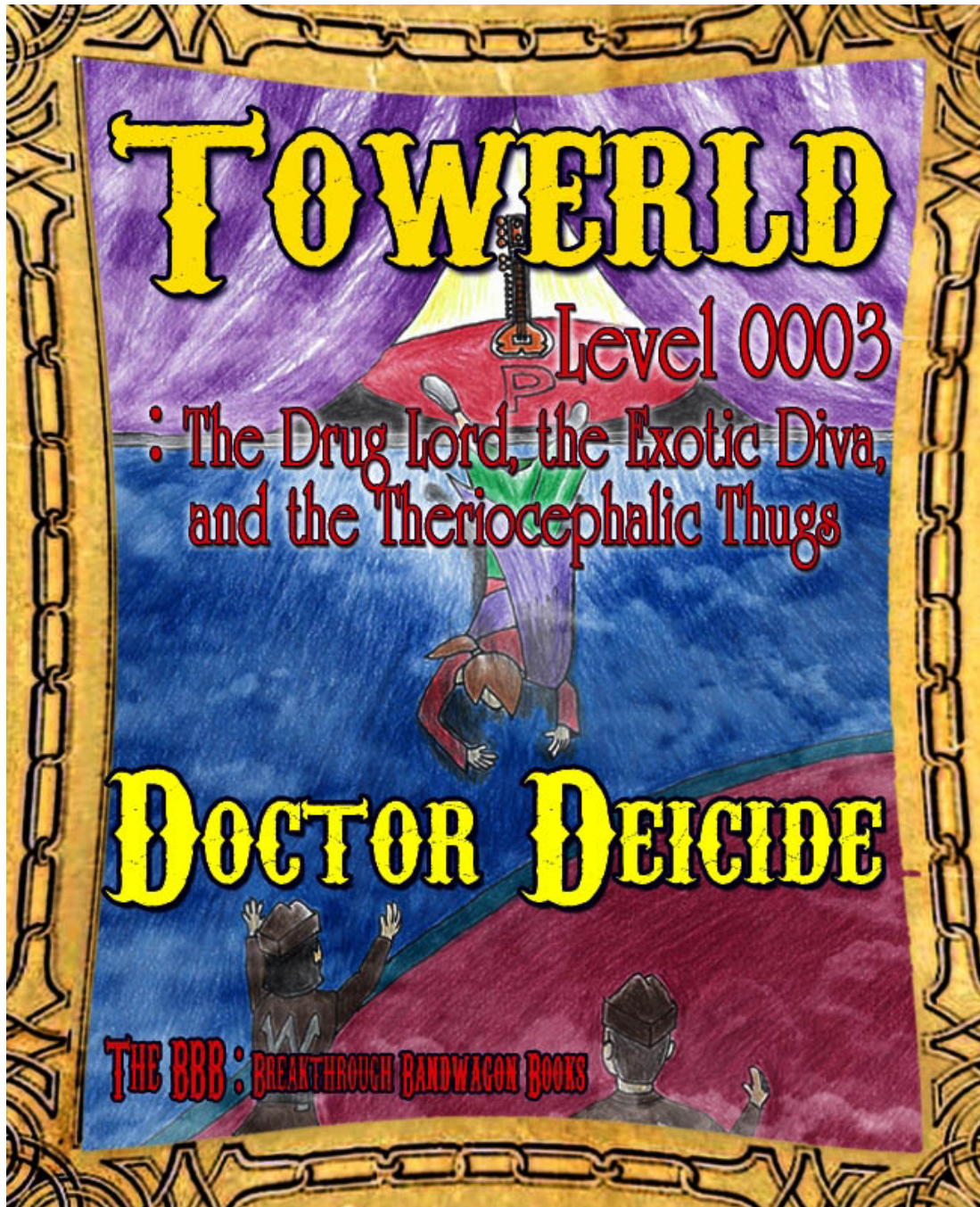


Towerld Level 0003: The Drug Lord, the Exotic Diva, and the Theriocephalic Thugs



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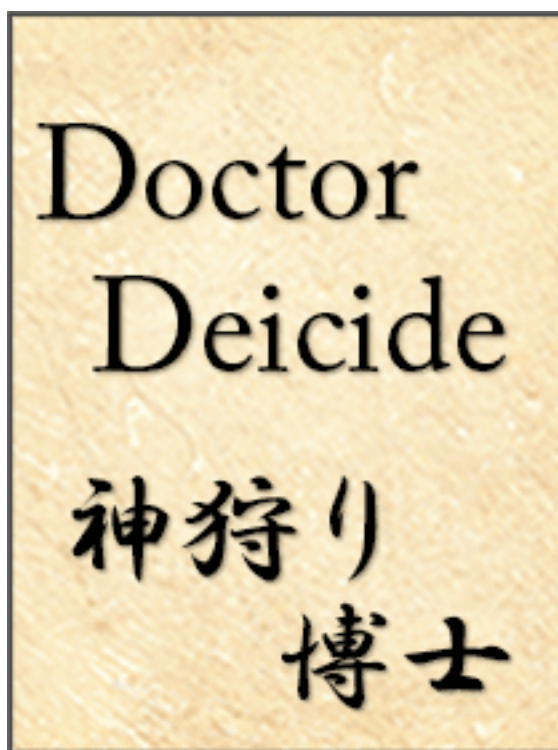
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## Part One

### ---01---

Now, Wendy and I are on the new level. We are on our way to the suite to deliver the package. There are no agents, goons, or dogs to block our way, at least for now. However, it does not mean that the path is guaranteed to be smooth all the way.

I feel somewhat dizzy and a bit delirious. It seems that my mind is now walking in the murky haze. There is something in the air that I cannot feel comfortable with. The entire new level reeks of smoke. My sight is getting used to the haze that I no longer notice it with my eyes, but the air does not seem to be completely clear.

Does the air on this floor contain the smoke that is emitted when toxic herbs burn? Is inhaling this smoke equivalent to taking drugs? Is breathing on this floor going to turn me into a mindless beast that Gideon Yendrey Drahtrex was turning into when he was choking my neck?

As I turn to Wendy to ask her a question, she is just pulling a smoke-protective mask, made of layers of white cloth, out of her mailbag. She hands a mask to me, and then she puts her own on her little face, which is pretty much hidden behind a mask. With the mask on, her eyes look even bigger compared to the small surface area of the exposed part of her face.

I notice that the mask is filtering the smoke out of the air, as I inhale air through the mask I just put on my face.

This confined world, named Towerld, is segmented into tiers, the number of which I have no idea of. Each level seems to function as an independent state or the world of its own. Therefore, it is not surprising that each floor has its own unique atmosphere (literally and figuratively). This floor is going to be quite hazy, in many different ways.

### ---02---

Dealing with the atmosphere is one thing, and hearing the sound of mesmerizing music is another. This floor is full of music, as much as it is full of fuzzy fumes.

I have never heard or listened to a musical tune like this in my life. In fact, I do not listen to music in general that often.

I try to imagine what type of instrument a musician needs to play to generate this kind of tune. I guess she needs an exotic instrument with elongated resonances, and she just strums as many strings as possible at a same time. The stroke has to be brisk, soft, firm, and gentle simultaneously. If the player expresses the smoky haze with music aurally, then this is how it sounds like.

The vibration of air that this tune is generating can cause a spatial distortion that opens a portal to a different dimension. The lower midrange of the string is harmonizing with my soul, as if it is trying to transform me into an ethereal being of music and smoke.

Am I being affected by the music or the smoke? Perhaps, the sound propagation and the chemicals in the air are mutually boosting each other to maximize the effects on my psyche.

This world is supposed to have no magic, but I can say that this phenomenon is as magical as it can get in Towerld. (The magic mushroom that I read about in a book may exist, after all.)

I begin to wonder how Wendy is perceiving this experience. I take a look at her next to me.

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“I am sensing that there is not too much demand to ear plugs.” Wendy shrugs. “The smoke seems to contain many drugs. I kinda like the aural resonance more than the olfactory stimulation, as long as the mask is taking care of the air filtration.”

This music is hypnotic. It is even more mesmerizing than the smoke that I am inhaling through the smoke-protective mask.

I confess. I find this mystical music to be far more attractive than the scent of the air. My mind is now craving for taking a trip to a different dimension. I wonder if the alternate universe that this music is inducing can send me to a world far away from Towerld.

---03---

Wendy and I keep on walking in the ocean of the faint haze and the music of spatial distortion. Even though Wendy loves running more than eating, sleeping, and something else, she is on alert so much so that she is slowing down. (Thank goodness. I do not have to pant and inhale this nauseating haze.)

The view of this floor has been nothing special, except for the haze. I see a long hallway, flanked by countless doors. It is almost like what I saw, when I escaped from the food-processing factory and entered the hallway of the industrial floor for the first time. (I am yet to see vicious dogs here, though.) Only the fuzzy fume seems to add the uniqueness to the visual impression. Perhaps, I should not come up with the conclusion too soon, because I am yet to see what lie beyond these doors. What makes this floor so unique may lie on the other side of the doors.

Wendy slows down, and stops in front of one of many doors.

“Now comes the real deal,” she utters. “This door is about to add to this music an eerie squeal.”

She opens the unlocked wooden door toward her.

---04---

For a moment, I am getting this impression that I have just entered a library.

This door that I am using is on the midpoint of one of the four walls. According to my quick visual measurement, this wall seems to span at least 100 meters, from corner to corner.

I see many metallic shelves, facing left and right sides from my point of view. They are lined up parallel to each other, one by one from left to right (laterally) from my vantage point. As long as I stand near the door I have just used, I can see the wall on the other side of the room through the spacing between two of the shelves at the center of the room. The shelves are tall enough to reach the ceiling, which is about 10 meters above the floor. Since the shelves are blocking much of the sight, I cannot fully view the entire room. I cannot see two of the four corners on the other side of the room.

I can tell that this huge room is for the layers of shelves. What are on the shelves? I can tell that they are not books.

As I try to carefully examine what are on the shelves, I fail to find proper words to use.

“These are plant pots,” Wendy explains. “Did you have different thoughts?”

Yeah, now I know that, all right. They are potted plants, put neatly into the shelves. It seems that each shelf contains one type of plant. I just do not know what they are. After all, I am not a plant expert. Even though I am used to seeing processed vegetables in food products, I have not seen live, planted plants that often in my life.

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Wendy resumes the explanation. “The owner living in a suite on this floor owns many farms like this, and he lets his servants grow many types of plants. Unfortunately, the most abundantly grown and the most demanded plants are certain types of hallucinatory herbs that are deadly enough to remind us not to overly regret or reminisce. They call it ‘suite wheat’, and the addicted ones think it is such a treat. The terrifying fact may force many people to launder their stained pants.”

I snigger, “Now, we are dealing with a serious business.”

“It reeks of evil, doesn’t it?” she utters. “This institution may trigger a life-altering upheaval.”

This is getting interesting.

---05---

We keep on walking through many aisles sandwiched between the plant shelves. Wendy seems to know the path, and leads the way. As usual, I end up gazing into her dancing jet-black locks. (I admit that it is not a terrible view.) She is not running here. She probably does not want us to collide with the shelves by accident. Besides, if I run in this hazy environment, my lungs will probably be contaminated with the tar.

As I am not running, I can take time to observe the plants in the pots. I have no idea of what they are just by looking at the plants themselves, for I am not a botanist. The shelves have the nameplates for the plants. Most of them seem to be designed for providing food to be marketed. Berries and tomatoes are just a few of the examples. (I just do not understand why they bother wasting space for bug-eating plants, such as *Drosera rotundifolia* and Venus flytrap.)

## Part Two

---01---

We are reaching a door on the opposite side of the farm room. Wendy opens it without hesitating, as if she knows the map of this smoky floor. There is another farm room with plant shelves beyond the door. It seems that much of this floor is comprised of farm rooms like this. I guess different types of plants grow in different rooms.

We walk through many doors. We keep on seeing farm rooms which look the same. I am beginning to wonder if we are getting anywhere, for it is beginning to look like we are getting lost in a maze of haze.

I do not remember how many rooms we have passed. We are reaching a room that is somewhat different from others. The music is louder and more mesmerizing than ever. I am beginning to think that my life in Towerld has been nothing but a strange dream. If I close my eyes, the wickedly resonant music reminds me of a desert empire in a fantasy setting. (I have not seen a real desert in my life, so I am not sure if the hallucination is real or not.) It is as if the dimensions of reality and dreams have exchanged their respective coordinates with each other.

Wendy warns sternly, “If getting the job done is what you want, brace yourself for the house of haunt. Do not react to the taunt.”

Judging from her words, I realize that we are getting nearer to the destination of the package that I am carrying. I do not understand what she means by ‘taunt’.

---02---

As we keep on walking through the murky haze, we see a wall and a door. It is not just another wooden door (with doorknobs) that we have walked through a few times. It is an ornately decorated metal double

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door that seems to possess enough protection for the front entrance of a fort. This must be the suite that we are trying to deliver the package to.

The closer we get to the double door, the clearer the view gets.

Two tall figures flank the metallic door. They are like those mystic creatures (part man and part animal). One of them has a horse's head, and the other one has a bull's head. Upon closer inspection, I realize that they are not still statues. They are living creatures!

Am I seeing things? Are the smoke and the resonant tune getting the best (and the worst) of me?

As I get even closer to the door, I notice that they are actual humans wearing leather helmet-shaped masks made from the heads of real animals. No human part is exposed from the neck up. The one to the left (from my point of view) is wearing a horse-head mask, and the one to the right is having its head completely covered with a head of a horned bull (or a water buffalo). They are both taller than I am by one human head. They are as tall as Gideon, if not as broad-shouldered as the forger.

The horse head is wearing a sleeveless white shirt, washed-out jeans with grommets that are decorating the hems, and an open-front leather cut-off (front side open). The shirtless bull head is protected with long leather pants (with grommets) and an open-front denim cut-off on his bare chest. (In short, they are not formally dressed.) I clearly notice that the grommets near the hems of their trousers are standing out. (Yeah, like those metallic rings are important enough to change my life. I occasionally end up paying attention to such trivial matters.)

Neither of the guards holds a weapon. Are they so good at fighting barehandedly? I do not want to face them even if I have to, because the lifeline of my fighting style depends on my ability to rob weapons from the opponent. That reminds me of the fact that I was having hard times dealing with vicious dogs on the factory floor.

I guess that they want to show off the wilder sides of their very beings, by wearing the open-front leather cut-offs. Are they branding themselves as outlaws? One of them (the bull head) is even exposing the chest hair and the beer gut. You just do not see a ripped body with six-pack abs in Towerld. (Such physique is only for fictitious characters such as superheroes and deities in mythologies that I have read in the past.) Even though these gate guards are not picturesque, I can tell that their bodies are practically strong and functionally sturdy. I won't be too surprised if they happen to participate in strongperson (strong beast?) contests of some sort on a regular basis.

---03---

This is just downright eerie overall. This is more like a crack house than just a subtle suite. Shall I call this smoke factory, opium joint, or drug den? What am I getting into? Is this not too much for a mere mailperson to deal with? Now I know why Wendy warned me of the potential danger.

We stop, while keeping the distance between the guards and us.

Wendy gestures for me to stop, and walks toward the guards. (I hope she understands what she is doing.)

She is now facing the gigantic guards, face to torso. The cute critter is little, and those guards are taller than I am. Her face is far closer to their hairy chests than it is to their masked heads. Needless to say, she is in quite a 'hairy' situation.

"We are delivering a valuable package to your master. Since we would like to hand it to your master directly and faster, would you please open the gate to allow us in without causing too much of a disaster?"

It is very polite of her to try to look into the eyes of the towering guards. She is looking so high up in the air that she might just snap her own neck.

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“Yeah.”

“Just enter.”

The guards are opening the hefty gate. It is so heavy that even those strong men have to muster the strength to move it.

After the gate is opened, the guard with the bull mask looks down on Wendy and commands, “Carry the package for yourself. If you are so weak as to have to rely on your lady friend over there, then you do not deserve being a legitimate mailperson.”

Do I hear this dude referring to me as a ‘lady friend’? Is he taunting her, me, or both of us?

I have been thinking up to this point that those guards do not speak too much. I am finding out how wrong I can be. Here comes the taunt time.

The horse head initiates the verbal harassment, by saying to Wendy, “Hey, flat rat. I hope that you shatter your knees so that you will be forced to retire.”

Am I hearing things? Did I hear this dude referring to the postal princess as a ‘flat rat’? How rude of him! Just because squirrels and rats are both rodents does not mean that anyone can refer to her as a rat (let alone being flat).

Wendy replies, “I need ten more years of service on many floors to get promoted to the self-described rank as the delivery dame, and ten more years after that to be eligible for the Delivery Service Hall of Fame.”

My mail master knows how to deal with such insults better than I do.

The horse dude and the bull head add more insult to the verbal assault, one after another, alternatingly.

“Once you are incapacitated, I will buy your lame organs dirt-cheap, dirt rat.”

“You’d better do something about the gutter stench.”

“Take an herb bath.”

“It is just too bad that taking a bath does nothing about you being as flat as a leftover soda.”

Just because these gatekeepers are our customers does not mean that I can tolerate this sort of treatment. I wish I could just punch them in their beast-masked faces. (Besides, Wendy does not emit an awful stench. I live with her, and I know that quite well.)

Wendy speaks rather tersely, “The prices of my organs are going to be steep. You will have to sell this suite to put up the TTT credits that you are not going to keep.”

(If she is that much worth the price, then I can sell her for a price higher than that of this suite. I would like to make her mine as my wife, or my pawn article. It is not that I want to sell her, though.)

The bull head snorts, “We will put you in a soup factory, and toss you and your pansy companion into an herbal stew. You are bony enough to be soup bones.”

I want to kick that muzzle. How can they make such a gender-wisely sensitive statement to the one without a Y-chromosome? Why? Y?

The horse face laughs, “Your eyes are so protruded that you remind me of a freakish pop-eyed goldfish or a dried toad. You look like an ingredient for what a wicked witch brews in a cauldron.”

The bull face scoffs, “To rid this flat rat of the stench, we need herbs, such as pansy petals. That is what this pansy butt is here for, right?”

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I am so close to lunging at them and run berserk. Calling me a ‘pansy butt’ is already maddening enough, and insulting Wendy in any way is even more infuriating. Nobody talks to my cute critter companion like that. Nobody!

I have to calm down. At least, my master seems to know how to handle the verbal insults.

Wendy counters, without changing her facial expression (hidden behind the filtering mask), “I believe there is more demand to the rich and greasy tastes of soup derived from beef bones and horse bones. That is still better than being a bunch of lazy gatekeeping drones.”

Nice retort.

I have to keep on reminding myself that they are our customers and customers are always right. I have to treat them like kings, even though they are not dressed like ones. If I lose my cool and go ballistic against them, then the post office loses major customers. It is not wise to antagonize the owner of the suite. They seem to control much of the darker side of the factory floor (and other floors), and they seem to influence our lives more than I can imagine. If they do not happen to like what I am doing, I might get purged silently. I cannot let the anger get the best of me here. Let the cool head prevail. Hot temper might get me killed. I have to step up to the test of patience here. If I cannot deal with a bunch of beast-headed buffoons, then there is no way that I can keep on conquering the upper floors of Towerld.

My mailing mentor is impressive, because she can deflect the verbal assaults from the goons. I guess she is used to that kind of treatment.

“If you imprison your spirits in a chicken coop, your lazy bones will spoil the soup.”

Wendy adds a statement as she walks through the gate. I do not know what it means. The guards do not seem to get it, either.

---04---

As I follow Wendy and try to go through the gate, the bull head warns, “Halt!”

Immediately after that, I feel a shattering pain skewering my body through the spine. The enduring shock is so profound that it seems to be destined to remain in my organs for a very long time. The horse dude has just knelt down, and delivered a sweeping uppercut from the floor level toward the ceiling. My midsection happens to be on the trajectory.

“Nggurgkt!”

The groan fails to escape from my mouth, which is feeling the steely taste of my blood instead. It is probably staining what was once a white smoke-protective mask.

I have been staying alert, especially around the suite and the gatekeepers. Despite my being on guard, I could not block the surprise attack. I can feel from the residually devastating blow that the horse head is no slouch at all. Probably, the bull dude is no different. These guards are not just big and ugly. They are tough, rough, and bad. They are not guarding the front gate of the suite for nothing. If mere guards are this strong, then the owner of the suite has to be a badass kingpin capable of dominating all facets of many floors. I have to remember that the leader is also rumored to be the drug lord.

The pain seems to pervade all the way into the deepest core of my very being, to the level that my body and soul seem to be flipped inside out. It is as if I just inhaled kilograms of liquefied lead into my stomach. I am doubling up in pain, and kneeling down on the floor.

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As if that is not enough, the bull head kicks my temple! This time, I am more prepared to defend myself. However, I can still feel the blow. The impact has just incapacitated the blood-stained mask on my face permanently, and it has just come off.

The horse head looks down on me, while proudly rubbing his fists.

“My fist felt no abdominal muscle. Who is this? A spoiled princess? A pregnant woman has a belly tougher than this.”

What? He has to be kidding. I was making the ends meet as a fisherperson on the flooded floor, and I have been running hard everyday as a mailperson lately. I am physically trained on a regular basis. I chase the dancing jet-black locks of the pretty punisher, and it is supposed to be paying dividends. (What sickens me is that this guy is talking as if he has punched the belly of a pregnant woman before.)

The bull dude says, “We are giving a legitimate mailperson a permission to walk through this gate.”

The horse head piles on the verbal assault. “We have no time for a sappy sissy who is too busy chasing the bony buttocks of the flat rat master.”

“This puny pansy is more like a girlfriend.”

“You mean, a wilted whore.”

They keep on rubbing my nerve the wrong way. I should get them for what they are saying. If they are challenging me to fight, I have to accept the challenge and fight like a man that I am. Isn't that what it takes to be a real man on a mission?

Just when I get ready for my counterattack, Wendy tries to intervene the confrontation.

“Hector!”

Wendy places herself between the gate guards and me. She then kneels down on the floor, and bows down to the guards.

“Please forgive me for my not explaining this to you. This disciple still has a lot to learn, as much as he is realizing the amount of respect and the credit he wants to earn. He is determined to learn his new profession by sticking to the delivery package like glue, and he has been improving as a delivery person to date. Would you give me and him a permission to go through the gate?”

She does not have to kneel and bow down to these crass thugs, but she is sticking to her professionalism. As I try to interrupt her, she gestures for me to stay put.

The gate guards seem to be convinced by Wendy's willingness to let me accompany her.

“All right,” the horse guy sighs.

“If you insist,” the bull head shrugs. “We are kind enough to give this flat rat a permission.”

Wendy gets closer to me, and wraps her arm around my shoulders from behind. (Is she trying to restrain me from going wild and lunge at them? Since my temper is so close to going out of control, she is making the right move.)

“I admit that their command is not easy to obey.” She whispers into my ear, “Hector, are you okay?”

(I am NOT okay. Can she not tell? I am about to spray blood all over the place. That is very nice of her, though.)

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“Remember that customers are always right, no matter how much the situation or your budget may get tight.”

(How can these thugs be right? If they are right, then do I have to be wrong? That very thought is surely demoralizing.)

As if they do not care about the pain that I am suffering from, the horse head and the bull dude continue their alternating verbal barrage.

“If you are not doing your job as a mailperson, why don’t you get the heck out of here?”

“You want us to feed the dogs that you are?”

“Bitches are not welcome here.”

“Show us the dog tags.”

I have to stay calm. Do not get carried away. As a mailperson that I am, I show them my mailperson’s tag to them. (It has been hidden in the pocket. They could not recognize it, eh?)

“I see a dog tag.”

“It is a bitch tag.”

“Next time you put it around your throat, make sure to make it visible.”

Shut the hell up.

The horse dude bows down (just for the sake of adding the fake theatrics to mock me), and gestures to the lobby of the suite beyond the gate.

“Welcome to the suite, lady. If you do not hurry up, we are going to incapacitate you permanently.”

Then, the bull head adds insult to injury.

“Take a look at you, pansy butt. You cannot do anything ‘but’ follow your stench wench.”

What did he just call Wendy? I will get them for this! I am thinking of quitting this job now, just so that I can attack them right now without worrying about having to treat them as my customers! Once I lose my job, I do not have to worry about being fired. To heck with professional courtesy.

Wait. My reckless maneuver can ruin not only my ambition of going to the upper floors but also Wendy’s objective of moving to different floors after squirreling away her savings. I have to keep this job, no matter what the cost. I have to remember that it takes a real man to endure the painful moments. Lashing out with anger and rage does not make me a warrior. It only makes me a mindless savage. Bravery and recklessness are different things.

Yeah, I have to be cost-conscious. I have to watch out for the big price to pay for my being short of temper. Compared to the grand ambition of going to the upper floors, this humiliating moment is a small issue.

### **Part Three**

#### **---01---**

The suite is entirely covered with a carpet of complicated patterns. Whoever wove the carpet must have based the pattern on microorganisms viewed through a microscope.

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The mesmerizing music is louder in the suite than they are in the farm rooms and the hallways. Are they dimming the lighting in the suite intentionally? Once I get used to this spooky atmosphere, I can never regain my sanity (if I ever have had any of that to start with).

The first room beyond the metallic door is a lobby, decorated with furnishing goods. We walk through it as if we have no business here, and enter a passageway leading to the deeper parts of the suite.

The suite is larger than I thought. We keep on going deeper through the passageway, which is narrower than the hallway outside the suite. Even though it seems to lack the lighting, Wendy seems to know which way to go. After all, this is not the first time for her to visit the suite.

---02---

Every time I grit my teeth to make a step forward, I sense the pain propagating from my belly to all other parts of my entire body. The pain is so residual that they are not leaving my body soon. Those heavies guarding the gate know how to deliver heavy blows. They are not slouches, for sure.

As if the physical damages that they inflicted upon me were nothing, the masked gate guards knew how to rub my nerve the wrong way. I am still livid with anger against the guards. I cannot help but be reminded of what just transpired, even though I want to just forget about it and move on to more important issues (such as going to the upper floors of Towerld). Wendy is just giving me a new filtering mask. I appreciate that, but it still does not quell my anger. The mask is not masking my rage.

“Who the heck do they think we are?” I sputter in disgust, temporarily oblivious to many servants who might be located inside the suite.

“Calm down, Hector. I am okay with it. I am used to it.”

She is putting her palm on my shoulder, trying to tame the wild side of mine.

“I do not blame you for your getting mad. Remember that you are a journeyman with a master plan. You want to move up the floors of Towerld by using this career of a mailperson as a launching pad. If you want to toss your anger into a trash can, all you have to do is to talk to me. My presence alone can allow your emotional state to settle down like a cup of herb tea.”

“You are likening yourself to a cup of herb tea. You surely smell better than incense.”

“Shall I take it as a statement of praise, even though I am just deemed worthier than a haze?”

“Of course, my master,” I reply. “I like incense scent, and I am telling you that you are even better. It does not get any better than this.”

“It is not easy to get me flattered, because my attention to you is being scattered.”

(I beg to disagree with her. She is trying so hard to hide her smile behind her mask, in vain.)

She is right about the danger of letting my anger get the best of me. A girl who is (supposed to be) younger than I am is telling me so, and that makes me look quite immature.

She utters, “I admit that I would not have enjoyed being taunted like you were receiving the verbal and physical blows. They cannot even wear decent clothes, and they are the ones I surely want to dispose.”

I am the one who should be consoling her. What am I doing? Is this what you call a role reversal?

Wendy keeps on speaking, “To tell you the truth, I am afraid that those gate guards would have dominated you to the level that you might have been fortunate enough to lose just a tooth. They are tough, at least as much as they are dressed rough.”

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She is so honest about her analysis of my fighting ability that it does not even hurt me. She has the privilege of being honest without hurting my feeling. After all, she lives with me and knows me quite a bit.

As I am being silent, my little master keeps talking. "If we combined our forces to fight those goons, we might have silenced them a bit. However, such an impulsive action against our customers would have rendered us jobless for many moons. The undeniable possibility of our eventual defeat is what I have to accept and admit."

It is no fun admitting my weakness without fighting.

Wendy is getting her face closer to my torso. (She is trying to get herself closer to my face, but she is not tall enough to do so.)

"You tried to prevent me from getting involved with the violence by not fighting back. You endured the surprise attack. You did not fall apart. I appreciate the kindness of your heart."

I confess, "Actually, I was feeling very weak from the punch in my gut. It is not that I was intentionally refraining myself from fighting back for the sake of your safety."

I just want to be honest to my partner. The cute critter cannot help but chuckle.

"You know how to endure the worst moments by gritting your teeth. I feel fortunate to have an apprentice who is as tough as you are underneath."

Is she giving me a compliment? I am not sure if it is what I call extravagant praise. (I do not feel too terrible about how she thinks of me, though.)

---03---

The passageway inside the suite stretches so far that I still cannot see the far end. It is as if this suite is more gigantic than the entire floor.

Wendy stops walking. I halt my pace as well.

She turns around, looks up into my eyes, and asks me a favor.

"Could you please tie my shoe? That is all I would like you to do."

What is she thinking?

"Why?"

"You will find out the answer later," she replies, smirking underneath her mask. "You will have a plenty of time for playing the vindicator. Besides, we cannot just spend too much time here to end up irritating the dictator."

I have no idea of what she is thinking. It is true that we do not have an eternity of time here. I kneel down in front of her, and gaze into her sneaker.

The shoelace is tied tightly and firmly.

"It is not untied."

"I know," she replies. "I run fast and hard all the time, as you know. I make sure that my shoes never get undone, by fastening the shoestrings thoroughly to the level that they are looser than none. I take care of my shoelaces more than just getting rid of grime."

"Why do you ask me to tie the tied shoes, then?"

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“You are much taller than I am. I want you to get your head down so low to the level that you can kiss my hem.”

I just do not understand what she is thinking.

She takes off my mailer’s hat with her left hand, and puts her tiny right palm on top of my head.

“I want you to calm down, and hope you get rid of your frown.”

This cute little critter is patting my head, as if I am her pet, or something. Is she not the one who reminds me of a squirrel? This is a role reversal at its extreme!

“Who do you think I am?” I ask impulsively.

“If being my guard dog is not good enough, I do not know what makes you say ‘ruff ruff.’”

She is confusing me.

I do not know why, but I feel the unexplainable urge of wanting to chew her sneaker. I want to pretend that I am a dog so that my mind can escape from this reality that is entangled with shame and exhilaration.

---04---

I know that I have to get back to the reality.

Wendy is now trying to inject a lot of pep into me. “Let us get our acts together, and deliver the attache case. I hope that your feet are light as a feather, so that we can keep our pace.”

I feel much better, all right. I admit that she possesses the character to make me feel better. I just hope that I can return the favor to her eventually (in a big way).

I have to accept the fact that Wendy is more experienced as a mailperson than I am. She must have paid her dues as a mailperson, and she has learned how to deal with the occupational lemon. I want to gain more experience as a mailperson, and be on par with her as her worthy partner. Even though I always will go to upper floors, there are things that I want to do as a mailperson before moving on to the higher levels.

I still want to make those gate guards pay the price. I will do something about it later, if I get the chance.

## **Part Four**

---01---

The passageway inside the suite goes very deep, and ends with a wooden door. It does not look as heavy as the metallic door at the entrance of the suite, but it is still ornately decorated with engravings of vine patterns. It seems to signal the end of the real world as we know it, and the beginning of the unknown underworld. The drug lord beyond the door is probably waiting for Wendy and me to make a step beyond the point of no return. (This eerie atmosphere is convincing me that the rumor about the owner being the drug lord is correct.)

Shall I just leave this package here, pick up a package, and get the heck out of here as soon as possible? No. It is already too late. I have come this far and taken a bit of clobbering, so that I can scout many levels before conquering the upper levels of Towerld. My mind is already entering the state of euphoria, no thanks to the fume and the mesmerizing music. The tune is getting entangled with my soul, just like the vine pattern on the wooden door in front of me. I do not want to leave my mission undone. If I cannot deal with a simple suite, how can I accomplish my grand mission?

---02---

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The servants nearby open the vine-patterned door. The slit between the two doors is widening, and it beckons me to gaze into the room through the opening.

As anyone can expect so, a room awaits beyond the door. It has to be an audience room of some sort. Sconces are attached to the walls, and the faint lights from the candles are barely preventing the room to be in total darkness.

In front of us, I see a throne. Two guards with animal helmets are flanking the throne. (Is it a fad here to wear animal heads?) The one to the left (from my point of view) is based on a goat. The mask covers his head and face from the neck up. The white sleeveless shirt and black trousers do not make him look special. (Only the grommets are saving the trousers from being even blander than they already are.) Is the one to the right based on a boar or a pig? The cut-off denim trousers and a waist belt cannot contain the beer gut around his fat waist. (I think he is strong. He is not just out of shape.) His pig helm does not cover his entire head above the neck. Only the upper half of his head is protected with the boar head, and the skin of the back of the boar is draped from the helmet to his back like a mantle. He is wearing a white, sleeveless shirt underneath the draped boar skin. The overgrown red beard does not cover his ugly face. These guards are just as gigantic as those guarding the front entrance of the suite. They all look so homely that they bring shame on primates, but I can tell that they are appointed to be the guards for the practical (not visual) purposes.

The guards are not the only ones who are not exactly looking like contestants of a beauty contest. The one sitting back on the throne must be the owner of the suite. This middle-aged man is short, partially bald, and out of shape, as if he is representing everything females find to be repugnant. His balding hair is so half-assed that he is still trying so hard to hide the bald spot on top by overgrowing the greasy and curly brown hair on the sides of his head. He had better learn a lesson or two from Gideon about how to get rid of the bothersome hair. He is not only fat but also out of shape. He is wearing an open-front long coat named jubba (also known as thawb, or dishdash) studded with dozens of fake badges and medals of dishonor, and long trousers. The fabric seems to be cut out from the carpet in the suite. Even though he is not standing up, I can still tell that he is only slightly taller than Wendy. As if in trying to avert the attention away from his ugly hairdo, he is growing his brown beard and binding it with a green rubber band. If he thinks that the chromatic contrast between the brown of the beard and the green of the rubber band is stunning, his sense of aesthetics must be wickedly twisted.

I realize that he is not wearing an air-filtering mask. (I guess the beard will get on the way anyway.) I guess the air is not that deadly, and he is used to the fume. Even though the suite in general is dim and not easy to tell so, the servants are not wearing anything on their faces. I am still not taking the risk of taking off my mask to breathe in the seemingly harmless incense-like smoke, though. Anyway.

Is this middle-aged geezer what one has to become, if he wants to rule the darker sides of many floors? I would much rather be what I am than this ambitious abomination.

---03---

As I observe what surrounds me, I realize that this is the real life. I see beasts, and I see no beauty.

In mythical stories that I have read in fantasy books, even the pedestrians and a mob of ordinary people are divinely beautiful. World-saving heroes and dictatorial villains are stunning. They are splendid, inside and outside. Demigods who possess inhuman powers and shine like celestial rivers are so abundant that they end up degrading their market values to the mortal wholesale levels. Yeah, only in the fantasy fables that I have read before. Yeah, like that actually happens in Towerld. (Those fictitious stories have been told from ancient days. I wonder if they originate from eras before the construction of Towerld.)

Life in Towerld sucks, as it does in this suite full of ugly dudes. This is reality.

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In real life, I encounter ugly ones only, with one exception. My partner, Wendietrea Nevaryt-terp, is cute like a little squirrel. However, it still does not mean that she is as beautiful as a goddess of beauty. (I admit that I like Wendy the way she is now.)

---04---

Wendy and I walk closer to the one who seems to be the owner of the suite. We then kneel down and bow down before him. (I have to remember that he is still a customer.)

The middle-aged man wrapped in a carpet-like outfit clears his clogged throat, and speaks to me loftily.

“Do I know you, kid?”

Is he talking to me, while referring to me as a ‘kid’? (It still sounds sweeter to my ears than the ‘lady’ or ‘pansy’ that the gatekeepers were referring to me as.)

I clear my throat, and reply, “My name is Hec ...”

My introduction is abruptly interrupted by the geezer.

“Say no more. I do not give a darn about your name being ‘heck’. I just say ‘Heck, no.’”

I get the message. I am just that much unimportant from his point of view, eh?

The coot goes on, “It seems that the heifer has brought a muscle for insurance, eh?”

Is he calling my partner a ‘heifer’?

He scoffs, “This lad seems to be a bit too unreliable to be the muscle.”

The hog head and the goat head flanking the throne are snorting. What is so funny? They are no different from the gatekeepers, eh? I have to suppress the urge for punching their muzzles.

“Let me introduce myself to you, kid. My name is Haloom Ghoude. I am the CEO (chief executive officer) of the organization named the Ghoude Corporation.”

This drug lord owns a seemingly legitimate organization named after him. What is this drug lord thinking? Does he have to hide behind the cloak of legitimacy?

Even this middle-aged lame ass has a first name and a last name. I only have an ID code. That makes me feel all so unimportant. I am battling my own inferiority complex for an unimportant reason having to do with my unimportant ego.

The fat one says, “You got the stuff from the forge, eh? Good job.”

Yeah, I brought the ‘stuff’, whatever that is. The word ‘stuff’ makes the package sound evil and cheap. Come to think about it, even I do not know what is inside the briefcase. Do I have the right to know what I am carrying? (I just want to know the contents.) Have I not become a mailperson so that I can gather as much information and dough as I can before I move on to the upper tiers? This is the moment to capitalize on. I have to make the right move now.

While I hand this lofty toad the briefcase, I ask him a question.

“Would I get into trouble, if I learn of the contents of the package?”

“Why does a peon like you have to know?” he scoffs.

He is trying to rub my nerve the wrong way, but I won’t budge. I have to keep reminding myself that he is a customer, and he is always right. (After all, ‘peon’ does not sound as bad as a ‘lady’ or a ‘pansy’.)

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I explain solemnly, “You are our most valuable customer, and we would like to be of your service for quite a long time to come. I think I will shuttle packages between you and the forger often, and it really helps to know what packages I deal with. I can carry the packages more properly, if I know what are inside them.”

“In that case, let me tell you many things.”

Yeah, I am squeezing information out of him, just like the trousers of these masked guards are squeezing the guts out of the waistbands.

---05---

“The contents of the package are musical instruments. They are designed and crafted by Gideon Yendrey Drahtrex, the most talented forger in my turf. They are not only aesthetically appealing but also functionally correct. It is as if he can treat his pieces with magic. If there is such thing as magic in this godless world, then his craft (aided with drugs) is the only thing that can represent magic or its equivalent.”

Did he say musical instruments? The notion of instruments reminds me of music. What music? Is it the music that I have been hearing all over the place since I reached this floor? I have to ask him more questions to make him keep on talking.

“Is there a musician who is worthy of playing the masterpiece instruments? Whoever is playing this background music surely sounds talented, in my humble opinion.”

Suddenly, Haloom leans his upper body forward, as if he is the one interested in the subject.

“Do I know her? Of course, I know her. I am glad that you are mentioning her.”

He seems to want to talk about the musician a lot. I think my ability to squeeze information out of any source is having a field day. All I have to do is to stimulate his ego a bit more.

“Is she your private musician? Since I am just a lowly mailperson, I am living such an unspectacular life. I am simply curious of your high life full of music.”

“Do you really want to know?” he asks.

(I surely do.)

Without waiting for my answer, he says, “Now that you want to know, let me tell you something.”

(Just tell me, okay?)

“In the not-so-distant future, an epoch-making and historically significant ritual will be conducted somewhere on an upper tier of Towerld. It is so far away that even I do not know the exact location. In the ritual, a talented musician has to play special instruments to initiate the ritual and keep it going. The special instruments are the magic flutes in the briefcase that you are delivering to me here. As far as I know, there is only one instrumentalist who can perform the ritualistic orchestration, and she happens to be my court musician.”

All of a sudden, my head is being flooded with new information. I have to organize my thoughts.

---06---

“If you want to know who the special musician is, let me introduce to you my dear diva known as the Pluck Princess.” Haloom exclaims. “She can compose music and play many different types of instruments, as if her singing ability is not the most impressive asset of her musical talent. It is just too bad that she is not that good at writing lyrics. Anyway.”

He then turns to his right (to my left, in other words), claps his hands twice.

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I look to the direction, and notice that there is a curtain being draped from the ceiling to assume a function as a wall. (I had not been able to notice it, because the room is slightly dark.) Is there a stage beyond the curtain? The curtain is thin, and I may be able to see what is on the other side.

Two of the servants standing by open the curtain by splitting it sideways.

Yes, an elevated stage appears as expected. Now, I see the center of our attention.

A small carpet is laid on the stage, and I see a female human sitting on it. Is that the diva?

The first feature that I notice is the garment. She is wearing a green long petticoat and a red long-sleeved blouse. Over those basic clothes, she is wrapped in a long strip of unstitched purple cloth (about 10 meters in length) made from thin and light fabric (silk or cotton). I think it is a sari. The stage is more brightly lit than the entire audience room that is somewhat dim. Thanks to the lighting, I can notice the vivid tints of the dress. I have never seen any style of fashion like this in my life.

What stands out at least as much as the fantastic fashion statement is the long musical instrument that she is hugging. The gourd-shaped resonating chamber is placed on the carpet, and the long neck is leaning on the instrumentalist. The neck is so long that the arms of the player may not reach the tip. It is decorated with so many strings that I cannot count them all. Many of the minor strings are known as sympathetic strings, which the player never touches during the instrumentation. Yeah, I have read about it. It is known as a sitar. Those sympathetic strings are probably responsible for the unique timbre and resonance that I keep on hearing in the music that is filling not only this suite but also the entire floor. So, it is safe to assume that she is the one who has been playing the music and it has been broadcast somehow.

As if the sari and the sitar are not strikingly distinctive and distinguishably unique enough, the one donning and controlling the illusorily illuminative items is emanating the exotic aura.

The color of the skin is closer to bronze than brownish. The contrast between her skin color, the chromatic combination of the sari (red, green, and purple), and the wooden pattern of the sitar makes me gaze into the unknown history of the humankind (for reasons that I cannot comprehend). (I am wondering if it has anything to do with the history before the genesis of Towerld.)

Naturally, I pay attention to her face, and I instantly regret doing so. I am already winded thanks to Wendy, and I do not want to be rendered even more breathless by looking into what is so breathtaking.

The brown hair is done up in a curly twist, as if she does not want to hide her sculpturesque face. (If the hair hides her face, it would have been such a waste!) The sharply sculptured face is decorated with a pair of large, almond-shaped gray eyes. The pupils are gleaming with the mysterious glow that renders the tint of her eyes meaningless. I know from my experience that eyes are like mirrors of the owner's mind. Her eyes are telling me that she is the owner of a strong will and unmatched (musical) talent. I cannot tell what she is thinking, but I can tell that she is as noble as a mere human can be.

To say that this brunette is just 'beautiful' or 'graceful' is a blasphemy to the various standards of beauty that the human race has defined in the untold history of the civilization. This is not like "a mere human encountering the ultimate goddess and being blinded by the explosive splendor of the radiant beauty". She reminds me more of a dark star in the center of an abysmal nebula than an exploding supernova. Yeah, I read the expression in one of many mythologies that have been told from and recorded by our ancestors. (I have to remember that this Pluck Princess is still a mere human in this imperfect world of Towerld. I cannot just describe her presence in ways those goddesses and the celestial bodies are defined in those fables.) It is more like "an adventurer meeting an exotic princess in a distant desert empire". (My lack of imagination does not impress me at all. I do not even know what a real desert is like, let alone celestial stars and immortal deities.) Nonetheless, this brunette is redefining the standards of beauty that I know. If she does

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not possess the radiant splendor, her gravitational exoticism is implosive enough to siphon the soul from me.

Most literatures that I have read in my life make this false assumption that blue eyes, blonde hair, and porcelain-white skin are the only benchmarks of beauty. The brunette on the stage is introducing to me an alternative dimension to the standards.

Actually, she may be redefining the definition largely due to the ugly ones that surround her. They can make dray horses look like well-groomed pedigree coursers. (That notion reminds me of the horse head, which I do not want to think about for now.) Nonetheless, the brunette is far more than impressive.

Not unlike the drug lord, the Pluck Princess is not wearing a mask of any sort. Thank goodness. It would have been a waste to hide such a fair face.

---07---

The Pluck Princess releases her hands from the sitar. The instrumentation stops. The sympathetically resonating music that has been dominating the atmosphere on the entire level stops. She does not just quit playing the tune. The music enters the 'outroduction' phase and concludes in style. (This is not a recorded tune on a magnetic tape, so a cheating such as 'fade-out' does not work here.)

The brunette stands up elegantly, and starts walking toward the throne.

She is indeed exotic. Just by looking at her, my mind seems to fall into a trance. (Is it the smoke that I am inhaling?)

As my soul trips into the fantastic foreign floor, the bungling brunette trips over her own feet.

"Oouh!"

She lets out a deflating sigh, and falls down on her face. I hear a dull thud of her body being slammed against the stage floor, as if someone is slapping a sack of raw meat against a hard wall. Her body has just struck the uncarpeted part of the stage, and that surely looks and sounds painful.

The scene is so unexpected that I am forgetting to react to it. It seems not to be scripted, because Haloom appears just as dumbstruck as anyone else here.

As if she does not care anything about the embarrassment, the bashful brunette gets up slowly.

"My legs are numb from sitting on the stage for too long."

I cannot believe my ears and eyes. She seems to be goofier than her mesmerizing appearance and the hypnotic music indicate. She may be more down-to-floor than I have expected.

It seems that she is not the most athletic human in Towerld. She is so much of a specialist that she excels in music and nothing else. Wendy is specialized in speed, while sacrificing her strength. I notice that there seem to be quite a few extreme specialists in Towerld. (No human specializes in everything, because they are not inhuman enough to be immortals.)

As if she does not care a bit about what has just transpired, the diva sits on the edge of the stage while draping her legs on the lower floor of the audience room. I guess she is waiting for the numbness to dissipate.

"My legs are pins and needles. It is as stimulating as my music."

The stage and the audience room are now filled with unnatural silence. The brunette diva seems to feel responsible for the unexpected silence, and decides to break the smoky ice.

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“I understand that it is not very polite of me to deliver my introduction in this manner, but we have only so much time for waiting for the numbness of my legs to recede. My name is Mary Teana Blockheart, also known as the Pluck Princess. I am the bandmaster of the official musical unit for the Ghoude Corporation. In my humble opinion, I am arguably the most talented musician on many floors. I can play so many instruments that I cannot name them all. I am good at playing various strings and flutes, just to mention a few. I can write lyrics, compose tunes, and arrange songs. I like musical compositions even more than writing lyrics. If you are looking for songs that can change your life, all you have to do is to contact me.”

Is the Pluck Princess trying to sell her talent, or what? She is even humbly bragging about her talent.

Her voice is vibrant enough to resonate in the entire stage and the audience room. She is not the appointed diva for nothing. The natural pitch of her voice sounds slightly lower than that of Wendy (whose voice is lower than her cuddly appearance suggests). It is not unnaturally perky or annoyingly squeaky.

“I always try to make sure that I stand up before I pick up an instrument. It prevents me from falling on the instrument to crush it or from breaking my bones trying to protect the instrument by accident. This is the consummate professionalism that I am proud of.”

She is making a unique point in a unique way.

---08---

Now that she is freed from the numbness in her legs, Mary Teana picks up a string instrument (more portable than a sitar), slips her feet into a pair of white sandals (that have been placed on the floor near the stage), and walks toward us. (Is the instrument called lute?) She seems to want to hold onto any instrument whenever she can. She is constantly strumming a beat or something.

She then sits on the armrest of the throne. (Rest your arm, not your buttocks!)

Haloom explains to the maestress, “I just received the package from Gideon. As a legitimate musician that you are, I would like you to check for yourself if the masterpieces are what we ordered.”

“My pleasure, my master.”

(Yeah. I can see the pleasure in her facial expression.)

Haloom opens the briefcase, and shows what are inside.

“Oh! Wow! Oh, my gracious gourd!”

The Pluck Princess sings the words of wonderment with her voice that sounds vibrant and luscious at a same time. It is not annoyingly high-pitched, and sounds slightly deeper than Wendy’s voice. Even though her gesture looks slightly exaggerated, I can tell that she is not acting. She is being honest about her feelings.

Even though the audience room is dim, the contents of the briefcase are reflecting enough light to illuminate the fair face of the exotic diva. (It is as if the masterpieces are emitting the light of their own.) The reflection is so complex that it seems to add extra dimensions to our space. The exotic beauty of the Pluck Princess is more gravitating than radiant, and she seems to attract the reflected light from the contents of the briefcase.

I take a look at what are inside.

Surely, I understand why she let out the gasp of admiration. I see three jeweled flutes of countless colors. If they are that vivid, they need no light. They can emanate their own lights. (If I took a look at any one of them under a bright sunshine (that I have not seen in my life), I would have been blinded.)

“Gideon never ceases to impress me.” Mary Teana speaks the words of praise.

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(Does she know Gideon personally?)

She then requests, “May I play the magic flutes to test them to make sure, even though I am sure I do not have to do so?”

Haloom reacts, “You may not want to do so here. I do not want the entire suite to become your slave.”

With the edge of her lips curved in a teasing way, she confesses, “I want to enslave the entire Towerld with my music.”

“This is not the right time and place. Please save it for the historic moment of the ritual on the distant floor.”

While gently strumming the lute, she states, “I want to save the best for the last. That is how we experience the blast. That seems to be the case all the time, whether you are talking about music or love.”

Mary Teana seems to speak of potentially historic moments, rather matter-of-factly.

## **Part Five**

### **---01---**

I have delivered the package, and have just met the court musician named Mary Teana Blockheart, also known as the Pluck Princess. I have accomplished quite a bit up to this point, but I am not going to stop here and be content. I want to know more.

I ask Haloom Ghoude, “This suite is surrounded by many farm rooms. What do you grow in them? I want to know, because I may deliver them in the near future.”

I am using my occupation of the mailperson as the reason for asking him a question, to prevent him from thinking that I am becoming a bit too nosy.

Haloom answers, “I am known as the drug lord, and that is already the worst-kept secret. The catch is that drug is not the only thing that I deal here. There would have been a few morons who would dare to dethrone me from my throne, if drug were the only specialty of mine. Of course, the addicts want me to prosper as the drug lord, so that I can provide them with the drugs they need. The Ghoude Corporation deals with so many types of businesses that it is too important in various facets of the floor communities to be destroyed. Not even the ubiquitous TIT can touch the organization that is unexpendable and irreplaceable to this extent. I ‘grow’ many facets of various businesses, so that I become too important to be eliminated by my oppositions. This is one example of business risk aversion.”

Is this greedy geezer answering my question? He is leaking more information than I can handle. Does he just want to brag about himself? Go on.

“The Ghoude Corporation takes care of food distribution, commerce, and trades. Herbs and vegetables grown here are exported to various levels outside this farm floor.”

So, this floor is called the farm floor, eh? I think the air should be clearer than this to bolster the healthier growth of the plants.

Haloom goes on, and brags, “I distribute not only vegetables but also fish. I am the one who built a fish market on the fishery floor below.”

Is he referring to my home (flooded) floor as the fishery floor? Is he the boss of the market masters and the market thugs who gave me hard times?

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He is exploiting the floor that is suffering from the constant flooding. Do not tell me if he is the one responsible for intentionally flooding the floor just for the sake of farming fish to make money. Am I imagining too many things? If he is the one behind the flooding, I have to punish him.

Wait. Do not come to the conclusion too soon. I have to ask him questions, to make sure.

Wendy is giving me a concerned look, for she knows that I once escaped from the flooded floor to survive. (Don't you worry about me, my dear master.)

Here comes my leading question. I inquire, "Do you happen to know why the floor is flooded?"

Haloom does not know what happened to me. He laughs out loudly, "Why do I give a darn? It just happened to happen. The floor was flooded, and was soon infested with fish. I decided to take advantage of the opportunity. I am good at fully utilizing the chance, and that is why I am the leader of my own organization that seems to be growing constantly and raking in dough."

Okay. So, he did not cause the flooding. He merely got the most out of the situation. Nothing more, nothing less. (Besides, I could make the ends meet as a fisherperson back then, thanks to him.)

---02---

This drug lord seems to have to do with so many businesses, and that automatically means that he has many enemies. Speaking of enemies, that reminds me of the agents in black suits.

I ask Haloom, "What are the enemies of the Ghoude Corporation? I have to know, because I may have to protect the packages from them whenever I am on a mission to deliver VIPs (Very Important Packages)."

As long as I mention my trying to do the best job of delivery, I do not sound too nosy or look suspicious.

Haloom asks me, "Have you not encountered anything on your way to this suite?"

"I faced men in black suits."

"Men in black suits, eh? They might be members of the Tetrarch. They are probably the ones trying to conquer my turf, even though I am not completely sure at this point."

It seems that there are issues he does not want outsiders to know. The glare in his eyes is preventing me from asking him more about the magic word (Tetrarch) he just uttered.

The drug lord flatly warns, "From now on, beware of the interferences."

"Yes, sir."

"At least, my dear canine friends are guarding the factory floor. You are going to be safe as long as you stay on my turf."

Is this drug lord responsible for feeding the vicious dogs? So, he is the owner of those guard dogs that almost mangled me, eh? They are not doing a good job of guarding the territory, for they let me and the agents in black enter the factory floor. They are just as imperfect as the TTT. (It is not that I am taking personally this particular issue involving the meat manglers which almost ate me alive.) Whatever Haloom keeps on telling me, I cannot stay rendered surprised here forever.

---03---

I can just receive the package (drug + injector), and leave this foggy joint to deliver it to Gideon. I can sense that Wendy wants to leave this place as soon as possible, judging from the way she has been looking at me.

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I have to organize all the information that I have collected thus far; Ghoude Corporation, drugs, distribution, commerce, trades, ritual on upper floors of Towerld, magic flutes, Mary Teana Blockheart (the Pluck Princess), and so on. The diva and the flutes have to reach the upper floors, located somewhere in this colossal construction, in order to participate in the mysterious ritual.

I have an idea. I can negotiate a deal with Haloom to get a new assignment for me. This new assignment will surely get me closer to accomplishing my grand mission to reach the distant top of Towerld (if the top floor exists, that is).

“Mary Teana Blockheart, the Pluck Princess, has to play the gleaming flutes to make the ritual complete. Is that not right? Isn’t the path to the distant floor in Towerld so perilous that the Pluck Princess and the instruments need the guards? After all, the entire construction seems to be riddled with many turf wars.”

Haloom’s eyes are gleaming in the dim room. (He is reacting to my words.)

“Yeah. I have been thinking about that for quite a while.”

All right! I am smelling a big opportunity.

“Mary Teana Blockheart, the Pluck Princess, will perform in the main event of the ritual. That is fixed. There is no doubt that no one is worthy enough to dethrone her from the status. As you just mentioned, the path to the upper floors, including the tier on which the ritual is planned to be conducted, is dangerous. Upper floors are turfs belonging to other organizations. I cannot just let my dear dogs guard all the floors, even though they are watching other incense-free floors nearby. Besides, there are many of those who try to take over the place of our dear Mary Teana. The successful performance for the ritual automatically means controlling the initiative of the entire Towerld. I surely want someone to protect her and the magic flutes to the stage.”

“Leave the protection to us!” I speak out, while beating my chest once.

I have to be brave and bold. I have to speak up. If I am too weak to show my willingness here, how can I be tough enough to keep on climbing Towerld? Wendy is not stopping me. (She is not pushing me, either.) She is just looking at me. Probably, even she does not know what to do about my aggression.

Haloom is carefully observing Wendy and me, while touching his bundled beard.

“You are surely aggressive, lad. I give you that. Do you have what it takes to protect our precious prizes? I mean, your companion seems a bit ... lightweight.”

Wendy objects to the comment, by saying, “I may be lightweight, but I can help you with your information update. If I punch or kick a wall, I will be the one paying for the property damages and taking a financial fall. Would it be all right if I show you how I can attack the smoke? I want to demonstrate to you that I am good enough to fell an oak.”

(Is she angry? I hope that she is not overselling herself. Besides, she is still cute even when she is angry.)

Before I say something, Wendy makes a step forward, and shows off her stuff by doing what she calls ‘shadowfighting’. She displays her punches and kicks against no one in particular. The virtual opponent is in her imagination. That way, the observers can appreciate how she delivers her attacks.

First, she punches the air particles in front of her repeatedly with various types of her sonic punches. Then, she delivers various types of kicks; front kick, side kick, reverse side kick, axe kick, scissor kick, roundhouse sweep kick, roundhouse jump kick, butterfly kick, and so on.

The spectators are stunned. The beast-headed guards let out sighs of wonderment.

“She is quick.”

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“She is fast.”

“Look at the accuracy.”

“She is, not too bad.”

I can tell that those guards are not easy to impress, because they are probably the toughest fighters on this floor. However, Wendy is skillful and fast enough to make them praise her.

Mary Teana is clapping her hands like an effervescent kid. “Wow! That is way cool! It is electrifying! Oooh, my gourd! Yeah!”

(I take it that her musical talent is more impressive than her not-so-rich vocabulary. Her brain seems to be electrified.)

This is where I make my statement.

“As you can tell, we can not only deliver packages but also provide protection to our clients. We even thwarted the men in black suits on our way to this suite.”

The shadowfighting that Wendy just demonstrated does not show the lack of impact her cotton-candy attacks suffer from. Emphasizing the speed (and not the impact) of her attacks is the key to leading to the successful negotiation.

I have to be careful not to say too much. (I am not telling them that I came close to being a mere spectator. Wendy set up a table for my showing off the ability to steal weapons from enemies.) I have to give them the impression; “Even the weak link (the girl) is that good.” If they realize that I am the weak link, finalizing the deal with Haloom about the issue of providing the protection service to the upper floors becomes that much harder. They would not want to rely on a man who happens to be even weaker than a squirrel girl.

Haloom is still evaluating Wendy and me, while pinching his beard.

“Even my corporation does not have too many of those who are appropriate for this convoy assignment to guard my dear Pluck Princess. I do not feed too many free-range animals here. Many of them are cooped up and fenced.” He then concludes, “Okay. It seems that you are combatively capable of the convoy service.”

Yes!

Wait. He has more things to say.

“However, having two guards does not make me feel so safe. As an insurance, I want you to have the third guard. I am not interested in fourth and subsequent guards, because too many guards can spoil a convoy soup. If you find the third and the final guard, then I grant you a mission and a permission to guard Mary Teana Blockheart and her jeweled flutes all the way to the projected site of the ritual.”

“Thank you very much, sir.”

I am heading to the right direction.

Who would be the third guard? Maybe, I should ask that defense specialist, if the path to the top floor has many stairways.

---04---

If the musician and the instruments need guards, then can Haloom not just reassign those badass gatekeepers to accompany them? Shall I ask him? I might risk losing a potential assignment just by asking too many questions. (There are things that they may not want me to know.) I do not want those beast-headed thugs to steal the assignment away from me.

---

No one (including me) can stop my curiosity, though.

“You already have formidable guards in this suite. Can they not just accompany the Pluck Princess to the upper floors?”

“Well ...”

It seems that he just does not want to answer the question. I am feeling the pressure of having to change the subject.

“This suite needs many guards, because there are many enemies, right? They are already too busy. That is why I am the candidate for the assignment of guarding the traveling princess.”

“Y-Yeah, that, that is right. That’s it.”

Haloom seems to be hiding something.

---05---

I have siphoned quite a bit of information and have gotten very close to gaining the opportunity to move to higher floors by being the guard of the talented musician and her precious instruments. The visit to this suite has been quite a fruitful one. (It would have been better, if those gatekeepers did not humiliate and hurt me. Well, I try not to think too much about it for the time being.)

As I am thinking about picking up the package (drugs and needles) and getting ready to leave the suite, Mary Teana walks toward me while plucking the lute strings. I just notice that she is tall enough to reach my shoulders. (In short, she is taller than Wendy.)

“Hello, my dear friend.” She is now talking to me.

“Hello, princess.” (What else can I say?)

“What is your name?” she asks me. She is interested in me, it seems.

“You can call me Hector.”

She is looking into my eyes. I am forced into gazing into her gravitating pupils. I cannot resist. I have become a prisoner of her optical organ. The gray eyes are light-colored, but they are so abysmally deep that I cannot discern whatever lies on the other side. If my mind were a celestial body, then her eyes would be dark stars (black holes) sucking in everything including light waves. Usually, I can tell what one is thinking just by observing the retinae, but this court musician seems to embrace the kind of unfathomable darkness that I cannot dare to shed light on. Is that her mysterious side as a talented musician that she is? (Musical talent can be quite deep, eh?)

It is not that she is burning with rage or prostrated with sorrows. Her deep eyes do not make me feel uncomfortable. I just do not understand what she is thinking. (I guess I am not artistic enough to understand the likes of her.)

The Pluck Princess whispers into my ear, “I surely would like you to find the third guard. I want you to guard me. I feel safe being protected by someone as reliable as you, hot stuff.”

She is now standing right next to me, and starts hugging my left arm! Is she aware of the fact that Wendy is in this audience room? I cannot just shake her off my arm rudely. What am I going to do about this? I am frozen.

I stutter, “It, it is, t-t-truly an honor.”

(I should do better than that.)

---

Mary Teana whispers into my trembling ear, “If the third person does not show up, I can find the candidate for you. You will be surprised by the fact that I can just do so much for a hot stuff that you are.”

“O-oh, th-that would be, v-v-very nice.”

My voice is sounding as if my larynx is flipped inside out.

Why am I trembling? What do I fear? I am sensing the stinging glare from my critter companion.

So, the Pluck Princess thinks that I am reliable, eh? I agree with that notion. However, I do not know how to react to that ‘hot stuff’ part. Am I supposed to tell her that I am more of a cold cut above the rest?

My being a hot stuff does not say too much, though. Compared to these beast-headed thugs with hairy beer guts, anyone can become a hot stuff. Besides, I have my uniform to aid my appearance. (I look good in uniform. Wendy acknowledges that on a constant basis.)

Wendy clears her throat, and stands in front of the Pluck Princess. Due to the air-filtering mask that is hiding much of her face, her round eyes look bigger.

“If you are looking for a companion at large, all you have to do is to pay the extra charge.”

The squirrel seems to be angry at something. She is trying to hide it with the smile on her lips (hidden with the mask), but her eyes are not smiling. (Are they burning with jealousy? Why?)

“What is the extra charge for?” Mary Teana asks, while letting go of my left arm. Thank goodness! Actually, I confess that my left arm kinda misses the rather bumpy hug, though. (I dare not tell that to Wendy.)

“Companionship fee.” Wendy replies, looking up into the musician’s face and puffing her chest up. “It is not for free.” (Wendy is trying to look serious and to sound businesslike, but such a cuddly critter can only do so much. Anything that a cute squirrel tries to do makes me smile.)

“A pet companion?” the diva says joyfully. “If I can travel to the upper floors with such a pretty pet, then I do not mind investing my fortune on the fee.”

“Uh, that is not what I meant,” Wendy utters hesitantly. “I am not exactly for rent.”

Mary Teana keeps on talking, “What would you like to get as the companionship fee? Acorns?”

“Acorns?” Wendy echoes.

“Many acorn trees are grown on this floor,” the musician says, while plucking the lute strings for no apparent reason. “I can procure many of them just for you.”

Wendy does not know how to react.

The Pluck Princess strums the strings of the lute, for no apparent reason.

Then, Mary Teana gently pokes Wendy’s cheek hidden behind the air-filtering mask.

“In my humble opinion,” the diva states, “it is a waste to hide such a cute face. I hope that you will eventually get used to the medicinal fume in the suite.”

(I agree that the cute critter is even cuter without the mask on. By the way, what does she mean by ‘medicinal’?)

Wendy is trying to say something that she does not know, and she is rendered silent. I can tell that she is not disliking the compliment of having a cute face.

---

The Pluck Princess chuckles, “I am wondering how many acorns your buccal pouches can contain, my dear Pouch Princess?”

Did she just say ‘Pouch Princess’? I could not help but smile and snigger.

“What are you chuckling at, Hector?” Wendy gives my calf a nudge. (The part of my body damaged by the gatekeepers hurts!)

“Forgive me, my master.” I apologize instinctively. (Do I have to apologize?)

Wendy makes her point, by saying, “I prefer the TTT account credit to nuts, because my inability to pay the taxes or to invest on my future is guaranteed to be equivalent to my taking the pay cuts.”

Well said.

## Part Six

### ---01---

We just picked up the package (the drug and the injectors) from Haloom Ghoude, and are heading toward the factory floor to deliver it to Gideon, the drug-addicted forger. We are walking (not running) through the farm rooms. The very thought that I finally get to get out of this gloomy level and take off the mask makes me feel much better.

All in all, I think I got quite a bit of information out of this delivery visitation. Getting to meet an exotically courtly court musician named Mary Teana Blockheart (also known as the Pluck Princess) is the highlight of this delivery assignment so far. What concerns me is that my mailing partner does not appear to be too crazy about the maestress.

“What is she thinking?” my master squeaks. “I got caught blinking. I do not eat acorns for breakfast or lunch. I am better at delivering a quick punch. Even though ‘Pouch Princess’ is something new, it still does not make me coo.” She has a lot to complain about, I suppose.

There are so many plant shelves with potted plants that we are gingerly walking through the complex. We do not want to run into them by accident. Wendy and I are walking alongside each other. (Even though this murky air is somewhat annoying, I prefer not having to run hard to catch up on the pouch, I mean, postal princess. She is close to me enough to be able to hug my arm, but she is not going to do so while on duty. She is a consummate professional, all right. Despite the mesmerizing haze, we are not exactly sharing a romantic moment. (There is nothing sexy about a smoky farm room full of plants.) Besides, Wendy seems slightly upset about the ‘pouch’ issue.

She utters, “I hope they are not going to pay the fee with squirrel food. This kind of treatment can easily trigger an internal feud.”

She is not serious, is she?

I try to console her, by saying, “Do not worry. If you get paid with acorns, you can sell them to a pawn shop.”

“I hope you are not supporting the payment proposal that is suggested by the sitar-playing swan. I am not that certain somebody who tries to marry me just for the sake of treating me as a pawn.”

She is taking the issue of the pawning proposal quite personally, I suppose.

“At least, your value can reach the top of Towerld, right? What is wrong with pawning you to buy back the entire world that includes you?”

---



What I have just said makes sense, right?

She sighs, looking amazed, “Can you believe that I am competing against acorns for the marketability? I know I have the edge over acorns in mobility. I hope it proves my humility.”

“Yeah, you are well-known for your humility as well, all right.”

For how long do I have to console this sulky squirrel? It is just too bad that I cannot silence her just by feeding her with acorns. (Her temperamental issue may end up granting her a pair of buccal pouches for real.)

---02---

“My dear Hector,” Wendy whispers.

“Yes, my master,” I react nervously. (Am I fearing this cute critter, or what?)

She speaks, “You are going to have to listen to my gripe. You were looking at the Pluck Princess making the move, as if she can make you get into the groove. Is she your type?”

Wendy is leering at me. What is she looking at me like that for? What does she expect me to say?

“Well, to be honest, whether I am trying to be honest or not, I can say that I was stunned by her exotic glow that seemed to be imploding more than exploding with energy that is not easily discernible to a mere human with or without the ability to analyze the mystic properties that do not exist in real life that I am trying to define for myself even though I can assure you that I was doing a good job of keeping my cool that I think never escapes from me in such a clutch situation in which I am ready to step up and make the statement that you already know the essence of.”

“That may turn out to be a bit too long for the answer that can be either ‘yes’ or ‘no’. I admit that you are good at explaining that particular type of glow.”

Her filtering mask is failing to hide the amazed look in her face. Her round eyes are worth a thousand words.

I sigh, “I do not know how to react. It is like eating a unique food in a foreign floor district for the first time. My heart is shocked by the exotic splendor, just like my stomach would be perplexed by the strange taste.”

“She can render you lost in confusion, as if you are perplexed by the illusion.”

“She is sucking the soul from my very being.”

“You sound as if you are talking about a rare gem. You just like someone who is more graceful than I am.”

Is my mail master jealous? (If she is jealous, why did she decline my pawning/marriage proposal?)

“You are cuter than the mastress.”

It is true. How can anyone be cuter than this pouch princess?

“Oh, really.”

“You are not too crazy about the compliment, are you?”

“My mindset is perplexed, to the level that I want to move on to the next.”

Her mindset is surely complex in ways different from my troubled soul. I just do not understand her, even though she shows signs of being so simple-minded.

---

As if in trying to check what I am thinking, my cuddly master asks me, “What do you think is my cutest feature? I hope you know how to amaze this little creature.”

I snigger, “Your buccal pouches, my dear Pouch Princess. They make me want to pinch them gently.”

Halfway through my statement, I have started wanting to retract my words. Too late.

The Pouch Princess sighs, “Let me just say that they exist only in your imagination. My face is fair enough to have no excess fat in the first place. Even though this is no time for flirtation, all you have to do to check the absence of buccal pouches is to gently caress my face.”

To be honest, I do feel guilty about making fun of her imaginary buccal pouches. It is just that the very thought of a cute squirrel having buccal pouches makes me feel the peace of mind. There is something very adorable about little animals in general.

The Pouch Princess keeps talking, “If you come up with a marriage proposal just for the sake of pawning me, then you might be prone to honey traps with chicks for free.”

Her imagination is making twisted turns. Does she like talking about this sort of thing?

“Do you want me to have a secret affair?” I ask her, to test her integrity.

“Of course not!” she reacts rather impulsively. The voice was far louder than she thought she wanted it to be.

“So, you want to live with me for a long time to come, eh?” (I do not know why I am saying so.)

She stutters, “Well, uh, that is not the subject of the matter, even though I may have to admit that I want to do what you think I want to do with you what I say you want me to do to the wall I can shatter.”

What is she trying to say? Why is she panicking?

“You are the greatest pawning material in the history. I give you that.”

“Give me a break, for goodness sake.” She sighs, holding her arms up.

“Do you not want me to pawn you?”

She is nudging me in the ribs. (That hurts!)

“What is the matter with you, Hector? Has the haze on this floor gotten the best and the worst of you?”

She is making a point. Both she and I are saying strange things to each other, as if we are being drugged.

Wendy says, “I hope that you do not choke my neck, like that bestial gentleman did to you while trying to turn you into a wreck.”

I puff my chest up, and state with confidence, “I will never do anything to harm such a valuable pawning article.”

---03---

Silence is beginning to dominate the atmosphere. I do not like this a bit. I feel that I am being suffocated. (It seems that the haze is not the only cause of this sluggish breathing.) I want to do something about it.

I speak to Wendy, “Would you stop, turn toward me, and look into my eyes?”

“Whatever you are getting at, I can do that,” she responds.

---

In the hazy farm room, we stop our pacing, and turn toward each other. Only those plant shelves are the spectators of the theatrical setting.

We look into each other's eyes. I look down, and she looks up. I make sure that her height is just about right. (I do not have to ask her to tie my shoe.) My sight is locked onto her hat. It is mine to take off. She trusts me as a partner and an apprentice so much that she is letting down her guard while shortening the distance between us. (She just does not mind getting very close to me, I suppose.)

I use my left hand to take her hat off. Either, she is not reacting to my move quickly enough or she is not willing to resist. (There is no reason for her to want to resist me.)

Then, I gently apply my right palm on her jet-black locks.

"I want you to calm down, and hope you get rid of your frown."

I pat her head, without messing up the hairdo. (Her hair is surely lively and elastic!)

"You are returning the favor, aren't you?" she replies, without showing any signs of resistance. "This is the moment you have been waiting for to savor, eh?"

I cannot tell from her facial expression (hidden behind the mask) whether she is liking what I am doing to her or not. (She does not seem to be annoyed.)

"This is a bit of vindication," I state.

Now, we are even. She can be my master all she wants, because she is more experienced as a mailperson. However, she is still a squirrel, and I am sure that she is younger than I am. Do not ever think that a cute little critter can just get away with patting my head like a pet.

## **Part Seven**

### **---01---**

We are going down the staircase from the fummy farm floor to the factory floor. Between the staircase and the factory floor, there is a steel door and a semicircular stairway. The Stairway Shieldian is supposed to be guarding the post. I am wondering if he managed to prevail over a bunch of shaded agents.

First, we take off our filtering masks. I still cannot believe that I am actually missing the oily air of the factory floor this much. We insert our mailperson's tags into the tag scanner on the door (between the staircase we are in, and the semicircular stairway), and I use my full might to open the hefty door. (Why are there so many heavy doors? It is as if they are trying to give the likes of Wendy hard times.)

The view over the door turns out to be so shocking that it makes me stop.

There are more men in black than I can count with my fingers, strewn about all over the place on and around the semicircular stairway between this steel door and the factory floor. Some of them have their shades shattered into pieces, and others are bloodied.

There are public cleaning staffs in uniforms moving fast from one place to another all over the place, while conveying the immobile bodies of the agents. I cannot tell if those agents are dead or alive. Either way, they are treated like trash.

Wendy utters in an assured tone, "I think we see the candidate for the third guard, even though you do not seem to think that making the choice has been hard."

I agree with her notion so much that I do not even bother reacting.

---

I think I know who is responsible for beating them unconscious.

The Stairway Shieldian is sitting near the edge of the midpoint of the semicircular stairway. He is raising the visor all the way up to the top of the helmet, and he is smoking a cigar. (I have not known that he is a smoker.) Wendy and I descend the semicircular stairway (while avoiding the bodies in black strewn about) to position ourselves to face the Stairway Shieldian. I see his face for the first time. He looks more aged and experienced than I am. There is a permanent scar engraved on his right temple. He looks like a tired, middle-aged man, about to face the midlife crisis. (I cannot decipher a life story by observing his facial expression, though.) I admit that he is younger and more handsome-looking than the drug lord, but that does not say too much.

“Oh, it is only you.” He utters rather uninterestedly. “You can go through.”

He does not even try to stop Wendy and me, as if he does not deem us to be his enemies.

If I can walk through this guard post without fighting anyone (especially someone who seems to be more formidable than I am), then I can just do so. However, I want to get as much information from the Stairway Shieldian as I can. These stiff bodies (dead or alive) lying about arouse my curiosity.

I ask, “Did you defeat them all by yourself?”

I know that the Stairway Shieldian is tough. I just want to know how mighty he is. I have to study him, because I might end up confronting him in the future.

The one also known as the Stairway Spider answers, while exhaling the cigar smoke.

“Yeah. Of course. Who else? Those cleaning staffs are cleaning the suit thugs, and they are not exactly combatively competitive.”

I just notice that his uniform is completely clean, as if he had such an easy time dealing with the men in black suits.

He yawns, “They are too easy, and too weak. Strength in numbers loses its meaning.”

I want to disagree with him. When Wendy and I faced two of the agents, we did not think it was a cakewalk. (We did not struggle, either.) Did the Stairway Shieldian deal with a bunch of them very easily?

The smoking soldier demands, “Next time you come here, bring someone who are bad enough to the bone, okay?”

It is easy for him to say so.

---02---

This is where I provoke him, so that I can extract more information out of him.

“You are bored of your current occupation, aren’t you?”

“What are you getting down to?” the Stairway Spider replies in a searching tone.

“I have a job to offer you. Are you not interested in helping my convoy mission, by any chance?”

The Stairway Shieldian replies flatly, “That sounds interesting, but I cannot leave this post and my job.”

I press on, “Did you sign a lifetime deal to serve as a slave to a despot, also known as the TTT?”

“Yes. Rather, I am more like a servant to stairways in general. I have so many things that I have to guard and protect.”

---

I guess he means things including and other than the stairway. I decide to ask him about it no more, for he does not seem to want to talk too much about it.

---03---

Now, he is observing the scars on my face, and analyzing whatever happened to me.

“You were on the receiving end of the conflict, eh? The punch to the gut must have not only damaged the stomach and the ribs but also shattered the pride as well. I do not know how to put muscles on a face.”

I admit that this seasoned soldier is good at analyzing the damages that I have received.

“Those beast heads struck first and fast,” I sputter in exasperation. “That was a surprise attack.”

“Oh, you faced those big guards wearing beast masks on their heads.”

“You know them?”

This is an opportunity for me to get valuable information pertaining to those beastly thugs. Who knows? I may learn of their fatal weaknesses, if they have one.

The Stairway Spider explains, “You just visited the headquarter of the Ghoude Corporation, didn’t you? The organization controls many industries on many floors, including the farm floor, the factory floor, and the fish floor. Those beast-headed guards are also known as the Theriocephalic Thugs. They are, indeed, notorious and dangerous. Even I do not want to have too much to do with them.”

So, they are dangerous, eh?

I try to provoke his pride, by asking questions, without taunting him too much. The proud ones tend to leak secrets, when they try to defend their pride.

“Do you think you can beat them? The Stairway Shieldian versus the Theriocephalic Thugs. That sounds interesting.”

The Stairway Spider answers rather flatly, sounding unprovoked, “I am nearly invincible on a stairway. If I manage to drag them to my home field, I can dominate them rather easily. Actually, they are rendered rather helpless once they step out of their turf, or the farm floor.”

Those gate guards are formidable only on the farm floor, eh? Is that why the drug lord does not want the gatekeepers to guard the Pluck Princess on her pilgrimage to the ritual?

This is the critical moment of my leading question.

“Do you know their weaknesses?”

While exhaling the smoke, the Stairway Shieldian explains, “Those thugs are tough inside the suite, but cannot do anything outside the farm floor. I do not know why. As much as I am not invincible outside a stairway, they are not that impressive outside the smoky environment. That is what I heard.”

Does the haze have anything to do with their weakness? I guess I will find that out later. Now I know that they are not invincible outside the farm floor.

---04---

I can just walk out of the semicircular stairway and be content with all the information that I have just got. Besides, I have a package to deliver to Gideon. I just want to ask the smoking guard one more question.

“Do you know anything about the Tetrarch?”

---

The Stairway Spider suddenly stops inhaling the smoke, as if he is shocked by what he does not want to hear.

He then exhales the smoke slowly, and look into my eyes. (I can tell that he means business.)

“If you value your life, you may not want to say that word too often.”

Even this tough guy does not seem to want to have anything to do with the Tetrarch, whatever that means. Is it my imagination? He looks more aged and tired than ever. It is just that much dangerous, eh?

“You are getting into the thick of things, to the extent that you have already given up on living an uneventful life.”

I have just decided not to have anything to do with the Tetrarch, for the time being.

## **Part Eight**

### **---01---**

Probably thanks to the vicious dogs and the Stairway Shieldian, we are facing no interference on the factory floor. I have thought that it would be a tough delivery from the suite to the forge. I am relieved, as much as I am somewhat disappointed.

The delivery of the musical instruments from the forge to the suite was planned to take an entire day from the start. As soon as we have come back to the factory floor, the day (regulated by the Towerld Standard Time) is almost over. We have decided to go back to Wendy's estate (also my home) to rest for the night (regulated by the time cycle of the TTT). Thanks to my moderately driving master, I am used to going to bed tired. The delivery service to the forge and then to the suite was a tough one, due to the fighting against the agents and the beating that I received from the gate guards. At least, I am getting well-rested.

### **---02---**

I am rested, and I feel energized. My bruised ribs are slightly sore, but I can take it. I am still chasing Wendy's jet-black locks. I am not getting lost. I just want to get this assignment over with, by delivering this package to Gideon.

What can be my next assignment? Being the bodyguard of the Pluck Princess? I want to accept the offer, because that gives me a good reason to go very high up the colossal construction of Towerld. Perhaps, I can reach the top just by being her guard. I just have to find the third member of my guard squad.

While thinking about many things, I am trying to focus on what I have to do for now.

### **---03---**

Here is the front door of the forge. The sign says, “Enter at your own risk.” There is a shaded man in a black suit, lying unconscious nearby. (Is he now experiencing his own risk?)

The cleaning crew will take care of this agent, dead or alive. We decide to ignore him, and enter the forge.

This time around, I am not eating a devastating tackle and I am not getting my neck being choked by the vice grip. Thank goodness, because I can only take so much beating and choking.

This time, Gideon is welcoming us rather gently. He is offering mere mailpersons tea and confectioneries. What difference does a day (or drug) can make? I see no trace of bestiality in the forger's demeanor. (I hope he does not go back to the untamed side.)

---



Wendy and I explain to Gideon what have happened since we departed the forge for the suite: Shaded men in black suits, the Stairway Shieldian, the farm floor, the suite, the beast-headed guards, the master of the suite named Haloom Ghoude, the Ghoude Corporation, and the court musician (maestress) named Mary Teana Blockheart (also known as the Pluck Princess). Even though I spent just about one full day on the delivery service, I sure have experienced a lot in such a short span of time. Is this the incentive of being a mailperson (especially when handling the VIPs)? I get to see the darker sides of the floor community, while dealing with the criminals. Is this the reason why Wendy is being a mailperson and she is recommending me to do this job? I guess it is worth it, even though the driving that I accept from the cute critter and the beating that I receive from the tough customers can get a bit rough on my body. (I am not invincible, for goodness sake.)

The way my partner is eating the confectionery appreciatively reminds me of a squirrel munching on acorns. It is cute and classy at the same time. Anyway.

---04---

After Wendy and I are done with explaining many things to Gideon, he asks us questions.

“How was the maestress named Mary Teana Blockheart doing? Is the Pluck Princess doing all right?”

Why does he ask us? Does he care about the maestress? I am not sure if he is the type of person to ask that sort of question. I am sensing the feelings that he has toward the musician. Perhaps, he is her secret fanatic, or something. This big guy is a ‘buff buff’, eh?

I say, “Well, she seemed to be doing fine. She was not feeling sick, to say the least.”

Wendy adds unnecessary details to my rather simple explanation, “She was falling down on her chest and her fair face, and that seems to establish her distinguishable pace.”

I do not think she has to say so. It is not that the little critter has any malicious intention, possesses malefic thoughts, or tries to be maleficent. (I think her cute appearance contributes to making her words sound less poisonous.)

The forger lets out a sigh of relief. “I am glad to hear that.”

The forger is still keeping his facial expression stern. Does something concern him?

Gideon utters, “I am not sure if she needs my service from now on.”

What the heck is he saying? He is not sounding very confident.

The forger sighs deeply, and then speaks, “Come to think about it. The Ghoude Corporation has been paying me with the drug and the credit in my TTT account for my masterpieces. I have been deemed worthy, just because of the discovered talent that I happen to possess. Now that they have all the instruments they need for the ritual, they may not need me anymore.”

I understand what he is getting down to, but I do not want to just accept what he is saying.

“I think the Ghoude Corporation is now trying to terminate my existence. For example, the drug and the injectors that you are delivering to me now may not be what they say it is.”

He opens the package, pulls out an injector with the solution in it, and places it on top of the table. He then places a sheet of paper (newspaper?) on the table, and slides the injector on top of the printed articles.

“The injector and the liquid inside are functioning as an optical lens. Because of that, the fonts of the article are magnified, as you can see.”

---

True to his words, the fonts surely look somewhat distorted and larger. Then, what is the point that he is getting down to?

“The magnifying power of this makeshift magnifier depends on the index of refraction of the liquid inside, among many other factors. This injector is the same type as what I use on a regular basis to inject the painkiller that I am addicted to. Despite using the injectors of the same physical properties, this liquid, whatever it is, is sporting a different scale of magnification compared to the drug that I have been taking and that I have been addicted to. This liquid is different from what I take on a regular basis.”

Gideon clears his throat, before he resumes his explanation.

“Whatever is inside this particular injector might be a poison. The Ghoude Corporation might be trying to make me use this potential poison, while tricking me into thinking that I am using the usual drug to temporarily relieve myself of the withdrawal.”

Is he not thinking too much? Is it just that I am just too simple-minded? I do not know what to say. I am rendered silent.

Wendy speaks her observation.

“It could be a medicine to cure you of the addiction for good, and to get you out of the wood. However, I do not expect that Haloom Ghoude, the drug lord, to be that kind to you. I won’t be surprised if he is trying to purge you.”

This is a cunning plot at its most diabolical. If Gideon takes whatever is in this injector, thinking that it is the same drug that he is addicted to, and it happens to be a deadly poison, then he just dies quietly in his room. The third persons who happen to investigate the case of this potential unnatural death will dismiss this as a suicide case, saying something like “A lonely forger gets addicted to drugs, and takes the poison to commit suicide.”

If it is considered just another suicide case, the Ghoude Corporation can get away with indirectly purging the unwanted forger without appearing suspicious. His personal information on the ‘TIT’ will be silently deleted, while being dismissed as just a suicide victim. This is a crime that is as close to being perfect as it gets in an imperfect world.

The grim silence starts dominating the living room. I think we are dealing with the darkest side of the humankind and the humanity.

---05---

The facial expression of the forger in front of me is nothing but grim. I do not blame him, for he is probably being that close to being poisoned to death. (It is not that we know what is inside this injector, though.)

The big guy leans forward on the table, and shortens the distance between Wendy and him.

“Wendy?”

“Yes?”

The little critter does not flinch. (She is surely fearless. She is used to getting her face close to others.) I would be surprised, if the stern face (proven to be impervious to attacks) is getting that close to me suddenly.

He speaks, “You told me that you want to be of assistance to me.”

---

“That is indeed what I said. There is more to this issue than just trying to win the bread.” Wendy says, with determination on her face. She seems to want to emphasize that she is true to her words.

“In that case,” the forger says, “I would like you two to do me a big favor.”

He backs off, sits on a chair once again, and takes a look at me as well. It seems that the issue is too serious (and heavily physical) for just a cute critter to handle alone.

“With both of you, I would like to sneak into the suite of the Ghoude Corporation, steal the drugs that I need, and then take the maestress named Mary Teana Blockheart (a.k.a. the Pluck Princess) out of the clutches of evil.”

What is he talking about? Both Wendy and I are stunned by the radical measures that this surprisingly bold (and bald) forger is speaking of. I have been making this assumption that he is a gentle giant when he is not suffering from the withdrawal.

He continues, “In order to deal with the withdrawal, I need the drugs for the time being. I know I have to take more drastic measures to deal with the addiction in a long run, but I need more time to get prepared for the thorough treatment. Now is not the time to talk about it. A temporary relief comes first.”

I know. His life is at stake, and this is a serious issue.

“Besides, I worry about Mary Teana. I am glad that she is chosen as the one to perform a ritual on an upper floor of Towerld, and it is truly an honor that she deserves. I know how proud she is, because I am proud of my masterpieces being chosen as the official instruments for the ritual. However, think about it. What will happen to her, after the world-changing ritual is over? Will she be terminated, being deemed useless?”

‘Termination’ sounds like a serious deal.

The forger is not done yet.

“Something tells me that she is destined to be discarded permanently. I want to get her out of the suite, and send her to safer places, before she leaves for the one-way road to the ritual.”

I am not sure if there are such things as safer places in Towerld. There is no escaping from this colossal confinement. (I do not even know what lies outside Towerld.)

I just come up with my own proposition, and I am telling him what it is.

“We can just abduct the Pluck Princess, and use her as a bargaining chip for getting the drugs you need.”

“Are you kidding me!?” the forger howls.

His sudden fury has just reminded me of his vice grip on my neck. Yeah. I am just kidding. I am kidding. Yeah. (This is not the right time to clown around.)

I understand that Gideon is making a point. There is a dilemma that I have to face here. I want to become a bodyguard for Mary Teana Blockheart going to the ritual site, so that I can automatically reach the upper floors in the process. Wendy wants to go to other floors, too. If I try to help the forger, I have to give up on my plan to use the Pluck Princess and her ritual as a way to fulfill my desire for climbing Towerld. Once the abduction is executed, there will be no more trip to the upper tiers for me to guard.

Do I choose going to the upper floors, or helping Gideon? Can I not just do both?

What am I supposed to be doing here?

---06---

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Wendy is sensing something in the way Gideon is feeling for the maestress. (She is keener about that sort of thing than I am, whatever that is.)

“Gideon, have you been falling in love with Mary Teana Blockheart in her prime, like the way she falls down all the time?”

Falling in, what? Are you kidding me, my master? She is not too shy about this sort of topic, I suppose.

That is catching me off guard. If I am too startled to react, then I cannot even imagine how mesmerized the fallen forger is.

“You do not have to be the one to blush,” my master says to me. “Do not tell me that you are also interested in getting to know that theatrical thrush.”

I admit that I cannot totally disagree with that notion.

The large forger looks somewhat guilty for no apparent reason, and mumbles, “Your suspicion is correct. I am, indeed, falling in love with the Pluck Princess.”

Oh, really. (Who wouldn’t?)

“Let me tell you about how I met her,” he continues.

Does he want to talk about his encounter with the Pluck Princess and what may be a juicy experience? I did not ask him to tell us in detail. Well, I guess I have to listen to what he wants to speak of. (Yawn.)

“A long time ago, when I was drug-free, I was just a financially struggling forger with nothing special in particular. One day, I had to go to a zoo on a different floor to fix a fence. I encountered a ferocious bear by accident. The beast was about to attack helpless children. Even though I only had my hammer to fight the bear with, I impulsively tackled the bear to give the kids time to run for their lives. The kids escaped the predicament successfully, but I was heavily injured. I was then transported to a medical facility nearby, and I met a medicinal musician. She was Mary Teana Blockheart, also known as the Pluck Princess.”

Wow, what a coincidence.

“Mary Teana Blockheart treated my wounds with her music. Her music was as good at healing wounds as any music could possibly get, but it was not enough. She introduced a painkiller, and that happens to be addictive as much as it is effective.”

The drug has its flip side, eh? We cannot expect a panacea or a silver bullet in this imperfect world named Towerld.

“She later told me that she came from upper floors to be recruited by the leader of the Ghoude Corporation as a court musician. I then became an appointed forger for the corporation, by utilizing the opportunity of the newly established connection between the Pluck Princess and me. I forge items and special instruments for the corporation, and I get paid with the much-needed painkiller and the credits in the ‘TIT’ account.”

The story does not end here, it seems. This is getting interesting, especially because I am not the one who has to feel the pain.

“My addiction to the painkiller did not go away. In fact, I still have it, as you know already. The drug started working wonders on my physical and artistic attributes. Until I started taking the painkiller, I had been just a mediocre forger with no talent for anything in particular. The drug seems to awaken the hidden strength in me, and it provides me with artistic inspirations.”

Whoa. That is quite a life story.

---

So, he is mediocre without the drugs, eh? To keep himself valuable to the corporation, he has to stay addicted to the painkiller even if the pain might be gone already. If he becomes drug-free, then he reverts to his average self, will be deemed useless by the corporation, and may have to be discarded by the Pluck Princess. What kind of damned life is that? He has to bear the cross of being an addict to justify his worth as an artistic forger. That is a complicated existence that he has to endure. Compared to that, my life as an adventurer to keep on trying to go to the upper floors is much simpler. (I do not think that the goal of my life (whatever that is) is that easy to accomplish.)

---07---

The fancysick forger keeps on making his confession, even though I am not asking him to talk about it more. (The cute critter seems to be interested in this sort of topic, for she is being all ears.) This is not a stunt that he is playing.

“Come to think about it, I had already been driven insane by the unknown force of my affection for the Pluck Princess even before the painkiller started triggering the withdrawal. My lovesickness is the cause of the insanity, and it is terrifying enough to create a crazed monster in me.”

Yeah, you are terrifying and monstrous, all right. (My neck still remembers the vice grip.)

The exotic Pluck Princess can awaken the bestial side in the gentle giant. Dare I say that it is the mysterious might of love?

I try to imagine myself being spellbound by somebody else. Will I ever be able to inject drugs into myself, just for the sake of loving my postal master?

Wait. Stop. What am I thinking? Why do I have to love a small squirrel? The exotic beauty is the one to love, right? Again, what am I thinking? This sort of topic can render my imagination untamed.

Anyway.

I just want to support this lovesick and simple-minded forger. I am willing to help him, especially if it leads to helping my own cause as well. Besides, my postal master is eager to assist him. The only dilemma here is that I still want to become an escort to accompany the Pluck Princess to the ritual.

## Part Nine

---01---

“Come on!” I scream. “Be more flexible.”

“It is not a part of my job,” the Stairway Shieldian shrugs.

I do not know how many days have passed since then. We have spent time preparing for the raid, and we are making the move.

At the bottom of a staircase that connects the farm floor and the factory floor, there is a metallic door. From the door, a semicircular stairway spreads to the lower level of the factory floor radially. This is the guard post of the Stairway Shieldian, and I am trying to negotiate a deal with him (without too much success so far).

The Stairway Shieldian is standing loftily on the top stair of the semicircular stairway, and I am standing on a stair that is a few steps lower. I am looking up into his visored face. A few steps lower and behind me, Wendy and Gideon are waiting. The Stairway Shieldian seems to care about the big forger, and seems to look toward the skinhead more than me or the squirrel. (Is he deemed the bigger threat to this defense post?)

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“My job here is to prevent the unqualified ones and the suspicious ones from passing through this door. I have no problem with the mailpersons with license tags, but I cannot be too sure about the big, bald one with a hammer, an apron, and crazed eyes.”

Shucks. Gideon is getting that much closer to suffering from the withdrawal. Before it is too late, we have to intrude into the suite of the drug lord named Haloom Ghoude, steal drugs to calm down Gideon’s withdrawal (for the time being), and abduct the Pluck Princess named Mary Teana Blockheart.

As much as I want to help the forger in many ways, I am not too crazy about this crazy plan to begin with. (I do not want to ruin my plan to be the escort of the Pluck Princess going to the ritual for the performance.) The little compassionate critter is moved by Gideon’s passion for saving the Pluck Princess. (Yeah. I guess she is a sucker for such a love story in the making. Does she not realize that it is the same Pluck Princess that is trying to stuff the buccal pouches of the Pouch Princess with acorns?)

There are lots of princesses around. Will too many princesses spoil the party? Anyway.

Now, what?

---02---

Here comes Wendy to negotiate the deal. She steps forward, and moves up the stairway to get closer to the Stairway Shieldian.

“In short, all our friend named Gideon needs is an ID tag for a mailperson to penetrate this makeshift fort.”

“That is correct,” the stubborn guard utters.

“A switch from a forger to a mailperson is going to be quite an interesting job change. It is far simpler than opening a post exchange.”

What the heck is this crazy critter blabbering about? A job switch is not that easy. I know that from my experience.

“I am just kidding,” she sings. “The very notion of the job change may turn out to be a bit forbidding.”

This is no time for such levity, my squirrel sage.

“I am merely suggesting Gideon to have two jobs at a same time. He is so capable that the proposition is not going to be too hard a mountain to climb.”

It is much easier said than done.

Wendy explains, “Now that the drug lord has all the ritualistic devices and the Pluck Princess is ready to leave the farm floor for the rite, the future of forging for Gideon may not be destined to be all so bright. Getting the second job of mail delivery as an insurance won’t hurt. It may turn out to be the primary pay dirt.”

When this positive-sounding possum says so, the situation does not appear so grim.

“There is a post office nearby. All you have to do is to fill out the application form and modify your TTT account on the fly.”

The big guy exclaims, “I am on my way. I know what to do.”

He does know, eh? He is a forger, and he knows how to forge documents, I suppose.

Gideon says, “You two can advance to the suite now. I will pass this post as a mailperson later, and will catch up on you shortly.”

---

I am not too hot about that proposal. In various operations, you can ‘divide and conquer’, and that is a useful tactic. The flip side is that you get divided and you get conquered once you are on the receiving end of this tactic. Besides, I am not too crazy about this idea of intruding into the suite to begin with. However, he is still making a point, because we have no time left. Gideon’s eyes are signaling to us that he is getting very close to entering the withdrawal. (The Stairway Shieldian knows that, too.)

Gideon’s withdrawal rage may affect our mission in negative ways. I do not want him to mess up the plan (that I am not too crazy about to start with). It may be a good idea to let him stay away from Wendy and me, by using any excuses available. What if he goes berserk in a post office? Well, let the post office worry about that.

“I got it,” I respond.

Wendy says to the forger, “Please catch up on us trying to rescue the musician, before we will have accomplished the mission.”

Gideon turns around, and descends the stairway to go to the post office nearby. He is moving slowly. Is it because of his massive girth? His upper back is broad vertically and horizontally, but it appears somewhat tired.

---03---

The Stairway Shieldian must have been listening to our conversation. We have not tried to keep it secret.

“Are you having anything to do with the ritual?” he asks.

“Do you know the ritual?” I ask him back.

I am really surprised that the rite is not so much a secret.

“I know that there will be a ritual of some sort somewhere on an upper floor of Towerld. Many people know the not-so-well-kept secret.”

Yeah, that is as much as most people know about the ritual, the name of which I do not even know.

The Stairway Shieldian is not done asking us questions.

“What are you trying to do now? Raiding a suite?”

I reply rather flatly, “We are delving deep into the love affair.”

“What?”

The Stairway Shieldian is confused. (I do not blame him.)

This is not so much of my idea. The Pouch Princess is so much a sucker for love that she wants to assist the forger’s seemingly unrequited admiration for the Pluck Princess. (It is not that I am against the idea. It is just that I am still interested in being the bodyguard of the Pluck Princess traveling to the ritual site.)

“You do not want to break your professional vow. Are you going to stop us now?” Wendy gently provokes the stern guard. She is holding her head high. (It is not easy for her to look intimidating.)

“No. What you are going to do upstairs has nothing to do with my duty. I am not going to help you or stop you.”

To be honest, I am glad to hear that. I do not have to battle this master of defense. (I hope he did not hear the sigh of relief exhaled from my mouth.)

---

“I just recognized the irregularity of your breath pattern,” the guard says to me. “Are you not used to the speed of your speedster master?”

He has just heard my sighing. Shucks!

He sees the ID tags of Wendy and me. He opens the hefty door.

As Wendy and I nod lightly and pass through the door, Stairway Shieldian utters, “Love affairs are very hard to clean up the mess of.”

What did he just say? What does he know about love affairs and all that? If I manage to make enough time, I will ask him a plenty of questions about that issue. (He may have many stories to tell, if he lives to tell them.)

Anyway.

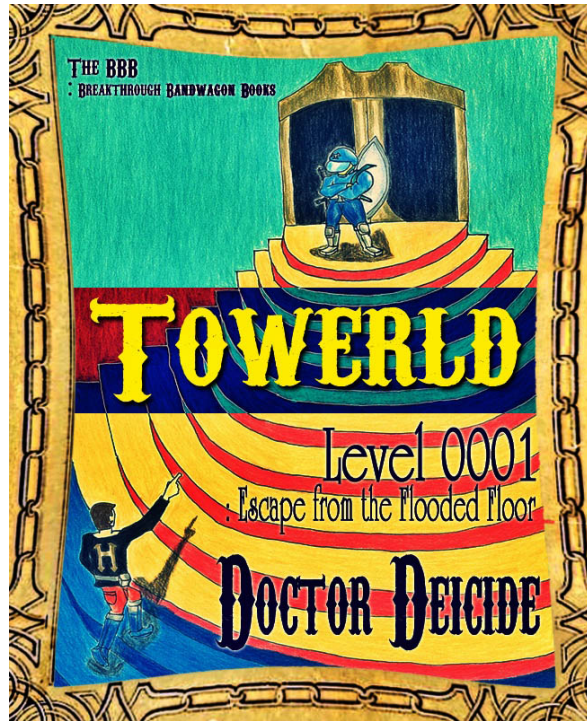
Once again, I am solidifying my resolve. I know this is not going to be easy, because I am trying to do two things (stealing the drugs and abducting the court musician) here, and I am somewhat half-hearted about this mission. There are so many unpredictable elements to the level that I cannot even expect what may happen next.

**(To be continued to Level 0004)**

**This work was exclusively written as one of the made-in-Japan content belonging to The BBB: Breakthrough Bandwagon Books.**

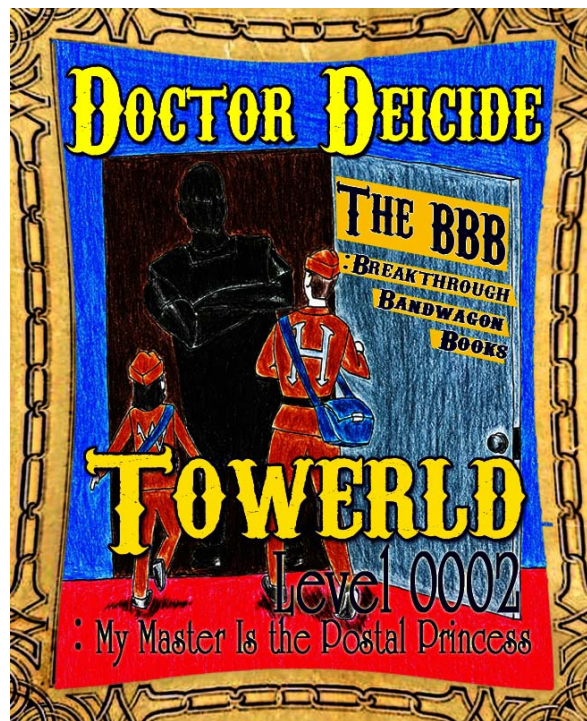


## Doctor Deicide Works List at The BBB



### Towerld Level 0001: Escape from the Flooded Floor

<http://thebbb.net/ebooks/towerld-level-0001.html>

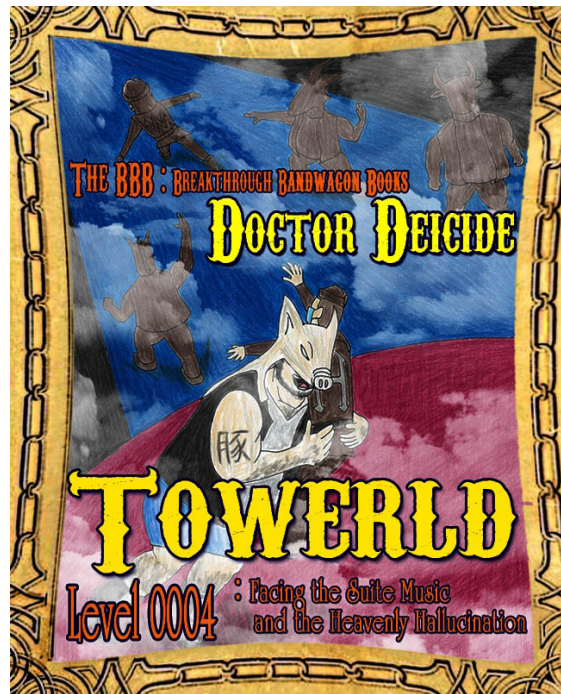


### Towerld Level 0002: My Master Is the Postal Princess

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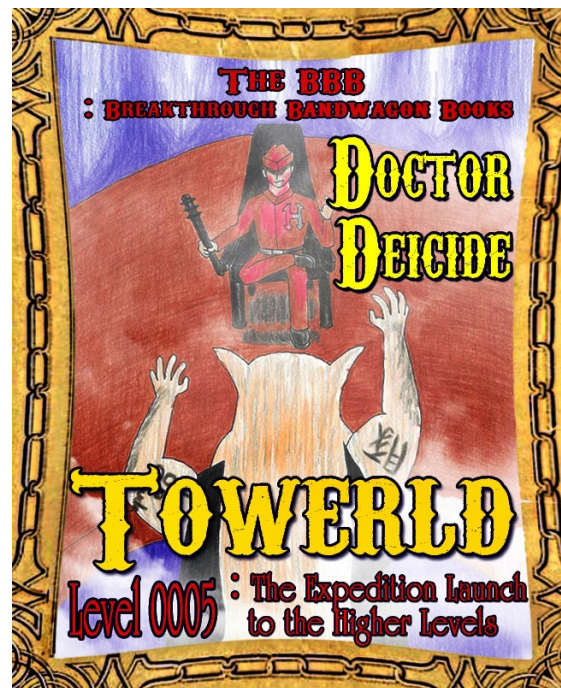
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Towerld Level 0004: Facing the Suite Music and the Heavenly Hallucination

<http://thebbb.net/ebooks/towerld-level-0004.html>



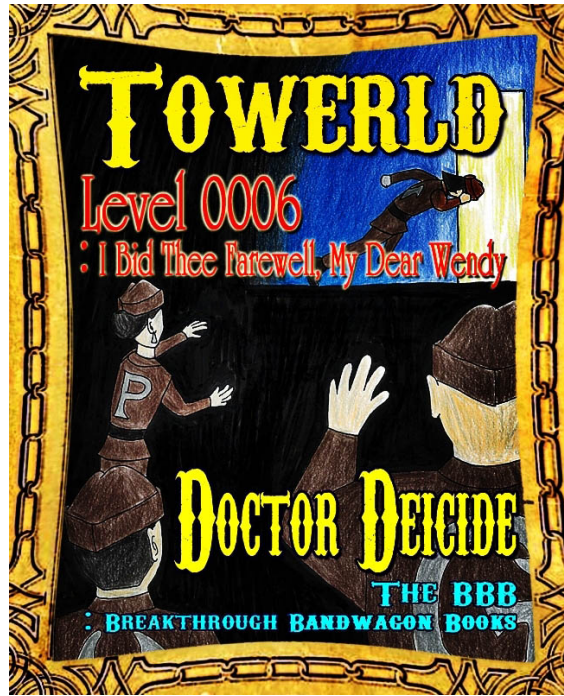
Towerld Level 0005: The Expedition Launch to the Higher Levels

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

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