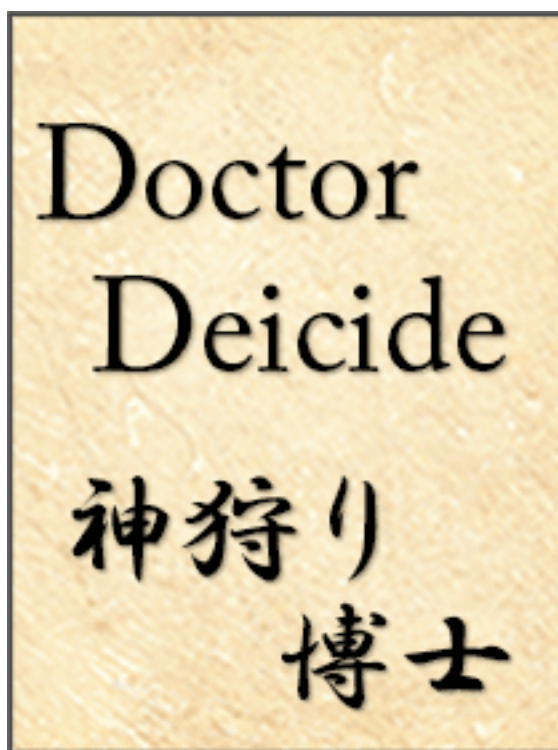
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ISBN: 978-1-312-53931-0



The BBB website

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Part One

---01---

I am in hot water now.

I took the risk of being treated like a fish in a food-processing factory, to get out of the flooded floor and into this drab factory floor. Have I just made a mistake of jumping out of the cold water (flooded floor) into the hot water (factory floor)?

Since I got out of the food-processing factory, I have been wandering about in the hallways of this level. The overall impression that I have about the floor (including the food-processing plant) is that it is just downright stark. I look up at the ceiling of the hallway, and occasionally I see what look like exposed steel beams and uncovered steel frames. There is nothing sexy about it, as if in telling me that no one wants a factory to be seductive. It is all about productivity. Some of the doors along the hallways are open, and I get a chance to take a brief peek inside. They are workshops and factories. There are not too many people inside these rooms. Even if I manage to find them, they are too busy to talk to me. I guess the residents of this floor in general are suckers for being (or pretending to be) industrious. (Maybe, they just do not want to have anything to do with a stranger.) Most of the doors are shut, and I am yet to see a human in the hallway. (I guess they want to get locked inside their closed rooms.) If humans are not there, then supposedly humankind's best friends are roaming about.

I am appreciating the dryness of the carpet, but it is not exactly painted in red. I am hearing music faintly, but it is not fanfare to welcome me. (Perhaps, I am hearing things.)

I am now surrounded by vicious dogs.

I have been getting lost on this new floor for such a long time that I have forgotten the concept of time. I am now hitting this intersection on which eight hallways converge. This section is not as brightly lit as other parts. This is probably the most morally corrupted part of the floor. The intersection connects to eight different places, and it is designed to collect the potential violators of law and order from many other places inevitably. I am now standing near the center of the intersection and all the exits are plugged with dogs. I can tell from their glaring eyes that they are thinking of feasting on me.

---02---

I do not know if these dogs are strays or pets. They are ugly mutts of unknown breeds. Since they do not look like pedigrees, they are probably strays. They look like failures of cross breeding. These crummy canines are representing the sense of being a bunch of losers, and that is quite fitting for what this colossal construction named Towerld is generally about.

I have to survive. Those growling dogs are not trying to make it easy.

I am a good fighter. I can survive a bunch of armed thugs for a few minutes, because I am skilled in wresting weapons from my enemies. However, this useful combative skill becomes useless against dogs, because they do not have weapons I can steal from them.

It seems that I have to fight these dogs with my bare hands.

---03---

“Come on! Try to get ... what?”

A bunch of mutts of unknown breeds lunge at me at a same time. It is very unwise of me to expect the mindless beasts to listen to my words. (Those courteous villains who actually wait for the heroes to finish the corny proclamation and the statement of the obvious exist only in fictitious settings.)

Before I clench my fists to fight back, my limbs are tightly locked in their flesh-mangling jaws. Even though I am more fit than average thanks to my former occupation as a fisherperson, my body is no match against the canine fangs. My flesh becomes as helpless as pink slime being squeezed out of a meat grinder. Several dogs are robbing me of the freedom of movement. I am instantly pinned to the floor, with my limbs being spread out. I am desperately trying to escape from the predicament, to no avail.

“Bad dogs! Get out! Let go of me! Bad dogs!”

Humans tend to act strange when they are cornered and become desperate. I keep on trying to wrest weapons from those who do not have hand-held weapons. I am panicking so hard that I have no sensibility left in me to realize the folly of my action. (Dogs do not understand my language, obviously enough.)

My grand journey into the unknown of Towerld has just barely started, and it may end at the center of a dark intersection rather unspectacularly. No one will remember an unknown ‘hero wannabe’ ending up being dishes for mutts. (It is not that being eaten by pedigrees would make me feel any better.) This ‘feast fest’ is just downright humiliating. It is like telling me that; I do not deserve being pedigreed, and I am only good enough to be dog food of musty mutts.

I am better than dog food, aren’t I?

---04---

Near the edge of my fading consciousness, I hear a whistle. Is that propagating from the river Styx? Is my audible range shifting near the moment of demise?

The dogs are losing the viciousness, as if they are ‘straying’ from the berserk streak. The grips of their jaws are getting weaker. Okay, I am alive, and that is good news.

I cannot just shake myself out of the dog pile, and escape into the carpet pile. The fangs are still cleft deep into my flesh. Now, what do I do?

As if in trying to answer my question, a voice echoes within the vicinity.

“I am not using my mace spray. I can just use the dog whistle to keep the dogs at bay.”

What?

It is a girl’s voice. It sounds neither too urgent nor annoyingly high-pitched. It is so unexpected in this ragged environment that my brain has failed to register the voice for a few seconds.

What have been mean dogs are now yelping like beaten puppies, and they are letting go of their jaw grips on me. The dogs are now trying to stay away from me. (What is happening to these poor mutts?)

As I shake off the (dogs and the) shock of the event, and raise my knee and my upper body while still sitting down on the floor, I observe the intervener.

---05---

It is natural for me to expect my lifesaver to be a sturdy-looking, dependable kind of guy. What I am seeing in front of me (trying to sit upright despite the pain) is the opposite of my expectation.

I see a mailperson. She seems to be too young for any professional occupation. Perhaps, this carpeted floor applies different rules and laws from those on other levels. She is wearing a brown uniform with many pockets. The trousers and the sleeves are long, as if she does not want to expose her skin. A belt with many spray cans is wrapped around her trim waist. On her shoulder, she is carrying a mailbag full of mails. The uniform cap is gently pressing down her jet-black bob hairdo, which is barely caressing her frail shoulders. She is holding a whistle with the noble curves of her lips. (That is probably where the whistling sound has

been coming from.) The surface area of her face is small, and that makes her eyes look big in comparison. In fact, she looks too cute to be a mailperson. (After being bitten by dogs, I am convinced that she is definitely no dog.)

I am somewhat forced into watching in awe this young lady in motion. She moves around like a nimble squirrel that jumps from tree to tree.

The whistle is so silent that I do not hear anything. She must have switched to a dog whistle that is designed for emitting ultrasonic sound (inaudible to humans). It is surely contributing to silencing the dogs. (The loud alarm whistle that I heard probably contains the frequency range that affects the mood of the dogs as well.) Dogs are vicious no more. They get their tails curled between their legs, literally. They are dispersing from this intersection to all eight hallways diverging from the girl and me.

I am so stunned by the sudden turn of events that I am forgetting to make the proper move. Probably, I am looking downright dumbstruck.

---06---

This mail girl, or whatever she is, has just rendered the bad dogs silent and harmless. Now, they are all gone. She looks around to make sure that we are all safe now.

The girl is now standing in front of me. She plants her hands on her knees, and bends over to look into my awestruck face. The way she blinks her round eyes on her small face reminds me of small animals, such as squirrels. (I think she should realize that her face is getting too close to mine. She thinks I am harmless, eh?)

She then speaks to me, "I heard dogs barking loudly from a distance, and decided to check what is going on. It appears that you do not mind getting my assistance, after having a fight. My dog whistle has just taught them that they cannot bite more than they can chew. Now that the dogs are gone, I cannot think of anything else to ask you. Are you all right?"

She is asking me a template question, despite her knowing that this gentleman who has been mangled by mad dogs cannot possibly be all right. (She is into rhyming her sentences.)

"To tell you the truth, I am not quite all right."

What kind of answer is she expecting? I have to do better than that to come up with fancy phrases to impress her. (Why am I trying to impress her in the first place?)

I have decided to show my appreciation, before I forget to do so.

"At least, I am still alive, thanks to your divine intervention. Thank you very much."

"You are welcome, hot stuff."

She should realize that her smile up this close is mesmerizing enough to make me forget the pain. (This kind of magic is still alive in Towerld, eh?) I am forced into realizing that the relief is temporary, as soon as I try to get up.

"Urgh!"

I collapse to the blood-stained floor. The mail girl is offering me a hand, but I politely decline it. I am so much heavier than she is that I will probably bring her down to the floor as soon as I grab her hand. (To be honest, she does not look very strong.)

She asks, "Shall I call the medical squad?"

I do not want anyone to discover my identity. I am afraid that the 'medical squad' will find out who I am and will send me back to the flooded floor.

I desperately beg, “No! Please do not call anyone. I can still walk.”

The mail girl gently pinches her chin with one hand, and tilts her head sideways slightly. It seems that she is thinking. Her subtle gesture is more picturesque than she apparently thinks.

“Where is your home?” she asks.

“I am from the level below this factory level.”

I have made up my mind to be honest. Something in her round eyes is telling me that I can trust her.

She is thinking again, with the chin-pinching gesture.

She speaks, “I do not know what is going on, even though I can somewhat guess what you are dealing with. Either way, it makes no difference. You are injured. You deserve being treated for the wounds. Why don’t you come to my residential room? It is not that far away.”

“Yeah, why not? I have no better choice than that.”

She smiles, while offering me her small hand, “Come and follow me.”

This squirrel incarnate seems to be a pleasant person to be with. I definitely prefer her to dogs.

---07---

As I manage to stand up, she holds my hand and starts leading me to one of the hallways diverging from the dreaded eight-way intersection. (Does she not realize that my hands are bloody?)

She is only as tall as my chest. (I am no small guy.) A third person may observe us and conclude that we are a parent-child combination. (That very thought makes me shudder with disgust. I prefer to imagine us being siblings to each other.) Speaking of the apparent age gap between us, I wonder what her age is. (I dare not ask her.) She looks like a teenager, but she might be older than her appearance suggests. I am assuming for now that she is old enough to become a mailperson. (I hope this factory level does not advocate child slavery.)

While walking toward her room (wherever it is), she introduces herself to me.

“My name is Wendietrea Nevaryt-Terp. You can simply call me Wendy. Yours?”

“My ID code is Hector_1304.”

“The level legend about the dwellers below having no last name is true, eh? It seems that you have many stories to tell me. Do not worry. I will listen to your tale. Your course is not what you want to derail.”

“Okay.”

I am too busy battling the pain all over my body.

“It seems that you are a quiet type, as much as your presence is quite unique. I guess that the time is not quite ripe. I like a journeyman with more tales to tell than words to speak.”

“Yeah. Whatever.”

Part Two

---01---

As soon as we arrive at her residence (a room along a hallway), Wendy hands me an emergency medical kit, and applies a few bandages and ointment on me. She then leaves the home for the remainder of her job for the rest of the day. (Even though there is no sun in Towerld, the TTT (Towerld Totalitarian Transmission) controls the standard clock and regulates the calendar to give the world the sense of time cycles.) It seems that she has a lot of letters and packages to deliver.

I am left alone in Wendy's residence room. (She may want to be more careful about letting a stranger stay in her room alone.) Even though the room is not too spacious, it is still large enough to contain everything one or two residents need for living. The overall interior impression is that of what I expect from a girl like Wendy. (It is not that I know a lot about a typical living space of the opposite gender.) She seems to be good at keeping her room neat and clean, all right. Even though the interior of the room is not as royally flashy as the castles in the fairy tales, it still looks relatively effulgent compared to the rugged feel of the hallways and the workshops.

I can sense the lived-in feel, and I still do not feel myself at home. Something in my mind tells me that I should not feel too comfortable here, even though Wendy appears to be very open and friendly to a stranger that I am.

I want to thank her for saving my life and my will to move up the levels. I am beginning to think about how to return her the favor.

---02---

Wendy has just come back, running into her room. It seems that she is done for the day.

"I am back."

Is she good at stating the obvious?

"Yes, you are back."

I cannot do any better.

I am sitting on a sofa. Wendy sits next to me.

"Have you not treated your injury with the medical kit? If you are too fatigued to do so, let me do it for you."

Whatever. Is she not tired from doing the mail delivery all day long?

---03---

While Wendy is using the medical kit to give me the additional treatment, she and I manage to exchange information. She is the first one to speak, as expected.

"What are you doing on this factory floor? I have heard of many rumors about the levels below. I know more about the upper levels than your home level, because I get to go upstairs occasionally as a part of my job. I am yet to go downstairs, because no one seems to want to send any packages there. Please tell me more about your home level."

I told her about my life story and the flooding.

"Are you trying to migrate to this factory floor, to escape from the flood?"

"Yes, and no. I am not content with just escaping from the flooding. I am trying to keep on moving to upper floors of this construction named Towerld. I want to take myself as far up the building as I can, even though I have no idea of how high it goes. My journey to the unknown does not stop here."

Wendy speaks enthusiastically, "That sounds interesting. I myself want to know more about this world. An accomplished mailperson can be granted a permission to deliver packages to upper floors. Becoming a mailperson is the best way to know this world without being jobless."

"Yeah, it gives you the bigger range of activities than being a fisherperson does."

She sniggers, "You want to be something better than a big fish in a small pond floor, to open the destiny door."

"Do you think I am fishy because of my previous occupation?"

She starts sniffing me. What is she thinking?

"You smell far better than a rotten fish, to the level that I do not mind turning you into a soap dish."

I do not know how to react to that comment.

She then speaks into my scarred ear, "Here is my proposal. You can use it at your disposal."

What? Proposal? Is she getting way too ahead of herself? (Besides, she is getting too close to me again. Her breath is caressing my bloody ear.)

"I think you should be my ..."

I am her what? What shall I expect her to whisper into my ear?

"... assistant."

That surely makes me sigh. (Is that a sigh of relief or a sigh of disappointment? Did I expect something juicy coming out of her? The job offer is succulent enough, all right.)

---04---

Wendy explains, "If you become my mailing assistant, then that gives you a job that is legit enough as a reason for your living on this floor legally."

I cannot help but ask, "You are saying; I get a job, and then I become a legal citizen of this floor. Shouldn't it be the other way around; I become a legal citizen and then I get a job? It has to be one of those political loopholes."

She answers, "It may be a loophole, but you might as well take this into consideration. It is not that you are about to sign a contract with many diabolical devils. As my delivery pupil, you can access to many different levels. That is one of many reasons for me to like my current occupation."

"Once I get a job, I have to stay here. Whatever will happen to my desire to keep on moving up the floors?"

"Do you know any way of going upstairs to enter an unknown joint, other than being a professional mailer? You cannot just leave here now and go to the next level without any legitimate access to the stairways. If an adventurer in a fairy tale wants to be a sailor, she should not expect to cruise easily on fairways. Besides, you are not 100% healed at this point."

I cannot argue against her at this point, to be honest.

Wendy suggests, "You can think about what to do after becoming a mailperson. For now, I think you may want to become my assistant to continue the road to the upper floors."

Her 'proposal' makes me think. I do not mind using this place as a relay station for my long journey to the higher levels of Towerld (with no apparent end in sight). The new job as a mailperson gives me a financial

base. I can stock up on the equipment. Besides, I can scout the upper floors, while delivering mails. This surely gives me time to regroup and revise my plans for the future.

“Why are you being so nice as to give me this interesting offer?” It just comes down to this question naturally. “I want to know the reason for the way you are treating me. The more I know your motive, the easier it is for me to accept the offer from you and to appreciate you.”

Once again, she is getting her face a bit too close to me.

“I am sensing your destiny calling, when I look into your eyes. Even when the ceiling is falling, you can stay being the one on the rise.”

“It had better not be a collect call.”

“It is a ‘correct’ call, for you are not likely to take a fall. You find ways to come through. I want to help you fulfill whatever your destiny is leading you to.”

“Why do you want to do that?” That is my natural reaction, for I am suspecting that she has a reason that backs up her words.

She explains, “I have been wanting to discover many different floors of Towerld, while using this job as a launching pad for the objective of my life to clear the raised bar. I want to eventually migrate to a distant floor to live far away from here and meet people that are totally different from those whom I have met thus far. We both possess similar wanderlusts, if they are not completely identical. It is natural for me to want to assist you. It is true.”

I can tell from the tone of her voice that she sincerely means what she says. (I take it that she does not like this floor too much.) The glow in her round deep eyes tells me that she is not lying. She is a curious, little critter (in a positive way).

Wendy adds, “Even though I do not give a darn about other parts of you in any degree, I admit that your eyes are mesmerizing me.”

Do I have to take it as a compliment? Anyway.

I solemnly swear, “I appreciate your constructive proposal. I gladly accept your offer to become a mailperson.”

“Thank you,” Wendy says cheerfully. “That surely makes my day, without any delay.”

I can tell from her smile that she is honestly expressing her feeling.

Before I forget, I ask, “What can I do for you as your assistant, to show my appreciation for the offer?”

“So you want to be my assistant as well, eh?”

“It is your proposal.”

“It is a product of my uncanny wit, and you are accepting it. You surely know what to do. How nice of you!”

I now do not know what to say. (Does she really have a short memory?)

She clears her throat, and explains, “Since you are my assistant, all you have to do is to follow me and carry packages that are too heavy for me. You look stronger than I do, and you appear to be productively persistent. I am counting on you, and I am ready to rely on your physical capability. This postal princess needs a muscle, to maximize her hustle.”

“Sure enough,” I mutter.

She chuckles, “You do not mind assisting someone as cuddly as I am, do you?”

She is adding an extra curve to the edge of her lips, as if she is trying to trick me. How am I supposed to react? Well, I do not mind being tricked by this trickster. (This attitude of mine makes me such a sucker.)

---05---

Wendy speaks, while offering me a handshake, “The deal is official, even if the phase it is in is still initial. I am glad that you are here to stay. I even got the uniform for you from the post office. I think we have worked hard enough for today. Why don’t you take a shower and get well-rested for tonight, and beyond?”

(Her hands are so tiny that I can completely encase it in my palm. I have to be careful not to crush it.)

What is she talking about? She cannot be serious about my staying here.

She explains, “As your master, I am responsible for providing you with the shelter to protect you from a natural or artificial disaster. I cannot let you sleep outside this room, unless you want to become fishy dog food imported from the flooded floor and mixed by many storms. Besides, I want someone to guard my room from potential intruders that may come in many different forms. You will save me from a potential harbinger of doom.”

“I am your guard dog as well, eh?” I quip.

“I would like to feed a dog that is capable of representing the work force. Of course, I treat you with respect, even though that may not be what you expect.”

Yeah, sure.

“Do you want me to think of you as a hot dog?” she chuckles. “I might as well upgrade you to a hot stuff.”

So much for treating this guard dog with respect. I do not even understand what she means.

“I would much rather be a cold cut, whatever that means.”

“You are surely a cold cut above the rest. That is why I think you are fit for the self-imposed quest.”

If I am better than those vicious mutts by just a thin slice of ham, then it does not say too much.

I have just decided to test her faith in me.

“This guard dog may bite the hand of the master.”

“If you can entertain me by being a clown, then I can play my dog whistles to calm you down.”

“Who do you think I am?”

Dog whistles are supposed to be inaudible to humans.

She answers rather casually, “You are my disciple, slash, dog.”

Yeah, that is simple enough.

She adds, “If your heart is craving for the moment of stability, I will blow the dog whistle to share with you the quiet time of tranquility.”

Whatever.

Part Three

---01---

It has been a few days since I managed to escape from the flooded floor. Wendy is generous enough to let me stay in her room. As much as sharing a girl's room with a girl makes me feel nervous, I honestly feel that it is far better than being mangled by vicious dogs in a hallway. (I keep on telling myself that I am living with a squirrel.)

Now that my wounds are completely healed (thanks to her treatment), I am ready to debut as a professional mailperson (and Wendy's assistant).

I am now sharply donned in the uniform that Wendy procured. I am dressed identically to her, except that my uniform is larger-sized.

I am wearing sneakers that are designed for running. I have been used to waterproof boots. It is like wearing the fabled winged sandals. If I see a real open sky now, I might try to fly.

Wendy and I are looking into the full-length mirror attached to a wall, to perform the ritualistic 'vanity check'. I make sure that I am dressed fine. I wear the cap low over my eyes, and firmly grip the strap of the mailbag that I am carrying on my shoulder.

I am surprised that I surely look good in uniform. Then, I have to understand that uniform possesses the magic to boost the visual impression of anyone. As far as I know, that is about the only magic that actually exists in Towerld. I think Wendy is impressed. (Yeah, her smile is magical, too.)

I feel energized. I am getting on a roll, while establishing my new career (that may not last forever).

She commands, while tapping my upper back, "Follow me, hot stuff."

I am about to realize that it is just that hard to obey her simple command.

"Can you catch up on me? You don't need a master plan. Catch me, if you can."

---02---

Wendy is fast. I mean, FAST!

As she sprints, I try to follow her. I can only try. She seems to run effortlessly, yet she is as fast as wind. She might as well change her name to 'Windy'.

It is true that I had lived on the flooded level for quite a while. I was adapting to the aquatic environment by becoming able to swim. I was getting better at swimming than running.

I confess. I may be running for the first time in many years. However, that is not a reason for Wendy's ability to run much faster than I do.

She is physically built for running fast. I know from my observation that she is as lean as ... a wild squirrel. Even though the uniform is good at hiding her physicality, I get to see her wearing clothes other than the uniform. (After all, I am living with her under the same roof.) I think Wendy is bred to run fast for a long time.

I am having hard times trying to catch up on her. I run as fast as I can, and my speed is not even close to the velocity Wendy can generate without half-trying. She has to stop and wait to allow me to catch up on her every now and then.

As we run through many hallways, we arrive at the entrance to one of the rooms. It seems to be a post office.

“This is one of the satellite stations.”

I pant, “Huff, oh, huff, puff, really, huff, huff ...”

I cannot even give a proper reply. This is embarrassing.

Wendy is not even breaking a sweat! Her breath is so steady that she can talk to me.

As I collapse and gasp for air, I realize that this cute little critter can be such a monstrous beast. I should not let the appearance fool me.

---03---

We walk through the entrance. It is like a carpeted warehouse. A long counter stretches laterally. Over the counter, I see countless desks.

The post office is full of mailpersons and post officers. They are so busy with their jobs that they do not seem to notice my presence. The uniformed staffs with sulky faces are speed-walking from one place to another. I think they should learn from Wendy how to get the jobs done fast without frowning.

As expected, there is nothing sexy about the overall look of the post office.

Mails and packages come and go rapidly. Even though it has the potential to be messy, the overall interior of the office is neatly organized somewhat. It is clean enough for the practical purposes, I guess.

The post office is a microcosm of what Towerld is about. It is just not perfect. Why are there so many mailpersons on this floor? As much as the TIT can control so many different aspects of our lives, it does not magically deliver physical objects from one place to another by itself. For example, it cannot convert tangible materials into data, transfer the data to different places, and rematerialize the objects from the transmitted data.

Towerld still has to rely on the primitive method of mail delivery. (For now, I am content with relatively meager magic, such as uniforms and big smiles.)

---04---

Wendy and I are behind the counter, operating the information terminal. We are accessing to my TIT database, to see what my current data status is. I do not have an ID card, but the biometric scanner takes care of the business by scanning various parts of my body.

“Let me see,” Wendy says. “Hector_1304. Here it is.”

On the flat panel, I see my name and my data. It is somewhat expected, yet I am still surprised.

“Hector, I thought you were a hot dog. It says you are a ... fish sausage. That does not sound too hot, whether you like it or not.”

That is strange. The biometric scanner did not issue an error. The TIT is just that much imperfect, eh?

“I know,” I sigh. “It is just not cool enough, either.”

“What is done is done. You can still get the mailperson’s license, since I am appointing you to be my dependable disciple Number One.” Wendy says so to encourage me. “You still get to keep your ID code and your name. They will stay the same. Let me add the new occupation as the mailperson to your account information, and get you a new tag to confirm your registration.”

“A dog tag?”

“An ID tag,” she confirms.

“A tag on a package, eh?” I shrug.

She taps my shoulder. “You have the potential to be my total package.”

This is too easy to be true. I am an alien from a different level. How can I become an official citizen of the floor just by having a job that a mere girl is introducing to me?

I ask, “The terminal is connected to the almighty TTT, right?”

“That is correct. What else do you expect?”

I should have known. The TTT is just that much imperfect. Probably, it does not give a darn about the one named Hector_1304 moving from the flooded floor to the dry factory floor above. Probably by the similar logic, I do not care about each of the biological cell in my body.

Wendy hands me a small, metallic tag attached to a sleek chain.

“This is a mailperson’s tag. This is a proof that you are a certified professional mailperson. When you access to various facilities, all you have to do is to show your tag. It is quicker than entering your ID code and the password.”

It is like a necklace. I put the chain around my neck, and then place the tag on my chest.

“So, I am officially a professional mailperson, eh? Is there any initiation that I have to perform?” I ask her.

Now, Wendy is getting her face too close to me again. (What is next?)

“Just follow my dancing jet-black hair, and gasp for air.”

I sigh, “You know how to play rough, thinking that I am just that tough.”

“I give you a permission to huff and puff, hot stuff. You can never thank me enough.”

She surely knows how to jest. (I can just hope for the best.)

Part Four

---01---

Since the moment of initiation, I have been working hard as a mailperson/assistant. Basically, I follow Wendy (that is the toughest part), and then carry heavy packages for her. (I guess Wendy’s speed is more impressive than her power.)

We run from room to room through corridors. We pick up packages. We deliver mails. We deliver packages. We pick up mails. We run, deliver, and get the jobs done as mailpersons.

It is amazing how much ground Wendy can cover without half-trying. This floor seems to be as big as the flooded floor I grew up on. The residential districts are located on an annulus of 30 kilometers in diameter, minus a concentric axis of 10 kilometers in diameter encased in a cylindrical wall. She runs from place to place effortlessly, and makes the entire accessible districts her turf. I have to run fast and hard with heavy packages on my back to somehow catch up on the speeding squirrel.

Wendy is still kind enough to slow down for me occasionally. In the armor of her levity, she hides the compassionate side of her heart. Her character is so polyhedral that she is downright multifaceted.

---02---

As I learn to be a mailperson by working hard, I observe the entire floor and notice the striking differences from the flooded floor below. (It seems like it is many worlds away.) This floor is dry, carpeted, and roamed around by dogs. (Thanks to Wendy's dog whistle, I do not have to fear the canine jaws.)

I see signs of factorial productions, here and there. I do not have to take a peek into the workshops on the other side of the doors to appreciate the industry and industriousness. I occasionally see stains (probably machine oil) on the walls and ceilings. (I never saw such stains on the flooded floor.) I also notice there are wooden crates and cardboard boxes piled up around the corners of some of the hallways. I guess that the residents of the industrial floors are not too much of suckers for scenery (floorscape?). If that is the case, why would they bother covering the floor with the carpets? They are probably trying their best to somehow make it more human-friendly.

There is a feature that makes this floor as strikingly different from the flooded floor as it is now.

Unlike the flooded floor, this floor has an automated method of transportation. Most mailpersons rely on the modern amenities. A network of moving platforms covers much of the factory floor. When we go to distant places, such as the other side of the floor, we use the moving platforms.

When I get on the belt, I try to take a rest. However, Wendy tries to keep on running even on the platform. She does not let me rest so easily. (Even with the aid of the moving platform, she is not easy to work with.)

---03---

This is scary. I am getting used to this new occupation as a mailperson. Even though Wendy is far faster than I can ever become, I am getting better at running on the dry surface. This is remarkable, especially considering that I had been getting too used to swimming in the aquatic environment. Even she admits that I am adapting to the new environment rather smoothly.

I do not dislike this job. Even though running fast constantly is hard, I do not mind running all the time. I am convinced that I am such an adapter.

There is an unexpected concern pertaining to my new lifestyle, though.

I feel so comfortable about living here and being a mailperson that I am starting to lose slowly my will to leave this new comfort zone to continue going upstairs of Towerld. The rather cozy environment is challenging my wanderlust. Wendy is not a very unpleasant person to live with (to say the least), and that is not helping me deal with my will to go to the upper levels.

I do not want to die a mailperson. I am too ambitious for that.

---04---

I am yet to go to different floors. The range of the activity as a novice mailperson has been limited to this factory floor. One of the reasons for my becoming a mailperson for the time being is that I can visit and scout the upper floors without breaking the law. I have been waiting for the opportunity to go upstairs. I guess I have to pay the dues as a mailperson to win the privilege, eh?

The good news is that I am finally getting the opportunity. Wendy has been aware of my eagerness for going upstairs, and she got the new assignment from the post office.

It pays dividends to pay the dues. Patience prevails!

I want to thank Wendy for her getting the assignment and granting me the permission to take it. (I have to learn to pat her head without getting my hand bitten.)

Part Five

---01---

Finally getting a chance to go to upper floors is one thing, but I want even more.

“Wendy, are there any VIPs (very important packages) that I can assign myself to carry to upper floors?”

VIPs are big deals. They allow me to go to places that are usually not accessible to commoners, and give me chances to study the floor (and beyond) even more. (In most cases, only people with a lot of dough get to receive VIPs.)

As if she has been waiting for me to ask the question, Wendy replies, “There is a VIP that allows you to go to interesting places. It even gives you quite a bit of dough, if you return from your assignment alive and manage to survive the worst possible cases. You can hit many jackpots, after dealing with many crazed crackpots. That is the least of what I know.”

I take it that it is about taking the risk.

I make up my mind again, and speak up, “Can I sign up for the assignment?”

“If you want it, you’ve got it.” She gives me the approval. “However, it is not what a normal mailperson wants to have too much to do with.”

I declare, “There is no one stopping me now.”

Wendy gets a bit too close to me, and looks into my eyes.

“I am not going to stop you clean. Your dark-brown eyes are signaling green.”

---02---

I can sense that this is going to be a special day. Wendy and I are visiting a forger to deliver a package to him and to pick up a new package from him. Then, we are going to go upstairs to deliver the package to a suite. After that, we pick up another package in the suite to deliver it back to the aforementioned forger.

Yes! Finally, I get to scout the unknown. What awaits me on the upper level? I do not know. I will find out, sooner or later.

Wendy has told me a plenty of things about the errand assignment between the forger and the suite upstairs.

“The forger is mentally unstable sometimes, and the suite owner upstairs is an oddball seemingly hiding behind a class barrier. Those who work in the suite are not easy to befriend. Even though I consider myself to be someone that is not easy to offend, they still give me hard times. Some of them are so sexist that I want them to just stop dead. Even though I like my job as a package carrier, going to the estate turns my feet into lead.”

This sounds like a serious business on the darker side of the floor community.

“Do you know why this assignment pays you a lot?” she asks. “Why is it that no one still wants to have too much to do with the delivery to the big shot?”

I answer, “This assignment and the customers are just that tough.”

“That is correct.” The tone of her voice is getting more somber. “Whatever may happen to you on the spot, remember that you are serving the customers and you have to stay polite. Customers are always right, whether you like them or not.”

She continues, “Those who have accepted the assignment between the suite and the forge have quit, if they have managed to live and get the discharge permit, that is.”

Judging from her words, I am about to deal with the toughest customers around. I am willing to take it, if this gives me the opportunity to go upstairs of Towerld.

---03---

We are now visiting the forger, residing in the district that seems to be designed for heavy industries.

As we get closer to the forge, I notice that the overall views of the hallways get somber and gloomy, as if no one is interested in keeping this district bright and sightly. The TTT wants to save energy, I suppose. (I do not even know the energy source of Towerld.) I hear the sound of industrial machines and factory workers. It is not exactly a slum section. Even though it is not polluted, the air reeks of oil and metals.

This is not the sexiest section I have seen in my life. (It is not that I now find the flooded floor to be sexy. It was too fishy.) Nonetheless, I can at least sense the industrial productivity. It is far better than a desolate district.

---04---

I am still panting. We have been running for a few kilometers, on and off the moving platform. I have to accept the fact that there is no escape from having to run, as long as I am with Wendy. (I cannot run away from running, just by running hard.) She is not even breaking a sweat! Does she have a sweat gland? (It is not that I want to investigate.)

Near a dark corner of the district, there is a metallic door on the wall of a hallway. I do not hear any hammer sound from the forge behind the door. (Is the forger taking a break?)

There is a sign on the door. It reads, “Enter at your own risk.”

This reeks of danger more than the grease stench. I love taking risks. (After all, that is why I have made up my mind to explore Towerld all the way to the unknown.)

Wendy knocks the door. (She is always ahead of me.) There is no response. She then presses the doorbell. No response.

Wendy takes a few steps back. I place the package (that I have been carrying on my back) on my left arm. I forcefully stabilize my breath, move forward, and grab the doorknob. (I do not want her to get hurt. The client can be quite dangerous. She has told me so.)

I twist the knob, and slowly open the door outward. Slowly. Surely. Easy does it. I hear nothing but my unsettled breath.

I look over the entrance. It is so much darker than the dim corridor that I have to let my eyes get used to the lack of light. I stand at the entrance, and take my time. (Besides, I need more time to calm down my breath.)

---05---

I call out, “Is there anyone home?”

There is no response. It means that I have to go deeper. We have a package to drop here, and a package to pick up. We cannot just leave here without getting anything done. Besides, the door is unlocked, as if in trying to invite us inside.

Wendy warns, “Hector, wait!”

I am not going to wait. (Who does she think I am?) I am here to get the job done. I have got a lot of lost time to make up for. My journey to the higher levels does not stop here.

---06---

As I take a few steps into the darkened room, I am tackled by a massive object emerging from the dark.

“Nurgh!”

My body is flung to the wall nearby, and ricocheted off the hard surface. I instinctively hug the package around my chest, and manage to protect it. My shoulder has just taken much of the shock, instead. (That hurts.) I plant my feet firmly on the floor to prevent from falling down.

Wendy has been warning me of this. Now I know that I should have heeded her words. Too late.

I see a pair of blazing objects in the dark. They are eyes. Only the possessor of the psychotic mind can generate that type of glare. The sudden fear constricts my body and soul.

As my eyes are getting used to the dim background, I see the owner of the insane-looking eyes.

I see a big and bulky human. He is not fat. In fact, he is rather muscular. His biceps are as bulging as my thighs. He is not exactly picturesque or statuesque like the characters and heroes in fictional fables, but I can tell that he is practically strong. I am no small man, but I end up looking as frail as Wendy compared to him. I can tell that he can swing a big hammer to strike a hot plate of steel on an anvil.

His head and face are completely shaved. It makes sense, because a forge can get too hot for a fancy hairdo and a bushy beard. The skinhead adds an extra element to his fear factor. His facial structure is becoming more obvious in the dim light, and it reminds me of a devilish fiend in mythical stories.

He is clad in ordinary trousers and a half-sleeved shirt. A black, steel-coated apron gives him the appearance of a legitimate forger. (He does not have the trademark forger's items like a hammer and mitts at that point.)

His blazing eyes are warning me that he wants to beat me into pulp. I have to escape from his attack range as soon as possible, and I am failing to make the right move.

He howls, “Where is the fix!?”

“What?” It is all that I can say, sadly enough.

I am confused. I do not understand what he is yelling about. Fixing dinner is not my job. I have a package to deliver to him. Is that what he means?

Remembering that I have to treat him like a customer, I report rather matter-of-factly while extending my arms and the package toward him, “Sir, we have just brought the package.”

The berserk one roars, “GRRRAAAAGGGHHH!”

He is not acting like a human being. In fact, I think I see a ferocious beast in his glaring eyes.

This beast incarnate is lunging at me, and I am just standing there stunned. I am so perplexed and intimidated that I do not know what to do.

He jumps on me. I fall down on my back. I let go of the package. Near the corner of my sight, I see Wendy catching the package. (What a fine catch!)

Before I manage to get up, he is mounting on my torso. I am pinned down.

Before I try to do something about the predicament, the beastly one starts choking my neck!

“Give me the fix, or give me death!”

(He is the one giving me death now.)

I cannot say a word, because his thumbs are suppressing my larynx. (I do not even know what to say in this situation.) I struggle to get my hands on his wrists to pry them away from my neck, but his vice grips are dominating my resistance. Is it boosted by mysterious drugs?

---07---

Here comes Wendy to the rescue. (I have become her assistant so that I can save her in crunch time. Now, she is trying to save me. This is not the way it should be.)

“Let go of him! When the situation is tight, the customers are not so right.”

Before she finishes her words of warning, she stands in front of the ferocious one (and right above my face), and starts delivering jabs with both of her fists.

“If you are not waving a white flag, I am demoting you to the rank of punching bag.”

I think she is trying to distract the strangulator by landing her little fists on his face. I like the intention, but it is not working. The fingers of the berserker are cleaving deeper into my neck. This grip is so strong that it can snap my neck at any moment.

Wendy can punch fast. I mean, FAST. She can land several punches in each second. I cannot see her fists. Speed and endurance of her punching (and her running) are far more than merely impressive.

The problem, it seems, is that her little pink fists can only pack so much wallop. Her jabs are top class in terms of speed, but I suspect that her hooks and uppercuts are as deadly as cotton candies.

“If you receive my kicks, I will consider giving you the fix.”

Wendy gives up on punching, and starts kicking his temples with both of her feet.

Her kicks are deadlier than her fists. (It does not say too much.) Her kicks share the same problem with her punches. They pack the velocity, but lack the ferocity. She is delivering roundhouse kicks from her left and right legs alternatingly. Not too many martial artists possess such attack symmetry, which Wendy is showing a plenty of.

---08---

I am fainting. I cannot think. My brain needs more oxygen, and this strangler is not letting me take it.

Wendy is trying to get the berserker’s attention, but to no avail. He is too impervious to pain, and he is too crazed to divert his focus from me.

I am losing consciousness.

Wendy is giving up on kicking. Now, she is pulling out a spray can from her utility belt. (Is it not too late? Is it better late than never?)

Is this where my glorious adventure to the unknown floors ends? I do not want to die in a dark forge. I do not want to be victimized by a crazed beast incarnate. I will not even be remembered in the history of Towerld.

Good bye, world. Good bye, Towerld. It has been nice knowing you, Wendy. I just want to tell you something that I do not even remember.

Part Six

---01---

As I slowly regain consciousness, I realize that I am not dead.

Where am I?

I was being strangled by a crazed man. That's right!

I clear my head in a hurry, get my upper body up, and look around.

I am still in the forge, near the entrance. The room is still dark, but my sight is now used to the darkness to the level that I see Wendy sitting near me.

Whatever happened to the berserker? What did he do to her?

Next to Wendy, the big beast is lying. He is either unconscious or sound asleep. Before I ask her a question, she starts explaining what have transpired since I lost my consciousness.

---02---

"After you fell unconscious, I thought of employing a new tactic. After all, my punches and kicks were not even good enough to distract the tough customer, let alone to put him in check. So, I decided to use the sleep-inducing spray can, and sprayed the solution into his eyes. He was so drugged that it did not affect him instantly. He was not letting go of you immediately. Eventually, he weakened his grip on your neck, to the level that I could finally manage to pry your neck off his clutch after many tries."

It must have been such an ordeal for the frail mailer to overpower the berserker, even though he was falling asleep and getting weaker.

Wendy is offering a few words of praise. "You are good at holding your breath for a long time. No wonder you have such a big chest. I am impressed."

"Thanks. I used to make my living by swimming everyday. Only you can render me breathless."

She then says, "When we get a chance to deliver packages to submerged floors, I will promote you to be my boss for that particular delivery assignment. That will add an interesting element to our political alignment."

"Yeah, sure thing." I replied rather uninterestedly.

Then, Wendy is back to her reporting.

"The berserker became too groggy to inflict any damage upon me and you. He was still craving for getting the 'fix'. He was still mounting on you, and was as dangerous as a powder keg ready to explode. I realized that we brought a package of drugs addressed to him. Even though it is against the mailpersons' code, I opened the package, pulled out a drug-filled injector from the package, and used the injector on him. The drug eventually calmed him down, and the sleep-inducing gas from my spray can put him to sleep. Thanks to the drug, he will wake up a sober person, at least for the time being. You can expect him to give you a friendly hug."

She is done with her explanation. In short, she somehow managed to save my life and to tame the beast. (I did not contribute to the victory, except that I functioned as a decoy.)

She seems to be noticing that I am somewhat silent. She taps my shoulder gently.

“The tactic worked, thanks to you. You did a good job of protecting the package from external shocks in many occasions. The injector in the package was staying intact, protected by the buffer. You are surely the best disciple I have ever had in my life. There is no question about it.”

I ‘do’ have a question, though.

“Uh, you are welcome,” I reply. Then, I ask, “How many disciples have you had in your life?”

“One.”

I should have known.

“You are the one, matched by none.”

Yeah, sure. Anyway.

I am also discovering the hidden talent she possesses. Her cotton-candy punches and sponge kicks are valuable assets, if making a feint is all she has to do. I admit that her skills, quickness, and speed in fighting are of expert caliber. (It is just too bad that her strength is nowhere close to her nimbleness.) She is not just a mailperson living next door. (She is living with me, for that matter!)

---03---

“This gentleman’s name is, Gideon Yendrey Drahtrex.”

I snigger sarcastically, “Gentleman, eh?”

This Gideon guy has not only the last name but also the middle name. Am I envious of him, or what?

“He is addicted to drugs,” she explains. “Even though he is arguably the most artistically talented and the craftiest forger on this industrial level, he has ruined his own life by being addicted to the blue devil. I do not know how and why he has gotten himself into the current sorry state. I guess that it is his fate.”

Whatever has happened to him? He makes me imagine wicked life stories behind him.

---04---

The forger named Gideon is waking up. I hope he is as sober as Wendy just said he would be.

The big guy gets his upper body straight and up, and then takes a look at Wendy and me. He instantly notices what had transpired before he was put to sleep. He lets one of his knees touch the floor, to assume the pose of getting down on his knee.

Gideon apologizes, “I am terribly sorry! When I run out of the drug, I lose my sanity. I hope that you are not hurt.”

My neck still hurts, and my pride is badly damaged, all right. (I just do not have enough courage to say that vocally.)

Wendy laughs off the incident, saying, “At least, you did not choke my neck.”

I come close to saying, “Yeah. He did not choke YOUR neck.”

As I try to observe Gideon, I notice that his eyes are now giving the totally different impression from that of his berserker’s glare. I see not only sanity but also serenity in his pupils now. Even though the basic facial structure has not changed, the mien has lost its fiendish flare.

What is causing such a striking difference? Can demonic drugs turn the owner of such clear eyes into a berserker? I have heard of many evil things about such substances. To hear of it is one thing, and experiencing the deadliness of it (with my own suffocation) is even more convincing.

I am getting this impression that this gentle giant constantly thinks about serious issues such as his forgery. He is casting a shadow of urgency on his face. If he were dressed in a clerical garb, he would have looked much more like a priest than a forger.

Wendy explains what has transpired near the entrance of the forge, and convinces Gideon that they actually occurred.

Then, Wendy introduces me to the forger. He seems to know Wendy, who has been involved with the assignment between the forge and the suite sporadically for quite a while. Gideon and I both stand up to shake each other's hands. He is clearly taller, bigger, and bulkier than I am. Next to him, I just look like a young page.

---05---

Gideon says the package that we are supposed to deliver to the suite is in his gallery. By utilizing my incentive as a mailperson to be able to step into various living quarters, I want to see how artistic this drug addict can get and how the drug affects his talent.

Gideon is leading us through a dark aisle. We walk through the forge, and then reach the darkened gallery. Then, he turns on the light.

I am stunned, and Wendy right next to me is rendered speechless.

I have expected practical tools. (Such products are not designed to be sexy, artistic, or beautiful.) Jeweled musical instruments and shiny weapons decorate the walls of the private gallery. Even though I am not exactly an artist, I can tell that whoever designed and made them must be artistic. I do not know if those instruments are functionally correct, but any musicians using those visually impressive instruments can make themselves look like history-making maestros. I cannot tell if those weapons are practically useful, but anyone wielding such weapons can surely look like world-saving heroes that appear in ancient legends. (That reminds me of a proverb, "Clothes make the person.")

I am forgetting that Wendy and I are supposed to be delivering packages.

---06---

Gideon hands me a briefcase. I do not know what is inside it. I want to know the contents, and I decide to ask him.

"What is inside the briefcase?"

"They are my masterpieces that I have forged. The master of the suite orders me to create the masterpieces on a constant basis. As a reward, I get the credit in my TTT account, the injector, and the drug."

Gideon is looking confident and ashamed of himself at a same time. The confidence seems to ooze from the "masterpieces" in the briefcase, and the fact that he gets the drug is generating the feeling of shame in his heart. The pride and shame add complex elements to his ever-grim facial expression.

Wendy gets close to Gideon. She has to bend her neck backward to look into his face (and the ceiling). It is like a little squirrel looking up to see a bear in a forest.

"We worry about you, Gideon. You must have experienced a lot of emotional highs and lows. You are suffering quite a bit, as if you are lost in a bottomless pit. As the saying goes, 'Destroy the lion while he is yet but a whelp.' If you want help, we can at least try to be of assistance to you."

That is very considerate of her. After all, she is generous enough to share a shelter with a stranger from the flooded floor.

Gideon replies, "I appreciate your offer. Let us talk about this issue, next time you visit here."

"You can count on us." Wendy tells him. "We are more than mere mailpersons."

Judging from the gleam in his eyes, I can tell that Gideon is crying for help silently.

Part Seven

---01---

On the way to the suite on the upper floor, we are using the moving platform. The ride is for free. It is paid by the taxes deducted from the denizens' TTT accounts. Even though I am yet to pay the tax with my renewed account, I might as well get the most out of the convenience of the public facilities. (I will pay the tax later. I promise.) The free ride is supposed to be so comfortable that I feel like sleeping on the belt (if I get the chance).

Wendy just does not let me rest. She keeps on running, as if stopping for a moment means instant death. As much as I like her, it is downright energy-consuming just to team up with her.

Just when I think of begging her to take a break, she puts a stern look on her cute face. It instantly tells me that something is up. (My motivation is not.)

She warns, "Keep running, Hector. Somebody is chasing us."

I look back. Surely enough, I see several people in black business suits and optical shades running toward us. It is a strange sight. (Why would anyone wear sunglasses in a sunless indoor world?) They are probably trying to blend into the public by looking like ordinary businesspeople, but they are ending up looking weird by getting dressed uniformly and moving in a large group. Other passengers of the moving platform seem to want to have nothing to do with the weirdoes, and they are making way for a mob of black suits. (I would have appreciated the bystanders more, if they blocked the chasers.)

I try to say something to Wendy, but I am already too busy panting. I cannot say a word.

She continues her words of caution, as if she knows what I want to know. "They are not ordinary businesspeople running to keep the score. I do not know whom they work for. They try to catch up on us, and they are outpacing themselves. Our main concerns are the ones in the front who are trying to block our way to the stairway leading to the upper floor. They are out there to cause a fuss, even though they seem to be able to do nothing better than making the out-of-fashion shades fly off the store shelves."

---02---

Wendy alerts me, "I think we are close to being surrounded. It does not mean that we are going to be grounded."

I see there are a few ordinary-looking people trying to get close to us. They are blending into other passengers of the moving platform, but I notice that their eyes are locked on to Wendy and me. The mob of black suits behind us and the ones disguised as normal citizens are trying to sandwich us on the platform.

The moving platform is two-way. There are 15 lanes for each direction. The lanes along both edges of each way are the slowest, and the lanes get faster as they are closer to the center (eighth and the fastest) lane. If each lane is painted with a bright color, then the moving platform will look like two rainbows moving in opposite directions to each other.

Wendy gestures for me to get off the beltway. I obey her, without hesitating.

We switch from the fastest lane to the slower lanes, and then we step to the fixed floor to get off the moving platform. (Moving platforms on this level do not have handrails or guardrails, so the users can just step out of the platform anytime they want.) The suspicious ones are getting off the beltway, and are chasing us. (The suspicion is confirmed!)

Wendy runs toward an alley. I follow her. (What else can I do?) She seems to know the map of the entire floor. I think she knows where to go. (I am still learning the map.)

There are countless alleys. She makes turns at so many corners that I come close to twisting my ankles. If I am barely catching up on her, then those who are following us will get lost soon. (I can now run faster than average humans.)

---03---

We have managed to shake off the pursuers. I am getting so much better at running, thanks to the constant driving from Wendy, that the chasers cannot catch up even on me (let alone Wendy). Yeah, she is such a hard driver, all right.

It seems that we are safe for the time being. The pursuers are nowhere to be found in our sights. In one of many ordinary hallways, Wendy slows down and stops. Thank goodness. My lungs deserve taking a break. She is giving me a chance to catch the breath. Her “tough love” attitude makes her occasional kindly gesture even more precious.

It has taken me a while for me to regain my breath. Wendy has not broken a sweat, and her breath is just as stable as ever. (I am beginning to think that she is really a squirrel.)

“Who are they, really?” (I cannot come up with anything better to ask her.)

As if running for hours means nothing, Wendy replies, “They seem to be the worst-kept secret agents of some sort. They are not good at keeping themselves discreet, as if they are launching a package tour. I do not know what organization is providing them with financial support. They are not goons working for the suite. That is all I can say for sure.”

“Do goons in general work for the suite we are delivering the package to?” The word ‘goon’ makes me wonder.

“Remember that a servant of the suite deposited the drug injector to the post office, before we delivered it to Gideon.” The tone of her voice is sounding grim.

“Is the suite a medical ward of some sort?”

“I wish that were the case,” she utters. “It is more like a mental ward. After all, according to many sources of information, the drug lord owns the suite.”

“Drug lord?” I gasp. “Are we helping a crime syndicate? Does that not make us criminals?”

Wendy gazes into my startled eyes with her round eyes. My attention is riveted to her pupils. I cannot pry myself away from her eyes that are gleaming uncharacteristically sternly. (Am I becoming a prisoner of her high-voltage cage of the mesmerizing gaze?)

While keeping the tone of her voice low, she speaks, “Hector. There is more to this floor level than just what it appears to be on the surface. That is a fact that we cannot just ignore. The gangsters use drugs to control much of this floor. We cannot live here without having anything to do with the darker side of the community, whether you like it or not.”

I sigh, "This is getting deep."

This makes me wonder if the TTT has anything to do with the crime syndicate (or whatever it is).

Wendy confesses, "I am telling you what I do not have to hide. I do not want to succumb to the evil side. In fact, that is the reason why I want to get out of this level as much as you want to go to the upper floors. I have been earning as much dough as I can by making a mailperson my current occupation. Now I have enough budget to go to the upper floors with you and realize my dream of migration."

"Oh, really?" I reply rather flatly.

She has been 'squirreling' away the dough for the eventual future, eh?

The crime syndicate seems to be pervading into the lives of the denizens of the factory floor. In fact, it is motivating Wendy to awaken her wanderlust. At least, the darker side of the floor community is making Wendy and me be on the same page of the same book. That is the positive side of the negative aspect of the community.

She declares, "I want to stay away from the crime, and be your partner in climb."

Wendy has her own will to move out of this floor, and wants to journey into the upper floors with me. That is why she decided to let a stranger (that I am) stay in her living quarter. I want to thank her, before I forget to do so.

---04---

Wendy and I scout the surroundings, to time the right moment to sprint to the stairway to the upper floor. (Of course, we are not going to be safe by staying at one part of the hallway forever.)

I hear dogs barking. I am reminded of the dreadful moment. I was mauled by many vicious dogs when I came to this floor for the first time.

I see dogs chasing shaded men in black suits. As if they have no time for Wendy and me, they just pass by us.

Wendy explains, "These dogs are trained to attack outsiders (and occasionally mailpersons) and eat them for snack. Judging from the way the dogs are chasing them to attack, the men in black probably reek of a peculiar smell. The dogs prioritize outsiders over mailpersons as their targets to fell. That is why the dogs are ignoring us and chasing the suspicious people in black."

We have to contend with not only the strange suite but also the outsiders from different floors. This is getting interesting.

Wendy speculates, "These agents must have come from the upper floors that belong to the different turfs than this floor. I smell a power struggle and a turf war."

Am I getting into a gang war, just because I want to reach the top of Towerld? I hope it is not going to block my journey to the upstairs. (Actually, I might as well make the turf war assist my journey. I have to figure out how to do so.)

So many things are at stake, eh?

---05---

As we are getting ready and starting to run to move on to the stairway, we see two figures blocking our way. They are two men in black suits and dark-shaded spectacles. (Can they not be more original than that?) They are dressed like that to try to blend into the common people. (Nice try, losers!) Their garments are not combatively functional, for the ties are only going to inhibit their ability to fight. They are just as tall as I am,

and they look like some kind of secret agents. (So much for being so ‘secretive’, eh?) I do not want my little critter companion to engage in a battle with someone bigger than she is. After being strangled by the frantic forger, I do not feel like fighting anyone.

The men in black suits are not using missile weapons. It seems that they do not want to damage the briefcase I am carrying. They want to wrest it from me undamaged. My ‘hostage’ is limiting their attack capabilities.

What they have in their hands are stun guns. This is the first time ever for me to see the real thing. (I have read about them in an encyclopedia.) Such electric devices are not designed for use with moisture, which can jam the mechanism. Using them under water is out of question. It is no wonder that stun guns are rarely used on the flooded floor.

In any case, they are still dangerous (if not deadly) even without missile weapons. I have to plan the next move carefully.

As I slow down, Wendy accelerates! (What is she thinking? She is not thinking anything, is she?) I want to be her shield, and she does not seem to care. Does she want me to babysit the briefcase? Since the humiliating defeats at the intersection and the forge, I have been waiting for the chance for redemption. This is when I rise to the occasion. Wendy, give me a chance, please!

Wendy commands me. “They are tough. I am going to make a bluff. Do your stuff.”

What makes her think that she is my boss? (Actually, I am officially listed as her delivery disciple.) Imagine a cute squirrel trying to sound bossy. That makes me laugh. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I am willing to obey your commands, my faster master. I am sensing the moment of vindication, and I am willing to capitalize on it.

---06---

One of the agents threatens, “All you have to do is to give us the package, if you do not want to get hurt.”

He is letting a spark run between the electrodes of his stun gun to intimidate us.

I want to throw in a few words to force the men in black suits to spill something, but I am too busy trying to catch up on Wendy. (Can she not just slow down a bit for me?)

As if she is oblivious to what I am thinking, she is closing in on the men in black suits! What is her combat plan? They have stun guns. What does she have? She has many gadgets attached to her waist belt, but they do not seem to be as deadly as stun guns.

The agents swing the stun guns at the lunging target.

Wendy puts herself on a screeching halt. The sparking electrodes miss her by just a few centimeters. (She is so quick that she can decelerate from the maximum speed to zero velocity within a step or two.)

Wendy pulls out a pair of spray cans, and sprinkles paints on the dark glasses. The shades are painted in bright pink. As much as the pink looks vivid in the black background of the suits, they look clownish. (The chromatic combination of black and hot pink is not exactly tailored for middle-aged men.)

Wendy jests, waving her hand in the agents’ faces, “You can’t see me.”

They take off the painted shades to see what is going on.

One of the agents groans, “Why, you little ...”

The other one lets out, “Now, I see you.”

Wendy talks back, “Now, you don’t see me. I am not available for free, unless you pay the fee.”

She then pulls out another pair of spray cans, and sprays chemicals into their exposed eyes.

“Nurk!”

“Ugh!”

Instinctively, I sense the opportunity. The men in black suits are blinded, and they are writhing. They are not letting go of their weapons, but I see that their defense is minimized.

I have been a mere spectator, up to this point. This is the moment at which I rise to the occasion. Now is the time. The time is now!

I proclaim in my mind, “Just watch me, Wendy. This is how a real man does the job. You set the table, and I am going to feast on my victims.”

I make sure that there is no one else within the vicinity, and put the briefcase on the hallway carpet. (I do not want anyone to steal the briefcase.) One of the agents is being blinded by the pepper spray, and the other one is given a dose of sleep-inducing chemicals. I am closing in on the former. (I can just leave the latter, for he will eventually succumb to the urge to sleep anyway.)

First, I give a knee lift into his midsection. As he doubles up in pain, I wrest the stun gun from the weakened grip. Before he can react, I turn on the switch, and sink the sparking electrodes into his neck.

“Ngngnggh!”

Muscles of his entire body seem to be twitching uncontrollably, to the level that he cannot even scream. To add a finishing touch to my sequential maneuver, I shove him away from me. He falls down helplessly, unconscious.

Wresting a weapon from a temporarily blinded foe is too easy for me. Wendy has set up the stage for me to show off my favorite maneuver of stealing a weapon from the opponent. She has made my execution of excellence very easy, and she has still made me look good. I want to thank her before I forget.

---07---

I hear someone clapping.

I turn around, and see Wendy applauding, with a stun gun in her hand.

She praises me by saying, “Hector, your wresting and wrestling maneuver is, shall I say, stunning. It augments your cunning. You have surely passed the test. I am impressed.”

I respond to the rhymed compliments, by simply saying, “Thank you.”

Her reaction is so unexpected that I cannot say anything better. What am I thanking her for? Yeah, she set the table, all right. I do admit that I appreciate her.

“You are no phony. Besides, you are as hot as my pepper spray. I am upgrading you from a fish sausage to a pepperoni. I am sure that it makes your day.”

(What is she trying to say?)

By the way, why does she have a stun gun in her hand? Where did she get it?

I see the other agent soundly sleeping near her feet. It seems that she just picked up what the agent dropped as he was struggling to fight the sleep-inducer.

“So, that is how you wrest a weapon from the opponent, eh?” Wendy says. “I would like to learn the skill from you in case of a disaster, my master.”

She is suddenly promoting me to the rank of master, eh? (Yeah, as if that makes me go soft on her.)

I tell her, “The lesson fee is going to be steep, as much as the skill can be deep. It is definitely not cheap.”

“That is a maneuver I want to steal. Is there any discount deal, your Majesty?” she asks, while kneeling and bowing down.

Now, she is mockingly treating me as if I am the king of Towerld.

“I will think about lowering the fee, if you reduce my workload just a bit.”

She stands up, picks up the briefcase that I put down a moment ago, and hands it to me.

“Let us talk later about the value of being so archetypal, my dear disciple. Let us move on at full speed, before we confront the black suit stampede. Catch up on my dancing locks, before you deplete your socks.”

After being promoted consecutively to the ranks of master and king, I have just gotten demoted to the rank of her ‘dear’ disciple, again. (She is a rough master to serve, as much as she is a tough hamster to preserve.)

Part Eight

---01---

After we stole the stun guns, we have managed to avoid other potential interceptors. We encountered a few dogs, but they are more interested in targeting the ‘intruders’ from other floors than us. Wendy’s dog whistle is repelling the potential danger. (I want to have a squirrel whistle.)

We enter a lobby near the circular central wall (concentric to the disc-shaped floor). The basic structure is similar to that on the flooded floor, it seems. (There is no water here.) The ceiling is tall. I see a circular stairway. It is like a piled-up bunch of concentric half circles of different sizes, shifting the sizes from the largest to the smallest in order from the bottom to top. (This looks familiar.) This is a stairway that is designed for complete defense. There is no weak spot or a dead angle.

I observe the stairway. At the top, there is a heavy, steel door. Near the top, there is a figure standing loftily. Have I seen this scene? I think I know him.

The Stairway Shieldian is guarding the stairway!

I am so confused that I do not know how to react. I think he is supposed to be on the flooded floor below and guarding the mystery door leading to unknown.

He is clad in the same uniform; with a visored helmet, pocketed uniform, nightstick, and vertically elongated utility shield.

I know that he is the one to have to avoid. He looks as dangerous as ever. He is also known as the Stairway Spider, waiting for the potential prey to get entangled in the web. (After all, I avoided him before coming to this level.) The semi-circular stairway reminds me of a spider’s web, and the Stairway Spider is aptly named for that reason.

---02---

I have to warn Wendy of the Stairway Shieldian, but she is already getting closer to the stairway! (Is she jumpy, or what?)

I yell, “Wendy, wait!”

While running, she shrugs, “I can’t wait, even if it might be a bait. My course is kept straight.”

I do not think she knows the Stairway Shieldian. He might knock her out cold.

I try to catch up on her. Fat chance. She is fast, even when she is going up. Is she faster going up than my running a stairway downward? She is not even breaking a sweat.

I cannot catch up on her. Do I have to witness my teammate getting bludgeoned by my nemesis? Do I get to realize that Wendy's quickness can prevail over the seemingly flawless defense?

The potential epic duel is quickly occupying the center of my attention, to the level that I am almost forgetting about my having to protect the briefcase.

Wendy puts her hand into one of the chest pockets. (Does she have a secret weapon?) She then pulls out the ID tag. I cannot imagine a tag being a deadly weapon. She wears the chained tag around her throat, and puts the tag itself into one of her pockets for safety. (I guess she does not want to run fast with the tag dangling around her chest.) Actually, I do the same thing with my tag.

She slows down, and walks toward the Stairway Shieldian, while holding the tag.

The Stairway Shieldian does not even flinch.

Wendy waves the tag to the guard, and inserts it into a card scanner attached to the door.

The Stairway Shieldian is standing still, as if he is approving what Wendy is doing. I am still confused.

Now I realize that the tag functions as a mailperson's license. I have mine, too. As long as I use my license, I can prove my legitimacy as a professional mailperson and use the stairway all I want.

The Stairway Shieldian is manually opening the door for Wendy. She is now gesturing for me to follow her and is walking past the opened door.

Now that I do not have to fear my nemesis, I know what to do.

---03---

As I insert my license tag into the scanner installed on the door, I get the permission to go to a different floor. (I guess the TTT has already accepted me as a legitimate citizen of this industrial floor. The administration process was rather rough. Oh, well.)

As I walk through the door, I have just decided to ask the master of defense a few questions to extract information from him. (I want to know what he is up to.)

"What are you doing here?"

He replies, "I just got transferred to this post."

I say, "At least, your career is not yet toast."

He comments, "You are adapting to the new environment; from a fisherperson to a mailperson. That is quite a career change. Suffice it to say that it is rather strange."

Is he complimenting me, or what?

"Are you not stopping me now?" I add a touch of taunting in my voice to test him.

The Stairway Shieldian explains, "It is my duty to guard my post. I am just doing the job. Nothing more, nothing less. You are free to go through this door, since you have the tag and you are just doing your job."

"I have a license, and there is no nonsense, eh?"

I am not telling him that I got the mailperson's license through a sloppy process, taking advantage of the imperfection of the TTT.

I try to keep the leading conversation going. "I did not expect to see you again. Not that I want to see you often."

He shrugs, "Same here."

Here comes a question to check if he is true to his statement.

"There are many outsiders chasing me and my job partner. Are you going to prevent them from going through this post?"

"You mean, your master?"

(How does he know?)

"My duty is to guard my post. That is about the only thing I can do. If they do not have proper ID's, they cannot walk past me."

Yes! The deal is sealed. This guard dog may be quite reliable as an ally, if he is on my side.

"I leave the rest up to you."

He advises me, "Speaking of the 'rest', you may have to rest for yourself. Your breath is getting short."

What makes him think that he is in a position to advise me?

I speak my prediction, "So is the time span between now and our eventual confrontation in the not-so-distant future."

It is all that I say, for I have this feeling that I and he will face off against each other, sooner or later. Now is not the time. (Thank goodness.)

---04---

As Wendy and I walk through the hefty door, the outsiders in black suits are running up the semicircular stairway. All I have to do is to shut the door and move on, but I also want to know what the Stairway Shieldian will do to the potential trespassers.

Through a little peep window attached to the steel door, I take a look at the trouble that is brewing.

The Stairway Shieldian stands near the top of the stairway. He confronts the mercenaries. "You are not allowed to trespass this gate, without a permission."

An agent in black threatens, "Permission? Who the heck do you think you are? Do you know who we are?"

The Stairway Spider replies, "No. I know that you do not know how to get dressed. You must be maggot minions from different floors."

(Look who is saying that.)

Another agent warns, "If you do not get out of the way, we will purge you."

The Stairway Shieldian does not budge. "If you want to punch through this checking station, you are going to have to penetrate my defense."

This is getting interesting. I get to watch this epic battle, without paying anything.

Then, I feel someone tugging at my sleeve.

“Come on, Hector. You are not mowing his lawn.” Wendy urges me to get going. “I understand that you get to watch this confrontation for free. However, please remember that you can breathe oxygen and live with me without paying a fee.”

“You are not available for free, unless I pay the fee,” I utter. “Is that not what you said to those secret agents?”

“I certainly did not make the statement to you. I said that to those agents to persuade them into getting the clue. I know you do not want to equate yourself to those who only deserve selling themselves cheap. Remember that you aim high enough to try to eventually reach the tower keep, even though the slope of the road to the dizzyingly distant destination is destined to be steep.”

She is tugging at my sleeve strongly. Is she trying to rip my uniform? (With her limited physical strength, that is not going to happen anytime soon.)

“We have to make haste, for there is no time to waste. Let’s get out of here, and move on to the upper tier.”

“Just one minute. I have to study the moves of my future enemy.”

I think fast, and summon my wit. She does not deem me dangerous, and does not even try to get away from my hands that I am now extending toward her. (She does not mind getting very close to me physically.)

I look into her eyes, place my hands on her frail shoulders, and pronounce each word slowly, “Wendy, will you marry me?”

Her round eyes are becoming rounder than ever, and she is failing to close her lips. My improvisation is taking her (and me) by surprise, and even this usually clever critter is frozen for a moment. I am capitalizing on this opportunity.

“I am thinking of pawning my future wife, namely you, to get money for the admission fee.”

She then recovers from the temporarily frozen state of her mind rather quickly. Her facial expression is so complex that she seems to be laughing, grieving, sighing, and smiling simultaneously.

“Get real, before you trip on your own lofty ideal. The worst enemy may turn out to be the invisible greed. You are being such a kidder. If you can buy the entire Towerld with the money you get by selling me to a potential bidder, and if you can catch up on my running speed, then I will consider.”

She is smart enough to come up with such a deal. If I get to own the whole Towerld, my journey ends there. Besides, I get to bring back Wendy (a denizen of Towerld) to me automatically. If I can pull off such a deal, I can become the first god of this godless world. What a steal!

She then speaks sternly, “Besides, I can wait, but Gideon cannot under his current physiological state.”

Shucks. She is right. This is not the right time to fool around. The ordeal that Gideon is currently dealing with brought my mind from the state of euphoria to the reality.

I have just decided to leave the steel door, without observing the supposedly deadly moves by the Stairway Shieldian. It is just too bad.

Wendy adds, as if she wants to answer what I have in my mind, “The Stairway Shieldian will prevail easily.”

I ask, “How do you know? Do you know him?”

She answers, “Yes, I do happen to know the Stairway Shieldian and his reputation. He is also known as the Stairway Spider. I encounter so many things as a mailperson and collect much information, to end up making the range of my knowledge get wider.”

Judging from the tone of her voice, she seems to want to get the Stairway Shieldian off her mind.

“The more I try to immigrate to different floors while keeping myself employed, the more I end up encountering the darker sides of many things that I want to avoid.”

It seems that Wendy is not just an ordinary mailperson. (She is too good at fighting.) I will ask her more about her history, when the time comes. (I think her life story is as interesting as mine.)

Part Nine

---01---

“Hector, are you out of breath again? It is too early to dance the dance of your own bane.”

“You render me breathless, all right.”

“Since your respiration seems to be stuck in a cauldron of bubbling goo, I wish I could donate my aspiration to you.”

Yeah, like that is possible. I do not want to suffer from a heart attack.

We are on top of the staircase, and standing right in front of the door that leads to the upper level.

The metallic door looks heavy, as if it is preventing someone as frail as Wendy from going through it. It is not going to stop me and my determination.

“Let me get the door.”

I put my hand on the door handle, and push it toward the other side of the door with my full force.

The air on the next tier flows out through the door, and it is not what I have expected.

“What the ...?”

Just when I am thinking that I am finally beginning to get into the thick of things, the air on the other side of the door is slightly thick with smoke. Someone must be burning incense, or something. Is the entire floor an incense factory? If the smoke is not from incense, what is it from?

I do not dislike the scent of incense, but it is surely making the vision unclear. Besides, I worry about its long-term effect on my lungs and my psyche.

It is not all that overly inviting, as if it is trying to test my determination to go to upper levels. It still does not stop me, though.

---02---

I gesture at the door solemnly. “After you, my master.”

“Thank you, my friend. You are kind-hearted all the way to the end.”

Yeah, anything for a cute little critter anytime. She enters the next level. My personal status enters the next stage as well, because now I am being promoted to her friend.

She says, “I am merely obeying the green light in your eyes, for they are not full of lies.”

I comment, “You run all the time as if you care nothing for traffic signals.”

She responds, “If I stop running, then I start thinking about you and I get short of breath. I do not want to be put to death. Dare I say that you and your stun gun are just that much stunning?”

Wendy gets so close to me that I can hear her heartbeat more loudly than mine.

She confesses, “Besides, the only traffic signal that I care for is you. Your presence encourages me to understand what to do.”

I sigh, “I am turning green with envy, as much as this smoke is turning my face green.”

I can tell that I am controlling my own destiny, the traffic signal, and the storyline of my life, if not my respiratory organs.

I speak, “It seems that we are on the same page of the same book of many adventures waiting for us. I am yet to know the title of the book, though.”

She agrees, “We are making quite a team, and that is already defining a theme.”

“We will see.”

“Is it true that I am the main character of the story?” she jests. “I want to savor my moment of glory.”

“Yeah, you can be the main cast, if you want to.”

“That makes you my court jester, whom I want to pester.”

Where is she getting the idea?

“I am counting on you to carry the heavy load, big guy. It is going to be a long road, if we are trying to reach for the sky. Once we hit the lode, we can spread our wings and fly.”

She can sweet-talk me into doing anything.

“I can tell that you do not feel too bad about being depended on by a girl this frail.” she chuckles, while nudging me in the ribs with her elbow. “You are trying to hide the positive curve on the edge of your lips to no avail.”

I do not know how to deal with this clownish critter.

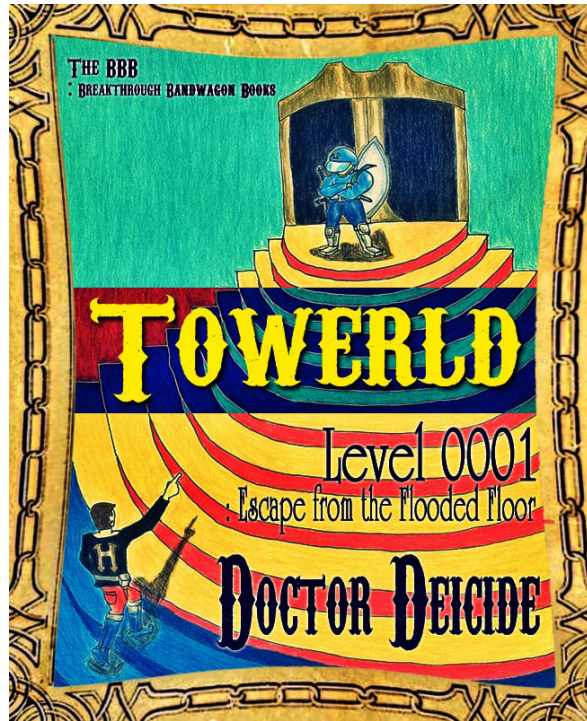
---03---

The air is murky and smoky. It is as unclear as our future and the endings of the most exciting adventure books that I have read. What await us on the new level, and beyond? We will find out, sooner or later.

(To be continued to Level 0003)

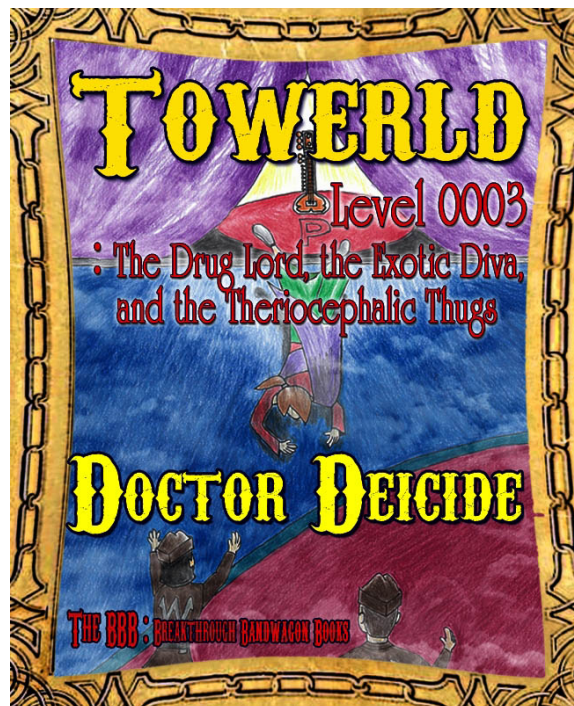
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Doctor Deicide Works List at The BBB



Towerld Level 0001: Escape from the Flooded Floor

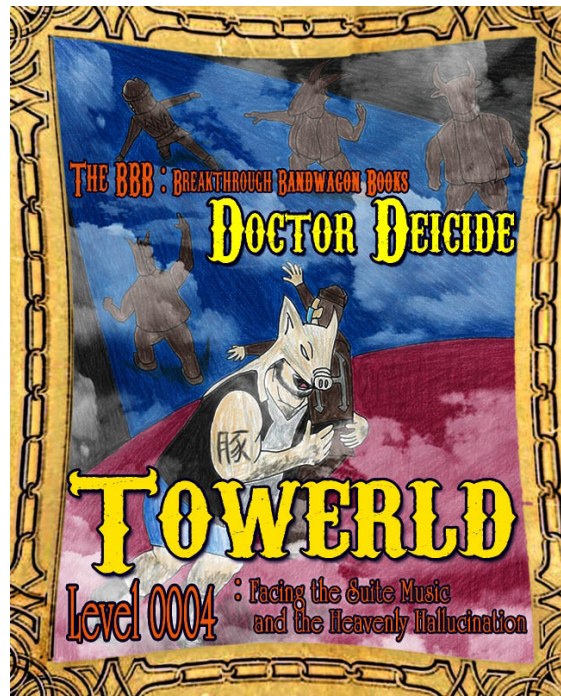
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Towerld Level 0003: The Drug Lord, the Exotic Diva, and the Theriocephalic Thugs

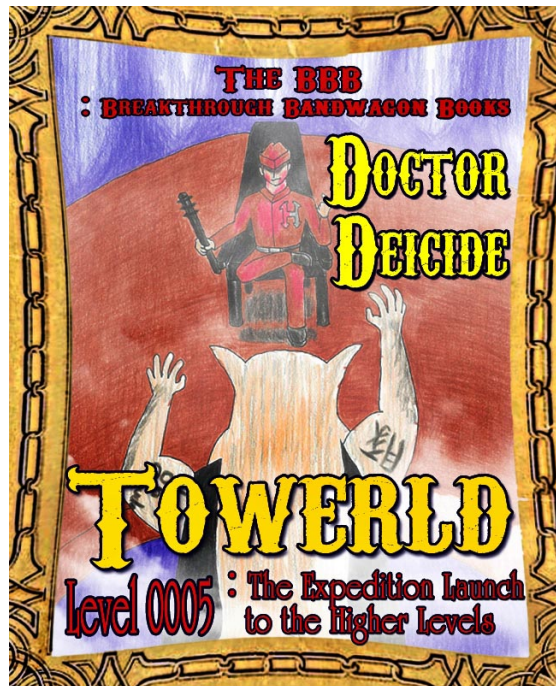
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Towerld Level 0004: Facing the Suite Music and the Heavenly Hallucination

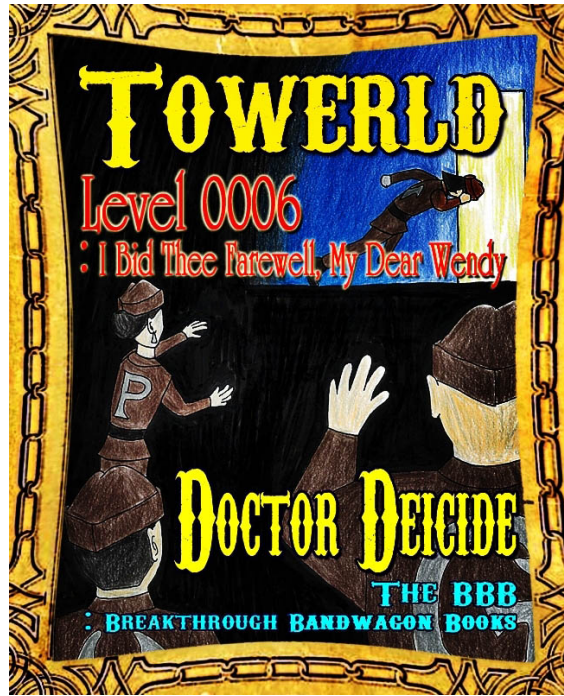
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Towerld Level 0005: The Expedition Launch to the Higher Levels

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Towerld Level 0006: I Bid Thee Farewell, My Dear Wendy

<http://thebbb.net/ebooks/towerld-level-0006.html>