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# HOW I BECAME KING BY EATING MONSTERS



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How I Became King by Eating Monsters Volume 1

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How I Became King by Eating Monsters Volume 1

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FINALLY, THERE WAS THE MAN  
WHO STOOD AT THE TOP  
OF THE HUNDRED: ZERO.

I WAS SHOCKED  
TO LEARN A MAN  
LIKE HIM EXISTED IN  
THIS KINGDOM.

THE HUNDRED WAS AN EVEN CRAZIER  
ORGANIZATION THAN I HAD IMAGINED.  
THEY USED AN ENTIRE FLOOR OF A DUNGEON,  
SHAPED LIKE AN ARENA, AND EVERY NIGHT,  
THEY ATE MONSTER MEAT AND INDULGED  
IN FULL-CONTACT SPARRING  
AGAINST EACH OTHER.

IT WAS INSANE.







"IT SEEMS  
THAT RECENTLY,  
THE MAGES' GUILD,  
LED BY LADY FRAU,  
HAS ALSO TAKEN TO  
EATING MONSTER MEAT."

"DRAGON MEAT IS  
RARE AND VALUABLE,  
SO WHENEVER THEY FLY  
ABOVE OUR TERRITORY,  
THEY'RE NOW BEING PELTED  
WITH BARRAGES OF ARROWS,  
SPEARS, AND MAGIC..."

FRAU

"WAIT A MINUTE.  
THEY'RE PELTED  
WITH MAGIC?  
WHAT DO YOU  
MEAN BY THAT?"

GAMARATH

OGMA

MARS







CASSANDRA

KEELY

LUIDA



# Prologue

A horned rabbit about the height of a child, its eyes a bright, blazing red, leaped at me.

It was a Killer Rabbit. They were relatively weak as far as monsters went, but the follow-up attack they made with their horns after they jumped would fatally injure anyone, even an adult, who took it head-on.

I sidestepped the rabbit's attack, then slashed at its flank with my longsword. I felt a dull thud. That wasn't enough to kill it.

The Killer Rabbit leaped backward, putting some space between us, then instantly charged me again.

This time, I dodged it by a hair's breadth, then swung my sword from below at its neck. I felt little resistance as my attack landed, and a spout of blood gushed out from the Killer Rabbit's throat. With that, its movements grew sluggish. Not bothering to hurry, I circled around to its blind spot and landed the finishing blow.

Then, I skinned it, drained its blood, used magic to kindle a fire, and cooked the rabbit's meat. At first, I had hated the sight of blood, but I was used to it by now, and I performed everything with practiced, fluid movements. This was, of course, so I could eat the Killer Rabbit. I also had some spices on hand, for taste and to mask the smell. Even after all that, the monster's meat still tasted awful, but if I didn't eat it, I wouldn't survive.

I wasn't a hunter or anything. I actually happened to be a prince of this kingdom—a prince who was, unbelievable as it sounds, slipping out of his castle and into the forest to hunt monsters and eat them. However, there's one thing I want to get straight: I wasn't living like this because the kingdom was poor. I imagine I was probably the only person in the kingdom who was going out of his way to eat nasty monster meat. The problem was, I just couldn't get a proper meal at the castle. So, out of desperation and starvation, I had resorted to

eating monsters.

I did have plenty of food back at the castle and in my quarters, but all of it had a pretty high likelihood of being poisoned.

Why, you ask? Because our government was thoroughly corrupt, and the prime minister, Gamarath, had completely usurped power. It hadn't always been like that. He had gradually accumulated power over time, then foisted his daughter onto the king, my father, probably out of a desire to become a maternal relative of the next king and solidify his authority.

Apparently, my father had been reluctant at first. Sure, he had loved the late queen—my mother—but I think the real reason he resisted was that Gamarath's daughter was the spitting image of her father. In other words, she was *ugly*. She had been ugly even to me, and I was young when I met her. I guess that showed how powerful Gamarath was, to be able to make my father marry her anyway. Regardless, after doing what married couples do (which was, as far as I'm aware, all done in the conventional manner), they quickly had a child. It was a boy.

To the prime minister, I was now officially an obstacle. My food taster almost died three times in a row, and I could feel that it was getting dicey for me, so I stopped eating any of the castle's food. My mother had died from an illness when I was young, and now, even that became suspicious in retrospect. Unable to trust anyone in the castle, I started procuring my food from the forest. I'd been doing that for about a year.

I was going to the forest in particular because it was connected to a secret passageway leading out of the castle. The back of the castle was enclosed by a high wall, past which lay the Forest of Beasts, a place no one ever approached. Since the founding of the kingdom, the wall protecting the capital from monsters had gradually grown larger, eventually turning into a fortress, and by the time a certain hero had come to govern the region, it had become the fortified castle it was today. That hero was one of my ancestors. Basically, the castle was close to the forest to protect the citizens from monsters, but no one ever got near the forest, which was why there was a secret passageway there, in case of an emergency. That made it the perfect place to get food without being seen.



I was twelve years old now, but I had trained in swordsmanship and magic from early childhood, which meant I could hunt monsters, as long as they were weak. I brought them down with my sword, then used magic to make a fire and cook them. To be blunt, they tasted terrible. But still, it was way better than eating poison. Thanks to my new routine, I was able to get one meal each day, at night. I was always tormented by hunger, so I could even put up with the awful meat.

*But how much longer can I continue living like this?*

*If his attempts to poison me keep failing, won't Gamarath eventually just try to kill me using a more direct method?*

I was plagued by some pretty nasty thoughts. I was doing everything I could just to survive every day, but I knew I would hit a wall soon.

As I gnawed on a piece of Killer Rabbit meat and thought about my depressing future, I felt someone's presence behind me. Then, they abruptly spoke.







“Hey, you,” said the interloper. “Become my apprentice.”

In that instant, I prepared for death. Up until the moment they spoke, I hadn’t sensed the owner of the voice at all. I thought the prime minister had finally sent an assassin because his attempts at poisoning me had so reliably failed. I reflexively grabbed my sword and turned toward the voice, getting ready to fight.

“Hm... Your swordsmanship still has a long way to go,” she said.

With that, the meaning of the person’s words finally entered my brain. *Become her apprentice? What the heck is she talking about?*

The person who had spoken to me was a tall, red-haired woman. She was wearing a suit of light armor and shouldering a greatsword. She had quite a beautiful face, but it was lean and sharp—the distinctive features of a career fighter.

“Umm, who are you, and why are you here so late at night?” I asked hesitantly. “You aren’t...an assassin, are you?”

“That young, and you’re already fighting assassins? You must’ve been through your fair share of fights. I knew you looked promising,” the red-haired woman replied. She looked satisfied.

*I get the feeling we’re talking past each other.*

“Oh, no, I haven’t fought anyone yet. But I’m ready, if I ever have to,” I said.

“I see. Well don’t worry. I’m not an assassin.”

That calmed me down a bit. To tell the truth, the woman looked quite strong. I had seen many skilled warriors in the castle, including my sword instructor, but this woman was on a completely different level from all of them. I’d lived my life not knowing whether I’d make it to the next day, so naturally, it had been important for me to learn how to judge people’s strength. After all, if my opponent was stronger than me, there was a chance I could die. *I could really do without this level of foreknowledge.*

“Uh, you said something about me becoming your apprentice, didn’t you?” I asked carefully. “What sort of apprentice?”

“An apprentice is an apprentice. You have promise. Enough promise to take up my sword after me. So, become my apprentice.”

“Then, I’ll be your apprentice in swordsmanship? What do you mean I look promising?”

Honestly, I was aware that I had some amount of talent with a sword. My instructor often told me so. But, I didn’t think this was a question of talent; if I hadn’t gotten stronger quickly, I could’ve died. I was only at my current level because I’d trained like crazy. I didn’t know whether I was actually talented, or if my skill was just the fruit of all that hard work.

“I said that because you were eating monster meat,” the woman replied.

“Huh?”







Chapter.1

NO PAIN,NO GAIN



# I: Meeting my Master

I was in a wild, primeval forest, free from all human interference and infested with vicious monsters that ate each other to survive. In front of me, set against the backdrop of the moon above her, stood a beautiful, red-haired woman. The woman's resolute gaze told me that this fantastical scene was no fantasy, but it was still hard to believe what she was saying.

She was telling me to become her apprentice—because I was eating monster meat.

*Not because of my talent with a sword, but because of what I'm eating?*

"It's a slow process, but every time a person eats monster meat, they absorb some of that monster's strength," she explained. "I didn't realize it until I was fifteen. You're younger than I was then, and you're already eating monster meat. That *disgusting* meat. Not just anyone is capable of that."

*Huh? You can get stronger by eating monster meat? Now that she mentions it, I do feel like I've gotten a lot stronger over the past year... Was that because of my all-monster diet? Wait, is she eating it too? But it's disgusting!*

"Well, I'm not eating it because I like it," I protested. "I just don't have anything else to eat, so I'm living like this, that's all..."

"Really, you don't? Are you an orphan? You don't look like one..."

I was a prince, so naturally, I looked like a prince. There probably wasn't an orphan anywhere in the world who dressed like I did. So, I explained everything that had happened to me up until that point to the woman. It was a disgrace to the kingdom, sure, but everyone in the castle already knew the score, so I didn't feel any need to hide it.

"You were afraid of being poisoned, so you started eating monster meat?" the woman asked. "Even though monster meat is also poisonous?"

*Oh, so it is?*

I had *thought* something was off. When I'd first started eating monster meat, I had often gotten sick afterward, and even thrown up. Still, it was better than the poison in my food at the castle—that stuff made my food taster faint in

agony from the smallest bite. And besides, after eating nothing but monsters for a while, my body had eventually adapted.

“Well, it’s not totally inedible, once you get used to it,” I said. People could eat anything if they were starving. Anything other than pure poison.

“Oho, I knew you had promise. But as long as you’re still afraid of poison, you’ve got a long way to go,” the woman said. Then, she put a hand into her breast pocket. “I bestow this upon you.” She took out a ring and tossed it to me.

*A ring with some sort of ominous, purple gemstone set in it... This must mean what I think it does, right?*

“Is this a magic item that makes its wearer resistant to poison?” I asked.

Magic rings that could neutralize any and all poison did exist. Of course, they were rare, and royalty the world over always wanted to get their hands on them, so they were incredibly valuable. You could buy a whole castle for the price one of those rings fetched whenever one was on the market. And unfortunately, our kingdom didn’t have any. *And to think I stumbled across one in a place like this... What luck!*

“No,” the woman said. “It’s a ring that *poisons* you.”

“Huh?”

“You won’t get anywhere if you rely on items to deal with something as trivial as *poison*. Just use your own strength to conquer it.”

*If I could just conquer it, wouldn’t that mean it wasn’t poison?*

Naturally, my inner monologue didn’t reach her, and she continued her explanation. “Hence, the ring,” she said. “By constantly poisoning yourself, you struggle against the poison, and by defeating it you can build up an immunity.”

*What the heck is she talking about? Does she have a screw loose or something?*

Yes, everything she said sounded correct, but if it was really that easy to become resistant to poison, no one would ever worry about poison.

“Um, how strong is the poison in this ring?”



“Hm? Well, it’s poison, so if a normal person puts it on, they’ll die. Also, if you put it on, you can’t take it off your finger until you either die or conquer the poison.”

*That’s just a cursed item! Who the hell besides a suicidal person would ever put this thing on?!*

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold on. Won’t I just die? Isn’t putting on a ring like this something you shouldn’t do, like as an intelligent person?”

“Don’t worry. You’ve already conditioned yourself to the poison in monsters, so you’ll be able to withstand it,” she said. “When I first put on the ring, it put me out of commission for a week, but I adapted. Now, it isn’t enough for me, so I’m wearing an even more powerful ring.” She showed me her right hand. There was a ring with a red gemstone on one of her fingers, and it radiated a truly menacing aura. “Besides poison, there’s paralysis, petrification, curse, and confusion all jammed into this little thing. You won’t find a beauty like this just lying on the side of the road. It took me a lot of work to get my hands on it.”

*...Wow, she’s crazy. I absolutely shouldn’t have anything to do with her. Tomorrow, I’ll throw this ring into a lake or something.*

Still, despite her dubious mental state, there was no doubting this woman’s abilities, so I decided to at least ask for her name, thinking it might be useful. “RReally?” I started. “That sure is amazing. Um, I have to get back to the castle soon, so would you mind telling me your name? I’m a prince of Farune, and my name is Mars.”

“Mars? That’s a fine name. I’m Cassandra.”

*Cassandra?* I’d heard that name before. It was pretty common, but there was only one woman with that name who was also a red-haired swordmaster. “Could you be the swordmaster, the Red Demon Cassandra?!”

“That’s what they call me. Although I’m not really a fan of the nickname ‘Red Demon.’”

The Red Demon Cassandra—she was a monster, terrifying enough to make even the most hardened criminal shake in his boots. She was crazy about fighting. It was said that if she met a man, she killed him; if she met a sorcerer,

she killed him; if she met a dragon, she killed it; and if she met a god, she killed it, too. In one story, a certain country demanded she submit to its authority. She had challenged everyone there, saying she'd serve the country if even a single citizen could beat her. She immediately brought the entire country to ruin. She was an uncontrollable berserker.

"You have seven days," Cassandra said. "Show me you can conquer that ring by then. As your master, I'm giving you this task as your first trial. Let's meet here again in a week, my apprentice." And with that, she turned and vanished deeper into the woods without giving me a chance to reply.

"Well, I haven't really decided yet if I want to be your apprentice..." I mumbled. I didn't know what she'd do to me if I said it loudly enough for her to hear.

The ring felt strangely heavy in the palm of my hand.

## II: A Ring of Poison Resistance and an Armlet of Strengthening

**AFTER** returning to the castle, I stared intently at the poison ring. At first, I hadn't had any desire whatsoever to put it on, but it was a different story now that I knew *Cassandra* had been the one to give it to me.

*To be honest, if things keep going like this, I will die eventually.*

I had somehow managed to avoid getting assassinated so far, but Gamarath was gaining more power every day, and my allies continued to dwindle. Many within the castle expected Gamarath's grandson—my younger brother—to be the next king. It would have been nice if Gamarath were to make some sort of big political blunder, but his policies were unexpectedly reasonable, so he didn't have any weaknesses on that front either. Despite how obviously evil-looking he was.

I was gradually being backed into a corner. It wasn't like I was particularly attached to the crown or anything, but I didn't think Gamarath would let me live even if I relinquished my spot in the line of succession. He'd kill me either way, if only to get rid of a potential future thorn in his side.

Then, there was Cassandra—the infamous swordmaster, ruiner of at least one country. With her at my back, I imagined I’d at least be able to escape with my life intact, if nothing else. Still, while she didn’t seem to be quite the berserker the rumors made her out to be, she wasn’t someone I could properly communicate with either. She had said she would make me her apprentice, though, and at the very least, that meant I’d made a good impression on her. If I became her apprentice and things went well, and I became valuable to her, that would definitely be helpful.

And, the first barrier to becoming her apprentice was...a poison ring.

*Wait, I’m getting the feeling that my life is in even more danger now than it was before. She said I wouldn’t be able to take the ring off until I either died from the poison or overcame it, but now that I think about it, that doesn’t sound like a cursed item at all. Isn’t it a pretty straightforward weapon to use for assassinating someone?*

In order to escape assassination, I had to wear something used to assassinate people. It didn’t make any sense. Apparently, a normal person would die instantly if they put on the ring—but I *was* a normal person. Still, if I could make it past this, I might have a real chance to survive. In other words, if I didn’t take advantage of this opportunity, I’d inevitably die within a few years anyway. When I thought about it that way...



**WHEN** it was time for breakfast, my meal was brought into my quarters. Usually I would say, “I’m not hungry, so I don’t need any breakfast,” and refuse to accept it, but I didn’t say anything today.

Both my servant and the maid carrying the food looked surprised, and my food taster, who had entered the room with them, had a grim expression on his face.

“I don’t need you to taste this,” I said. “I want to eat alone, so can you all leave my room?”

My food taster was clearly relieved, but my servant refused to back down. “I cannot allow that! Your Highness, you mustn’t throw away your life!”



*He must think I'm planning on dying. Yeah, I can see why he would.*

But I didn't want anyone to see what I was about to do, so I had to get them out. "Leave my room. That's an order."

"But Your Highness..." My servant looked like he was about to cry, but eventually, he bowed silently and left, taking the maid and my food taster with him.

I made sure they were gone before I set everything up. I couldn't actually eat my meal, so I cut up the food to make it look like I had taken a few bites, and even spilled a bit of soup on the table. Then I steeled myself and put on the ring.

The second I did, my vision turned dark. I felt like throwing up, became delirious with fever, and lost the feeling in my arms and legs.

*I'm gonna die. This thing is gonna kill me. Okay, I'll take the ring off after all.* I grabbed at the ring, but it might as well have been part of my body. It refused to come off.

"Ahh, dammit. I *knew* this thing was a murder weapon..."

As I cursed my misfortune, I thought I should at least lie down, so I gathered up the last of my strength and staggered to bed.

Then, I lost consciousness.



**I'LL** spoil the ending for you: I survived. When I came to, I had been tucked into bed, and two servants were there beside me, nursing me back to health.

Apparently, I had been comatose for three days, deathly pale and with a sky-high temperature. The doctors had very quickly given up on me ever recovering, and had even brought in a wizard to cast an antidote spell, but it hadn't worked at all.

*This poison comes from an item I have equipped, after all, so trying to dispel it is pointless.*

I only realized after waking up that there had also been the very real possibility of me being assassinated while I was bedridden. Seeing as no one

had tried, they had all probably assumed that someone else had gotten to me first, so they could just stand by and wait for me to die. Still, I shuddered at my own poor planning.

I still felt some lingering numbness, but no major issues, and when I reached for the ring again, I found that it came off easily. *This must mean I've gained a resistance to the ring's poison*, I thought.

The story of my recovery from the brink of death quickly spread throughout the castle. On the surface, everyone was congratulating me, but on the other hand, nobody seemed to think it was at all strange that I had almost died from being poisoned. I got a few warnings that went, "Yeah, that's not a surprise," and "You have to be more careful, okay?" Even my own father, the king, cautioned me mildly, saying something like, "You have to protect yourself."

*That's hardly what you should be saying to a victim. Though in this case, it was entirely my fault.*

There was even a formal investigation, but needless to say, as I was the culprit, they didn't find anyone. Everyone was thinking, *Yeah, it was Gamarath, wasn't it?* But this happened to be the one time those were false charges.

I hadn't had anything to eat for three days, so this time, I ate what was served to me without complaint. If what Cassandra had said was true, I now had a resistance to poison anyway.

Over the next few days, there didn't seem to be any poison mixed into the food I tried, so mealtimes passed without incident. Eventually, though, something in the food made my tongue tingle. It wasn't spice, or anything like that, which meant it was probably poison. I had some mild diarrhea after I ate it, but on the whole, it was no problem. Apparently, I really had developed an immunity to poison.

I let my food taster go. I said, "You shouldn't throw your life away for me," and everyone around was deeply moved. They interpreted it as me being kind, but in reality, I just didn't need him anymore.

Seven days passed, and it was time for my next meeting with Cassandra.



“**MASTER**, I overcame the ring of poison,” I said, showing her the ring on my right hand. Like the last time, we were in the forest.

“Is that so? I knew you could do it, apprentice!” Cassandra exclaimed. She seemed incredibly happy.

“Thanks to you, now I can eat poisoned food no problem. Thank you,” I said. Her method had certainly been something else, but my newfound poison resistance was a big deal. I was truly grateful for it.

“That’s good to hear. By the way, have you also been eating monster meat?”

“No, not for the past week...”

Despite the occasional poisoned dish, I was enjoying eating regular meals again enough that I didn’t feel any desire to go out of my way to eat any of that awful monster meat.

“Really? We can’t have that,” Cassandra said. “Wait here.” As soon as she finished speaking, she disappeared into the forest.

After some time, she returned, dragging a monster I had never seen before behind her with one hand. When I say “dragging,” it might sound like the monster was small, but it had to have been ten times Cassandra’s size. It was such a surreal sight that it made me doubt my own eyes.

The monster was covered in blood, and it looked dead. *I’ve never seen a giant monster like that around here before. Where did she even find it?*

Cassandra effortlessly tossed the monster upward, then, swinging her longsword with blinding speed, chopped it up in midair. What had once been a monster was instantly transformed into so many chunks of meat. Then, she took one of those chunks in her hand and held it out to me. I reflexively reached out and took it. It made a nasty, squelching sound in my hand.

“Eat it,” she said. “It’s the meat of a Great Basilisk. If you’ve conquered the ring, this should be no problem.”

*A Great Basilisk?* They were really dangerous; if a Great Basilisk showed up near a human village, an entire knightly order was often needed to bring it down as a group. *And she found one and defeated it in that short period of*

*time?*

*Wait, more importantly, I have to eat it? Raw?*

“Master, may I cook it?” I asked.

“No. That would be less efficient,” Cassandra replied. According to her, it was best to eat monster meat as fresh as possible—raw was best. This apparently made it easier for you to absorb the monster’s strength. She lifted another chunk of meat in her own hand, and bit into it without any hesitation.

I could hear her noisily smacking her lips. *She’s actually eating it...*

“Hey, eat.”

Now that she had started eating it herself right in front of me, I couldn’t very well say, “No, thank you.” So, I reluctantly brought the chunk of meat closer to my mouth.

It reeked.

As you might expect, it smelled like blood. But it also smelled sort of like a wild animal. I felt like I was going to vomit.

Instead, I steeled myself and took a bite. The bloody smell, as well as an intensely irritating sensation, spread throughout my mouth, and my body started to ring alarm bells at full blast that told me: “Do not eat this!”

*I have to throw up, I have to throw up.*

But, Cassandra was staring at me. I chewed vigorously, then forced myself to swallow. It was disgusting. I felt like I was about to evacuate the entire contents of my stomach. It was as if my body had reverted to the state it had been in before I had built up my poison resistance.

“Master, this meat is pretty poisonous, isn’t it?”

“Of course it is,” Cassandra said. “The stronger the monster, the harder it is for a person to ingest its meat. Dragon meat is deadly. Right now, you can just barely tolerate this Great Basilisk meat.” As she spoke, she continued to eat the chunk of meat in her hand, and in the end, she finished the whole thing. Then, as if issuing my death sentence, she commanded, “Eat everything I gave you.”

It took some time, and I almost started crying, but I ate it all. It was the hardest thing I had ever gone through in my entire life—bad enough to make me wish I were fighting to overcome a thousand poison rings.

“All right, you did it,” Cassandra said when I finally finished. “Now, take up your sword.”

*Training, after you made me eat poison? I can't help but feel like this has gone past harsh and straight to murderous.*

My hands and mouth were covered in blood, and I wanted to wash them off somewhere, but Cassandra wasn't the type of opponent to allow that. So I drew my sword, faced her, and took a fighting stance.

“Come at me,” she said. She didn't even have her hand on her sword. It was like she was saying she didn't need it.

I felt simultaneously indignant that she was looking down on me and resentful at having been forced to eat that gross meat, so I decided to slash at Cassandra with everything I had. I had a right to that much, at least.

However, the instant I tried to raise my sword above my head, I was blown backward, and I slammed into a tree behind me. My stomach and my back throbbed with intense pain. When I looked up, I saw that Cassandra was standing exactly where I'd just been readying myself. She had seemingly punched or kicked me as I was raising my sword. But I hadn't even seen her move.

“As I thought,” she said. “You're slow.”

“Well... You'd never expect someone to attack just as you were raising your sword,” I said, trying to justify myself as I rubbed my aching midsection.

“Fighting is a matter of life and death,” my master said flatly. “Excuses are worthless. Don't give your opponent any chances.”

*She's definitely right. And my daily life is the same way.*

“Your movements are slow because your physical abilities are lacking. Take this.” My master took something out of her pocket.

It was a pretty metal armlet that glittered with a blue light, and when I looked



more closely, I could see that the surface was tightly packed with etchings of spells. I could only imagine that they meant something unpleasant.

“This is an armlet that bestows Gravity’s effects on the wearer.”

Gravity. It was a type of hindrance magic that made the target’s body heavier and their movements sluggish. Usually, it was used against monsters.

“Gravity? On my opponent?”

“No. On you.”

*Casting a hindrance effect on myself? I’ve never heard of anything like that.*

“When you put on this armlet, it doubles your body’s weight. Just equip it.” She tossed the armlet to me and I caught it, then put it on my arm.

The second I did, I was overcome by the feeling that my body had become significantly heavier.

“Now try standing up.”

I tried to do as she said, but I couldn’t move very well. After quite a bit of struggling, I managed to use the tree at my back to prop up my newly heavy body. *So this is Gravity.*

“It’s pretty hard to move. What should I do while wearing this?” I asked.

“Live your life normally with the armlet on, and your body will get in shape on its own. You don’t have to do anything special and you’re still training—wonderful, isn’t it?” My master smiled without a care in the world.

*She really does think it’s wonderful. But what’s so wonderful about making my everyday life even harder? I knew there was something wrong with her.*

And, daily life aside, I didn’t even know if I’d be able to get back to the castle with this thing on.

*I’ll take off the armlet for a bit. Just a bit. I need to get used to it first, little by little... Hm? It won’t come off?*

“Master, how do I take this off?”

“You can’t,” Cassandra said, easily giving me her unthinkable reply. “It’s an armlet made to prevent prisoners from escaping. You aren’t supposed to be

able to take it off yourself.”

*It's for prisoners?! First, a murder weapon, and now, the equivalent of a ball and chain. Where the hell is she getting these things? Please, don't tell me it's actually because people are trying to assassinate her, or because she was in prison.*

“Do you know how to take it off?” I asked.

“I don't. I was able to take it off after about a year of wearing it, but probably because I gained the ability to counter the binding magic on the armlet. So there's no need to worry.”

*I have nothing but worries! I'm worried about my own life, at this very moment.* Binding magic wasn't something you could easily break. It would have been pointless if you *could* break it. At that moment, I had no hope for the future.

### III: A Certain Maid's Monologue

I lived in the castle and served as Prince Mars's personal maid. I was the third daughter of a noble, but as I wasn't the eldest, I wasn't lucky enough to receive any good candidates for marriage. So, to live as a member of the nobility in the future, it was necessary for me to catch the eye of a nobleman with decent status while I worked as a maid. However, nobody paid any heed to my trifling ambition, and I was assigned a certain task.

Count Randolph, from the main branch of my family, ordered me to poison Prince Mars. The count was part of Prime Minister Gamarath's faction, so the order probably came directly from him. Personally, I couldn't even stand to look at either Count Randolph or Prime Minister Gamarath, but be that as it may, my family's status was such that I was unable to refuse the count's order.

Having said that, poisoning the prince was easier said than done. In the first place, he had a food taster. Even Count Randolph himself didn't seem to expect the poisoning to succeed; he was probably just trying to make Prince Mars believe that his life was in danger, to weaken his resolve. *Some people are truly nasty.*

Left with no other choice, I diligently slipped poison into Prince Mars's food.

As a result, he witnessed the collapse of his food taster on three separate occasions, and stopped touching his meals altogether. Surely that would weaken him both mentally *and* physically.

Or at least, that was what I thought.

Prince Mars's condition temporarily deteriorated, but then, he seemingly began getting his meals from another source. He quickly regained his vitality, and if anything, grew more robust than before. The count told me to investigate, and find out where he was getting his food, but I didn't have the slightest idea where it could be coming from. I had already poisoned any and all food that entered his quarters.

Incidentally, one day about a year later, Prince Mars suddenly said that he would be having a normal meal. This was a surprise. I wished he had told me beforehand. After all, he hadn't had a meal in a whole year, so I hadn't mixed any poison into his food.

That's right—I didn't poison his food. But for some reason, Prince Mars collapsed after eating it anyway.

*Hm? Why?* I thought. I was incredibly perturbed, but Count Randolph assumed I *had* poisoned Prince Mars, and he commended me and gave me a small reward. So, I went along with it, and acted like it really had been me.

For three days, Prince Mars hovered on the brink of death, but in the end, he managed to recover. I had figured his poisoning was the work of someone else, so I didn't make a move while he was bedridden, but that turned out to be a mistake. I should have taken my chance when I had it.

I had mixed feelings. I hadn't poisoned him, but when he recovered, it looked like I had tried to poison him and failed. In fact, when Count Randolph found out about the situation, he told me, "Don't mess up next time," and gave me an even more potent poison than the one I had been using.

Luckily, after that, Lord Mars began taking his meals without a food taster, so it was relatively easy to slip in the poison. I thought it odd that even though he had almost died, he didn't seem to be worried about poison. Could it have been that he didn't care whether he lived or died?

Up until that point, I had only ever used a small amount of poison, so it would be harder to detect, but now I was a bit angry, so to teach Prince Mars just how harsh life could be, I just up and dumped the whole poison in before serving him his next meal. This was a type of kindness. I imagined that, the moment he put a bite of food into his mouth, he would reunite with the dearly departed queen in the afterlife.

But Lord Mars practically devoured his meal—the meal I had poisoned generously. Not only that, but he exulted in the joy of eating. “Aah,” he said. “Normal meals sure are the best.”

*Hm. Something strange is going on. Why is he still alive?*

I had even already set up another maid to take the fall for it, but all that work ended up being for naught. It wasn't like it was my fault. Count Randolph must have given me a harmless medicine that he only *thought* was poisonous. Be that as it may, though, he was still a count, so without any evidence, I couldn't tell him he had messed up.

I decided I would fill a cup with water, stir in a few tiny drops of the poison the count had given me, and taste it myself with just the tip of my tongue. The prince had practically inhaled his food, so I knew the poison had to be harmless. Even if it was dangerous, there was no way it would cause too much damage, and then I would be able to prove that Count Randolph had given me defective poison. That would put him in my debt.

I must have been the world's biggest fool for thinking that. The second I tasted the water, my entire body convulsed, and I felt a jolt of pain in my throat that made it feel like it was being torn apart. I immediately shoved my fingers down my throat and made myself vomit up the contents of my stomach. Even after that, though, my body still felt numb. I was unable to move for a while afterward.

When I reported this to Count Randolph, he said. “That's strange. He shouldn't even have had time to take an antidote—it's inconceivable that he's still alive. Come to think of it, it's odd that he survived last time too, even though I bought off the doctors and the healers.” He furrowed his brow and began to brood. If he, too, failed to poison Prince Mars, Prime Minister Gamarath would probably

be furious with him.

“Lately, have you noticed anything strange about the prince?” the count asked. “Tell me anything, no matter how trivial it may seem.”

*Anything strange?* I hadn’t sensed any particularly large changes in the prince’s behavior. But maybe there had been something small. That reminded me—not long ago, the other maids were talking about how he had started wearing a ring.

When I relayed this to the count, he said, “A magic item? It can’t be. I’ve heard of rings that neutralize poison, but could he really have gotten his hands on one?”

This was the first I was hearing about such a thing. But now that the count mentioned it, I got the feeling that Prince Mars had stopped worrying about poison around the time he had started wearing that ring.

“Is that so? No, it *must* be so,” Count Randolph said. “That’s why he was able to dismiss his food taster without a second thought!”

*I see. When he let his food taster go, everyone around him praised him for his kindness, but he was only putting on an act.* I felt anger toward the prince well up inside me.

“All right!” the count said. “Tell me every little detail about that ring. I’ll have a fake prepared. After we’ve swapped it out, we’ll poison Prince Mars when his guard is down!”



**SOON** after that, Count Randolph sent me an excellent copy of Lord Mars’s ring. It was the spitting image of the real one, from its size to the gemstone embedded in it. Hiding the fake in my pocket, I was able to successfully swap it out with the actual ring while the prince was in the bath. Immediately afterward, I brought the real ring to Count Randolph.

“Oho, so this is the ring that neutralizes poison,” the count said. He took the ring and held it in his hand, looking exceedingly pleased with himself. “From what I hear, one of these can fetch a considerable price. What do you think? It’s a bit too good to just hand over to Prime Minister Gamarath...”



As he spoke, he slid the ring onto his finger, like he was testing to see if it looked good on him.

“Ungh, *aaieeeee*—!”

The second he put it on, the count started shrieking like a monstrous bird. With his other hand, he desperately tried to take the ring off, then flopped onto the floor.

He was deathly pale, and blood poured from his eyes, mouth, and nose. The count was completely and utterly dead.

I put a hand over my mouth to suppress a scream. Then, to dispose of the evidence, I took the ring from his finger myself and ran away.

The next day, Count Randolph’s body was discovered in the spot where we had held our secret meetings, and an uproar swept through the castle. To all appearances, the count and I had hardly even been acquainted with each other, so I was never suspected. And there was no reason I should be—after all, *I* wasn’t the one who had killed him...

After some time passed and the scandal faded, I swapped the real ring back in for the fake while Prince Mars was in the bath again. Needless to say, I was way too scared to have ever tried to put the ring on my own hand. I watched Prince Mars as he finished his bath, wondering what would happen. He put on the ring without any hesitation.

Then he frowned quizzically, mumbled, “I must be feeling a bit off today,” and walked off to his room.

*...Wait, should I be afraid of Prince Mars?*



**COUNT** Randolph was dead. And apparently, he had been poisoned.

I had been the one to suggest to him that he poison Prince Mars, though of course, I had never said anything explicitly, so there was nothing connecting him to me—the prime minister. I had made sure of that to prevent any trouble for myself, just in case Count Randolph failed.

In the end, though, the count was the one who had been poisoned. It had to

be a warning: anyone who messes with Prince Mars will get what's coming to him.

The culprit was a terrifying foe who had left absolutely no evidence behind. But the prince had hardly any allies in the castle, and there were none on that short list who could have carried out this type of clandestine deed. I was in league with the guilds of the underworld, and our interests were aligned, so it was out of the question that they had betrayed me.

So, who had the prince brought over to his side? I didn't know. That was what was so frightening.

To be blunt, I had judged Prince Mars to pose no threat to me. I had assumed he wouldn't be a problem, even if I didn't manage to kill him. The poisonings were just supposed to be a minor threat.

Now, all my assumptions seemed to have been based on a mistaken estimation of him. I resolved to do whatever it takes and kill Prince Mars by any means necessary. I *had* to install my grandson on the throne.

## IV: Training Partners

**THREE** years had passed since I first met my master, Cassandra. Every seven days, we got together, ate some awful monster meat, and then had a simple practice bout. If I ever failed to eat monster meat during the six days we didn't see each other, she made me eat extra when we met again, so I made sure to eat monsters every day (the meat she brought was always especially vile).

Speaking of which, she was always able to guess the number of days I *hadn't* eaten monster meat. Apparently, she could tell based on how much I'd grown since the previous time we'd seen each other. I had no idea how she did it, but the thought that she was monitoring my body that closely gave me the creeps.

Whenever I skipped a day of training, she would give me a vicious beating in our bout. This, too, was apparently because she could tell from how much my techniques had developed. Her beatings were severe, and left me covered in cuts and bruises, which were always hard to explain when I returned to the castle. Because of this, I decided to train every day, without ever slacking off.

In the end, because I had to eat monster meat *and* train every day, I ended up

fighting monsters daily. But even if I did that, my master counted any battles with weak monsters as slacking off, so I had to fight—and then eat—monsters I could barely beat.

When I first started wearing the Gravity armlet, my movements had been sluggish, and many in the castle thought someone must have been poisoning me again. I got used to it after three months. Humans really can adapt to anything.

Also during this time, I had a brush with an assassin, a servant who attacked me. In a rush, I tried to grab and pin him down, and when we both fell over together, I ended up crushing him. Gravity magic sure is scary.



**BY** the time I'd been wearing it for a year, I was able to remove the armlet. I was pretty happy. I felt like a prisoner who had finally reached the end of his sentence.

When I joyfully reported this achievement to my master, however, she said, “Really? Then I’ll give you a new one,” and made me wear an armlet that *tripled* my weight. Her love was heavy stuff—physically speaking, that is.

It took another year for me to be able to take off the new armlet, and this time, I kept quiet about it. I wouldn’t be able to handle an armlet that made me five times heavier. As it happened, Cassandra wore an armlet that made her *ten* times heavier. She said she couldn’t give it to me yet, but I was sure that if I ever put that thing on, I wouldn’t be able to survive my normal life.

As for our bouts, Cassandra was so quick that I could never avoid her attacks if I tried to follow them with my eyes. I had to move while sensing her presence. She also had a nasty special ability that allowed her to attack with as much force as possible without killing me. Naturally, because getting hit meant teetering on the brink of death, I was desperate to avoid her attacks. As a result, I developed a skill that let me avoid attacks by sensing them.

Actually, it wasn’t really a skill; it was more like my intuition just got a lot better. But my master referred to it as “grasping an intention,” which I suppose meant it was an actual skill. Once you *grasped intentions*, you could sense anyone or anything that was targeting you.

In other news, in the year after I had gained a resistance to poison, there had been a spate of failed assassination attempts in the castle, disguised as accidents. First came stray arrows, then it escalated to various other methods, like collapsed buildings and magical attacks, but I avoided every one of them. If those things could kill me, my master would've killed me a long time ago. Compared to dealing with attacks from Cassandra, or even a powerful monster, avoiding assassination was so easy I could probably have done it in my sleep. If anything, I felt that the assassins were going easier on me than my master.

At first, when I became her apprentice, I'd had the ulterior motive of using Cassandra's name to protect myself from assassination, but I no longer had any intention of doing that. Or rather, I didn't need to. Now that I had nothing to fear from assassins, there was no reason to use Cassandra's name. And in fact, if I did mention her, I could clearly see people bothering me about it and saying things like, "Where did you meet her?" or, "Have you been slipping out of the castle every day?" or, "Stop eating monster meat," or, "Stop that dangerous training," and so on, so I kept quiet.

And one day, between the many near-death experiences I endured on a daily basis, my master announced that she would be leaving.

"Now that you have the fundamentals down," she said, "continue your training on your own. The next time we meet, if I see you've been slacking off, I'll kill you." Then, she left.

She was kind of a nomad, traveling the world in search of powerful opponents, and she hadn't ever been the type to settle down in one place. It was probably more unusual for her to have stayed in a single country for three years than for her to take off like this. And I knew her parting words were no metaphor—she'd actually kill me—so I continued my daily training.

Around that time, faking accidents must have gotten to be too much trouble, because the assassins began attacking me directly instead, no longer caring whatsoever how it looked. If I was walking outside on official business, an assassin would come at me with a sword; if I was standing around in the castle and chatting, an assassin would drop down from the ceiling; if I returned to my room, an assassin would be there waiting; and so on. Still, I could grasp their intentions, so I was able to sense them before they attacked, and they were

weaker than monsters or my master, so it wasn't a big deal—except for the time there was a complaint when I reflexively killed a wannabe assassin.

“Your Highness, to investigate who sent him, it really would have been best to capture him alive...” I was told.

When I answered, “I wasn't trying to kill him, but he was too weak for me to capture alive,” it unnerved everyone around me. But compared to monsters and my master, normal humans were fragile, and they died easily.

I didn't know if Gamarath had gotten wind of what I'd said, but after that, the assassins' skill levels increased. There were also more of them at once. I was pretty strong, but things got tricky when multiple trained assassins came at me at the same time. I had generally fought monsters or my master one-on-one, so I didn't have much experience with fighting multiple opponents. Of course, suffering a defeat was out of the question. God might forgive me, but my master certainly wouldn't.



**ONCE**, I walked back to the castle through the forest after fighting a monster, idly wondering what to do, when I heard the sound of swords clashing. It was coming from an old fort. By this time, I had begun going a bit deeper into the forest in search of stronger monsters.

I masked my presence and surveyed the area. Inside the fort, I saw two heavily armed men in armor locked in a sword fight. There were three other men watching, which put the total number at five. The spectators were also armed. When I saw that they were giving shouts of encouragement and advice to the two fighters, I realized that they weren't fighting to the death; they were just training. But they were fighting like it was a real battle. That was quite unusual.

This kind of true-to-life training just wasn't done in Farune. Mainstream sword training consisted of methodically copying specific patterns of movements and positions. During bouts, it was expected that you'd stop your swing just before hitting your opponent, and if you actually hit them, you were showered with abuse. Maybe that was only natural after over two hundred years of continuous peace. The capital's knights hardly ever actually fought, so



they had started looking down on real combat with disdain. The word “chivalry” was in vogue, and noble, refined conduct was valued above everything else.

To put it bluntly, skill with a sword was seen as unnecessary and barbaric. Dueling with swords was banned, of course, and simulated combat was avoided, even in training. And the training I did with my master? That was out of the question, or rather, it was ethically unacceptable. If the authorities had found out what Cassandra had done, they would have taken her to prison. Not that there was any authority in the world that could capture her.

Putting that aside, the swordsmen in the fort were quite strong. They looked to have gone through their fair share of training. When I looked at them closely, I could see that the men fighting and the spectators all had several fresh wounds.

*I can use them.*

I just had to get them to let me join their practice, and then I could train against multiple people at once. Their strength was just right for what I needed.

So, I decided to make my presence known.

“Would you mind letting me join your training?” I asked with as friendly a voice as I could muster. It was the middle of the night, though, and they reacted with extreme caution when I stepped out from the forest. When I thought about it, it made perfect sense that they were on their guard. There was no way people gathering in a place like this in the dead of night were normal, respectable people, after all.

“Who the hell are you?” the man who looked like their leader asked. He had close-cropped blond hair and sharp, masculine features. He was probably the most skilled in the group.

“Well, I was walking in the forest when I heard a sound,” I said. “I came to have a look, and I saw you guys having a practical bout, which you hardly ever see these days, so I was thinking it’d be nice if you let me join you.”

“You were just walking in the forest? The Forest of Beasts? Cut the crap!” the man yelled.

The others joined in all at once. “Y’know, you look a lot like a spoiled little

noble brat! Get lost if you don't want us to kill you!"

"And wipe that stupid smile off your face. You're just having a bit of fun, aren't you? And looking down on us all the while!"

*They don't seem to be too fond of the nobility.*

I did wish I had clothes that stood out a bit less, but unfortunately, there were no commoner clothes in the castle. As I wondered what to do next, the leader of the men spoke again.

"Well, why not? If you want to train with us, then we'll let you."

*Ah, finally, someone reasonable.*

"But, don't come crying to us if you die, got it?" he said, then came at me with his sword.

*Nevermind. He's just another hotheaded tough guy.*

I reflexively blocked his attack with my sword, then let off a succession of slashes. I could easily tell from the way he had swung his sword that he had been aiming to kill me. He was more skilled than the assassins that ambushed me on a daily basis, but not by much.

So, I tried a quick slash at his torso.

"Gah!" the man exclaimed, just barely blocking my attack with his sword. He was sent flying backwards in a clean arc, and he slammed against the ground, coughing up blood, but alive. He tried to stand up, but his body was jerking, and it wouldn't move how he wanted.

*Good job.* If he'd been one of the assassins, that attack would have cut him cleanly in two.

Seeing that, the other men attacked me all at once, and I beat them down. None of them died, which showed me how tough they were. *I knew it, they're the perfect training partners.*

Right away, I had them kneel while I told them what I planned to do. "Once every seven days, we're going to spar. To be honest, I'm stronger than the five of you, so because you'll be sparring against me, you'll all get stronger too. Now that doesn't sound so bad, does it?"

The men looked torn. After their leader, Ogma, the rest of them introduced themselves as Aaron, Barry, Bill, and Bruno, respectively.

“You’re strong enough to beat us, so what’s the point of training with us?” Ogma asked.

“I have my reasons,” I replied. “For example, I need to be able to fight against a large number of people at once.” I needed more training to counter the new tactics of the assassins with designs on my life. But that was hard to explain.

“What does a spoiled noble brat want with us, except to kill some time?!” Aaron shouted, glaring at me. He had a small build, and he maintained his rebellious attitude, despite the fact that he was being made to sit submissively on the ground. “It’s hard enough for us to get enough food to eat every day, y’know! I bet you’re eating steaks coated in gold for breakfast, or somethin’! C’mon, tell us what you ate tonight!”

“Um... I think tonight it was Redbone meat?” I replied. The monster that I had fought before coming across them had been my dinner.

“I knew it! You’re eating meat! The most we ever get is bread and some sou— Wait, did you just say Redbone meat?!” Aaron’s jaw dropped, and the other four looked equally shocked.

“Why the hell are you eating monster meat?” Ogma asked, looking suspicious. “And not only that, but Redbone? It’s impossible to take one of those down alone.”

“Long story short, I guess I’m eating them to get stronger.” I wasn’t exactly lying. The truth was that if I didn’t eat monsters every day, the next time I met with my master, she’d kill me. But that didn’t sound as cool, so I kept it a secret.

“Eating monster meat makes you stronger?” Ogma asked. He seemed most interested in the “stronger” part.

“It does. The more you eat the meat of strong monsters, the stronger you get. But the stronger the monster, the more poisonous its meat.”

“Monster meat is actually poisonous? I’ve heard rumors, but it’s actually true?”

“It is. But if you condition yourself by eating weaker monsters first, you eventually get used to it,” I explained. “Or at least, it gets to be not that bad.”

“Whoa, whoa, just hold on!” Aaron cut in, having regained the ability to speak. “That’s a filthy lie! Everyone knows you can’t eat monster meat because of the poison! You’re trying to trick us, aren’t you?!”

It appeared that he didn’t believe me. I was slightly offended that he was calling me a liar, so I decided to give a little demonstration. Actually, a Bloodbear happened to have come up to just behind where the men were sitting at that moment, probably on its way to attack us after sensing the presence of humans.

“All right, look behind you,” I said. They immediately saw the Bloodbear and tried to run away in a panic, but the Bloodbear growled and went after them before they could escape. I ran out in front of them, drew my sword, and lopped off the Bloodbear’s head with a flash of my blade. Monsters at that level were no longer any match for me.

“No way...” One of the men let slip his astonishment.

I swung my sword again and again, taking apart the Bloodbear and turning its body into a butchered pile of meat. I was used to this by now. Then, I took a decent-sized chunk of the Bloodbear meat and popped it into my mouth. It was raw, so it made squishing noises as I chewed it. I quickly swallowed. “Look, I just ate it, didn’t I?” I said.

They all nodded dutifully—including Aaron, of course.

“Do you guys want any?” I asked, taking a small piece and tossing it to them. “Just take a nibble for now. If you eat it all at once, you’ll probably die.”

They hesitated, then Ogma mustered up his resolve and tried it first. “Geh! Uuuugh...” He instantly spat out the small bite he had taken.

The others tried it too, but like Ogma, none of them could stomach it.

But at least I had demonstrated to them that monster meat was edible. I felt kind of proud.

V: Ogma

**FARUNE**, the land of my birth, wasn't a great place. It wasn't the absolute worst either, but it wasn't any good. It had an uncertain, half-baked feeling.

The best way to put it might be that everyone was always just managing to survive somehow. There was rampant class stratification, so the nobility prospered while the common people suffered. Apparently, Farune hadn't always been like that, but after one portion of the nobility began using their position to enrich themselves, the rest eventually followed suit, and then everyone else had to deal with the consequences. The royal family that ruled over the country was always being dragged into power struggles with the nobility, and it was rumored that they were no longer actually in charge.

For my part, I was born the third son in a noble family. From the moment of my birth, my life was already at a standstill. I was the eldest son's spare's spare. That was my role, and my brothers were both completely healthy, so it didn't look like I'd ever get a chance to shine.

The one thing I did like was swinging my sword. It was easy to understand: all that mattered in sword fighting was how strong you were. I considered trying to make a living out of it, but in Farune, practical skill with the sword wasn't anything to be proud of. Instead, you were judged on how pretty your forms were. Some big, important noble who couldn't swing a sword to save his life had said, "What is required of nobles is beauty in conduct, not barbaric hacking and slashing," and the idea had spread. By now, even the capital's knights took it as gospel.

Those fools! Sword fighting was about winning or losing, and nothing else. Beauty was unnecessary. The kingdom had been founded by a hero whose swordsmanship had pushed back the monsters to open up undeveloped land. The ancestors of the current nobility had also secured their positions with their military exploits, performed with swordsmanship or magic. Today's nobles, who rejected the very martial achievement that had resulted in their exalted births, were all trash.

It really was a worthless kingdom.

But knighthood was hereditary, and it only passed through common bloodlines. So what was I supposed to do?



These were the sorts of gloomy thoughts that weighed me down and made me restless. To fight against the despair, I started acting recklessly, and along the way I made new friends who shared my struggles. They were strong too, and like me, they didn't have a good way to channel that strength. So together, we created a group called the Hundred.

The Hundred would be an organization purely dedicated to the pursuit of strength. As the name might suggest, we aimed to gather one hundred compatriots in all, and we decided we'd use strength to determine our ranks. The strongest one in the group would take the name of First, the next, Second, and so on. In the future, we would become a traveling band of mercenaries and leave this rotten kingdom behind.

I was the strongest, so naturally, I was given the title of First, and became the group's leader. Nearly every evening, we gathered together and trained to sharpen our skills. Sometimes, we even hunted monsters together.



**AFTER** a year, there were more than twenty of us, and I was proud to call us the strongest group in the country. All those knightly orders had nothing on us. We, and we alone had superior strength.

However, I was foolish. I got carried away, thinking we were really something just because we swung our swords around a bit and hunted weak monsters as a group.

One day, a young man appeared before us in the forest as if sent there to laugh at us and our thoughtless pride. He was an overwhelming force of nature. This man easily beat the top five members of the Hundred at once, then instantly killed a monster it would usually have taken ten people to bring down—and then as if that wasn't enough, he ate the monster's meat.

He looked like a member of that accursed nobility, but his power surpassed that of any human I knew. He said he had gotten strong fighting those vicious monsters every night and eating their immensely poisonous meat. He hadn't been satisfied with that alone, either; he had established contact with us because he wanted to train against people.

This man was truly one who walked the path of strength. Ashamed of our

relative weakness, we begged him to teach us. He promised to give us instruction in fighting once every seven days, and on top of that, he initiated us into his secret method of gaining strength. That's right: just like him, we started fighting monsters and eating their meat. "Monster meat is poisonous, so start by eating the meat of weaker monsters raw," the man explained considerately.

He hadn't given us his name, and when I asked, "Can we call you Zero?" he permitted us to do so, saying, "Yeah, that works fine."

Zero—the man in the zero-th position. I chose it because I thought it would be a fitting alias for the man who guided the Hundred, while at the same time setting him outside our normal ranking.

As Zero had instructed us, we decided to begin eating monster meat, starting with Killer Rabbits. I had an aversion to eating it raw, but I had seen Zero wolf down raw Bloodbear like it was nothing, so, wanting to become like him, I ate it without hesitation.

Naturally, it made me vomit and gave me diarrhea. I trembled with awe at Zero's greatness. He had eaten meat that was even more poisonous and been completely unaffected. *Just how long is it going to take for me to reach his level?*

When I asked, he said that he had been living this way since the age of twelve. What deep devotion! Surely he was aiming to stand at the pinnacle of the entire world.

After a month of eating Killer Rabbit, when I was finally used to the poison, I noticed a change in my body. My agility had increased dramatically. Killer Rabbits were weak monsters, but they had a reputation for swiftness. It felt as if I had absorbed that speed, making it my own. In fact, during training among members of the Hundred, a gap began to form between those who were eating monster meat and those who weren't.

When I noticed, I gave an order to every member of the Hundred: "Eat monster meat! That is now our ironclad law."

I thought some would protest, but surprisingly, they accepted this new rule without complaint. They had seen firsthand the strength we had gained by eating monsters, and they were devoted to Zero, who unerringly visited every

seven days to instruct us. He could easily crush ten members of the Hundred at once—his power was absolute.

Strength, strength is everything! Under Zero’s leadership, our hearts as the Hundred beat as one.



**AFTER** I started training with the organization that called themselves the Hundred, my ability to fight against groups improved by leaps and bounds. The Hundred fought me with an almost abnormal passion; no matter how many times I knocked them down, they got back up and kept coming at me until they passed out. Even the assassins never tried to kill me with that much persistence.

Training with simulated combat was forbidden in Farune, so there was a rule among the Hundred to go by names like First, Second, and so on, to conceal the identities of the group’s members. But your position within the group—and therefore your alias—changed based on your strength. This was extremely confusing.

The Hundred gave me an alias as well: Zero. I hadn’t told Ogma or the other four my identity yet, and I couldn’t very well go by my real name, so this arrangement was perfect. To protect my identity even further, I also wore a helmet that hid my face. It was part of a set of armor I’d found in an ancient underground ruin, a full suit of pitch-black plate armor. It was rather ominous, but it had magical properties and gave me quite the defense boost.

Before I knew it, a year had passed, and the Hundred began to veer off in a strange direction.

“Raise your meat!”





At the command of First (Ogma), the members of the Hundred each held up pieces of monster meat. There were more than a hundred of them by now.

We were in the same ancient underground ruin where I had found my pitch-black suit of armor. It was in the middle of the Forest of Beasts, and the deepest level underground was a massive open space, which made it perfect for gathering in large numbers.

“Eat!” Ogma shouted.

At once, everyone dug in. Some fainted in agony, but none of the others gave them a second thought. Everyone in the Hundred was advised to eat the meat of the most powerful monster they could handle, and those who ate only the meat of weak monsters were disparaged as cowards. If anything, it was seen as more praiseworthy to eat meat that made you faint from the pain.

*I don't really think that's a good measure of someone's worth, though.*

The body of an Earth Dragon was stretched out behind me. At Ogma's request, I had begun bringing with me the monsters I had hunted to eat. Apparently, he wanted to use this as a show of my power as Zero.

I raised my helmet's faceguard and began eating the Earth Dragon's meat, and as I did, the members of the Hundred looked at me with devotion in their eyes. I could hear what they were saying:

“No way...”

“I'd die if I ate that.”

“How many monsters has he eaten in total?”

I'd never been this revered, certainly not as a prince back at the castle, and I had mixed feelings about it.

Once they had all eaten their monster meat and displayed their allegiance to the organization, the fights to determine rank among the Hundred began. These ranking matches were only held on the day of the week when I attended the Hundred's gatherings. On other days, they trained and hunted monsters. Among the Hundred, where all was ruled by strength, ranking was incredibly important, so the fights to determine it were intensely competitive. Even those



in the position of spectator went wild with enthusiasm. In fact, some members had apparently only joined the Hundred to watch the ranking matches.

Watching people fight like crazy *was* pretty entertaining, and I did have fun, but sometimes I spotted a familiar face and my heart skipped a beat. They might've been a castle guard, or a member of a knightly order, or sometimes even the leader of one of those orders. They hid their faces behind masks or helmets, but those who knew them could tell who they were from their build, or the way they fought. According to Ogma, anyone with confidence in their swordsmanship could be admitted to the Hundred regardless of status, and they all competed to be the best. Predictably, the leaders of knightly orders ranked in the top ten, and had proven to be fierce competition for the senior members.

As long as we're on the subject, there were four knightly orders in Farune: the White Knights, the Red Knights, the Black Knights, and the Blue Knights. The White Knights served as the royal guard, the Blue Knights protected the royal capital, and the Red and Black Knights went on the offensive during wartime and took on the duty of fighting monsters. Naturally, this meant that there were more Red and Black Knights in the Hundred, only the occasional Blue Knight, and no White Knights at all.

After all the ranking matches were complete, it was my turn to fight. This had nothing to do with ranking, though; it was done under the pretense that I was teaching them. Everyone's general skill had increased lately, which meant that I couldn't take on the top ten all at once anymore, but I did fight either the top two, the third through fifth, the sixth through tenth, or the eleventh through twentieth at once. Today was the day I would fight the ten people ranking eleventh through twentieth.

When I proceeded to the center of the floor, the ten members of the Hundred made a semicircle surrounding me. Everyone spectating had put a fair amount of distance between themselves and us. If they didn't, the lower-ranking members would be at risk of getting injured.

"Begin!"

At Ogma's command, I charged my sword with mana and swept it sideways,

firing off an attack into the middle of my opponents. This was called Sonic Blade, and it was a technique my master had used.

She had used it by instinct, so she hadn't directly taught it to me, but it was cool, and it had looked useful for attacking enemies from a distance. So, after investigating various techniques and going through a bunch of trial and error, I had learned how to use it myself. As it happened, the hero, my ancestor, had apparently been able to use Sonic Blade as well, so it was recorded in a document in the castle. That had been very helpful.

I couldn't knock down the top-ranking members of the Hundred with just a single attack of Sonic Blade. But, whether they withstood it or dodged it, their formation broke down, and that was what I was aiming for. Next, I charged at the twentieth member first, who had needed to give everything he had just to block my Sonic Blade. I landed a flying kick on his torso, sending him soaring all the way over to the spectators. I hadn't used my sword, because a kick was easier to chain into my next movement—instantly striking number eighteen with my sword. He barely blocked it with his own sword, and when I forcefully pressed in, I landed an attack on his shoulder. He covered his shoulder with his hand, made a pained expression, and fell to his knees.

During that time, my other opponents had all rushed my position. There were still eight of them left. I grasped their intentions so I could evade the attacks coming at me from all sides, weaving my way between them and landing hit after hit. I knocked seventeen out with a palm strike to the chest, but kneeing nineteen in the face gave twelve room to slash at me from my exposed side.

I blocked it with my left palm. Needless to say, if I had taken his attack normally, my fingers would have been cut off. But, I knew a technique that let me create an invisible shield by focusing mana in my palm, though it only worked for short periods of time. This was a skill that the Demonic Monkeys living deep in the forest used, and they had forced me into some tough fights over the past year. After eating large quantities of their meat and training until I was ready to drop, I had finally, recently acquired the skill, and that meant there was no way I wasn't going to take advantage of it here.

Secretly chuckling to myself at stunned twelve and the astonished reactions of the crowd, I kicked him, knocking him out of the fight. After that, I easily

crushed the remaining five.

## VI: Chrom, the Commander of the Black Knights

I first heard about the organization called the Hundred from my subordinates, among whom it had been a whispered rumor. They said there was a group that spent their days constantly fighting, and hunted monsters and ate their meat. Apparently, this group had also gathered a great deal of support from the common people, and their influence was only growing by the day. There were even several Black Knights who had joined.

I was at a loss for what to do. I was grateful that the Hundred hunted monsters. After all, that made our jobs easier. Monsters showed up all the time, so we knights only bothered killing the ones that caused the most damage. The other option, requesting the help of adventurers, was costly. The upshot was that we simply didn't have the personnel necessary to take down every monster—except in the areas near the capital, which were under the jurisdiction of the Mages' Guild. The Hundred hunted monsters on their own initiative, so the people must have warmly welcomed their help.

But there was one issue: they ate monster meat. That was suspicious. Even children had the common sense to know that monster meat was poisonous. This organization disregarded all that, eating the flesh of monsters and drinking their blood. It was possible that they were the minions of some heretical religion, and now that some of my subordinates were participating, I couldn't ignore it.

So, I decided to try joining the Hundred. I wanted to withhold judgment until I could see them with my own eyes and listen to what they had to say with my own ears. Depending on what I learned, I was prepared to order the Black Knights to take them down, if necessary.

Going undercover was easy. The Hundred accepted everyone, regardless of gender, age, or status, and when I joined, they didn't do anything in particular to confirm my identity. They seemed to suspect that I was a knight, but they probably never imagined I was a commander of a knightly order.

I joined a branch of the Hundred in a nearby town, and there, they rigorously

taught me basic sword forms, how to hunt monsters and eat their meat, and so on. The senior members were always there for support during the hunting and eating, making sure that no one was hurt or killed.

I was surprised to see that they had a highly standardized process for the whole thing. Those with promise were permitted to participate in the ranking matches at the group's headquarters. I was confident in my swordsmanship, so I had assumed I would be able to go quickly—but first, I had to be able to eat monster meat.

According to the head of the town's branch, "With your skill with a sword, you could make it in the ranking matches without a problem, but if you're in the Hundred, it's ironclad law that you eat monster meat. No matter how strong you may be, if you can't eat monster meat, you'll be seen as a weak-willed coward. And besides," he added, "you should eat the meat for your own good. I know it tastes bad, but once you get used to it, you're guaranteed to grow stronger."

This was easier said than done. The piece of Killer Rabbit they made me eat was unbelievably nasty. It was so horrible, in fact, that I suspected they may have found out who I was and were trying to poison me.

Vomiting and diarrhea were par for the course in the beginning. Apparently, it took a month to adapt. That was rough. However, after a month passed, I did in fact get used to it, and besides that, my agility improved. It seemed that monster meat really did have positive effects. And as soon as I could eat monster meat, my participation in the ranking matches was instantly approved.

The Hundred's base was on one floor of a dungeon in the Forest of Beasts. Because it was in the forest, I naturally had to fight monsters to get there, as if even the path to headquarters was a test of my strength.

The Hundred was an even crazier organization than I had imagined. They used an entire floor of a dungeon, shaped like an arena, and every night, they ate monster meat and indulged in full-contact sparring against each other. Actually, their matches were more extreme than that, because they never surrendered, not even when you normally would during regular sparring. They fought until one of the competitors collapsed, which meant that every member of the

Hundred was almost completely covered in injuries. It wouldn't have been strange at all if someone had died. But despite that, they all gladly fought.

It was insane.

But it was most definitely entertaining. Even enjoyable.

The Hundred lived by two fundamental principles: the pure pursuit of power, and the starkly defined ranking system that made each member's strength clear. It made sense that these men were total fanatics, given that they clearly craved the thrill of battle, but lived in such a complacent, stagnant kingdom.

I jumped headfirst into that fanaticism. As the commander of a knightly order, I was confident in my strength, so I wanted to test myself and see how far I could go. The people who fought in the ranking matches were strong. Honestly, they were strong enough that the average knight couldn't compete. When I looked at the higher-ranking members, I wasn't even sure that I could win, but as I watched them compete, the desire to give it a try myself welled up inside me.

They always fought with all their might, but they showed respect to each other at the same time. They sought to learn something they could apply to the next battle—the winner from his victory, and the loser from his defeat. Even the spectators were trying to achieve something as they watched.



**FINALLY**, there was the man who stood at the top of the Hundred: Zero. I was shocked to learn a man like him existed in this kingdom. He possessed an overwhelming strength, and he had mastered the legendary techniques said to have been used by the kingdom's founding hero, like Sonic Blade and Mana Barrier. He also imparted the secrets of those techniques to those below him without a trace of reluctance. He had no qualms about aiding his followers in their quest for power. Every single member of the Hundred saw him and strove to be like him.

I came to think of the group's base as sacred. It had been absurd of me to even think about trying to subjugate the Hundred. This place was, without a doubt, the reason I'd been living up until now.



**LATELY**, rumors about the Hundred had even reached the castle. The nobility saw us as a group of savages hunting monsters, but some had a positive opinion of us anyway, and we had particular support from the common people. Mainly, that was because we defeated monsters for them, which they saw as a great help.

*We aren't doing it to help people, though—we're doing it for the monster meat.*

Many of the members of the Hundred had regular jobs, which meant they couldn't travel very far in search of monsters. That was why they mostly hunted the monsters that appeared in the vicinity of towns, and ended up helping out the common people as an added bonus.

Talk about us eating monster meat had also spread, inspiring rumors that we were some kind of heretical religious group.

*You would think that, though, wouldn't you?*

All in all, I didn't want to be exposed as a member of the Hundred at this point. I had no idea what kind of fight Gamarath might try to pick with me if he found out.

Incidentally, around when we'd first met, Ogma had told me he wanted to make the Hundred into a band of mercenaries. He hated Farune, and his goal was to live in another country as a mercenary after building his strength as a warrior. I was thinking about joining him. There was nothing in this kingdom worth staying for, only constant attempts on my life. The members of the Hundred always sung my praises, which to be honest, felt pretty nice. It was much more gratifying to my self-esteem than staying a prince. I was so confident in my abilities by then that I didn't think working as a mercenary would be all that bad, either.

As I was mulling things over, though, the situation took a turn. My father, the king, summoned me to his audience chamber, where I found myself standing before a row of his most powerful vassals.



**“MARS,** do you know of the group called the Hundred?” my father asked. He sounded solemn and kingly—but he didn’t seem all that dignified. The villainous Prime Minister Gamarath standing next to him had much more of an imposing presence than he did.

*Yes, I know them very well! I’m a member! In fact, I’m in charge of them!*

But I couldn’t say that, so I acted like I didn’t know much of anything. “Only rumors,” I said, a safe answer. “I’ve heard it’s a group that hunts monsters.”

“Hrm. It seems like it would be more accurate to say that they hunt monsters in order to eat them,” my father said.

“They eat them?” I replied. “That’s quite an odd practice.” *I’m eating them myself.* Of course, I’d never say that, no matter what.

“Many suspect they may be disciples of a heretical religion.”

“Really? What kind of heresy would that be?”

“Well, those are just rumors. But, there is an issue.”

“What is it?”

One of the nobles in attendance, Count Snail, cut in. “The problem is that they’re eliminating monsters without permission.” He was a thin, anxious-looking man who also happened to be an influential noble in Gamarath’s faction.

“Isn’t hunting monsters a good thing?” I asked. I already knew it was causing the nobles to lose face, but I wanted to force them to say it out loud.

“Exterminating monsters is the duty of the kingdom. For that to be done without the kingdom’s leave is a stain on its honor.”

“Honor? I can’t imagine that anyone would mind *who* exterminates the monsters, so long as it helps the people.”

“No, it’s a grave issue!” Count Snail said indignantly. “The Hundred are beginning to exert a bad influence on those very same people they purport to help! They have forgotten their obligations to the kingdom. There are even towns and villages where refusal to pay taxes is becoming commonplace!”



*That reminds me, there's a member of the Hundred who comes from Snail's domain and said that the count is 'a bastard who does nothing except steal our hard-earned money.'*

"Isn't that just a problem with your rule?" I asked innocently. If he had been governing properly, the Hundred would never have had the chance to become a big issue.

"What?! The prince claims that I'm the problem?" Snail exclaimed, feigning exaggerated disappointment and outrage. "Surely you can't be siding with those barbarians?"

"Putting aside the Hundred," I said, "I do think it's an issue that the people's hearts are drifting away from us..."

Just as I was about to imply that Count Snail was incompetent, though, the king stepped in. "Prince Mars, this isn't just about Count Snail. Several members of the nobility share his opinion, and have requested that the government deal with the situation."

Taking a second look at those around Snail, I saw that all of them were contenders for top spots on the list of "The People's Top Ten Most-Hated Lords." They were also all part of Gamarath's faction. It was plain to see that he was the one pulling the strings here.

"I see," I said. "And, what exactly does that have to do with me?"

"Prince Mars," replied Gamarath. "You will one day become the next king. Unfortunately, you have few accomplishments to your name. That brings us to the present issue. If you defeat the Hundred, everyone—both within the kingdom and without—will surely recognize you as fit to be king. Luckily, you excel in swordsmanship, so I can't imagine that suppressing some rebels will be beyond your capabilities."

*He wants me to suppress the Hundred?* And there was something that bothered me even more than that. "Wait, do I need to accomplish something to become king?" I asked. "Did my father accomplish anything when *he* was a prince?"

Awkwardness filled the room.

Just as I thought, my father hadn't done anything remarkable when he had been a prince. *If he had, I bet Gamarath wouldn't be acting as he pleased now. So he's making me, his son, do what he didn't?*

"I-In any case, this subjugation will rely on the Black Knights and the Red Knights as its core forces," Gamarath continued, trying to keep up appearances. "Your Highness will also bring along several White Knights as your retinue, and assume command of the entire army."

Incidentally, the Black and Red Knights kept a healthy distance between themselves and Gamarath. That was probably why he had assigned them to do this dirty work. And as for my assignment to take command, it was painfully obvious that Gamarath didn't want me to be the next king. Needless to say, this wouldn't actually be perceived as an achievement. The people supported the Hundred, so if I took them down, my popularity would plummet.

*More to the point, he's probably hoping I get killed in the process.*

"Now Mars, you'll do it, right?" my father confirmed. It was doubtful that he fully understood the situation.

"Certainly," I said. "I shall humbly execute your command."

*As the Hundred, let's escape, each and every one of us,* I thought.

## VII: Planning a Rebellion

**ON** the third night after I received my orders to go into battle, I headed to the Hundred's base. I had wanted to go as soon as I could, but more people showed up on the days when ranking matches were held, so I decided it would be more convenient if I went then.

As Zero, adorned in my black armor, I stepped inside.

*...Something's off.* All the members were strangely excited, or to put it another way, they were looking at me eagerly, as if they had been waiting to tell me something.

I entered the room where the top-rankers—the de facto leadership—met. This space had been the dungeon's treasure room, but chairs and tables had since been brought in, and it was now being used as a substitute for a meeting

room. Senior members like Ogma and Aaron were gathered here, but I also spotted the commander of the Black Knights, Chrom, and the commander of the Red Knights, Warren.

Chrom was a descendent of the thief who had been a member of the party of the hero who had founded the kingdom. He was good looking, with black hair. His build was small for a knight, but he was agile and had a distinctive, nimble style of swordsmanship. The emphasis he placed on mobility and stealth was also characteristic of the Black Knights as a whole.

Like Chrom, Warren was also descended from a member of the hero's party, the warrior. He was a large, magnanimous, red-haired man. His fighting style prioritized power, and under his command, the Red Knights had become a specialized assault force. At present, he was ranked seventh in the Hundred, and Chrom was ranked sixth, which meant that they were both allowed to be in this room.

However, I hadn't expected them to be here. I had assumed they would no longer be showing up since receiving orders to take the Hundred down. Maybe, like me, they were torn between their loyalty to their country and the bonds they had forged with their comrades in the Hundred, and they had come to warn the group that they should leave.

*If so, that'll make things quick. Let's bring together everyone who wants to form a mercenary band and get out of here.*

"Zero, listen to this," Ogma said. "The kingdom is trying to wipe us out."

*Aha, so he has heard about it after all! Maybe he's already come up with a plan to flee.*

"Apparently, Chrom and Warren have already received the order," Ogma continued.

Looking at the two commanders, I saw that they were agonizing over this. *Well, they did betray the kingdom and leak secret information to the Hundred, so it makes sense for them to feel that way.*

"We Black Knights and Red Knights have chosen to throw in our lot with the Hundred," Chrom said resolutely. "The only thing left is for you to say the word,

Zero!”

*Huh? What do you mean, ‘throw in your lot’?*

“Justice no longer exists in this corrupt kingdom. If the Hundred combines forces with us Black Knights and Red Knights, our military might will be sufficient to stand against it. With you leading us, Zero, our rebellion will have the chance to succeed!”

*What? Am I hearing things right, or are you even more eager to betray your country than I thought? This must be why everyone in the Hundred seemed so excited! With war against the kingdom on the horizon, their motivation must be through the roof!*

*But hey, wait a minute, this is a seriously crazed group of people. A rebellion? I don’t want to support something like that. It sounds like a real pain. If you’re willing to go that far, I’d much rather flee the country and live freely somewhere else.*

“There will be no rebellion,” I said definitively.

“What do you mean?” Chrom said. They were all looking at me suspiciously.

I took off the black helmet I was wearing. The senior members knew my face, but Chrom and Warren didn’t. When they saw it, they would understand why I couldn’t support a rebellion.

“I can’t believe it! Prince Mars!” Chrom exclaimed. As I had expected, he and Warren were shocked.

“Prince Mars? What’s the meaning of this?!” Ogma shouted. Chrom and Warren’s reactions shook the other members in the room. They had known I was a noble, but the thought that I was a prince had probably never even crossed their minds.

“This is His Highness, Prince Mars, and he has been given the task of leading the army that will be sent to subjugate the Hundred,” Chrom answered. “In the castle, his life is constantly under threat, so he hardly ever shows his face in public, and has been living quietly so as not to stand out. I certainly never would have expected him to have secretly formed the Hundred!”

*'Living quietly so as not to stand out'... I guess I can't deny that. But I wasn't the one who created the Hundred; that was the five I met in the forest.*

"What?! So that means...?!" Ogma was still shocked.

*That's right. I'm a prince, so I can't have any part in a rebellion.*

"For you, Zero, I mean, Prince Mars, this won't be a rebellion, but a just war?" Ogma continued.

*...Come again?*

"Precisely!" Warren said, excited. "It is as Prince Mars says: there will be no rebellion. This war is justified to solidify his position as heir to the throne. Justice is on our side!" He had seemed distressed over the prospect of betraying his country just moments earlier, but that was entirely gone now, and it looked like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

*No, prince or not, I'll be fighting the government, so I'm pretty sure it's still a rebellion.*

"I see! Zero, I mean, Prince Mars must have been preparing for this moment for years! He predicted that this would happen and appeared before us in order to gather like-minded comrades, and built up his power and influence using the Hundred!" Aaron shouted.

*Shut up.*

*And hold on, please don't say such disturbing things about me. It makes me sound like I'm too dangerous to be a proper member of society, okay? Besides, you guys were the ones who went out and recruited more people, not me! And why is it even called the Hundred when there are more than a thousand members?!*

"That's quite right," Warren replied. "Prince Mars had no backer in the castle, and he was isolated. Perhaps because of that, he rarely participated in royal functions and always stayed shut up in his room, which gave him a poor reputation as a mediocre prince. I never would have suspected he was building his own organization that would give him the power he needed to secure royal succession! What keen insight! I am deeply and thoroughly impressed!"

*...Is my reputation in the castle that bad? Well, I do always sleep during the day because I hunt monsters at night, so I guess that makes it look like I've just been staying shut up in my room. But my life is always in danger—what else am I supposed to have done?*

*Also, why is everyone acting like it's obvious that I'm going to fight? I don't really care all that much about being king.*

In an attempt to calm them down, I decided to confront them with the truth. “Even if we did raise an army, the castle itself is a tough opponent. How would we even go about attacking it?”

The castle had originally been constructed as a fort to ward off monsters, so it was well-fortified, and surrounded by a tall wall besides. It wouldn't be easy to get its forces to surrender.

“Bledd, the deputy commander of the Blue Knights, is number twelve in the Hundred,” Chrom answered instantly. “I've made arrangements for him to defect and open the castle gates for us from inside.”

The Blue Knights had the duty of protecting the capital. Their commander was part of Gamarath's faction, but—and this was news to me—the deputy commander was apparently a member of the Hundred. *Is this kingdom going to be all right?*

“What about the Mages' Guild?” I asked. “They're the most vital branch of our kingdom's army. They won't be easy to deal with.” The Mages' Guild was, in fact, the kingdom's main military force.

In Farune, descendents of the wizard who had been in the hero's party served as successive court mages. Those court mages had slowly expanded their influence over the generations, and now, they commanded the Mages' Guild, which was more powerful than any of the knightly orders. With the mobility of their flying magic and the offensive capabilities of their powerful attack spells, they were an irreplaceable force—especially in Farune, where monsters tended to appear without warning all around the kingdom.

It could be said that the present neglect of swordsmanship was due in no small part to the attitude that, with the Mages' Guild around, engaging in hand-to-hand combat was entirely unnecessary. The current court mage, Brahms,

was a vulgar, greedy man with a lust for power. He was also one of the nobles who had joined forces with Gamarath and was corrupting the kingdom, so there was no way he'd ever become our ally.

"The Mages' Guild will certainly present a sizable obstacle," Chrom said. "No matter how many powerful warriors we may have in the Hundred, the Guild will surely be a source of great difficulty in the fight to come. But with you, the prince on our side, won't that no longer be an issue?"

*With me on our side it won't be an issue? Why not?*

"The Mages' Guild's main source of power, Lady Frau, is your fiancée. She'll take our side, surely?"

*...Frau. Oh yeah, now that he mentions it, she is my fiancée. I've only ever seen her a few times though, when we were kids. I've always thought of our engagement as more of an in-name-only kind of thing.*

Frau was Brahms's daughter, and she was naturally gifted in magic. Ever since she was very young, she had been widely known as a child prodigy. These days, she was a dangerous woman; her specialty was lightning magic, and her nickname was the Lightning Empress.

Someone like her was my fiancée because Brahms had taken advantage of her reputation to set her up in the position of consort to the future king. That meant that Brahms had originally been intended as my backer, but he had instantly flipped sides when Gamarath had dangled gold and power in front of him. Back then, there had been rumors that our engagement would be canceled, but now that Chrom mentioned it, it occurred to me that we were still technically engaged.

Despite that relationship, though, we hadn't had any contact for some time. Frau had always had a blank look on her face, even as a kid, and I could never tell what she was thinking. Honestly, I wasn't even sure if she still remembered me. I certainly didn't think she would be our ally.

I said, "No, Frau—"

"I will support Prince Mars." A woman's voice suddenly echoed around the room.



Looking for the source of the voice, I saw a petite, white-haired woman standing at the room's entrance. She had pretty, doll-like features, but her expression was strangely lacking in dynamism.

"Who the hell are you?!" Ogma yelled, and he and the other senior members of the Hundred put their hands to their swords. Their reactions were only natural—someone had abruptly appeared in a spot that had been empty just moments earlier.

"Lady Frau! Why are you here?!" Chrom said, his voice going high-pitched with excitement.

Yes, the woman was Frau, the person we had just been talking about. And after her sudden, almost ghost-like manifestation, I was as thoroughly shocked as the others.

"I am Prince Mars's fiancée. I've always been watching over him," she answered in a monotone voice.

"‘Watching over?’ What does that..." My voice trailed off.

*I don't remember her ever watching over me. In fact, it's been years since we saw each other. Right?*

Frau showed us the back of her right hand. There was a black symbol there that looked like some sort of emblem. "This is a Contract Seal. With it, I can share Prince Mars's sense of sight at any time," she said. "If necessary, I can also instantly teleport to be by his side."

I unconsciously glanced at the back of my own right hand. I had a mark there, too, and it looked exactly the same as hers. Frau *had* cast a strange spell on me at some point when we were kids, and told me it was an engagement ceremony or something. The mark had appeared on both of our hands, and I'd just thought it looked kinda cool, so I hadn't really thought about it much, but...

*Wait. When she says she's 'watching over me,' she doesn't actually mean that she's constantly monitoring me using this crest, does she? We haven't seen each other at all, but she's been one-sidedly watching me this whole time?*

A chill ran down my spine.





*She's bad news...*

"Hey," I started. "I never heard anything about—"

"I'll take over the Mages' Guild. They won't be a problem for your army," Frau said, interrupting me again.

"Oh, to think that the Lightning Empress would join our side!" Chrom exclaimed.

"With this, victory is all but certain!" Warren asserted.

"We'll wipe out those corrupt nobles!" Ogma shouted. Clearly, Frau's declaration had gotten the Hundred even more excited.

Certainly, if the Black Knights and the Red Knights combined with the Hundred, the deputy commander of the Blue Knights turned traitor from inside the castle, and Frau dealt with the all-important Mages' Guild, the only obstacles to a rebellion would be the White Knights and the guards. We did have a chance for victory now, but...

Even if we could take control of the kingdom easily, I had still just been informed of a massive, personal issue.

*How do I get this mark to go away?*

## VIII: Frau

I was born with the ability to see mana. For as long as I can remember, the mana that resides within people, animals, and plants, and that flows through the atmosphere, has been visible to me. So, it's always been easy for me to use magic. The first words I ever spoke were a lightning spell, because I had an affinity for lightning magic. My father was happy. He said that he was certain I was naturally gifted. He taught me various spells, and they were all simple, so I learned quickly, without issue.

When I was six years old, my father brought me along with him on an excursion and I defeated my first monster. Then, I was put in the Mages' Guild, where I defeated monsters every day. I didn't think much of it. I just did it because I was told to. Those days were gray and monotonous.

I met Prince Mars when I was eight, when my father introduced him to me as my fiancé. He was a prince, and he was wearing expensive things, but inside, he was ordinary, even if his mana was a bit higher than average. However, I had just learned how to cast the Contract Seal spell, so it was a good opportunity to use him as a guinea pig. After all, he was my fiancé, so there wouldn't be a problem.

And the spell was a success; I was able to synchronize my senses with his. I also tried teleporting to his location while he slept, and that was also a success. Satisfied, I then lost all interest in him.

When I was eleven, the prince almost died from poison. I was curious about poison, so I used the Contract Seal for the first time in a while to find that the prince was fighting a Killer Rabbit. Then, he ate it.

It was gross.

Why was he eating something like that? My interest was piqued. From then on, I occasionally synchronized with the prince using the Contract Seal. Every evening, he fought a Killer Rabbit, then ate it. Over time, he slowly got better at fighting, and he also became better at eating Killer Rabbits.

Then, he met Cassandra. She was the first person I had ever seen who had more mana than I did. She was a warrior, and the mana within her was like a raging storm. The prince trained with her once every seven days. Actually, was it training, or was it more like abuse?

Either way, the prince's mana grew. He also got physically stronger, but the increase in his mana was what surprised me. The latent mana within a person wasn't supposed to change after they were born. No matter how much you trained in magic, you could never surpass that predetermined limit. That was how my mana was too. However, when he ate Killer Rabbit, the prince's mana increased. It was so subtle that I hadn't noticed as it was happening.

I decided to start eating monster meat myself. Following the prince's example, I started with Killer Rabbit meat. My mana, which I thought would never change, went up ever so slightly.

Watching Prince Mars was entertaining. His days were full of training that brought him close to death, fights with powerful monsters, and attempts on his

life. I watched him every day, and I was never bored. I wanted to keep watching him. I was glad that he was my fiancé.

After three years passed, I had increased my mana with monster meat so much that people started calling me the Lightning Empress. Around that time, my father suddenly announced that he would be canceling my engagement with Prince Mars and setting up an engagement with the second prince—but I refused. In response, I used lightning to destroy half of the house, and my father respected my decision. Dialogue between parents and their children is important.

In the meantime, the Hundred steadily grew in size and strength, until the day they began planning a rebellion. I had never considered fighting against Farune, but it did sound entertaining.

And then, my name came up. Prince Mars hadn't hadn't seen me much, but I had been monitoring...watching over him for a long time. As his fiancée, that wasn't a very polite thing to do. So I decided to join the rebellion. From now on, I would behave more like a proper fiancée.



A week had passed since everyone had decided to start a rebellion for some reason, and a week since I had learned that Frau had been surveilling my private life, so as you might expect, I was mentally exhausted.

And that wasn't all—today was the day of the planned subjugation of the Hundred.

I was riding a horse on the way to the Hundred's base. Surrounding me as my escort were around thirty White Knights.

"Anxious over your first real engagement, Prince? You're looking down," said Bran, the deputy commander of the White Knights. "There's no need to be so tense—you can just leave the fighting to the Black Knights and the Red Knights."

The White Knights under Bran's command had been tasked with guarding me, and it didn't seem like they had any intention whatsoever of joining in the battle against the Hundred.

The White Knights were all members of the nobility, many of high status. However, they had little actual strength. The ones guarding me could handle a sword better than most, but even they were nothing to write home about. In a way, Bran was right: if it really came down to a fight with the Hundred, the White Knights there wouldn't be of any help.

Some other White Knights also spoke. "Indeed. You just need to defeat Zero, their leader."

"If you don't at least do that, it won't be much of an accomplishment. But I've told the Black and Red Knights not to get carried away and defeat Zero themselves, so please don't worry."

Everyone was expecting me to defeat Zero in battle. The general sentiment was that, if I didn't at least do that, I would have to give up my claim to the throne to my younger brother—not that he had any accomplishments to his name, either.

Of course, I had evaded numerous assassination attempts, but that didn't exactly sway anyone to my side. They all saw me as just "that prince who's somehow still alive."

Nearly every noble expected my younger brother to inherit the throne, but there still had to be a good reason to disinherit me. This fight with the Hundred would probably be made into that reason. The plan had to be either that I would lose against the Hundred, or that I would die in battle. The White Knights wouldn't protect me at all—on the contrary, it was very likely that they would try to stab me in the back. They were avidly encouraging me to enter into one-on-one combat with Zero, probably secretly hoping I'd be killed in the fight.

When the location where we were supposed to link up with the Black Knights and the Red Knights came into view, the White Knights expressed their surprise. Each knightly order had around five hundred members in total, and the combined force of the Black Knights and the Red Knights who were here was over a thousand. In other words, they had committed their entire forces to the battle.

"It looks like Sir Chrom and Sir Warren brought along their entire armies."

"But why? The Hundred's just a bunch of commoners playing at being



knights...”

“What a shame to see them getting so serious against a bunch of dirty crooks. What have our kingdom’s knights come to?”

The White Knights all laughed disparagingly at the Black Knights and the Red Knights. They looked down on them—just as they underestimated the strength of the Hundred.

At that moment, Chrom and Warren rode up to me. “Prince Mars, our preparations are complete,” Chrom said. “If at all possible, before we start, I’d like to have a word, please.”

“Rather than speaking with the prince directly, you’ll have to go through us, Sir Chrom,” Bran chastised him pompously. “Besides, I can’t imagine why you’d find it necessary to talk to the *prince* to defeat a foe such as the Hundred.”

This was quite an arrogant attitude to be taking with the commander of the Black Knights. Chrom and the other White Knights ignored him in any case, and only looked at me. It was then that I noticed the Black Knights and Red Knights were surrounding us. I could tell with just a look that they were ready. Neither I nor the White Knights would be able to escape what was coming.

*Why did it have to end up like this? I don’t want the throne that much. All I ever wanted was to survive.*

Still, I couldn’t just abandon the Hundred, the Red Knights, and the Black Knights. Not now, not after all this. They had told me they would follow me when no one else ever had. There was no way I could let them down, so I grudgingly drew my sword and pointed it in the direction of the castle.

“Inform the troops: the enemy awaits at the capital!”

The Black Knights and the Red Knights immediately raised a bellowing cheer.

“Prince! What are you saying?! The enemy is the Hundred!” Bran shouted reproachfully.

I brought my sword down on him. His blood sprayed everywhere and, no longer able to speak, he fell from his horse with a thud. *Well, he was trying to kill me, so it’s his fault, really.*

The Black and Red Knights went wild. *They must really hate these haughty White Knights.*

The other White Knights pressed me. “Prince, have you gone mad?! What have we done to deserve this?”

“You would have made me fight Zero, and whether I won or lost, you were going to ensure I didn’t make it out alive,” I said. “That was the plan, wasn’t it?”

One of the White Knights moaned in disbelief. “How does he...”

*Oh come on. Anyone could figure that out. How stupid do you think I am?*

“Well done, Prince Mars. I knew you had seen through their tricks,” Chrom said, smiling as he cut down a White Knight himself. He did it with no hesitation, like he was squashing a bug.

The remaining White Knights began fearfully begging for their lives. “We... We only did what the deputy commander asked of us...”

“That’s right! We had no choice in the matter. We were just following orders!”

I silently cut down another White Knight, and the Black and Red Knights took care of the rest.

It was possible that someone standing on watch could have just seen us from afar as we cut a swath through the White Knights, and I could have been being monitored with magic as well, so this was now a race against time. I urged my horse to gallop at full speed toward the capital, the Black Knights and the Red Knights following behind me.



**AS** I led the rebel army in its approach on the royal capital, the castle gates were being hastily swung shut. But then their movement stopped, and when it resumed, they were opening back up. Bledd, of the Blue Knights, looked to be right on schedule.

When I entered the gates, Bledd met me with some of his Blue Knights. “Prince Mars, the Blue Knights are now under your command,” he said.

“What happened to the commander?” I asked.

“Over there.” He pointed to a pile of Blue Knights who were dead on the ground, probably the commander and his retinue, killed right after ordering the gates shut.

“In that case, the Blue Knights will move at once to maintain order and prevent confusion from spreading,” I commanded. “We’ll head for the castle.”

“Yes, sir!”

I set off at a gallop. The people of the city who had gathered to see what was going on scrambled out of the way, surprised by my horse’s speed.

At the front of the castle grounds, an armed group was fighting with the castle garrison. They were the Hundred, under Ogma’s command, having gathered in the capital beforehand. My entrance into the city had been their signal to rise up in revolt. The Hundred’s equipment was shabby, even compared to the garrison’s, but the strength of every individual member combined was enough to overcome that disadvantage, and the fight was proceeding in their favor.

The Mages’ Guild still hadn’t made an appearance, either. Frau must’ve skillfully dealt with them.

Because the Hundred had secured a path for me, my infiltration into the castle went smoothly. Inside, the White Knights and the knights tasked with guarding the nobles began to resist. Setting aside the White Knights, the nobles’ guards were all experienced warriors, and they were putting up a good fight against the Black and Red Knights.

However, I defeated the resisting knights and headed for the throne room. I had already sealed all the secret passageways out of the castle that I was aware of beforehand, but if I took too much time, the corrupt nobles, including Gamarath, might still be able to escape. Cutting down some nobles that I had always hated along the way, I arrived at the throne room, but the moment I entered, my body detected something unexpected.

There was a party of adventurers waiting for me there.

## IX: The Seizure of the Royal Capital

***“PRINCE Mars is leading an insurrection.”***

When Brahms heard the report, he couldn't believe his ears. He had no idea why Prince Mars, who was supposed to have gone to take down the suspicious group known as “the Hundred” or something, had decided to start a rebellion. Prince Mars didn't have a backer or any supporters to speak of, so he didn't have the troops for a revolt, even if he *had* wanted to lead one.

Brahms asked for more details and learned that after Prince Mars had headed out to subjugate the Hundred, he had linked up with the Black Knights and the Red Knights, then killed the deputy commander of the White Knights before eliminating the rest of them. Finally, he had begun an advance on the capital with the Black Knights and Red Knights in tow.

Brahms didn't understand what the prince's connection was with any of these knights. He had never had the impression that Prince Mars was particularly close with Chrom or Warren. In fact, Chrom hated the capital and rarely showed his face in the castle, so he really shouldn't ever have come into contact with Prince Mars.

Regardless, all these knights combined were definitely strong enough for a rebellion.

Prime Minister Gamarath then gave Brahms an urgent request: lead the Mages' Guild in subduing the rebellion. Brahms felt momentarily worried—*is it really all right to subjugate the two largest knightly orders in the kingdom?* But on the other hand, doing so would leave the Mages' Guild as the only reliable fighting force in the kingdom, and that would lead to a rise in Brahms's status. He might even be able to accrue more authority than Gamarath himself.

After weighing the pros and cons of the situation, Brahms accepted Gamarath's request, then hurriedly headed to the Mages' Tower.

The Tower was an institution in the castle where mages worked around the clock researching magic, and it was also Brahms's stronghold. On the way, he thought about his daughter, Frau.

Frau was a magical prodigy, but she lacked...feeling. She had loved magic since she was a small child, but had never had any interest in anything else. However, she had insisted that Prince Mars remain her fiancé. That was unusual

for her. Brahms had wanted to cancel her engagement with Prince Mars—who could have died any day at this point—as soon as possible, but when he brought up the subject with Frau, she had violently refused.

All young people want to rebel against their parents every so often, but surely not many children have done so by suddenly shooting out lightning and destroying their family mansion. Fearing for his life, Brahms had decided to pretend the whole thing had never happened, but he couldn't help wondering how Frau would react to this latest news. He didn't know what Frau saw in the boring, unremarkable Prince Mars, but there was a rebellion going on. No matter how little Frau cared about anything besides magic, Brahms was sure that at the very least, she would understand what it meant for Prince Mars to be a traitor.

By the time Brahms arrived at the Mages' Tower, he had come to a conclusion: at worst, he could take command of the Mages' Guild without deploying Frau, and bring down Prince Mars himself.

But when Brahms opened the door to the Mages' Tower, Frau was already standing in front of him, the mages all lined up behind her. *Did they already get word to prepare for battle?* Brahms wondered. Just then, Frau opened her mouth to speak.

"Father, your precious daughter has the request of a lifetime for you," she said. Along with her expressionless face, her delivery was also completely monotone.

Frau had cute features, but her blank expressions negated any potential charm. *She has the request of a lifetime for me?* Brahms had a bad feeling. "Frau, this is an emergency. Prince Mars is rebe—"

"Retire," Frau interrupted him.

"What?"

"Hand over your title and the estate to me and retire, Father," she pressed Brahms, her face as emotionless and doll-like as ever. "The mages are in agreement as well."

Looking at the mages standing behind Frau, Brahms saw a lifeless expression

on every face. They definitely didn't look like they necessarily agreed. *How the hell did she persuade them?* At worst, maybe she had used magic to influence them.

"Hang on, Frau," Brahms said. "I'm nowhere near the age to retire. And even if I wanted to give you the estate, you're a woman. It's impossible for a woman to be head of a family."

Frau had an outstanding aptitude for magic, but the inflexible world of the nobility wasn't about to let her be her father's heir. There was hardly any precedent for it.

"No? That's disappointing," Frau replied. She didn't look disappointed in the slightest, though. In fact, her face hadn't so much as moved a muscle. She didn't seem to be listening to him at all. And there was a much more pressing issue—her right hand was beginning to shine blue. She was using magic without an incantation. This was one of the reasons she was known as a magical prodigy.

"Wait, what do you think you're doing, Frau? What are you planning?"

"Rebellion," Frau replied curtly. Then, she activated her spell.



**WAITING** for me when I arrived at the throne room was, it seemed, a standard party of adventurers: a swordsman, a warrior, a priestess, a wizard, and a thief. Behind them, my father, the king, was sitting on the throne with a stern look on his face, but he also appeared troubled. I was forcibly reminded that he was the kind of man to neglect to investigate my mother's death properly. *He probably doesn't care which side wins, as long as he can make it out with his life.*

Beside him was the portly Gamarath, who looked confident and relaxed.

*The wizard is reciting some sort of spell. She's probably targeting me with Gravity.* For the first time in a while, my body felt heavy. *Maybe this is sad, but I actually feel a little nostalgic.*

"You can't move, can you, Prince?" Gamarath said triumphantly when he saw me stop in my tracks. "I took the liberty of restricting your movement with

magic. You surprised me with your sudden rebellion, but I've employed a party of A-rank adventurers for exactly this eventuality. The army is gathering from the surrounding regions and will soon relieve us," he declared loudly. "It's over."

He did indeed seem convinced that I was unable to move, which must have been why the adventurers weren't showing any signs that they were about to attack. It was hard to move like this, though, so I decided to take off my armlet, the one from my master that made my body three times heavier.

When the armlet fell to the floor with a clank, my body instantly became lighter. I tried a few practice swings with my sword, and it made a pleasant whooshing sound as it cut through the air. I felt even more agile than usual.

"Hey! What's going on?!" the swordsman, who looked to be the leader of the adventurers, yelled at the wizard. "You cast Gravity on him, right?!"

"I did! And it's definitely working!" the wizard shouted back, sounding panicked. She aimed her wand at me again, double-checking the spell.

"Hey, don't worry. Gravity's definitely affecting me," I gently explained, feeling some pity for her. "I'm just used to it, that's all. Your magic is working just fine."

The wizard paused. "Huh? You're *used* to Gravity? I've never heard of someone like that!" she shouted hysterically.

At the same time, the thief nimbly ran up to me and threw something in my direction. I swiped it away with my sword. It seemed to have been a pouch, and it burst when I hit it, covering me with the powder that had been inside.

"Gotcha!" the thief said smugly. "Now you're paralyzed! Get him before he can move!"

*Was that poison? I see, now that he mentions it, I do feel tingly.* My body felt a bit off, so I decided to take off the ring of poison for the first time in a while. When I did, the poison resistance my body had been using to combat the ring returned in full, and I stopped feeling any effects from the thief's poison. The warrior, however, having assumed that I could no longer move, readied his sword and rushed me. He was probably the party's tank, and was trying to

detain me.

He was pretty fast—it was clear he wasn't an A-class warrior for nothing. I reflexively swiped horizontally at his torso with my sword. Having taken off the armlet and the ring, I couldn't control the amount of force I put into my swing, and the black blade of my longsword cut through the shield he was holding like it was a soft stick of butter. At that moment, the seasoned warrior looked absolutely enraged at his impending senseless death. The inky blade severed his body cleanly in two at the waist, his steel armor no different from his cloth outfit in the face of my sword's deadly edge. After fending off countless assassins, I had gotten used to this sort of scene. There was no way around it. My life mattered most here.

“Geh!” Gamarath and the king gagged, turning their eyes away from the grisly sight.

“Hey! Can't you heal him somehow?!” the swordsman yelled, this time at the priestess.

“Of course not! Even God's power has its limits, you know!” the priestess snapped back. “If you want to bring *that* back, you'd better ask a necromancer!”

*Yeah, if you reconnected those two pieces and revived him, he'd probably come back as a Ghoul or some other undead creature.*

“How dare you do that to Heinz!” the thief shouted. Overcome by anger, he threw a knife at me. Apparently, the name of the warrior I had bisected was Heinz.

Unlike the poison pouch he had thrown earlier, the knife came at me with considerable speed. I twisted my body out of the way, avoiding it instead of blocking it. However, I was unable to dodge it completely, and the knife grazed my upper arm as it flew by.

“That's what you get!” The thief smiled savagely and pointed at me. “That knife was coated with poison from a Poison Lizard. It's over for you now!”

I'd eaten a Poison Lizard before. They were slimy, black monsters covered with purple spots, and they spat liquid poison. Everything about them screamed



“Danger! Poison!” so I hadn’t wanted to eat one, but my master had forced me to.

“A Poison Lizard?” I said. “Yeah, those things sure taste horrible...” I looked at the wound on my arm and reminisced about old times. Needless to say, I hardly felt any of the poison’s effects.

“Huh?” the thief exclaimed, caught off guard. “You *ate* one? A Poison Lizard? Don’t you know that they’re basically big piles of pure poison? Poison Lizard blood even has value on the trading market as an ingredient, *for use in poison!*”

“No wonder it tasted so bad. I’ve only eaten one of them myself.”

The thief wrinkled his nose, put off by what I was saying.

*Hey, hold on, don’t make faces at me. I have feelings too, you know?*

“Chad, cut the chit-chat and divert his attention! Mika, stop with the ineffective Gravity spell and get an attack spell ready! Luida, cast a support spell on me!” The swordsman ordered his party members around, which seemed to shake them out of their confusion. With a start, they began to move. The thief practically flew around me, the wizard began reciting a new spell, and the priestess prayed for divine protection for the swordsman.

Meanwhile, with the effect of Gravity gone, my body felt even lighter. Her Gravity spell hadn’t been *completely* ineffective, after all, and now, I was easily able to keep up with the thief’s movements. As he threw knives at me from a distance, I fired off Sonic Blade just as quickly, matching his speed. The literally piercing wind blasted away Chad’s knives and ripped at his body.

“Gaaah!” he screamed. He had tried to evade at the last moment, so he had avoided a direct hit, but his body was still nearly torn apart.

“That’s Sonic Blade! How the hell does he know a swordmaster-level technique?! Luida, can you heal Chad?!” the swordsman shouted, surprised. He looked expectantly at the priestess.

“He’s practically torn to shreds! This isn’t like sewing a stuffed animal back together!” Luida waved her hand from side to side, gesturing as if to say that it was impossible. “If I could fix that, I’d quit being an adventurer and live a pampered life as a saint!”

*These guys are pretty entertaining*, I thought, but just as I did, the wizard, Mika, finished reciting her spell.

“Crimson flames! Reduce my foe to ashes!”

That was a high-level fireball spell called Raging Flames. The fire took the form of a giant snake, slithering across the floor and attacking me. It was impossible to avoid.

Instantly, I deployed an invisible shield to block it. The shield was a type of magic barrier, so if I had more mana than my opponent, it was possible to block their spell.

With an explosion, her Raging Flames crashed into my shield, then dispersed.





“That was my strongest spell...” Mika sank to the floor. At the failure of the spell she had been so confident in, she had lost all motivation to continue.

The swordsman looked baffled. “Magic Barrier? Only high-level monsters can use that technique!”

*You’re right, you’re exactly right. It took me a lot of work to learn that. I’d had to fight against countless Demonic Monkeys and eat their meat each and every time until I finally acquired it. But if you’re surprised, then I’m satisfied.*

By now, the swordsman was pale with fear, the wizard, Mika, was slumped on the floor, and the priestess, Luida, seemed to be searching for a way out of the room. They had completely lost their will to fight.

“Can you get out of my way?” I asked. “I’m not here to kill you.” Though I had killed two of them with the excess power resulting from removing my ring and armlet, I didn’t have any hard feelings against any of them. It was fine with me if they ran.

“I won’t back down like this, not after you killed Heinz and Chad! I’m an A-rank adventurer!” The swordsman roused himself, inspired by his anger over his friends’ deaths. To show that he still had the desire and resolve to face me, he held his sword at the ready, aiming it right between my eyes. Luida, who should have been right next to him, instead sprinted at top speed over to the wall to avoid getting caught in the crossfire.

Then, in a single instant, the swordsman closed the gap between us and slashed at me. Perhaps thanks to Luida’s support spell, it seemed like his physical abilities had been boosted. I blocked his first attack with my sword, but he continued his offensive, letting loose another without a moment’s delay. I had an edge in terms of pure power and speed, but he surpassed me as a swordsman when it came to technique. His chain of flowing strikes gave me no room to counterattack.

*I see. In a pure sword fight, he might have a chance to beat me.*

In a pure sword fight.

The instant our swords crossed, I roundhouse kicked my opponent. His body folded and he went flying, crashing against the wall. He had probably broken

several bones, but he tried to stand up anyway, using his sword to support himself while he spit blood.

“Impossible... A kick? So he isn’t a swordsman, but a monk...?”

“Who knows?” I replied. “My master fought this way, that’s all.” This was, in fact, the master swordswoman Cassandra’s style. She had a policy of using anything she could to win, without getting hung up on choosing just one fighting style. She had even beaten monsters to death with just her fists a few times. I had actually felt sorry for those particular monsters.

I didn’t know whether this swordsman had heard what I said, but he fell over, collapsing to the floor.

*Hmm, it really does look like I can’t control my power when I take off the armlet and the ring. He might be dead.*

“Well. You’re the last one left, Gamarath,” I said. I approached him straightaway, to conceal the bad taste that killing three people by mistake had left in my mouth.

Gamarath backed up all the way to the wall, his face frozen in an expression of terror. My father, sitting on the throne, gazed on as if none of this had anything to do with him.

## X: The Man Named Gamarath

**HOW** *did it end up like this?*

As Gamarath watched Prince Mars approach him, all the events leading up to this moment flashed through his mind.



**FIFTEEN** years ago, when the previous queen and her family’s despotic rule of the kingdom reached its height, Gamarath, who was also prime minister then, stood up to them. They were squandering the country’s finances, filling positions as they pleased, and executing all who resisted them to maintain their reign of terror. Gamarath felt that a crisis was fast approaching: if things continued as is, Farune would collapse under its own weight.

Gamarath was a brilliant politician, so on the surface, he went along with the

queen and her family, all the while secretly rallying forces against them and gathering evidence of their crimes. Then, after persuading the king to his side, he prepared everything for an official denunciation of the queen, a sort of palace coup.

He arrested the queen and confined her to her quarters, then killed her, but made her death look like it had been caused by an illness. Then, to get rid of the root of the problem for good, he massacred every one of the queen's relatives and their cronies. He split their property and authority between himself and the powerful nobles he had made his allies.

Gamarath knew he ought to have returned the defeated rulers' wealth to the country, but he had promised it as a reward to the nobles in exchange for their support. On top of that, if he didn't make any displays of greed himself, he wouldn't be trusted as a comrade of the nobility.

He wanted to avoid all factional disputes among the nobles so he could run the kingdom properly. To that end, he secured concessions from them, then distributed them to bring the nobility firmly under his control. Then he could start gradually improving the kingdom. Progress advanced at a snail's pace, and so long as the nobility existed, Gamarath could only make political change by getting his hands dirty.

His one worry was the former queen's son, Prince Mars. He was still very young, so naturally, he hadn't participated in any of the corruption. Also, the jealous queen hadn't allowed the king to take any concubines, so the prince was his only child. That meant it was impossible for him to charge Prince Mars with anything or have him disinherited.

Even though Gamarath had purged the queen's family, he knew it wouldn't be long before nobles started trying to interfere in the government by getting Prince Mars—the presumed next king—on their side. So, Gamarath installed his own daughter in the position of queen. Like him, she wasn't much to look at, but she was well-educated, and he was proud of her. She was well-versed in politics and economics, much more so than your run-of-the-mill civil official. She cooperated with her father, helping curb the widespread financial waste in court, and eventually, she gave birth to a long-awaited baby boy.

*Finally, I can disinherit Prince Mars,* Gamarath thought at the time.

Those who had been persecuted by the queen's family already felt animosity toward Prince Mars. They attempted to assassinate the boy without Gamarath even having to order them to, and he did nothing to stop them. Prince Mars wasn't to blame for anything, but now that there was another heir, his death would be even more convenient.



**NEVERTHELESS**, Prince Mars survived. He evaded everything from poison, to assassins, to traps made to look like fatal accidents, and he survived. He had a terrifying vitality that would have been unthinkable in an ordinary person. Count Randolph had tried poisoning the prince and ended up getting poisoned himself. That wasn't the work of the prince—he must have had allies. But it was still a mystery who those allies were.

*This is bad*, Gamarath had thought. Prince Mars's disinheritance was already determined, but if he had a powerful noble as an ally, that noble might undermine the whole operation by objecting on the grounds that the prince had done nothing wrong.

It was at that time that the group known as the Hundred began to gain power in Farune. From what Gamarath had heard, they hunted and ate monsters. Not only that, but they also competed against one another, constantly training to improve their skills. Their leader was an unknown man by the name of Zero, who was particularly skilled with a sword.

They were a highly suspicious bunch, but they were convenient for Gamarath. He planned to order Prince Mars to subdue them, under the guise of achieving something as prince. It would have been best if the prince and Zero killed each other, but Gamarath wouldn't have minded either if Zero just took the prince out.

Next, taking into account the possibility that the prince might once again survive, Gamarath assigned the deputy commander of the White Knights, Bran, to the prince as his escort. Bran's entire family had been executed by the former queen, so he held a grudge against her son. It was easy to get him to agree to the assassination.



Finally, to cover absolutely all his bases, Gamarath also hired some adventurers. He would need to have an extra force in reserve to deploy if the scenario unfolded in an unforeseen direction.

But despite all his preparation, the situation spiraled beyond Gamarath's wildest imagination, turning into a complete nightmare. Bran was quickly killed, both the Black Knights and the Red Knights went over to the prince's side, a group that appeared to be the Hundred rose up in the capital, and even the Blue Knights, who were supposed to protect the city, seemed to be colluding with the prince. Gamarath's last ray of hope was the Mages' Guild, but its leader, Brahms, couldn't be reached.

*How did it end up like this?* Gamarath had absolutely no idea. The prince shouldn't have had any backers or power of his own, but knightly orders had flocked to his side. Were Sir Chrom or Sir Warren allied with the prince? They were incompetent in everything but sword fighting—it was impossible to imagine them having the brains to plan this coup. Could the man named Zero be the prince's ally?

By now, none of that mattered anyway. In an unbelievable display of power, the prince had slaughtered Gamarath's trump card, the A-rank adventurers. An A-rank party was said to be powerful enough to match an entire knightly order, but the prince hadn't even broken a sweat. Did he possess the power of his ancestor, the hero?



**PRINCE** Mars approached, and Gamarath realized that it was all over for him. He at least wanted to save his daughter and grandson's lives. *Can I beg him to spare them somehow?* It was impossible to imagine this demonic man would listen, not after killing those adventurers without blinking an eye.

As Gamarath despaired, a group of men entered the throne room. They were the leaders of the Hundred, evidently. The swords they held were stained red, their bodies covered with the blood of their victims.

"Zero, we dealt with those noble bastards," the one who looked strongest said. "Gamarath is the last one left."

Prince Mars turned around to look at him. "You dealt with them? All of

them?”

“Yeah, the whole stinking lot of ‘em. Now things will finally get better around here.”

Gamarath trembled with fear. Prince Mars had responded when that man had called him Zero—so *he* was Zero! This could only mean one thing: Prince Mars himself had formed the Hundred and masterminded the entire rebellion. The prince hadn’t had any noble allies or collaborators after all. Instead, he had created with his own hands the organization that would lend him strength, enticed each of the knight commanders to join, and trained, all in preparation for this day.

What resourcefulness, what strength! Gamarath had judged Prince Mars to be mediocre, merely struggling to survive, but now he realized his mistake.

At the same time, Gamarath had mixed feelings about the deaths of the nobles. They had been his comrades in getting rid of the former queen, but after that, they had only ever been an impediment in the affairs of state. Besides, he often found them pretty unpleasant to be around.

After learning of the deaths of the nobles, Prince Mars thought for a moment, then looked at the king. “Father, about the throne...”

“It’s yours,” the king replied without hesitation. He even looked somewhat relieved.

*He was never fit to be king*, Gamarath thought. *If he hadn’t tolerated the former queen’s despotism, the kingdom would never have gotten this chaotic in the first place.* Even when Gamarath had tried to convince the king to get rid of the queen so as to avoid the kingdom’s impending ruin, he hadn’t agreed. It had taken threats to finally get him to comply. He had always been weak and indecisive.

Now that Mars had confirmed he was going to be the next king, he looked back over at Gamarath.

*So it’s finally over*, Gamarath thought, but then Mars said something unbelievable.

“Gamarath, you’ll be in charge of the government.”

“Huh?” Gamarath exclaimed. *I’ll be in charge of the government?* He couldn’t comprehend what the prince was saying.

“Hey, Zero! What are you saying?!” the strongest Hundred member shouted. “Everything’s his fault! And he tried to assassinate you so many times!”

That was a natural reaction. Overthrowing Gamarath had seemingly been the goal of the rebellion, after all.

“But he failed. I would never die from something like that anyway,” Mars said.

Chrom interjected. “But you know what entrusting the government to him means, right...?” The Black Knights didn’t seem to think highly of Gamarath either.

“I use everyone who’s useful. That’s all there is to it.” Mars showed no signs of budging on appointing Gamarath.

“But, my prince... Why me...” Gamarath groaned. He was the one who could believe this twist the least.

“Remember, Gamarath: all the nobles are dead,” Mars said, his words laced with meaning. “You’re the only one I can put in charge of the government. So it’s all yours to do with as you please.”

*All the nobles are dead, so I can do what I want?* Gamarath tried to think through his confusion. Certainly, with the noble establishment gone, this was an excellent opportunity for him to implement his ideal political system. His most dearly held wish was to move away from the old, noble-centric government and toward a centralized state based on the newest legal principles.

*But how does Prince Mars know that?* Only a small, select group of people like his daughter and his most trusted officials knew his true goal, and it was hard to imagine them letting it slip to an outsider.

*What if... Did Prince Mars notice signs of the small reforms I was furthering behind the backs of the nobility? Yes, that has to be it.* After all, the prince was, apparently, extraordinary enough to build influence and execute a coup all on his own. He had to have considered the future administration of the kingdom, thought about whom to entrust with it, and decided how he wanted things run. He must have noticed Gamarath’s inconspicuous, painstakingly slow political

reform.

Tears streamed down Gamarath's cheeks. He had lamented the state of the kingdom more than anyone, and had been scorned as disloyal because of it, but there had been someone who judged him fairly. Gamarath had given up on ever being appreciated, so long as his actions were for the sake of the kingdom, but beneath it all, he had craved recognition for his efforts more than anything else.

*This man is, without a doubt, a king among kings.* In his mind, Gamarath swore his loyalty to Prince Mars.

Then he knelt down in front of him. "I swear to unswervingly carry out my duty, even at the cost of my life."

## XI: The Royal Succession

*I defeated the adventurers, so all I have to do now is cut down Gamarath and it'll be over,* I thought, but just at that moment, the other members of the Hundred spilled into the throne room.

"Zero, we dealt with those noble bastards," Ogma said. "Gamarath is the last one left."

*You dealt with all of them? The nobles? Every single one?*

I was dumbfounded by what the Hundred had done. The nobility were definitely a bunch of incompetents, but that didn't mean they were *completely* unnecessary. They had their own role to play; they carried out the affairs of government, organized civil officials, and managed their domains.

*How do these idiots think they're going to oversee administration of the kingdom without the nobles?*

Chrom and Warren were nobles, but they cared more about building muscle than institutions, and the rest of the Hundred had never held anything lighter than a sword. I couldn't let them run the government. The second I did, they would turn the kingdom into hell on earth. Every citizen's social status would be determined by ranking matches. I didn't want to live in a place like that.

Thinking I might as well have the king stay the same as before, I turned to my father. "Father, about the throne..."

"It's yours." He decided to abdicate the throne in a split second.

*Hey, at least hesitate for a little longer. You could have just said, 'It's still too early,' or 'You aren't fit to be king,' right? You basically just handed the crown to me, and what am I supposed to do with it? I just got swept up in the excitement and happened to start a rebellion. I don't actually want to be king.*

*...This is bad. I don't care at all about politics. The whole thing sounds like way more trouble than it's worth. Just as I was wondering what to do, there was Gamarath, right in front of me. Oh, there's one noble left. And he's an experienced politician, to boot.*

"Gamarath, you'll be in charge of the government."

*There's no one else I can force to take this job.*

"Huh?" Gamarath exclaimed, dumbstruck.

"Hey, Zero! What are you saying?!" Ogma shouted. "Everything's his fault! And he tried to assassinate you so many times!"

*Shut up, you idiot! The only reason we're in this mess is because you all slaughtered the nobility without even thinking!*

Cursing him internally, I replied, "But he failed. I would never die from something like that anyway."

Chrom was the next to interrupt. "But you know what entrusting the government to him means, right...?"

*And what about it? Are you going to do it? I heard that when you and Warren were young, you both skipped your statecraft classes and went gallivanting around the city instead. Am I mistaken?*

*You've been way too crazy about the Hundred, lately. You're starting to think of anyone who isn't strong as less than human. There's no way I can let you guys run the kingdom!*

"I use everyone who's useful. That's all there is to it," I said. I wanted to shout, "I can't use you guys, so my only choice is to use Gamarath!" But of course, I held myself back. I didn't want to agitate a bunch of men who were already covered in blood and holding swords.

“But, my prince...” Gamarath asked. “Why me...”

*He doesn't understand the situation either.*

“Remember, Gamarath: all the nobles are dead,” I reminded him. “You’re the only one I can put in charge of the government. So it’s all yours to do with as you please.” *There aren't any nobles besides you left, so you're my only option. I don't want to do it myself, so feel free to do whatever you want.*

For some reason, Gamarath burst into tears and kneeled. “I swear to unswervingly carry out my duty, even at the cost of my life.”

*I guess I did save his life. That's something to be happy about. Do your best, if you don't want to die.*

*...Now, the castle is in a horrible state. There are dead bodies and pools of blood everywhere. Who's going to clean all this up?*



**THE** kingdom calmed down faster than I expected, in just a few days. Surprisingly, thanks to Gamarath’s nearly abnormally enthusiastic work, there was immediately a ceremony for my coronation, and I got married at the same time. Though I could’ve done without the wedding part.

Needless to say, Frau was the lucky lady. During our brief civil war, after switching to my side and bringing the entire Mages’ Guild with her, she had wiped out the armies that the nobles of Gamarath’s faction had deployed near the capital. Then, she had continued the fight, mercilessly attacking any force that resisted. Thanks to her, I had easily been able to restore order to the kingdom. Her actions were recognized as the most important contribution to the war, and everyone had pushed for us to get married right away.

But I had heard the detailed reports. Frau had used the rebellion as an excuse to use anti-human magic—which she’d usually never get away with—as much as she felt like. Her actions had been the epitome of cruelty: she had used mind magic to manipulate enemy soldiers into killing each other, and resurrected dead soldiers before forcing their undead forms to attack their comrades. Perhaps that was why the enemy army had folded so quickly. As a result, the civil war had come to a swift conclusion, but according to Frau herself, “There

were a few more spells I wanted to try, like magic that uses human sacrifices to summon demons.”

*Why do I have to marry someone whose sense of morality is so conspicuously missing? Is this country going to be all right with someone like her as queen? It's entirely possible that, say, after a string of mysterious disappearances across the kingdom, it'll turn out that the queen was using people for magical experiments. Does nobody see the problem with that?*

I was reluctant to agree to the marriage, but the Hundred aggressively pressured me to marry her, basically saying things like, “She’s a wonderful woman. We can’t imagine anyone besides Lady Frau being fit for you, Prince Mars. Mainly in terms of strength.”

*You know, queens need to be dignified and intelligent, and all that. She doesn't need to be strong.*

*This is my life you're talking about here!*

Putting all that aside, after adeptly—and singlehandedly—managing the coronation and the wedding, Gamarath’s next objective was to confiscate all noble-owned property. From what I heard, he brought along a few especially intimidating-looking men (even for the Hundred) and went around the capital visiting the mansions of deceased nobles and seizing any and all property. This was done under the pretext that the nobles had been guilty of embezzlement, accepting bribes, and abuse of authority.

Naturally, their families resisted, but seeing as Gamarath was at the root of the problem himself, he had evidence to prove everything. When the families blamed him—“You did the same things we did, Lord Gamarath!”—he just smiled brightly in response. “That’s right,” he told them. “That’s why I returned my entire fortune to the treasury.”

He was telling the truth. Gamarath had transferred his entire estate to the government, then moved into the prime minister’s quarters in the castle, bringing only a single attendant with him to take care of his everyday needs. Since then, he had been working hard without any time for sleep, lest it interrupt his duties.

Apparently, when they heard this, the families of the nobles were struck

speechless, and while they stood there stunned, the scary-looking members of the Hundred efficiently went through and seized everything. They were like a bunch of shady debt collectors. But, thanks to Gamarath's work, the country's destitute financial situation was instantly alleviated.

Beyond just confiscating the deceased nobles' property, he also placed all their land under the direct jurisdiction of the crown. From the noble families' perspective, this was just adding insult to injury, but they were afraid of what Frau or the Hundred might do if they protested, so there wasn't any significant resistance.

I couldn't comprehend how Gamarath could do something so cruel to the people who had been on his side until recently. Still, nearly half the country was now under the direct control of the king, which greatly strengthened my authority. Apparently, one of the reasons my father had been such a mediocre king was because he had controlled only small areas of land, which had given him a weak power base and left him unable to check the power of the more influential nobles.

Gamarath also pushed ahead with legal reforms and improved the tax system, eliminating noble middlemen and cracking down hard on graft and exploitation. With his previous experience, he knew all about the various ways people could cheat the system. Thanks to him, collecting taxes became more efficient, and he was able to lower the tax rate to match. The citizens were overjoyed, and I enjoyed a rapid rise in popularity. Not that I had actually done anything to merit it.

The central figure in all of this, Gamarath, devoted himself to his job with such devotion that I thought he might die of overwork. He had rapidly slimmed down, which had somehow given him the face of a clever and intelligent bureaucrat. His daughter, Lilia—my stepmother—had requested that she be allowed to help him, and she was just as busy managing the affairs of government as her father. She also became healthy and vivacious as she devoted her newfound energy to reducing court expenditures.

I had no interest in lavish decor or useless court functions, so I had approved every one of Lilia's proposals, and as a result the financial situation had greatly improved. Lilia's son, who was my younger half-brother, Nicol, seemed to have



an interest in politics and the economy as well, so would likely be appointed a civil official in the future.

With the finances in better shape, I thought about how to use all the money that had been confiscated from the nobility. I hadn't given the Hundred any reward for their services. I had officially recognized the organization and appointed top rankers as knights under the king's command, but I hadn't repaid them in land, money, or anything else material. As a group, they had always been unconcerned with titles and riches, so they didn't seem to mind, but I still felt guilty about it.

That was why I decided to construct an arena. The Hundred's base was still in that ancient underground ruin, which was both extremely hard to get to and unpleasantly damp—not the best environment for fights. I thought the group would like it if I built an arena near the capital, where they could train and conduct their ranking matches.

So in the throne room one day, after hearing Gamarath's report on government policy, I said to him, "I want you to construct an arena."

"An...arena?" He didn't quite seem to get it.

"The Hundred will hold their ranking matches there," I explained.

Gamarath paused. "I see. I've heard that their matches are quite an impressive sight. Are you perhaps suggesting that, by holding them in an arena, we can make them into a show?"

*A show?* I hadn't thought of that. But the ranking matches *were* entertaining, so that could work. "That's right. You get it, Gamarath."

"Thank you very much. Then, was Your Majesty considering making it a public enterprise and charging spectators a fee?"

*A fee? For that? Who'd want to pay for it?*

"No, not that."

"No? Then how should it be monetized?" Gamarath was silent for a moment. "Of course! We'll allow spectators to gamble on the matches, correct?!"

*Is money the only thing this guy thinks about? Gambling, huh... Well, I guess*

*I'll look stupid if I waste the government's money on an arena with no return on investment, so I suppose that works.*

“That’s right,” I replied, as if it had been my idea all along. “Turn the arena into a public enterprise and allow for betting on the Hundred’s ranking matches.”

“Wonderful!” Gamarath exclaimed. “The arena will undoubtedly become an economic mainstay! I’ll arrange everything right away!” Spellbound, he gazed at me with admiration before hurrying from the throne room.

*Yeah, sure...but there's no rush. It was just a throwaway idea.*





Chapter.2

# FIGHT CLUB



## XII: The Arena

**THOUGH** Gamarath had rapidly reformed Farune, he still had one worry. The treasury was temporarily flush with cash after the seizure of the nobility's property, but Farune had always been a poor country. Its main purpose was to serve as a bulwark against the Forest of Beasts, and it had no industries of note. No matter how much Gamarath reformed the government or increased economic efficiency, the economy itself would never grow so long as there were so few goods in circulation. At this rate, the kingdom would grind to a halt.

Gamarath was an excellent politician and administrator, but he was no merchant, so he had no idea how to introduce and promote industries that would increase foreign traffic and the flow of currency. He was achieving real results with his reforms, but he was worried about their limits.

Then, one day, as he was reporting to King Mars about government policy, the king, who usually listened silently, spoke.

"I want you to construct an arena," he said.

"An...arena?" Gamarath replied. He was surprised by the sudden suggestion. King Mars had given him free reign in the administration of the kingdom, and up until that point, hadn't made any proposals of his own. Besides, an arena was unusual regardless. A vanishingly small number of nations out there had arenas where they forced gladiators into battle, but it would be a first for Farune.

"The Hundred will hold their ranking matches there," King Mars explained.

Gamarath paused. "I see. I've heard that their matches are quite an impressive sight. Are you perhaps suggesting that, by holding them in an arena, we can make them into a show?"

"That's right. You get it, Gamarath."

Gamarath got the feeling he knew what the king was aiming for. He was probably thinking that, by making a show out of the Hundred's ranking matches, he could turn them into a unique attraction for the kingdom. The matches had already become famous across Farune for their intensity. But so far, only the members of the Hundred could watch, and becoming a member

meant both eating monster meat and having the requisite skill with a sword—a high barrier for the average person to overcome. Many were interested in simply watching the ranking matches, but they currently couldn't. Turning the matches into a public form of entertainment seemed like a good plan.

“Thank you very much,” Gamarath said. “Then, was Your Majesty considering making it a public enterprise and charging spectators a fee?” *If we can get enough spectators, the proceeds would generate a sizable revenue stream*, he thought. *We might even be able to bring in visitors from outside the kingdom.*

“No, not that.”

“No? Then how should it be monetized?” His first suggestion struck down, Gamarath set to thinking. The king had keen insight. He'd never be foolish enough to construct an arena just to let anyone watch matches for free. After spending a moment contemplating methods to bring in revenue without charging a fee upfront, Gamarath had a realization. “Of course! We'll allow spectators to gamble on the matches, correct?!”

The ranking matches were no ordinary mock battles. Gamarath had heard that they were serious fights, with real swords and real injuries, and the competitors staked their skills and reputations on the results. The spectators would go crazy for the matches if they could bet on their outcomes.

Gambling was illegal for the most part, but it was an impressive industry in regions where it was officially sanctioned by the government. Gamarath had even heard of other countries that had dramatically raised their revenue with legalized gambling.

“That's right,” King Mars replied. “Turn the arena into a public enterprise and allow for betting on the Hundred's ranking matches.”

It was a wonderful idea. The king might as well have seen right into Gamarath's mind and learned all his worries—no, there was no doubt he had. There was an unfathomable depth to the king. He had probably noticed long ago that there were no significant industries local to Farune, and knew it was a weakness. It was even possible he had already mentally mapped out this development back when he had been forming the Hundred.

“Wonderful! The arena will undoubtedly become an economic mainstay! I'll

arrange everything right away!” Overcome with admiration for the king’s incredible prescience, Gamarath hurried from the throne room, off to devote all his energy to getting the project underway.



IT took less than six months to complete the arena. I had no idea why, but for some reason it was huge, more than twice the size of what I had imagined. Apparently, the stands could accommodate thousands of people, making it without a doubt the largest building in Farune.

*We won’t go bankrupt building this, right?* I thought anxiously, but as soon as the Hundred’s ranking matches actually began, spectators absolutely packed the stands. The impressive fights between top rankers drove the crowd wild—and more importantly, they were betting. A lot.

The arena was also inundated with sightseers from nearby countries who had heard rumors about the Hundred, so it quickly paid for itself. According to Gamarath, the arena would more than double the kingdom’s revenue in the long run. *I certainly can’t complain about more money coming in.*

Beginning with Ogma, the Hundred responded positively to the arena, too. They enjoyed fighting while the shouts and cheers of the crowd rained down on them—and competitors also received prize money, which made the arena a good source of income for them. Many among the Hundred were of commoner origin, and had at times worked multiple jobs to make ends meet, so their arena winnings enabled them to devote themselves fully to the Hundred.

By now, being a top ranker in the Hundred basically made someone a celebrity, earning them riches, fame, and status. The number of applicants to the Hundred—both in Farune and beyond—swelled. There were all types: some had strength that had gone unrecognized due to low status, others were adventurers who were confident in their skills, and still more hoped simply to test their strength by joining.

Applicants to the Hundred turned the Forest of Beasts into their hunting ground in search of monster meat, and as a result were opening up this previously untouched, fertile land. As a country, Farune acted as a kind of check against the forest, so claiming the forest also meant expanding the kingdom’s

borders. While the arena increased the kingdom's revenue, the development of the forest widened its territory. Everything was going well.

Until an unexpected issue popped up. One day, Gamarath came to me with a report.

"The Killer Rabbit population is nearing extinction?" I repeated.

"That's correct, there are now hardly any sightings of them within our borders," Gamarath explained. "Killer Rabbits are the easiest monsters to eat, so with the growth of the Hundred, they're being overhunted."

Killer Rabbits were both the weakest species of monster, and pests that harmed livestock and crops. As a result, novice adventurers often went after them. But *extinct*?

"Who ever heard of monsters going extinct?" I asked. "Don't they just spawn endlessly from wherever?"

"It's the first time I've heard of it as well. Though rather than *nearing* extinction, it may be more accurate to say that the species has been totally eradicated within our borders," Gamarath continued. "Additionally, there seems to have been a noticeable decrease in reported sightings of other monster species in the kingdom. I've heard rumors that even dragons have been avoiding our territory's airspace."

"They have?"

Dragons, on the other hand, were the strongest variety of monster—and an incredibly rare sight. Usually, the most you might see was a Wyvern, the weakest species of dragon, flying through the skies of Farune on its way to somewhere else.

"Yes," Gamarath said. "Dragon meat is rare and valuable, so whenever they fly above our territory, they're now being pelted with barrages of arrows, spears, and magic. If they do fall from the sky, they're hunted without mercy. Dragons are highly intelligent monsters, so they've begun avoiding our country altogether, which is why sightings have drastically decreased."

"Wait a minute. They're pelted with magic? What do you mean by that?"



“It seems that recently, the Mages’ Guild, led by Lady Frau, has also taken to eating monster meat. They are proactively gathering the meat of high-level monsters, mainly, while at the same time gaining combat experience.”

*Now that you mention it, Frau did say she was also eating monster meat. She said it increases her mana, or something. Is she forcing her subordinates to eat it too?*

Dragon meat was certainly valuable. It was impossible even to catch a glimpse of a dragon without traveling quite deep into the Forest of Beasts. At the same time, they were so strong that it was an emergency whenever one was even spotted in the air above our territory. It meant evacuating residents from nearby villages, and forming a subjugation squad to fight it.

There had been no reported sightings ever since I had become king. Apparently, this was because they were already being hunted for their meat without anyone bothering to tell me. And that wasn’t all. The Hundred and the Mages’ Guild were actually fighting over which group would get the coveted meat.

*...Now even dragons are running away? What kind of hellish place is this kingdom?*

After a short silence, I ventured, “Well, isn’t it a good thing that monsters are disappearing? It reduces harm to the citizens and crops.”

“Indeed,” Gamarath agreed. “We would usually hire adventurers to exterminate those monsters, but with the monsters getting completely wiped out, this year has been the largest harvest in the kingdom’s history, and without the need for adventurers. Farmers are tirelessly expressing their enthusiastic gratitude for the king. I thought I knew the depths of your wisdom, my king, but to have had this in mind when promoting the consumption of monster meat... I have no words!” He looked at me with rapturous eyes.

*Bizarre.*

I hadn’t calculated or planned anything. I had only eaten monster meat because I hadn’t had anything else to eat, and when I’d told other people you could get stronger by eating it, this was what had happened. That was it.

“Then there’s no problem,” I said. “Killer Rabbits going extinct is a good thing, right?”

“Well, not exactly. According to Lord Ogma’s reports, the poison in meat from monsters stronger than Killer Rabbits is deadly to those who aren’t used to it. Without Killer Rabbit meat, he can no longer get new recruits acclimated to eating monster meat.”

*Well they should stop eating it then. It’s poisonous, and it tastes terrible.*

That being said, I was still eating monster meat. After all, I didn’t know when my master, Cassandra, might return. If I slacked off in my training or stopped eating monster meat, she’d kill me without hesitation—whether I was king, prince, or otherwise.

The members of the Hundred probably thought I ate monster meat because I enjoyed it. They even gave it to me as tribute, so it regularly appeared on my plate at the dinner table. *I’m king now, so why do I still have to eat like that? I want my meals to actually taste good.*

“Hm. Well, if they really want to eat Killer Rabbit meat that much, it sounds like they should be breeding the monsters themselves,” I said sarcastically, unable to comprehend anyone who enjoyed eating monster meat.

“Breed? Monsters?” Gamarath echoed. “Why, I never even thought of that. My king, I am amazed once again by your unconventionally brilliant idea!”

*Oh, dammit. He took it seriously. A country that raises monsters? And for food, too. Everyone else is going to think we’re crazy.*

“Now hold on, Gamarath. We can’t breed monsters to eat them.”

“No? Then you mean...to exhibit them?”

*An exhibit? This guy’s always ready to suggest the strangest things.*

“We won’t exhibit them—”

“Not an exhibit? But of course! Begin breeding Killer Rabbits as a first step to making monsters a part of our military! Incredible, my king! I hear that in countries to the north, some breed dragons to ride them as dragon knights. So you’re saying we should emulate them with monsters more generally?!”

*What is he talking about? Use monsters as part of our army—what am I, a demon lord?*

“No, that—” The conversation was veering off in a bad direction, but when I tried to stop Gamarath’s rampage, suddenly my voice stopped working.

“Meat, exhibits, military power... Now that you mention it, breeding monsters has endless benefits! It will be difficult, but it’s worth an attempt!”

I tried to say, “No, no, no, that’s not at all what I’m saying!” but the words still stuck in my throat, somehow.

I had a bad feeling, and then I looked around and spotted Frau, who, without my knowledge, had entered my office and was now standing in the corner. As always, she had probably eavesdropped on my conversation with Gamarath after using that Contract Seal to teleport here. And now, she was casting some sort of spell. *That has to be why I can’t speak!*

“It’s decided. I’ll quickly make the necessary arrangements, so I’ll be taking my leave.” Gamarath exited the office without noticing Frau. Then, Frau vanished too. I had no idea why, but she seemed to really want to breed monsters.

“I guess trying to stop her is pointless...” I said to myself, confirming that I could talk again.

Whenever I thought about the kingdom’s future, I felt depressed. Now that Frau had latched onto this, there was nothing I could do to stop her. As queen, she never showed any attachment to money or authority, but she had a tendency to get wildly obsessed with whatever caught her interest. And I may have been able to bring her under control if I’d used everything I had, but the damage to the surrounding areas would have been catastrophic.

*I’ll just leave her be. This’ll probably turn into some sort of worthless monster corps or something, but it’s still better than her destroying the castle.*

### XIII: The Priestess, Luida

**TWO** men fought before a large crowd of spectators. One of them had close-cropped blond hair and sharp, masculine facial features; it was Ogma, who

ranked first in the Hundred. The other was his friend, Bruno. I think he ranked around fifth. He was bigger than Ogma, and more muscular, but his plain, simple facial features would probably have fit him better as a farmer. Bruno's rank always fluctuated somewhere between fifth and eighth, which was why I couldn't remember exactly where he was. Ogma's was easy because he always maintained first place.

A fierce fight was unfolding between the two of them—and the spectators were going wild. I could understand how they felt. The Hundred's top rankers were so strong that, if they were adventurers, they would have been S-rank. They had surpassed normal human limits, which made their fights quite the spectacle.

Still, though they were both strong, Ogma was a cut above. Bruno put up a good fight, but Ogma was gradually wearing him down. Bruno had Ogma beat in terms of pure power, but Ogma had a good balance of strength, speed, and technique, and he had very few exploitable weaknesses. As their battle continued, Bruno eventually failed to fully block one of Ogma's attacks and lost his balance. Ogma took the opportunity to lop off his right arm.

Something between a scream and a bellow erupted from the crowd, and Bruno admitted defeat. Ogma accepted his surrender, picked up the man's severed arm, and shook Bruno's remaining hand with his other hand. After witnessing the fighters' mutual celebration of one another's efforts, the crowd gave them a warm round of applause.

*What's wrong with you people? You don't think there's anything strange about friends fighting each other to the death?*

I wished they would at least use wooden practice swords. The mithril swords they did use were seriously nasty. They had been bestowed with magic protection and were sharp enough to cut through a normal suit of armor like it was made of paper.

*They both have refreshed, cheerful smiles on their faces, but is it really okay as a human being for you to pick up your friend's arm—that you cut off—from the ground like it's his lost wallet or something?*

As I was having that thought, Ogma came my way, still holding Bruno's arm. I

was in the arena's medical facility, which was set up in a location where I could easily see the fights in case of an emergency.

"He's in your hands, Miss," Ogma said, casually thumping Bruno's arm on the table in front of me like it was a pint of beer.

I sighed. As Bruno cringed a little, I held his arm up to where it had been cut off and offered an invocation. After a short time, a golden light enveloped the severed part, and the arm was reconnected.

"Thanks Miss, I knew you could do it," Bruno said, his tone halfway between sincerity and flattery. "You aren't an A-rank priestess for nothing." He took a small gold coin out of his breast pocket and tossed it to me.

I snatched it out of the air and then, like always, admonished the fighters. "Accept defeat sooner next time. I can't heal you if your head gets cut off. And as for you, Ogma, let him admit defeat without lopping off his arm. Try putting yourself in my shoes for once!"

They both looked embarrassed, but I knew they felt absolutely no remorse. Everyone in the Hundred was a horrible sore loser, and they never surrendered unless they were gravely injured or unconscious. Of course, that was why the arena practically printed money...

In any case, they had been mistaken—I certainly *had* been an A-rank adventurer, but that had nothing to do with my ability to reattach a severed arm so easily. As an adventurer, I had been best at keeping the damage to my party members at a minimum by constantly healing them so they could move freely, and meticulously mending wounds just enough to keep them from becoming fatal. I'd only gotten this skilled at healing after joining the Hundred.



I used to be a member of the adventurer party called the Silver Hawks. There were five of us: Keith, the swordsman; Heinz, the warrior; Chad, the thief; Mika, the wizard; and me, the priestess. The Silver Hawks weren't especially skilled in any one thing, but we were all excellent adventurers in our own right. Our party was well balanced, and we steadily completed requests and increased our rank.

Then, one day, we received a request from the kingdom's prime minister,

Gamarath. He was trying to get rid of a dangerous individual—Prince Mars—and, having imagined a particular worst-case scenario, he wanted to hire us. Basically, we were supposed to be backup and probably wouldn't even have to fight, but for all that, the pay was good. Of course, we knew there was no way the request would be as easy as it sounded on paper, so we decided to go to the castle and get all the details before accepting.

When we went to the castle, we learned just how weak Farune's knights were. The White Knights, who served as the royal guard, were a bunch of pompous nobles who clearly lacked any real strength. They were only about as skilled as D-rank adventurers. We agreed that if all Gamarath's forces were at that level, it was no wonder he wanted to hire us.

In the course of our talks with him, he brought up two additional concerns. The first was that Prince Mars had already fought off numerous assassination attempts, and was apparently quite a strong warrior. The second was that Farune had an incredibly powerful wizard called the Lightning Empress. She was sort of the kingdom's ace in the hole. Also, she was Prince Mars's fiancée, and she still hadn't canceled their engagement despite many attempts to persuade her. We didn't know if or how she'd interfere, but at worst, it was possible that she might join the enemy.

After taking the whole picture fully into account, we accepted Gamarath's request. There were two reasons for that as well: First, Prince Mars hardly had any allies, so Gamarath's plan appeared to have a high chance of success. Second, we judged that while the Lightning Empress sounded strong, she was only a single wizard. With the combined strength of a whole party of A-rank adventurers, we assessed that we could take her down without too much difficulty.



**THE** situation turned out to be nothing like what we'd expected. Prince Mars, who had actually been the one to form the secret society known as the Hundred, also had the Red Knights and the Black Knights firmly under his control, and he turned the tables on Gamarath to stage a large-scale coup.

The prince advanced all the way to the royal castle without so much as

breaking a sweat, and came alone to the throne room where we were waiting for him. Gamarath had told us, “If you capture Prince Mars, the coup’s ringleader, that’ll bring things under control,” and we didn’t doubt him.

That was a big mistake. Prince Mars was as powerful as an S-rank adventurer—no, he was even stronger. He took the spell, Gravity, and Chad’s deadly poison like they were nothing, then he easily killed Heinz, Chad, and finally Keith. The prince looked and acted like an ordinary, unremarkable young nobleman, and it only made his power stand out that much more. Unable to run, Mika and I collapsed on the spot.

And so, the prince’s coup was successful.

Prince Mars had apparently been looking for a healer, so he made me join the Hundred as their exclusive priestess. And Mika? The Lightning Empress, Frau, said only, “I’ll take this one,” and like she was adopting a cat, casually assigned Mika to the Mages’ Guild.

The Hundred hadn’t had anything resembling a healer until I joined. Before, the members had simply let their natural healing do the work—which was why they were always covered in wounds and bruises from head to toe. Even with all that, though, they had actually been holding back just enough to barely avoid serious injury in their battles with each other. With me as their new healer, their ranking matches got that much more intense.

To start, I healed only simple cuts and bruises, but the extent of their injuries steadily ballooned, and it took no time at all before arms and legs started getting cut off. I vehemently protested this turn of events, saying, “I can’t heal that!” but when they begged me to do it anyway, I reluctantly performed the appropriate healing ritual. It was a surprise when the first arm I was trying to fix actually reconnected, just like that. The Hundred praised me, saying how impressive I was as an A-rank priestess, but I knew my abilities had never been *that* good.

My best guess was that I had been able to hone my ability as a priestess because I was constantly, without any breaks, casting healing magic on the members of the Hundred. Each day, they had just as many horrific injuries as an army on a battlefield during an active war.

The other reason for my improvement was the monster meat. The Hundred basically forced me to eat monster meat now that I was in the organization. It was disgusting; actually, it was just poison, plain and simple. In what was basically an act of blasphemy, I cast an antidote on myself as I ate it.

The Hundred only praised me. One said, "You can really hold your meat, Miss," but this was no laughing matter. Monster meat was not fit for human consumption. Even if someone was starving and near death, they ought to have chosen their dignity as a human being and died rather than eat that stuff. Members of the Hundred, all of whom ate monster meat daily, were completely abnormal.

That being said, I had to admit to the positive effects of eating monster meat. The members of the Hundred's powers of recovery far surpassed those of normal humans. They had made do with natural healing before my arrival, which meant that wounds normally requiring magical healing simply got better over time. It was a trait shared by everyone there, probably because of all the monster meat they were consuming.

I believed that was the case for my healing abilities, as well. No matter how intensely and how frequently I had cast healing spells over the years, I was no longer a novice, and at my age, I already had well-established limits. There was no way my healing powers should have increased nearly this easily. But increase they did, gradually.

Then, finally, there was a single decisive event that settled it.

"Please, heal him! He's my friend!"

That was what I was told, but when I went to check on the "friend" in question, it was just a corpse with a sword sticking out of its chest. Aaron was the culprit, and Barry was the stabbing victim. They were both senior members of the Hundred. They had gotten carried away during a ranking match, apparently, and Aaron had stabbed Barry without thinking.

*Even a murderer could come up with a better excuse. When will you people learn to stop stabbing your friends?!*

"No no no, there's no way I can fix that!" I said. If I could have healed that, I'd have been able to keep everyone in the Silver Hawks alive.



But soon, Ogma and other members of the Hundred joined Aaron in frantically begging me to help—actually, I started to think I might be killed if I *didn't* do anything—so, never thinking it would work, I gave a resurrection spell a try. Back when I had been taught the spell, I hadn't even been able to revive the carcass of a rat. I couldn't even cast the spell back then, so in the intervening years, I had never tried to use it.

I prayed intently. Because of the murderous men who surrounded me, my life literally depended on it. And then, a miracle happened. Barry was revived. I'm sure that one of the reasons the spell worked was because he had died only moments before, but it was also undeniably true that my ability had improved, dramatically.

"That's our A-rank priestess!" Aaron whooped. "I knew you could do it!" They were getting all excited, and I just snapped.

"Stop screwing around!" I shouted. "I'm never doing that again! The next time someone dies, I'm turning them into a zombie! And whoever killed them will have to shut up and go to prison!" As I lectured them, I had tears in my eyes.

Ever since then, my nickname has been "Miss," and those idiots in the Hundred have made sure to avoid fatal injuries while fighting.



**BACK** in the present, Ogma and Bruno's ranking match had just ended, and the exhibition match was about to begin.

The king of Farune, Zero, appeared in the arena. His official name was King Mars, but everyone in the Hundred still called him Zero, to the point where many thought his real name was actually King Zero.

To show he was going all out, Zero removed his armlet and his ring. The armlet applied a gravity spell, and the ring had a poison curse. About the only other kind of person who'd wear anything like that was a prisoner on death row. As befitting the leader of the insane Hundred, he was the craziest of them all.

His opponents were the winners of today's ranking matches. For them, being able to fight Zero at his full strength was the greatest reward for their victories

—though it was guaranteed that he'd defeat them all and leave them at death's door. When that happened, it was my job to heal them.

At any rate, there were unfathomable depths to Zero. This exhibition match contained two hidden calculations. By crushing the members of the Hundred, Zero etched knowledge of his strength into their bodies, and cultivated the seeds of terror he had planted in their souls, further reinforcing the Hundred's loyalty toward him. At the same time, by defeating the Hundred, he demonstrated his majesty as king to his subjects and heightened their sense of affinity with Farune.

Normally, monarchs were akin to heavenly figures, and most citizens only ever thought of them as important in theory, but by unambiguously displaying the strength that made him worthy of his title, Zero had gained the fanatical support of the population of Farune. He had the elite organization of the Hundred, the powerful Mages' Guild led by the Lightning Empress, and the rock-solid support of the people as the foundation of his power. I even heard rumors he was trying to form some sort of a monster corps.

*What exactly is Zero planning?*

The wildest of the rumors was that he aimed to unify the entire continent of Ares. It was basically out of the question for a small country like Farune to do something like that, but I couldn't help thinking Zero might be the one person who could pull it off.

As for me, I'd be lying if I said I didn't hold my friends' deaths against him, but I was satisfied with my current position. It was exhausting work, but with my pay from the arena and tips from the competitors, I now made several times my income from the time I'd spent as an adventurer. Monster meat was disgusting, but my abilities as a priestess had reached a level I never would have been able to imagine before. Now that I had money and power, I had no complaints.

I also sometimes met up with Mika after she joined the Mages' Guild. She seemed to have gained more power as a wizard too. On occasion, she adoringly praised the Lightning Empress with a blank look in her eyes, which bothered me a bit, but overall, she seemed to be doing well...probably.

Despite how it may sound, the Hundred really was a decent bunch, and I was

curious about Zero's ambitions, so I decided to stay here in Farune and see what the future held in store for this country.

## XIV: A King's Duties

**THE** monster mass production project was starting.

*But the more I think about it, the more I wonder: is there really any point to building a monster corps for our military? Monsters are causing less harm across the kingdom, and it's not like other countries are about to waste their time invading this little backwater. We don't have any use for a monster corps.*

*But what if I make the monsters fight the Hundred so I don't have to do it anymore?*

Ever since the arena had been completed, I had been fighting the Hundred almost every day. That was because when I had defeated the adventurers in the throne room, I had taken off the gravity armlet and the poison ring to make full use of my power, and the Hundred had found out about it. Suddenly, I was flooded with baffling criticism, like, "You haven't been using your full power? You tricked us!" and, "It's not fair that you went all out on some random adventurers but not on us!" Basically, they wanted me to fight them when I was at full strength. Pretty much everyone in the Hundred was clamoring for it, which was a real pain.

I came up with the idea of holding an exhibition match against anyone who won in their ranking matches. So just when they were totally exhausted after their own matches, I would defeat them all at once, easily satisfying their demands. It was a wonderful plan, if I do say so myself.

And it went well. Ranking matches took place between two evenly matched opponents, so when it came time for another match, they had already worn themselves out. It didn't matter how brawny and hardheaded they were; I was always able to wipe the floor with them, even against more than ten at once. My thought was that if I held an exhibition match just a few times, pretty much everyone who wanted to fight me would get their fill.

That wasn't how it went, though. Those idiots got it in their heads that they'd be able to participate in an exhibition match *whenever* they won their ranking

matches, and demanded an exhibition match every time they won. That meant I had to fight in the arena almost every day. Even regular contenders in the ranking matches usually took five days to recuperate between their bouts. Why was I the only one who had to fight every day? Was I a gladiator? No, even gladiators weren't forced to fight *every* day. I tried refusing their request on humanitarian grounds, but then Gamarath came to me with a demand of his own.

"Whenever you, the king, hold an exhibition match, many more spectators attend, so please keep doing it as often as possible," he said. Apparently, my matches had become a major attraction and people were desperate to watch. If anything, many spectators actually came to the arena for my matches specifically. And that was why I had to fight almost every day.

When Gamarath put it that way, it was hard to refuse him. The spectators always cheered extra loud for me, and when I won, they chanted, "Long live King Zero!" It wasn't a bad feeling. Even though I was actually called King Mars, not King Zero.

"Well, if you insist..." I responded, getting caught up in the moment, and before I knew it, I had accepted the responsibility of daily exhibition matches.

That was a big mistake. The priestess, Luida, whom I had hired on as a healer, had greatly improved her healing magic skills, which meant the winners of every match, even the ones that ended in mutual injury, were able to participate in the exhibition matches. *Please, I'm begging you, be a bit more gentle.*

They also started saying something like, "It is disrespectful to fight the king while injured," so they started getting healed for everything before fighting me, even minor wounds and exhaustion.

By now, I was stuck fighting more than ten top-ranking warriors in perfect condition every day. They even had the gall to get stronger over time, too, so fighting all of them had gotten to be quite difficult.

*How did it end up like this? Are kings even worse off than gladiators? I never should have hired that priestess.*

I considered complaining to Gamarath, but I had delegated all the duties of governing to him, and as a result the prime minister was so busy that he was

well past the point of possibly dying from overwork. There was no way I could bother him about this.



**AS** I spent my days uncertain about what it meant to be king, armlets came into fashion among the top-ranking members of the Hundred. Yes, they were those Gravity armlets, intended for prisoners. Apparently, the Hundred had procured them from a foreign merchant.

“We hope to get just a bit closer to you with these, King Zero,” Chrom said, and they all looked bashful.

*Why are you buying souvenirs from the prison gift shop with your hard-earned money? Who pays for something you can get for free in another country if you commit a crime? Are you stupid? I’m not wearing this thing because I like it, you know!*

Now, thanks to them, all the kingdom’s leaders—besides Gamarath—were walking around the castle looking like convicted criminals. *Is this castle a prison?*

Speaking of armlets, these days, mine was different from the one I had been wearing before. On my first birthday since becoming king, my wife, Frau, gave it to me as a present.

“I have a present for you,” she said. We were in our bedroom.

*So she has a charming side to her after all,* I started to think, but then she took out an armlet.

“I made it. Its effect is five times.”

“...Hold on. What do you mean, ‘five times’? Five times Gravity? I won’t be able to walk if I put that thing on.”

“Making an armlet that bestows five times Gravity is highly difficult. I had a hard time doing it,” she said. Her face was as expressionless as always, and it didn’t *look* like it had been hard for her. Still, I’d never even heard of five times Gravity, so it must have been nearly impossible to make an armlet that bestowed it on the wearer. All the same, it was extremely annoying.

“It might have been difficult for you while you were making it, but if I put it on, my life is going to be just as difficult, every single day,” I said. I had conquered poison and the three times Gravity armlet, and with the fear of assassination gone, my life was finally peaceful. *Why, oh why, must I suffer like this?*

“Even though you’re wearing another woman’s armlet?” Frau said.

“Urk...” That did make it hard to refuse. Frau was the only person who knew about my master, Cassandra. Both the ring and the armlet I was wearing had been presents from her. Wearing them around my wife could have been said to be unfaithful of me. No matter how horrible their effects were.

*And I think it’s a bit of a stretch to treat my master as a woman. I’m not sure she’s even human.*

“Frau, that may be true, but you didn’t have to make a five times Gravity armlet, did you? I’d have been happier if my present bestowed some kind of magical protection.” If I was going to wear something, I’d rather wear a piece of cool magic equipment with a positive effect. *Why would she spend all that time making a cursed item’s effects even stronger?*

“Strengthening her husband is a wife’s duty.”

“I’ve never heard anything like that!”

“You don’t want it?” Frau stared at me.

I couldn’t tell what she was thinking, but I did know that she worked hard for me. Apparently, she had also stubbornly refused to cancel our engagement when everyone around her had urged her to do so. I didn’t dislike Frau. She may have been a bit lacking in human emotion, but she was still my lovely wife. At any rate, it wasn’t like there had ever been anyone else.

“...All right,” I relented. “I’ll wear it. Thanks for the present, Frau.”

“I’m glad you like it,” Frau said, almost looking satisfied.

The next day, when I sat on my throne, it was immediately crushed under my weight. I had a new throne made right away, but because they prioritized durability over everything else, it was massive, sturdy, and intimidating.

My wife's love was heavy stuff—physically speaking, that is.



A Cadonian diplomat named Oddo walked through Farune's royal castle with a heavy heart. He had come to make demands of Farune.

Cadonia neighbored Farune, and they both bordered the Forest of Beasts to the south. Together, both Cadonia and Farune essentially formed a buffer zone between the forest and the central countries of the continent. Cadonia was around the same size as Farune, but it had been founded earlier, which meant it ranked slightly higher in importance than its neighbor.

Cadonia currently had a problem: monsters were causing substantial damage to its territory. Because the country bordered the Forest of Beasts, monsters had always been an issue, but in recent years the damage and casualties had positively exploded. And the cause was obvious: ever since Farune had begun proactively defeating monsters and expanding into the Forest of Beasts, large numbers of monsters had taken refuge on the Cadonian side of the forest.

This enraged the king of Cadonia. His kingdom was suffering because of a weaker country? Oddo could sympathize with the feeling. But defeating monsters had always been the duty of both countries, and developing the forest, too, was an established state policy. Farune's actions were only natural, and not remotely worthy of criticism.

However, Cadonia was now demanding that Farune defeat the monsters on the Cadonian side of the border *and* pay reparations for damage, to the tune of three thousand gold coins. Diplomatically speaking, these were absurd requests. Farune might have been a lower-ranking country, but it wasn't much smaller than Cadonia. Farune would never accept such an unreasonable demand—especially not when the person Oddo was supposed to be negotiating with was the infamous mad king of Farune.

The present king of Farune, King Mars, had been the first prince, but had been on the verge of being disinherited due to his poor behavior. As soon as he'd realized he was going to be ousted, he had taken the name Zero and led a bunch of criminals and thugs in a coup. He had used force and terror to seize command of multiple knightly orders, then eradicated any nobles who resisted

him in a bloody purge.

It was even said that King Mars forced his subordinates to eat monster meat, which was fatally poisonous, as a show of loyalty. Yes, there were legends that eating monster meat made a person stronger, but even newborn babies had the common sense to know it was too poisonous to eat. So there was no way the legends could be true.

However, King Mars *was* making people eat monster meat as part of swearing their loyalty to him, so there could have been a strong connection between the two.

Apparently, the king called the corps directly under his command the Hundred, and anyone could join, no matter their background, as long as they were strong. Many murderers and other serious criminals were rumored to be members, and King Mars enjoyed making those kinds of vicious people submit to him.

After becoming king, he had built an arena. There, he bathed in the pleasure of making the warriors of the Hundred fight each other for entertainment nearly every day. He even made money from it, by allowing people to gamble on matches. Then, after each day's battles, he single-handedly crushed the victors in a grandiose display of his power.

He was truly a mad king. It was said that, wherever he went, he left rivers of blood and mountains of corpses in his wake. There was no way that such a king would accept Cadonia's demands. Oddo actually suspected he wouldn't return home alive—before leaving for Farune, he had left behind a will for his family, and had embarked on the journey prepared for the worst and filled with a sense of grim determination.



**UNEXPECTEDLY**, Farune was more lively now than it had been during the previous king's reign. Many new buildings had been constructed, centered around the massive arena. The commoners looked happy. But when Oddo arrived at the castle grounds and entered, he didn't see a single noble inside. So *the rumor that he eradicated the nobility was true after all*, he thought.

When he entered the throne room, another surprise greeted Oddo: all of the



kingdom's leaders besides the prime minister, Gamarath, were soldiers, and each of them wore a Gravity armlet, the kind convicted criminals were supposed to wear.

*So it's also true that King Mars has staffed his court with criminals!*

Oddo felt a chill run down his spine. There was no mistaking it: King Mars was crazy. And on second glance, even the throne itself had changed. Compared to the previous king's, it was much more solid, and massive enough to intimidate all those who set eyes on it. It was clearly a symbol of the current king's reign.

Finally, King Mars entered. He wasn't at all what Oddo had expected. He was just an unremarkable young nobleman. Of course, that didn't mean Oddo could let down his guard. Many nobles knew how to put on a friendly face while secretly plotting and scheming behind the scenes.

## XV: Cadonia's Demands

I received news that an envoy had arrived from Cadonia. It would be my first time convening with someone from another country since taking the throne. I hadn't engaged in diplomacy at all yet as king. Or rather, all the nobles who had been in charge of diplomacy were dead, so there was no way for me to do it. Gamarath was fully committed to working on internal affairs, and if I gave him any more duties, he'd for sure die of overwork this time. My only official duty, so far, was to fight the Hundred in the arena. *It's hardly a job fit for a king.*

Now, finally, I seemed to have a genuinely kingly duty to fulfill, so I was looking forward to meeting the Cadonian envoy.



**THE** envoy, who introduced himself as Oddo, looked so shaken up that I felt sorry for him. Everyone lined up in the throne room as my retainers were members of the Hundred. I treated them like military officers, but they were covered in fresh cuts and bruises from their daily ranking matches, and as a result looked quite rugged and foreboding. They certainly didn't give the impression of refined knights or soldiers; they were more like a gang of rogues and thugs.

*I'd be more surprised if they didn't make him tense.*

After we exchanged greetings, Oddo handed Gamarath a letter from the king of Cadonia, which Gamarath then handed to me. This felt very kingly, and I liked it.

The letter itself was a list of complaints from the king of Cadonia. Basically, it went like this: “You’re overhunting monsters so much that you’re destroying the ecosystem, and the surviving monsters are pouring into our territory and causing damage. Pull yourself together, defeat the monsters in our lands, and pay us three thousand gold coins as reparations!”

*...Yeah, I should’ve expected this. We’re hunting monsters so much that dragons are avoiding our territory, so I bet surrounding countries are feeling the effects. It’s completely our fault.*

“I see,” I said after looking over the letter. Then I handed it back to Gamarath, who scanned over its contents, his face turning red with anger.

“Cadonia is claiming that the damage from monsters is our fault, and requesting we take care of the monsters and pay them reparations?!” he blurted out. “I can’t believe it. Monster subjugation is the responsibility of each individual country. It takes some nerve to push that onto us, not to mention demanding reparations... Does Cadonia have no dignity as a nation?”

“Well,” Oddo started apologetically, “we’ve been able to deal with the monsters up until now, but with your country overhunting and rapidly developing the Forest of Beasts in recent years, monsters are fleeing into our country. We’re at a loss as to possible countermeasures. We lack both funds and personnel, so if you could at least take our request under consideration...”

*That sounds about right. Sorry about this bunch of idiots we have here.*

“That is out of the question,” Gamarath replied harshly. “We are simply carrying out our national policy of exterminating monsters and clearing the forest. Foreign countries like yours have no right to criticize us.”

*He’s not wrong, but I still think we have some responsibility in the matter.*

“That’s right!” the captain of the Red Knights, Warren, echoed Gamarath. “If there are more monsters over there, then hunt them yourselves. Or are you too weak?!”

His comment was the cue for every other member of the Hundred in the room to start criticizing Cadonia all at once. They left nothing unsaid, including things like, “If you can’t defeat monsters, that means you aren’t training enough,” and, “If there are too many monsters, just eat them,” and even, “What a waste. We have a monster *shortage* in *our* country.”

*Hey, listen, not everyone is a bunch of battle-hungry meatheads like you.*

Oddo shrank apologetically. It seemed there was no end to the Hundred’s complaints, so I stepped in to stop them.

“Wait.”

I was the king, after all, so everyone listened to me.

“I think we should accept Cadonia’s demands,” I said.

Everyone was taken aback. Even Oddo looked like he couldn’t believe it.

*We have plenty of people who are just itching to defeat monsters, and we’re making more than enough money with the arena, so I don’t think there’s any actual issue here.* More than anything, though, I was a pacifist at heart, so I wanted to keep things friendly with our neighbors.

“My king, please reconsider!” Chrom, the captain of the Black Knights, protested. “If we accept such demands, Farune will become a laughingstock!”

I understood what he was trying to say. In diplomacy, it wasn’t good to concede too much. However, it was undeniable that our actions had caused problems for Cadonia, and this also seemed like the perfect opportunity for me to go on a trip abroad with Frau for once.

“I have my reasons,” I said. “Engaging in diplomacy with our neighbors is important. And as for the reparations, I can take Frau along with me to bring the funds myself, and also make it my first formal visit, now that I’ve ascended to the throne. I think...about a month from now should work, so there’s time for all the preparations. Are there any issues with that, Gamarath?”

“A month will certainly be enough time, but you’re going yourself? And you’re bringing Lady Frau with you?” Gamarath asked, the picture of confusion.

“That’s right. So, in a month then. Let’s use the time between now and then

to defeat the monsters on Cadonia's side of the border. Is that all right with you, Lord Oddo?"

"Yes!" Oddo agreed. "I have no objections! My deepest thanks for Your Majesty's magnanimous decision!" Then he bowed his head so low that he seemed moments away from groveling on the floor.

"We'll be sending some of our own into Cadonia to defeat monsters in the meantime. That won't cause any problems, will it?"

"Of course not!"

"Very well. Then, you may take your leave."

"Yes, sir!" With my permission to depart, Oddo scrambled out of the throne room as fast as he could. The only people left were from Farune, and they all looked dissatisfied, somehow.

"My king, what was your reasoning behind your decision?" Gamarath asked. "If possible, we would all be grateful for an explanation that we might understand..." He spoke for the whole room.

*They must really have doubts. Was it a bit much? I can't just say, 'I wanted to go on a little trip with my wife,' so I have to come up with some sort of appropriate excuse.*

"I'm trying to avoid a stampede," I said after a pause.

"A...stampede? You're worried about a stampede?" Gamarath asked.

Stampedes were sudden, large-scale surges of monsters. It wasn't certain what caused them, but it was thought they had to do with changes in the monster ecosystem and territorial conflicts between monsters, among other factors. So, it wouldn't be strange for overhunting to cause a stampede. Whenever stampedes occurred, they caused devastating damage to surrounding countries—so if one happened in Cadonia, there was no way Farune would escape unscathed.

All in all, a stampede made for a good excuse.

"That's right," I replied. "Monsters have gotten more active in Cadonia. Anything that further aggravates them is very likely to lead to a stampede.

What do you think will happen to Cadonia then?”

“The nation will be devastated,” Gamarath said. Then, his face lit up with understanding. “I see! So that’s why we’re subjugating monsters in Cadonia!”

The others also started saying things like, “I never would’ve thought of that!” and “Wow, what foresight!”

*I’m glad you’re all satisfied.*

“Then,” Chrom ventured, “when you say you’ll go to Cadonia a month from now, that’s when...”

“That’s right. We’ll end things by then,” I said. It would give the Cadonians a good impression of us if we could take care of the monster problem by the time I visited.

“Understood. You can count on us, the Black Knights, to subdue the monsters in Cadonia. We shall see this great duty to its completion!” Chrom declared.

He was strangely enthusiastic, but I was grateful. “Excellent. Then I’ll leave it to you. I’m looking forward to a month from now.”

Chrom kneeled. “Yes, sir! Your wish is our command!”



**OUR** king’s wisdom knows no bounds!

After he exited the throne room, we all praised King Zero. He hadn’t said anything explicitly, because there was always the possibility of a leak, but he was going to use this as an opportunity to conquer Cadonia. Not only that, but he had the ingenious idea of using a stampede to cover up his true motives.

*He must have already accounted for Cadonia’s ridiculous demands in his calculations. No, even before then—he’s probably been developing the Forest of Beasts specifically to manipulate Cadonia into making those demands!*

At first, when the king said we’d accept every one of Cadonia’s terms, I hadn’t understood his intentions, but now I did. Defeating monsters within Cadonia’s borders would be a cover for us to agitate the monsters there, and when the king went to pay the reparations, we’d trigger a stampede. I didn’t know if we could actually cause a stampede that way, but as long as we drove them out of

the forest, we could probably get something close to one. This would lead to devastating damage in Cadonia, and just as that was happening, our strongest military assets, King Zero and Lady Frau, would be entering the country.

It was perfect. We would simply be acting according to Cadonia's demands, but we'd be able to take control of Cadonian territory at the same time—under the pretense of saving villages and towns under attack by monsters.

*No, knowing King Zero, he may even intend to conquer the capital of Cadonia, Mos, in one go.*

My Black Knights had a significant role in this plan. We would have to make it look like we were defeating monsters, while actually trying to figure out if we could trigger a stampede. With our monster breeding project well underway, Farune had already made advances in monster research. If we used the results of that research, we'd probably be able to agitate the monsters into a stampede successfully. It was wonderful. Anything and everything King Zero did had a deeper purpose to it.

Come to think of it, he probably had a plan in mind for unifying all of Ares. Ordinary people like us had no way of comprehending the depths of his machinations, but we had to do what we could to be of service to him, no matter how small our roles were. As an opponent, Cadonia was at our level, but we would probably come into conflict with even larger countries in the future. King Zero was going to provide us with more and more opportunities for battle. I couldn't wait.

## XVI: Stampede

**THE** day of my trip to Cadonia had arrived.

It was only a neighboring country, but I'd hardly ever taken any trips outside of Farune's borders, so I was excited to go. I was to be escorted by a group of fifty of the Hundred's most elite, top-ranking members, headed by Ogma, as well as ten mages from the Mages' Guild under Frau's command. At first, there had been a suggestion that I take an entire knightly order along with me as my escort, but I had rejected the idea: "That many won't be necessary." The reply to that had been, "I see, then you'll bring a small, elite squad instead!" And that

had brought the guard situation to where it was now.

*...It still doesn't sit right with me. I'm going in the spirit of friendship and goodwill, so I imagined I'd bring a refined delegation of diplomats and civil servants. This feels like some sort of punitive expedition instead.*

But still, the journey there was fun. It was nice to ride with Frau in an extravagant carriage (mainly in terms of weight limit) and take a leisurely trip somewhere. Whenever my guards spotted any monsters, they went and attacked them before they could reach us, but I decided to ignore that so I could enjoy the atmosphere.

"This would be more fun if some bandits attacked us, or something," my guards said, but I couldn't imagine thieves wanting to get anywhere near such a murderous group.

Regardless, after three days of travel, I could finally see the royal capital of Cadonia, Mos, in the distance. But something felt off. Pillars of smoke rose up from the city, and as we got closer, I could see an abnormal number of monsters surrounding it. I stuck my head out from the carriage to see what was happening, and just then, Ogma came riding up on his horse.

"It seems that the Black Knights did everything as planned," he said to me.

*As planned? What plan? I don't remember planning anything this brutal.*

"What should we do now?" Ogma asked.

*There's no other choice. As human beings, we should help them.*

"Exterminate the monsters!" I shouted.

At that, my guards went crazy with excitement. They charged the monster horde, each striving to get there first. The mages began reciting powerful spells, as if they had been waiting for this moment, and I noticed that Frau had already gotten out of the carriage and was preparing a spell herself—something so powerful that the air around me was crackling. I even thought I could sense a trace of happiness in Frau's expression.

She closed her eyes and began to chant: "Transcending pure crimson, black, hell-begotten fire, return everything to the darkness whence it came..." Her

voice sounded like it was overlapping itself.

*Is it just my imagination, or does that sound a lot more violent than any of the spells I know?*

Then, Frau raised her arms, and a vortex of black flames erupted from her hands, swallowing up the monster horde like a massive wave. She had only just learned this spell—called Darkness Flame—and it was ferociously powerful. *I always wonder when someone living a normal life would ever need to learn such a dangerous spell.*

Frau's spell instantly reduced the number of monsters, and combined with my guards' attacks, the monsters were quickly losing momentum.

This had been an unforeseen event, but that was no reason to delay the plan. So, to ensure I made it to my meeting with the king of Cadonia on time, I got out of the carriage and, defeating the monsters clinging to the castle gates on the way, entered the city of Mos. Inside, knights were fighting like crazy to beat back some monsters that had made it inside the city. There were a lot of them, but they were only of middling strength. I cut them down easily.

A man that seemed to be the commander of the knights came up to me. "Thank you for aiding us!" he said.

"I am King Mars, of Farune. Let your king know that I've arrived."

*I sent the Black Knights to subdue the monsters in Cadonia, but there are still just as many monsters. In fact, the monsters are wreaking havoc in the capital. How am I supposed to explain this to the king?*

"Why, King Mars! Please, excuse me. My name is Georg. I serve as the commander of the knightly order responsible for protecting Mos. And, my apologies, but...the king is not currently present." The knight, who looked to be nearing old age, made a pained expression. "As soon as he was informed of the approaching monster horde, he took his royal guard with him and escaped the city."

*That's great! Now I don't have to apologize to him! Meeting with him today would definitely have been awkward. Before I face the king, I'll exterminate as many monsters as possible.* As I was thinking, my guards approached.



“We’ve finished mopping up the monsters outside. Nearly all that made it into the castle have been defeated as well,” Oigma reported. Every inch of his body was covered in monster blood, but he seemed incredibly pleased. My other guards looked ecstatic as well. They must really have enjoyed their first real, large-scale battle in a while. I wished they had healthier hobbies.

There was a stir among the Cadonian knights. “You wiped out that many monsters?! Unbelievable!”

*Well, they’re strong enough to drive the monsters in our territory to the brink of extinction, so killing a small number like this is a piece of cake.*

“Have other Cadonian towns besides Mos been affected?” I asked Georg.

“Yes. Monsters are currently spreading throughout all of southern Cadonia. Unfortunately, we don’t have enough strength to hold them...”

*That’s bad. If the damage has already spread that far, then our reparations won’t be enough for repairs. But if I try to increase the amount we’re paying, I feel like Gamarath will get mad at me.*

“Got it,” I said. “We’ll do something about it.”

“Really?! But, we can’t accept so much from Farune. Cadonia’s reputation—”

“Would you sacrifice your citizens’ lives for your country’s reputation?!” I asked, purposefully playing up my anger. *Please, just let us subdue the monsters. I don’t want to have to pay any more money.*

“Well...certainly not...” Georg hung his head.

“Did you hear me?” I said to my guards. “We will subjugate the monsters invading Cadonia! Don’t let a single one of them escape!”

They happily replied, “Yes, sir! Anything for our king!”

It only took three days for the monsters that had overrun Cadonia to be completely wiped out, thanks to the Farunians’ efforts.



**JUST** before Mars and his retinue arrived in Mos, the king of Cadonia escaped the city, escorted by his royal guard. Based on the reported number of

monsters, he had judged the fall of the city to be unavoidable. And he hadn't been wrong. But of course, after the Cadonians had bought some time, Mars and his guards came in and fought off the monsters anyway...

"Why, why did this happen?!" the king of Cadonia begged, alone in his carriage. "Why did I have to run away from my own castle?! What did those damned Farunians do?! Weren't the Black Knights or whoever supposed to be reducing the number of monsters?"

Before Mars's visit, the Black Knights under Chrom's leadership had seemed to drive back all the monsters near the Forest of Beasts. Ostensibly, they had then entered the forest in order to eradicate the monsters, but Cadonia was now totally overrun with them despite that. The king had no idea why. He couldn't get in contact with the Black Knights, and regular communications from the unit he had attached to them as messengers had ceased. "...Impossible. Could the Black Knights have instigated this? No, was this Farune's plan from the start?" Just as he thought that, the carriage came to a sudden stop. "What's the meaning of this?!" he shouted at the driver.

"Sir... We're surrounded..." the driver replied.

The king peeked outside and saw that a group of knights clad in black armor had encircled his carriage. His royal guards were already engaging in combat with them, but they were being handily disposed of. "Black armor? Wait, are these Farune's Black Knights?!"

He had heard reports of their strength. They were powerful knights who could crush monsters that Cadonia's knights struggled to defeat. Now, they were defeating his royal guards one after another—and they were the most elite knights in Cadonia. The Black Knights steadily tightened their ranks, preventing all thoughts of escape. Finally, the king's carriage was all that remained. His driver was quickly cut down when he tried to flee, leaving the carriage stranded, and just then, one of the Black Knights came up to the carriage and hailed the king.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Your Majesty," he said. "My name is Chrom, and I am entrusted with the command of the Black Knights."

Resigned to his fate, the king of Cadonia slowly stepped outside. "So, not

satisfied with simply breaking your promise to defeat the monsters, you now intend to kill me as well?" he asked.

"Why, we would never break our promise. In fact, we've defeated quite a few monsters. All of the monsters that were attacking Cadonia when we arrived have been exterminated."

"Then why is my kingdom still infested with monsters?!"

Chrom smirked. "Apparently, monsters are naturally attracted to the blood of other monsters, which can sometimes draw in more monsters of higher rank. If you leave the job of monster extermination unfinished, you only end up triggering a stampede."

"That's ridiculous! I've never heard of defeating monsters causing a stampede!"

At that, Chrom took out a small bottle from his breast pocket. Inside was a thick liquid. "There's also this," he said. "It's a chemical monster lure our mages created. When you mix this with monster blood, the extreme reaction makes the blood hundreds of times more attractive to monsters. We took the liberty of sprinkling a trail of this from the Forest of Beasts all the way to Mos."

"So you're the ones who caused the stampede..."

"I wonder. We certainly did what we could to bring one about, but this would never have happened if you hadn't invited an order of foreign knights into your own country. If only you hadn't been shameless enough to demand reparations from our king, and make us take care of your monster problem."

The king shrunk under Chrom's cold glare. "Hold on," he said. "If you didn't want to do it, you could have just refused. Why did you have to go this far?"

"Even your foolishness was all a part of my king's plan," Chrom explained. "And now that I've cleared everything up, I believe I've treated you with the courtesy you deserve as king. Let's end this, shall we?" Chrom uncorked his bottle of monster lure and splashed the liquid all over the king of Cadonia.

"What are you doing?!"

"It still works, even without monster blood," Chrom said, and as the king

panicked, Chrom pointed his sword at him.

“Stop! I’ll pay you!” the king said frantically. “No, if you switch to Cadonia’s side, I’ll give you all the land and prestige you could want! Just—”

Chrom plunged his sword into the king’s chest. “Unfortunately, there aren’t any knights in our kingdom who could ever be tempted by money or territory,” he whispered to the king’s now-silent corpse. The king’s blood mixed with the chemical, and a sweet, bloody smell began to fill the air.

Chrom and the rest of the Black Knights put some distance between themselves and the carriage. Soon, monsters were emerging from out of nowhere, gathering around the corpses of the king and his guards before beginning to chow down.

“Well, that’s that. Put it down as, ‘monsters attacked the poor king of Cadonia while he was trying to escape,’” Chrom said.

After watching long enough to make sure all evidence was destroyed, the Black Knights disappeared from the area.

## XVII: Suppression

I was born in the small village of Riem in southern Cadonia, about midway between Mos and the Forest of Beasts. There was nothing particularly unique about Riem. You could probably find other villages just like it pretty much anywhere. I was the mayor’s daughter, and he brought me along with him to Mos about once a year. It was the thing I looked forward to most, and I always boasted about it to the other village children.

As it happened, I was somewhat afraid of monsters. The adults liked to scare us by saying, “If you do bad things, the monsters will come and eat you,” but it was all talk. Monsters never actually showed up in the village, and I only ever heard occasional agitated reports of them being spotted nearby. The adults would panic a bit when that happened, but no one ever got hurt.

Recently, though, monsters had gotten more active. Villages farther south and closer to the forest started to suffer, and I began hearing more and more talk about monsters near our village. I’d never seen any myself. *I wish I could get a chance to see one just once*, I thought vaguely. I didn’t know just how

scary monsters could be.

Not until today, that is.

After eating breakfast, I was helping out on the farm when someone came running from the village, yelling, “There’s a horde of monsters! More than anyone’s ever seen at one time!”

Everyone ran to the village outskirts, and I went with them. I could see clouds of dust being stirred up far away, and a massive number of *things* running. When I squinted hard, they looked like big animals, but a bit different.

“They’re headed straight toward Mos!” someone called out.

It was true, they were going in that direction. But Mos had tall castle walls, and plenty of knights and soldiers. It would be all right.

“Doesn’t it kinda look like they’re spreading out?”

On second glance, a few of the monsters among the horde making a beeline toward Mos started changing direction slightly, like they were turning away. *Mos is pretty far away. Maybe they’re impatient, and trying to go somewhere else instead?*

“Do you think they’re going to other villages and towns?”

“They wouldn’t come here, would they?”

The adults seemed to be thinking just as I was, and the atmosphere grew tense. I prayed that the monsters would spare Riem. We wouldn’t be able to do anything against those giant things.

Before I knew it, though, my father spoke from where he stood next to me: “Everyone, get ready to flee! It’ll be too late by the time the monsters get here! And militia members, prepare to fight!”

Because he was the mayor, everyone listened to him and got busy preparing at once. The militia was a group of men in the village who used bows, spears, and other weapons to fight monsters if necessary. They only trained occasionally, and never on a set schedule. I hadn’t ever seen them in an actual fight.

Time passed while I anxiously watched everyone accomplish their tasks, and

then just past noon, one of those *things* came. A white, catlike thing. Well, it was kind of like a cat, but it had exposed fangs and darting, bloodshot eyes, so it wasn't cute at all. More than anything else the catlike monster that came to Riem was big, about the size of two adults.

The militia shot at it with arrows, but none of them hit. The monster easily dodged them all, seemingly without a care in the world.

"Run!" my father yelled, giving directions to the villagers that we should all grab our belongings and get ready to flee, when...

"It's no good! There are more of them!"

Another big cat appeared in the direction we were trying to run. We were about to try taking another route, but when we looked around, we saw cats swiftly moving in and surrounding the village. Apparently, those clouds of dust weren't the only place the monsters were coming from.

*We're surrounded!*

The giant cats had encircled the village, almost as if they knew we were trying to escape. Without anywhere else to go, we gathered in the village's largest building, the church. We huddled together and fervently prayed to God that those cat monsters would go away, but our prayers weren't answered. The giant cats showed up and easily broke through the door of the church. The militia members there made a last-ditch effort to drive the monsters away with their spears, but the cats brushed the militia away with their front paws like they were playing with balls of yarn.

"Ahh!" one of the militiamen shouted as he was thrown against the wall of the church.

*What incredible strength. So these are monsters... They aren't just scary stories. There's nothing you can do against them.*

One of the cat's mouths twisted. It looked like it was watching us and laughing at our fear. Then, it suddenly crouched—it was getting ready to pounce.

*This is hopeless!*

As soon as I thought that, something dropped from above and landed right in the space between us and the cat. Actually, it was *someone*—a young man, maybe a bit older than me. He was holding a sword and wearing what looked like armor, but it wasn't the solid kind of armor that knights wore, it was something lighter. It looked like he had broken into the church through a skylight, one of the windows in the roof that I never really understood the purpose of.

"A White Tiger. Pretty average, then," the man said, looking at the cat monster. Apparently, it was called a White Tiger.

That White Tiger was on its guard against the man, its earlier confidence completely gone, almost like it had never been there in the first place. The man deftly readied his sword, then approached the White Tiger with smooth, fluid movements. The White Tiger bared its fangs, unsheathed its front claws, and pounced right on top of the man.

In the next moment, the White Tiger's head tumbled to the floor. The man had swung his sword, but I hadn't been able to see it at all. Blood spouted from the White Tiger's neck like a fountain I had once seen in Mos, and the villagers shrieked and screamed. The man paid them no mind, instantly moving on to the next White Tiger, which swiftly attacked him with its claws and fangs.

"Nice, nice, that's the stuff!" the man said, praising the monster's attacks for some reason while nimbly dodging them all. Then, he made a series of rapid sword swings, finely slicing into the White Tiger in the blink of an eye. Once he'd weakened the monster, the man drove his sword into it, finishing it off. The third and final White Tiger seemed spooked, and it slowly backed out of the church. "I'll come back when I've defeated them all, so wait here until then!" the man said, then exited the church, chasing the remaining White Tiger.

The adults began talking. "Who was that?"

"I don't think he was a knight."

"Is he an adventurer?"

"If he is, we might have to pay him a reward, you know."

After some time, the man returned. "I dealt with all the monsters in the

village. If you don't burn their bodies, bury them, or do something else to dispose of them, others will come."

"U-Understood... By the way, who are you?" my father asked on behalf of the villagers.

"The name's Juza. I'm a member of the Hundred, and I'm number one hundred. I came to save this village on the orders of King Zero of Farune."

*The Hundred? I don't know what that means, but Farune is one of Cadonia's neighbors. Why would the king of a neighboring country send someone to save our village?*

"The king of Farune? Why does he care about this village?" my father asked. He must've been thinking the same thing I was.

"It's not only this village. My king sent help to all the towns and villages that were being attacked by monsters."

"All of them? Are there others as strong as you in Farune?"

"I'm number one hundred. That makes me the lowliest ranked member of the Hundred. Higher-ranking members are headed to the larger towns. I shouldn't say this, but this is a pretty small village. They judged that I'd be enough, and they were right."

Juza said it like it was nothing, but we were shocked. *He's lowly? And he's number one hundred; does that mean there are ninety-nine people who are stronger than him?*

Hearing our murmurs, Juza said, "Not just ninety-nine. King Zero is above the Hundred. That man is truly mighty. He's strong enough that the entire Hundred couldn't beat him, not even if we all worked together. He's also very generous. That's why he sends aid to villages in other countries."

A strong, kind king? We'd only ever heard of kings like that in fairy tales.

"So, are you the mayor?" Juza asked my father.

"Yes, I am," my father replied nervously. A foreign king had saved our village—there was no way we'd get away with that for free. My father was probably expecting Juza to demand something in return.



“Was there any damage to the village?” Juza asked.

“Well, somewhat, yes.”

Our fields and crops had been devastated, and some buildings had been a bit damaged—though I had a feeling the most expensive thing had been the church window that Juza had broken.

“Okay. Then take this,” Juza said. He took a small leather pouch out of his breast pocket and handed it to my father.

“What is it?”

“There are gold coins inside. Cover the damages with that.”

“Gold coins!” my father exclaimed in surprise. He tipped the contents of the pouch into his hand. There were ten gold coins inside. Any one of us would hardly have had the chance to see even a single gold coin in our entire lives. I was pretty sure that ten gold coins were worth more than the money and property of every villager combined. “And...we can use these?”

“You can. My king brought them for this country.”

The villagers started to murmur among themselves. This king had not only helped them, but he had also given them gold coins. They’d never heard of a king like that, not even in fairy tales. That wasn’t a king—that was a god.

“It’s because my king is the greatest king in history!” Juza said with a lighthearted chuckle. Then, he left—but first, he cut off a piece of the White Tiger meat and took a bite out of it, which caught my attention, but that wasn’t important.

As we burned and disposed of the White Tiger carcasses, every one of us sang the praises of the king of Farune, King Zero.



***THIS*** has turned into a real headache.

The king of Cadonia had been attacked by monsters and killed. Apparently, his body had been found lying on the ground next to the highway heading north out of Mos in a horrible state, partially eaten by monsters. The bodies of his guards had been scattered around him, so there was no doubt the body in

question belonged to the king.

I could deal with that. He was just the king of a foreign country, and I'd never met him, so I didn't feel particularly broken up about it. If anything, he might have been lucky to have avoided listening to complaints and making things right after the stampede. But as for us, we were unable to return to Farune with Cadonia's king dead.

After arriving in Mos, I had immediately dispatched my guards to subjugate the monsters. Then, I had gone around to a few of the larger towns with significant damage and defeated monsters myself. Along the way, we freely distributed all the gold we had brought with us. Basically, my idea had been that if we used the money to help Cadonia, they'd have to accept it, and no one would complain about reparations in the future. The Cadonians had all seemed happy to get the gold, so I was pretty sure I had used the money well.

I rejoined my guards and the Black Knights on the way back to Mos, and it was then that I received the report of the king of Cadonia's death. This news seemed to have already circulated throughout Mos, and the responses to it varied.

On the most extreme end of the spectrum were the southern lords, who said, "The king was the very first one to run away, and monsters killed him instantly? How absolutely pathetic." That was all well and good. The problem was when they started saying, "We can't be part of a country like this, we belong to Farune now!"

*Ugh...what a pain. Why am I the one who has to deal with Cadonia's mess?*

The upshot was that after I got back to Mos, lords, mayors, village heads, and other leaders streamed into the city to meet with me and freely swear their loyalty. They all had pretty much the same things to say. To sum it up: "Thanks for helping us, and thanks for the money." Then they said, in a way that kind of sounded like a threat, "Now that we've declared ourselves a part of Farune, we can't go back to Cadonia!" and tried to force me to recognize their new allegiance. I had no choice but to accept.

Apparently, there had been disputes with the Cadonian nobility in some areas, but when members of the Hundred happily headed to those places as

reinforcements, all of the conflicts were quickly resolved.

Before I knew it, nearly all of southern Cadonia had become Farunian territory.

## XVIII: The Princess of Cadonia

“**THE** princess of Cadonia is in Mos?” I asked.

“Yes, sir. We have her under our protection,” Georg said.

After I had reluctantly taken over southern Cadonia, Georg had told me something curious. The king of Cadonia had had multiple children, and all of them had apparently been feuding over who had the right of succession—but *nearly* all of them had fled Mos during the stampede. Now, they were each living with their respective mothers’ families, except for Princess Rubis, who had remained behind in the castle.

“Lady Rubis declared, ‘While there are citizens remaining in the city, we cannot run away and leave them behind,’ and she decided to stay in the castle,” Georg continued.

“Ah, that’s admirable of her,” I said. It was impressive that she had taken a stand like that, despite almost all the other nobles having fled the city.

“However...even if Your Majesty *did* rescue Mos, you were still a foreign king, and we didn’t know what you’d do, so we’ve kept her presence hidden until now.”

“I see,” I said. *I can understand why. There’s no telling what a king from another country might do with a princess who has no one to support her.* “Why tell me now, though, after all this time? I’m sure she’s had plenty of opportunities to escape since the stampede.”

“It was Lady Rubis’s decision, sir. She saw how you saved the people of Cadonia, and she stated that she wishes to meet with you.”

*Oh, well that’s nice to hear.*

“I see. I guess I’ll meet with her, then.”

“Additionally, she wishes to keep the meeting absolutely secret. She would

like it to take the form of a dinner, with just the two of you. Is that to your liking?”

“It’s fine with me...”

*You can try to make it a secret all you want, but Frau can hear everything through the Contract Seal.*

“Thank you very much! I’ll prepare everything right away!” Georg said, before hurriedly taking his leave.



**PRINCESS** Rubis of Cadonia lamented the state of her country. Her father, the king, had fled, abandoning the people of Mos, and now he was dead. Because of his actions, the hearts of the citizens of Cadonia had drifted away from the royal family, shifting loyalty instead to the one who had saved them: Mars, the king of Farune. King Mars had also generously given financial assistance to citizens of the areas affected by the stampede, which in turn gave him an iron grip on support in the south.

And the reason he had brought so much money with him on his visit to Cadonia in the first place? That was because her father had demanded it from Farune.

It was too perfect. Rubis suspected that all of this had been a setup from the start. After all, Cadonia’s demand for reparations had itself been unreasonable, so it was strange that Farune had so readily accepted it.

*Farune caused the stampede.* When she thought of it that way, all of the pieces fit together. But that didn’t change the fact that the person who had both requested help with the monsters and demanded reparations from Farune was her father. Farune had only done what Cadonia had demanded, so Rubis had nothing she could criticize them for. Even if she suddenly came out and denounced Farune, saying, “It’s all a Farunian conspiracy!” she had no solid evidence to back up her suspicions, so it would just sound like she was making excuses for her family’s bad behavior.

*No, even if I had any evidence, now that Farune’s strength and generosity are so widely known, the people might look the other way.* If all of this really had

been King Mars's plan from the get-go, it was astoundingly ingenious. He had taken advantage of Cadonia's own demands to invade. By now, there was nothing that could be done to change that.

*...No, there is something.* There was one final course of action. It was an ancient method, used since time immemorial in truly dire circumstances: assassination. Rubis had been getting detailed reports of King Mars's actions, and apparently, he didn't make use of a food taster. Not checking for poison might have been a way for him to display his courage, but in his position as royalty, it was nothing more than a vulnerability, pure and simple.

After she had discussed it with Georg, they had come to a conclusion: poisoning King Mars was their only option.

They could also have attacked him while he was asleep to catch him off guard, but the strength the king had shown when first entering Mos's castle had been truly extraordinary. Rubis and Georg had a feeling that they would never succeed with that particular plan, no matter how many assassins they sent. For starters, the members of the Hundred that constituted the king's guard were all literal one-man armies. Force wouldn't work against them.

So, poison was their only choice. Unfortunately, the king's wife, Frau, was a powerful wizard. If she was sitting with him at the time of the assassination attempt, there was the possibility she could use a spell of some kind to detect the poison. They had to aim for a time when the king was alone, and the only way that could be done was if Rubis herself invited him to dine with her.

Actually, that was the better option anyway, even though it made the culprit obvious—or perhaps because of that. Without a clear perpetrator behind the poisoning, there was no way to know how or to what extent Farune might retaliate against Cadonia. More than anything, Rubis didn't want to cause trouble for her kind maternal grandfather, Duke Gordon, who still had a great deal of influence and land in the remaining, northern part of Cadonia.

*I want to settle everything with my own life.* Rubis was grimly determined to see it through. She was only fourteen, but she was full-fledged royalty. Georg, who was a relative of Duke Gordon and who had been close to Rubis for her whole life, had tearfully accepted her resolute decision, and had acted as the

messenger to King Mars.

Finally, the day of their meeting arrived. It was to be in a specific room in the royal castle at Mos. Mars came alone, without even a single guard accompanying him. This surprised Rubis and everyone she had brought with her, but from Mars's perspective, it made sense to come alone. After all, he had been told it was a secret and he had gotten used to acting on his own as a boy—or so Rubis had heard. Everyone around him was familiar with his behavior, and none thought he had any real need for guards in the first place.

The table was piled high with traditional Cadonian royal cuisine. After they exchanged greetings, Rubis was the first to take a bite. She did this to show that the food was safe, but she had actually taken an antidote beforehand, and besides that, there wasn't that much poison in the food. As long as she didn't eat more than a certain amount, she would remain unaffected.

The poison was also evenly distributed among all the different dishes. There was always the possibility that Mars might suddenly demand his plate be swapped with Rubis's—those kinds of self-defense measures were reasonable precautions for royalty to take. But Mars didn't do anything of the sort.

"Now, you wanted to meet with me, but what did you want to talk about specifically?" Mars asked Rubis.

"That's right. My grandfather, Duke Gordon, is a powerful noble in northern Cadonia," Rubis began. "I believe that, with your present control over southern Cadonia, if you and he were to form a close relationship, it's possible you could stabilize the disorder in Cadonia as a whole..." Rubis had purposely chosen a topic that would get his attention. The goal was to get him so absorbed in the conversation that he would eat more without thinking.

But all Mars said was, "I see." *Politics is such a pain*, he thought to himself. Still, the Cadonian court cuisine was unexpectedly delicious, and as he listened to the princess speak, he devoured his meal. He especially enjoyed its tingling spice.

As a matter of fact, Cadonian food *was* traditionally spicy, but the liberal use of seasoning this time had been to disguise the flavor of the poison.

Meanwhile, Rubis was bewildered by Mars's lack of enthusiasm, even though

she was hinting at the idea of him unifying Cadonia under his own rule. But at least he was devouring his food, so she was confident that the poisoning would be a success—or at least, she was at first.

As the meal progressed, however, no matter how much Mars ate, Rubis didn't see any changes whatsoever in his condition. On the other hand, Rubis had taken an antidote, but would still experience effects of the poison if she ate too much, and the longer their meal lasted, the worse Rubis—and only Rubis—felt. She looked to Georg, who was standing nearby, and he gave her a look that said, “King Mars's food definitely has poison in it!”

She had investigated and confirmed beforehand that Mars was not wearing anything that neutralized poison. Her wizards had appraised Mars's accessories from afar and said, “King Mars is not wearing anything with a protective effect. However, the armlet and the ring he's wearing seem to do exactly the opposite. They both have some sort of sinister curse...”

Rubis had felt a twinge of anxiety after hearing that Mars was wearing cursed items, but regardless, she had confirmed that they weren't effective against poison. Despite that, though, Mars was cheerfully cleaning plate after plate, brimming with energy all the while. Rubis was pretending she wasn't all that hungry, and she really hadn't eaten that much, but her consciousness was still slowly growing hazy.

“By the way, how old are you, Lady Rubis?” Mars asked, changing the topic. He was bored with political chatter.

Rubis tried to feign composure, hiding the changes in her own condition, and replied, “I'm fourteen.”

“Fourteen, huh? That's what I thought. You know, my younger brother is fourteen too, and when I saw you, I thought that you looked to be around his age.”

Hearing that, Rubis's guard went up. From the way he was speaking, she could tell he was trying to advance the conversation toward the topic of marriage. King Mars was, without a doubt, trying to make her marry his brother, and it could only be for one purpose: she was a princess with a powerful northern noble for a grandfather, so by having her marry his brother,

Mars would put his brother on Cadonia's throne, leading to a harmonious annexation of the country.

*Was he after that from the start?* Rubis trembled with fear. King Mars had seen through every one of their tricks, and now he was letting them squirm around in the palm of his hand. *I have to do something to avoid playing into his scheme.*

"How about it? My younger brother knows a lot about governance, and I think you'd get along well with him, Lady Rubis."

She wanted to say no, but a direct refusal was out of the question. Proper practice was to politely and indirectly turn him down. That was the appropriate way for royalty to behave. However, while Rubis was known for her intelligence, the effects of the poison made it impossible for her to think straight. She just wanted to cut the meeting short and take more antidote as soon as possible. She had come to the dinner prepared to die, but if she died now, it would be worse than pointless; the Cadonians might get angry enough to escalate the situation to bloodshed.

"...Very well. I'll take it under positive consideration," Rubis said. It had taken all of her energy to reply at all.

Meanwhile, as Mars watched the young Rubis trying her hardest to fulfill her royal duties, a certain idea suddenly flashed through his mind: *Nicol's also fourteen, and royalty, so why don't I put him to work, too?* Mars had been getting tired of dealing with Cadonia, but there hadn't been any suitable person he could push the responsibility off onto. There were too few nobles in Farune, and they were dealing with a drought of people able to take on important roles. However, Princess Rubis was only fourteen, and her conduct made her a splendid example of royalty already. It was only natural to think that his younger brother might be able to take on similar responsibility.

*I'll bring Nicol over to Cadonia to act on my behalf, and assign him to the management of the country while getting pointers from Rubis,* Mars thought.

That was why he had said to Rubis that he thought she and Nicol would get along. He hadn't been thinking of marriage at all. He had simply wanted to delegate his most annoying tasks to his younger brother so he could return



quickly to Farune.



**BECAUSE** Mars had gotten a positive response from Rubis, he used magic to contact Gamarath back home after the meal was over.

Needless to say, Gamarath, after hearing the direction the meeting had taken, also judged that they had been talking about marriage—he thought like a proper noble, after all—and he made preparations for the wedding and sent Nicol to Cadonia. From his perspective, he was completely in favor of his grandson becoming the king of Cadonia. In fact, he was impressed by Mars’s foresight, saying to himself, “I expected nothing less of King Mars. After his ascension to the throne, it wasn’t mercy that made him refrain from killing Nicol; he spared him to use him for a role like this in the future!”

And so, while Mars was unaware of it, and while Rubis was bedridden from the effects of her failed assassination plot, all obstacles to the wedding were rapidly being cleared away.

## XIX: Nicol’s Wedding

**MY** base of operations in Cadonia was the former mansion of a Cadonian noble who had fled during the stampede and then promptly been killed by monsters. As a result, I didn’t have to worry that he might come back and tell me to get out. Apparently, the mansion was one of the largest buildings in Cadonia, and it featured a luxe interior as well—a massive difference from Farune’s royal castle, which was a remodeled fortress.

My new home base did have one drawback, though: because I was wearing the five times Gravity armlet, if I sat in any of the many artfully crafted chairs in the mansion, they shattered to pieces. With no other option, I was using a large log that had been cut into a makeshift seat. I couldn’t even fully enjoy the mansion’s beautiful interior. Was I a king, or the chief of a gang of bandits?



**NICOL**, whom I had summoned from Farune, arrived at the mansion where I was staying. Lilia had accompanied him to Cadonia, and she immediately knelt and thanked me. “Lord Mars,” she said, “let me express my deepest gratitude

for finding Nicol a suitable bride.”

*I only called Nicol, so why did his mother show up? I had no idea he was such a mama's boy. And what was that about a bride?*

Nicol kneeled too, right next to Lilia. “Brother, thank you for bestowing upon me such an important role. I shall fulfill your expectations!”

*I'm glad to hear you're enthusiastic.*

At fourteen, Nicol had gentle, intelligent features. He looked like he would make a competent civil servant.

I was in a hurry to push everything in Cadonia onto his shoulders and get back to Farune right away, so I humored him: “Yes, I leave Cadonia to you. Please cooperate and get along well with Princess Rubis.”

“Certainly! If possible, I'd like to meet with the princess right away,” he said. “Where is she now?”

*Huh, someone's assertive. Princess Rubis was pretty cute, I guess. Maybe he's heard good things about her, and he's excited to find out if they're really true.*

“The princess should be in the castle, but I hear she isn't feeling well right now, so I don't know if you'll be able to see her quite yet.”

After our meeting, her health had apparently taken a sudden turn for the worse. Maybe it was because she had gotten too tense during our meal. *She did look sicker and sicker as we sat there...*

“My king, shall I accompany Lord Nicol on a tour of the castle?” suggested Chrom, who was standing at the ready nearby.

*Letting Nicol get a look at the castle might be a good idea. And if Chrom is with him, he won't get into any trouble.* I had chosen two relatively sensible-seeming members of the Hundred and attached them to Nicol as guards.

“Good idea. Chrom, show Nicol around.”

“Yes, sir!” Chrom nodded happily.



**“PLEASE** wait! You may be retainers to the king of Farune, but this outrage

will not..." Georg frantically tried to hold back Chrom, Nicol, and Nicol's guards, all of whom had suddenly shown up and forced their way through until they were right outside Princess Rubis's quarters.

"Lord Georg," Chrom said with a bright smile. "The man who will be Princess Rubis's husband, Lord Nicol, has come all this way to meet her. Can't you understand his desire to see his future wife?"

The Cadonian knights who had been guarding the princess were lying on the ground all around them. Needless to say, Nicol's guards and Chrom were responsible.

"I haven't heard anything of the sort!" said a red-faced Georg. "That's only according to Farune!"

"Lord Georg, we aren't the only ones saying it," Nicol said. Despite the carnage around them, he smiled kindly at Georg.

*I knew these Farunians were a bunch of lunatics,* Georg thought.

"There's already been an agreement," Nicol continued. "My grandfather, Gamarath, and the princess's grandfather, Duke Gordon, have spoken with each other. They were both deeply pleased. I'm grateful for the work my brother, King Mars, has done to facilitate this union."

"That's absurd! There's no way Duke Gordon would agree to something like —"

"Why not?" Nicol asked. "It's an appealing offer! After all, his granddaughter gets to be queen of Cadonia."

"That's not..." Georg's words trailed off. Nicol was right. Princess Rubis had suspected that Mars was behind the recent series of events, and had tried to expel Farune from Cadonia, but she hadn't consulted Duke Gordon about it. From the duke's perspective, Farune may have intruded into Cadonia, but there was a high likelihood that he could be related to the next king.

"And, to a certain extent, I know what the princess tried to do to my brother," Nicol continued, still smiling.

"What on earth are you..." The color drained from Georg's face. If Farune

investigated it, both he and the princess were as good as dead.

“Every country, no matter which, always tries the same things against him. It’s truly foolish. The mere rabble cannot hope to defy a truly great king.” Nicol’s smile widened. His absolute devotion to Mars was clear.

Chrom was smiling too, but his face was more fiendish than adoring, as if to say that Georg’s life would be forfeit if he put up any further resistance.

*Is there nothing that can be done...?* Georg thought. Just as he was about to lose hope, the door he had been guarding opened, and Princess Rubis appeared.

“Georg, that’s enough,” she said. Her face was pale, which showed that she was far from fully recovered, but she was still acting courageously. “Lord Nicol, by all means, come in. However, please come alone.”

“Of course,” Nicol said with a cheerful smile, and he entered Rubis’s quarters.



“**WHAT** are your demands of us?” Rubis asked Nicol. She had dismissed all of her ladies-in-waiting from her quarters, so it was just the two of them now, sitting across a table from each other.

“We have no demands. I simply want us to work together to improve Cadonia as a country,” Nicol replied. In contrast with Rubis’s tense demeanor, Nicol looked cool and refreshed.

*“Improve Cadonia...”* Rubis spat. She glared at Nicol. “Cadonia was great before Farune came.”

“Is that so?” Nicol asked, unfazed. “If that were true, then no matter how wonderful a king my brother was, the citizens would never have submitted to him so easily. A truly great country would never give another country an excuse to intervene in their affairs, but Cadonia did. And the cracks were already starting to show before Farune ever arrived.”

“But...” Internally, Rubis did agree that Cadonia had been partially to blame. However, that was hardly reason to accept Farune’s intervention.

Nicol’s expression turned serious. “Princess Rubis, whom do you believe a

country is for?”

“The people, of course,” Rubis replied. That was her firmly held belief, and it was also why she was trying to remove Farune from Cadonia. She was staunchly resisting because she didn’t want to hand her country over to the infamous Mad King Mars.

“If you truly believe that, it’s all the more reason to join us. No king has the people as close to his heart as my brother.”

“What nonsense! Even children know the stories about the mad king of Farune! Wherever he goes, he leaves rivers of blood and mountains of corpses in his wake!”

Mars’s reputation throughout the entire continent of Ares was as bad as it could get. It was said that he had led a bunch of criminals in seizing control of a country and slaughtering its nobility. He ate monster meat and took pleasure in watching fights to the death in an arena he had built. Nobody even bothered criticizing him as a ruler; they just thought of him as a bad *person*, plain and simple. However, now that she had actually met him, Rubis had gotten the impression that Mars was in fact an exceedingly ordinary person.

“That blood and those corpses belonged only to nobles. Not a single hardship befell the people,” Nicol said. “And that was true in Cadonia as well, wasn’t it?”

“That’s not...” As she spoke, Rubis thought back. He was right; no common people had been harmed whatsoever, and only nobles had died. “No, that still doesn’t justify their deaths!” From her perspective, the nobility were also important subjects, and it wasn’t right to treat their lives as disposable.

“Really? What do the nobility do for the nation? Do they plow the fields? Do they fight for their country? There are some brilliant people among them, of course. However, there are only a few. Don’t you think that, on the whole, they’re useless?”

“Don’t be ridiculous! Where would a country be without its nobility?! Who would manage the country’s territory? Who would carry out the affairs of government? There are many things that are impossible without educated nobles!”

“I’m saying that there are too many of them,” Nicol said, staring into Rubis’s eyes. “Keeping the nobility and their lifestyles afloat has a high cost, and that’s nothing but a burden on the people. Do you really think it’s acceptable for the people to suffer, so long as it’s for the nobility’s sake? If education is the issue, then that’s simply a matter of selecting brilliant people and educating them. There’s no need for them to be nobles.”

“But...” It was difficult to acquiesce to such a dramatically different mindset so suddenly, but even though Rubis wanted to object, she couldn’t come up with the words to do so.

“Farune is still functioning, and we don’t have a nobility. Without nobles, the exploitative middlemen are gone, tax revenue increases, and the tax burden on the people actually decreases. Everyone is happy. No one in Farune speaks ill of my brother.”

In fact, Mars enjoyed tremendous popularity in Farune. Nicol himself thought that, if he had been king, things would never have gone so well.

“...I don’t believe it.” It was all she could do just to say that. She was unable to change her deeply held beliefs so easily.

“Please, come visit Farune. You should see the truth with your own eyes,” Nicol said softly. “And, I’m glad.”

“Huh?”

“I’m glad my future wife is such an intelligent and charming person.”



**NICOL** and Rubis had a grand wedding. Southern Cadonia enthusiastically supported it, because it meant they would be placed under Farunian jurisdiction. Duke Gordon arranged everything in the north, and in exchange for recognition of the nobles’ interests, he ultimately approved of their marriage.

With that, Nicol became the new king of Cadonia, and Cadonia became a de facto vassal state of Farune. Nearly all of the south was placed under the direct control of the king of Cadonia, and Nicol used his political acumen to push for new reforms.

As for Rubis, when she visited Farune on her honeymoon and saw how things really were, she finally acknowledged the advancements the nation had made. After that, she supported Nicol and worked with him for the future of Cadonia, and the two of them became a loving couple.

But Mars had a question.

“Why did those two get married?”







Chapter.3

VERY VELL.THEN  
LET IT BE KRIEG



## XX: Dorssen

**TO** the north of Farune and Cadonia lay a country called Dorssen. Dorssen was five times as large as Farune, and at least double the size of Farune and Cadonia combined. Said to have existed since the formation of the continent of Ares, Dorssen had a long history, and its royal family was alleged to be descended from a goddess. It was one of Ares's great central powers, and in addition to its territory, its economy and military both surpassed Farune's by a long shot.

From Dorssen's perspective, both Farune and Cadonia were just buffer zones against the Forest of Beasts, but those buffer zones had suddenly merged.

The king of Dorssen wasn't happy about that. Naturally, he was well aware of Farune's recent expansion into the forest and accompanying sudden, rapid growth. He could tolerate that. But no matter how much a small country developed, there was a limit to its scope. Even the construction of that barbaric facility, the arena, and the revenue it generated from gambling, had earned only a derisive laugh from Dorssen's king—poor countries were always desperately trying to find *some* way to stay afloat.

However, he couldn't overlook the fact that Farune had annexed a neighboring country, thereby doubling in size. Farune still possessed nowhere near Dorssen's might, but the annexation indicated it had territorial ambitions.

The country didn't appear to have greatly expanded its military, but it had introduced the Hundred, which recruited a select, elite few without distinctions in status. The king of Dorssen had also received information indicating that powerful wizards of poor moral character were gathering in Farune after hearing that they could conduct unethical magic research there. Finally, there was the suppression of the stampede in Cadonia. Farune had apparently accomplished it with a small number of people, without the use of a large army. That showed that Farune's power was not a straightforward affair. According to reports, the stampede had been relatively small, but even so, Farune's strength was clearly nothing to scoff at.



**TWO** men stood before the king of Dorssen, bowing their heads. They were the first and second princes of Cadonia. They had fled Mos as soon as the stampede began, and when they had learned of the death of their father, the king, they'd immediately begun struggling over succession—in other words, they were irredeemable fools. It was that stupidity that had lost the royal family its internal support and allowed Farune to annex Cadonia in the first place.

*If these two and the late king of Cadonia had been just a bit more sensible, they could easily have avoided their current predicament,* the king of Dorssen thought.

The two princes gave an account of their hopeless situation and pled their case to the king of Dorssen. According to them, they had been unjustly banished from Cadonia; the annexation had been a Farunian invasion; their father had to have been killed by Farune, not monsters; Farune had caused the stampede; their younger sister, who was now queen of Cadonia, had conspired with Farune; and so on.

It was the baseless whining of a couple of sore losers. If they had been the king of Dorssen's subordinates, he would have executed the both of them. However, what the king needed right now was a pretext. No matter how preposterous their assertions may have been, the two of them did have the right to inherit Cadonia.

"I understand what you want to say," the king of Dorssen said solemnly. "Dorssen cannot overlook Farune's outrageous behavior. We'll consider possible responses."

The princes were ecstatic, and feverishly thanked the king.

*You incompetents,* the king mentally cursed them. When Dorssen, one of the strong central powers, took action, it always drew the attention of the other great powers. If the king wasn't careful, one of those powers might interfere. A great deal of preparation and maneuvering was required, which took quite a lot of time and manpower. If a war broke out, the financial burden would be enormous. Nothing was simple. But still, it had to be done. Problems were best squashed while they were still small. That was the duty of a statesman.

First, he would go through ordinary diplomatic channels to demand that the

current king of Cadonia relinquish the throne. At the same time, he would make plans with the Cadonian nobility. Then, he would mass troops at the border with Cadonia, mobilizing as many soldiers as possible and carrying out military exercises as a show of force. With that, the majority of Cadonian nobles in the north would most likely decide to collaborate with Dorssen.

If the other side meekly gave up the throne, that would settle things, but Farune would never allow that to happen. Ultimately, war between Dorssen and the combined forces of Cadonia and Farune was likely on the horizon. If the king of Dorssen could win that, then all he'd need to do would be to set up a puppet king in Cadonia and manipulate him as he wished. He could then mercilessly extract the cost of the war from Cadonia while letting Cadonia's new king take the blame. None of the resulting disorder would matter in the slightest to Dorssen as long as the king of Dorssen achieved his actual aim: beating back the rising nation of Farune.



**THE** new king of Cadonia, Nicol, looked over the letter from Dorssen and sighed. The letter took issue with Farune's usurpation of Cadonia and demanded that he relinquish the throne. If he refused, the implication was that Dorssen would escalate to using force.

This was actually exactly what Nicol had expected. It was only natural that a large, neighboring country would set its sights on Farune after its recent series of highly conspicuous moves. If anything, this had taken longer than Nicol would have thought, but Dorssen had probably needed some time to coordinate various factors, both foreign and domestic.

Of course, giving up the throne was out of the question. Nicol's older brother had entrusted the management of the entire country to his judgment, and there was no way he was about to squander the opportunity.

Nicol had been brought up with strict training in statecraft from a young age. The crown prince of Farune had been Mars at the time, but his disinheritance had been as good as certain, so Nicol had believed it was only a matter of time. His mother and his grandfather had taught him politics and economics, telling him, "The future of Farune is in your hands!" In particular, his grandfather,

Gamarath, had taken a role in his education, teaching him the ins and outs of specific policies and effective people management, which had made Nicol a highly skilled politician from a fairly young age. Nicol himself was also ablaze with a passionate idealism—he would become king and turn Farune into an enviable nation.

But one day, that future suddenly disappeared—the day of Mars’s coup. Nicol’s grandfather had held enormous amounts of political power, but he had quickly surrendered in the face of violence. Gamarath and the rest of the nobility had thought Mars was mediocre, but he had secretly been a charismatic military man. He had formed the Hundred, a sort of private army, and gained the support of regional military orders, the Black Knights and the Red Knights. Mars had also strengthened his connection with his fiancée, Frau, who was a powerful wizard. Together, they had taken control of the Mages’ Guild and used Mars’s overwhelming military might to seize the royal capital. He had then purged Farune’s prominent nobles, even holding Nicol and his mother in custody for a time. But, after pardoning Gamarath, Mars had ultimately allowed them to survive.

After that, Mars had appointed his former enemy, Gamarath, to an important position of trust. Now that the noble establishment was gone, Mars was allowing Gamarath to carry out a bold program of reform. Nicol himself was also taking part. In one simple step, Mars had accomplished the necessary political and economic reforms for Farune, and had used his own former political enemies to do it.

“I can’t hold a candle to him,” Nicol said to himself. He had once looked down on his brother, but now, he respected him from the bottom of his heart. Mars’s self-isolation in his quarters out of fear of assassination had only been a front. In fact, he had secretly, steadily been preparing to become the next king. Nicol, on the other hand, was more developed as a politician than as a king. His brother had demonstrated that he had that undefinable *something* that made him fit to fill the position.

Finally, Mars had given Nicol the duty of being Cadonia’s king. It could only mean that the brother Nicol respected so much had recognized his ability and the hard work he had put in from such a young age.



**AFTER** Nicol married the princess of Cadonia, he dealt gently with the northern nobles, increased the land under the direct control of the government in the south, and rapidly rebuilt the kingdom. The princess was not a typical noble lady, steeped in privilege; instead, she was an intelligent woman, which was to Nicol's liking. She was also an ideal partner in terms of ability, and Nicol was very grateful to his brother for choosing such a good spouse for him.

Nicol had also brought along several leaders of the Hundred from Farune, and introduced a similar system in Cadonia. Mars had proven the effectiveness of a powerful military, so there was no way Nicol wouldn't follow in his footsteps. Still, everything took time to come to fruition, and at the moment, Cadonia was still powerless against the impending threat of Dorssen. If war was declared, most of the northern nobles would probably collaborate with the invaders. Nicol had even privately told Duke Gordon, a prominent northern noble and the queen's grandfather, that if the time came, he didn't mind if the duke surrendered. His resistance alone would be pointless.

However—depending on how he thought about it, the situation could also present an opportunity. Nicol could charge everyone who collaborated with Dorssen and use that to break the power of the northern nobility. If he could excise the unnecessary excess that was the noble establishment, Cadonia would instantly grow more powerful. It was even possible that his brother, Mars, had predicted that this was exactly how things would go. If so, his foresight was shockingly formidable. Come to think of it, he had probably already worked out a way to achieve victory in a war against Dorssen.

Nicol had asked for military support from Farune, and the Red Knights had already arrived. They were small in number, but they had high morale, and their strength had already been proven. Nicol had also requested that Mars and Frau participate in the fighting, if necessary. With those two, Nicol felt they could win any fight. Of course, he also intended to head into battle himself. The king's presence on the front lines was important for raising morale, and this was also a good opportunity to vacate Mos, which would reveal potential defectors in his absence.

War was a failure of diplomacy, a political mistake, and an economic burden,

but in this case, it was inevitable. Mars was undoubtedly aiming to turn a victory against Dorssen into a way to expand Farune's territory into the center of the continent. The rumors everyone was whispering might very well have been true: ultimately, Mars had his eye on the unification of all of Ares. Nicol thought his brother was destined for greater things than ruling just one small country; he believed Mars ought to be the first man to unify the continent. So, to make that dream a reality, Nicol resolved—as his brother, and as king of Cadonia—to devote himself to Mars.

## XXI: The Monster Corps

***HOW** did things end up this way?*

After reading the letter from Nicol, I held my head in my hands. He had just received word from Dorssen demanding that he cede the throne to the first prince of Cadonia.

*That's fine. If he gives up the throne, problem solved. It's nothing but a big headache, after all.*

The issue was that Nicol had married the princess, and was now the king of Cadonia. *Why did they get married? They sure got to know each other awfully fast.*

Then, far from giving up the throne, Nicol requested something from me: "There's a high likelihood of war with Dorssen, so I ask that you please deploy Farune's greatest military strength."

*Huh? Why? I don't remember Nicol being the fighting type.* I had pushed all the responsibility of Cadonia onto him because I had thought he seemed like a quiet bureaucrat. This wasn't at all how it was supposed to go. And to make matters worse, my subordinates were all fired up after learning of the letter.

"All right! Time for war!"

"Let's crush 'em!"

"Better yet, let's attack first!"

They were out of control. The Red Knights, who hadn't gotten a chance to fight during the stampede, got ahead of themselves and went straight to

Cadonia. Their commander, Warren, said some stuff that sounded plausible, like, “We’ll be going to Cadonia for a time to stabilize unrest while they’re being pressured by Dorssen!”

I could only reply, “O-Okay, got it.” Warren had a super menacing look on his face at the time, so I couldn’t bring myself to stop him.

Even the one person who seemed like he’d oppose war, Gamarath, wasn’t making any sense. “I expected nothing less from you, Your Majesty,” he said. “You made sure the war would start just in time for the completion of the monster corps, am I right? So it was all Your Majesty’s plan from the start!”

*I don’t remember planning any of that. Who the hell would want to go and start wars? Peace is best, no question about it.* The way things had turned out, Farune had annexed Cadonia, but that land hadn’t originally been Farune’s territory, so it really should have been fine for us to give it up. *Is there nothing we can do to prevent war?*

With that in mind, I decided to reserve judgment. “Hold on. Dorssen is five times stronger than Farune. The citizens will panic if there’s a war. We shouldn’t decide this so quickly.”

I was being noncommittal, but none of my retainers bothered trying to convince me any further. They all had confident, knowing smiles on their faces, as if to say, “Oh, we get it.”

*Do you though? Do you get it?*



**THE** next day, members of the Hundred gathered in the castle courtyard. I hadn’t asked them to or anything. They had heard news about a possible war with Dorssen, and had spontaneously shown up there of their own volition.

I looked out over them from the window of my quarters. Ogma was standing on a balcony and beginning a speech—without my permission, of course. This was basically an unauthorized, illegal gathering. *Why isn’t anyone telling them off?*

“Thank you for gathering here, my finest warriors!”



*Don't gather without my permission.*

"As you know, Dorssen has demanded that we give up Cadonia to them!"

*No, they just told us to restore the original heir. It's a completely reasonable request.*

"Do those bastards think we'll take this outrage lying down?!"

*So starting a rally in the castle without the king's permission isn't an outrage?*

"Will you stand idly by and watch as they try to steal Cadonia out from under our noses?!"

*I'm begging you, please shut up. Stop riling them up!*

The gathered members of the Hundred roared. Nearly all of them expressed irresponsible opinions, saying, "No way!" and, "Crush those thieves!" and, "We'll make them pay!" and so on.

Satisfied by their response, Ogma paused for a moment. He waited until everyone calmed down, then he began speaking again, quietly this time. "Dorssen is a massive country, and a great power. They must have five times as many soldiers as Farune, each one well-trained and well-equipped."

There was a confused stir in the crowd. *Have they finally regained their senses after hearing about the gap in strength?*

"Is anyone here afraid? You can leave; I don't mind. King Zero only wants the strong! If you're a coward who's bothered by the difference in our armies, then go home to tremble with fear!"

*No one's actually going to leave if you put it like that. If you really want to make them go home, you should suggest it more gently.*

Of course, none of them moved a muscle. They all silently waited for Ogma's next words.

"In that case, you all must have the will to fight. Then let me say this! They *only* have five times as many soldiers as we do. Each one of you only has to defeat five of them!"

*What the hell is he saying? He's starting to sound like a math problem.*

“None of you are such weaklings that you can’t defeat a measly five people, right? On my honor as the first of the Hundred, I declare that I’ll defeat ten times that many—fifty people—and offer their heads to King Zero!”

“I don’t need them!” I shouted reflexively. I was in my quarters, so naturally, nobody could hear me. But imagining fifty heads piled up on the ground in front of me made me feel sick.

“I’ll decapitate ten people and offer their heads to King Zero!” one Hundred member shouted.

“Then I’ll do twenty!”

“I’ll do thirty!”

The value of human life was rapidly depreciating. And the stack of decapitated heads in my mind’s eye was steadily growing.

Then, Ogma shouted, “I offer the Dorssenian pigs’ heads to King Zero!”

With those irritating words, the unpermitted, illegal gathering reached its climax, then ended.



**AFTER** that, rumors about the impending war with Dorssen spread far and wide throughout the kingdom, but there was no particular unrest among the citizens. I had someone take stock of the general sentiment.

It went like this: “We should make Dorssen pay for making unreasonable demands of Farune!”

“This is our chance to prove to other countries how strong the Hundred is!”

“It’s time the entire continent of Ares knew the glory of King Zero!”

And so on. Almost everyone was in favor of war.

*The citizens have been watching fierce battles in the arena every day, so maybe now they have less of an aversion to fighting.* At the same time, they deeply trusted the Hundred, and they were certain that there was no fight they couldn’t win. Thanks to that, I heard almost no opinions against the war.



**AND** so, all anyone said at the anti-Dorssen strategy meeting was, “The time is ripe for war!”

“The warriors have high morale!”

“The citizens are pushing for war against Dorssen!”

“The monster corps is ready for action!”

There was nowhere left to run. I reluctantly declared, “Very well. Then let there be war,” and the war against Dorssen was set in motion.



**THE** day after we officially decided to declare war, I went to meet with the person in charge of the monster breeding project. They were a mage, and one of Frau’s followers. I had let them do as they pleased without meeting them up until now, but with war coming soon, I was anxious about their progress.

The project’s base was situated behind the castle, in a newly built facility in the reclaimed forest. There was one decently large building, around the size of a noble’s manor, surrounded by rows of gigantic tents. I headed there together with Frau.

“It is a great pleasure to meet you, Your Majesty,” a woman greeted me. “My name is Keely. I am researching monsters at Lady Frau’s behest.” The mage who had introduced herself as Keely was a short woman with black hair and black eyes. She looked like a very young girl, but her eyes shone with fiery devotion, like a worshiper in some cult.

“I’ve heard,” I said to her. “You seem like you know a lot about monsters.”

“I do! I researched monsters in the Magedom of Kiel.”

The Magedom of Kiel was an unusual country that had a wizard as its founder, and it made magic research a matter of state policy. It was in the center of the continent, so wizards from all over gathered there to study. It was widely known as a wizard’s utopia.

“Why did you leave Kiel for Farune?” I asked.

“Over there, they don’t even try to understand how useful it is to research monsters! Yes, making progress in my research means some unavoidable

sacrifices, but to exile me from the country just because of a few tiny casualties...” Keely started mumbling complaints. Apparently, some monsters she had strengthened using her research had gone on a rampage, and it had ended in several deaths.

*...Yeah, I don't need her.*

I furtively glanced at Frau, who was standing next to me. She gave me a little nod.





The gesture meant, *"Hear her out for now."* Since we had begun living together, for some reason or another, we had pretty much learned how to communicate without words.

"So, is the monster corps going well?" I asked.

"Yes, of course!" Keely said enthusiastically. "It's always been my dream to create an army of monsters! They never gave my research approval in Kiel, but I'm allowed to do whatever I want in Farune, so I've been pouring all my energy into tackling the project!"

*So her dream is a monster army... Yeah, that would get you banished. And I have no memory of telling her that she can do whatever she wants.*

"But even so, making monsters into food, exhibiting them, and allowing them into the military... Your Majesty is exactly the person I expected from the rumors!" she continued to gush. "An average person could never come up with ideas like that. Even I, who was wholeheartedly devoted to studying monsters, never dreamed that my research could have such far-ranging applications!"

"Rumors? What sort of rumors are they spreading?" I asked. *Come to think of it, I have no idea what they're saying about me in other countries.*

"They mainly say that King Zero led a bunch of criminals in a coup, got rid of anyone who challenged him, and is ruling the kingdom with no regard for morality or common sense!"

I paused. "I see. Well, I wouldn't say I've ignored morality *that* much."

*When she puts it that way, it really does sound like I'm some sort of unthinkable evil king.* Sadly, I couldn't deny any of it.

"No, not at all! And for the sake of magical advancement, you don't even shy away from human experimentation! You're a mage's ideal king! As we speak, rogue, exiled mages like me are gathering in Farune from all over. That alone is enough to prove your unique virtue!"

*Rogue mages? So, wizards who were exiled for engaging in morally reprehensible research. Why are they gathering in Farune? Besides, Frau was the one who took advantage of the confusion of the civil war to perform human*

*experiments. Not me.*

I looked at Frau again. She huffily averted her gaze.

*...I see. So she's the one who's been gathering all those crazy wizards.*

"By the way, how's making monsters more edible been going?" I asked.

"It's progressing smoothly. I have succeeded in capturing Killer Rabbits, and they are good prospects for breeding. Please, take a look," Keely said, pointing to a plot of land surrounded by a somewhat tall fence. A bunch of Killer Rabbits were energetically hopping around inside.

"There sure are a lot of them. I thought I heard they were on the brink of extinction."

"They have always been well-adapted to this country's climate, so as long as you preserve a certain number of them, they multiply on their own. It's just that the Hundred was exterminating them too quickly," Keely explained. "That's Farune for you! Normally, you'd never be able to wipe out a low-ranking monster population like Killer Rabbits, no matter how many you killed! Pushing them to the brink of extinction is truly anomalous! I accompanied the Hundred to where they captured the monsters, but in this country, monsters run away as soon as they see someone. The positions of human and monster have been completely flipped! Now that is truly astonishing!"

*Monsters run away as soon as they see someone... I get the feeling that's a good thing, from a safety perspective, so why can't I bring myself to feel happy about it?*

"I see. So, where's the monster corps?"

"It's over there," Keely said.

She guided us to a tent that was noticeably larger than the others. Inside, there were canine monsters called Warwolves, which were similar to dogs, but as large as human adults. They attacked in packs, too, so their strength was nothing to scoff at. There looked to be about a hundred in all, restlessly moving around the tent or curled up on the ground.

"I feel like they're a bit bigger than normal..." These ones had surpassed even



human size, unlike the Warwolves I knew.

“They’re being fed monster meat,” Keely said. “Warwolves have always had a tendency to eat the meat of other monsters, but it seems that, by eating the meat of higher-ranking monster species than they’d normally be able to consume, they’ve increased in size. I was able to make effective use of the large quantities of monster meat we brought back after the stampede. And I’ve blended my own special chemical formula into their food, which greatly increases their combat capabilities.” Keely puffed out her chest proudly.

*That reminds me, the mages have been freezing and storing the monster meat from the stampede. So that was for raising monsters? I did think it was way too much for them to eat on their own.*

*Also, what kind of chemical makes Warwolves stronger? It’s not some kind of illicit drug, is it?*

“But there are only about a hundred of them here. That seems too few to use in a war,” I said. I’d heard that Dorssen’s army was well-trained and numerous. They’d probably dispatch one hundred monsters easily.

“This is only a small number of them. Once a pack is fully trained, they’re allowed to roam the forest freely. If there are too many here, it becomes a real chore to feed them all. I’ve communicated this already, but just in case, if you happen to see any Warwolves in the Forest of Beasts, I’d ask that you please don’t attack them.”

I had heard about that. I’d assumed they were being conserved as targets for capture, but I guess I was wrong. “You can just let them run loose? Do they actually come back?” I asked. It was hard to imagine any of them obediently returning once they were set free into the forest.

“Warwolves are completely obedient to the leader of their pack,” Keely explained. “As long as their pack leader listens to what I have to say, the rest of them will answer my commands.”

*The pack leader? Now that she mentions it, who exactly is telling these Warwolves what to do? Don’t tell me Keely can command them to do her bidding... That’s going to keep me up at night.*

“Where is that pack leader?” I asked. “And whose orders does it obey?”

“It’s currently expanding its influence in the Forest of Beasts. Thanks to that, the number of Warwolves under our command is increasing by the day. Also, the leader is absolutely obedient to *you*. Or rather, you occupy the pack’s highest position.”

“I do? How’d that happen?” I asked. *It’s news to me.*

“Oh? You don’t remember? You captured a Warwolf for us about a year ago.”

*A year ago? I guess I did capture a Warwolf around then. In fact, I was the one who chose Warwolves for the monster corps.*

The reason was simple: they were similar to dogs, which were friendly with humans. Monsters that resembled reptiles or insects were gross; spirits like Wraiths and plants like Treants were creepy; and I had been reluctant to use humanoid monsters like Goblins or Orcs. That was why, after thinking it over, I had gone with Warwolves.

Frau had asked me to capture a sample about a year ago, and I had grumbled to myself, thinking, *Why does a king like me have to do such an annoying errand?* Apparently, though, the strength of the person who defeated a Warwolf was important to making it submit. I had been perfect for the job because I was the strongest person in Farune. When Frau put it that way, it had been nice to hear, so I had scoured the forest and eventually captured the strongest-looking Warwolf I could find. I had beaten it with my bare hands instead of using my sword, because I wanted to capture it alive, then I’d brought it back to the castle. I didn’t know anything about what had happened after that.

“Come to think of it, I *did* capture a sample,” I said. “What happened to it?”

“That Warwolf was traumatized when you captured it. It was awfully afraid when it arrived, the poor thing. But thanks to that, it recognized you as a more powerful being, so it was simple to make it submit to you.”

*...Did I do something bad? All I did was hit it until it quieted down.*

“When I say, ‘If you don’t listen to me, I’ll get Lord Zero!’ it meekly obeys all my instructions, so making an army out of its pack went unexpectedly

smoothly. The fact that the Warwolf you brought was already a pack leader *and* an excellent sample also helped make the project a success.”

“Ah, I see,” I said after a pause. “That’s good to hear.”

“So, I believe there are now over five hundred of them under our command. That’s sufficient fighting power, isn’t it?” Keely said.

*That’s definitely enough. That number is a match for an entire army.*

Something still didn’t sit quite right with me, but the preparations for the battle with Dorssen’s army were steadily reaching completion.

## XXII: The Battle of Brix

**KIMBREY** was a seasoned Dorssenian general. He was tall and lean, and his hair, which had always been gray, had by now started to whiten considerably, probably because he was past the age of fifty. He always stood straight like a soldier and wore a stern expression, which tended to make those around him tense up. A reliable tactician and strategist, he was a veteran of numerous wars, great and small. The king of Dorssen placed a great deal of trust in him; he had given Kimbrey full command of the invasion of Cadonia, and Kimbrey was making sure everything was well prepared.

First were the military exercises on the border with Cadonia. They served as a show of force for the northern nobles, and simulated the coming fight against Farune. Based on the country’s strength, Farune was expected to have an army two thousand strong; that was probably around the limit of the number of soldiers a country of that size could mobilize. On the other hand, Dorssen had ten thousand men—five times as many as Farune. There was no conceivable way they could lose. However, the king of Farune’s private army, known as the Hundred, was considered Farune’s main military asset, and was powerful enough to suppress a stampede.

So, Kimbrey separated his soldiers and knights into groups of three each, and trained them to coordinate taking on a single enemy at a time. Even the strongest warriors found it difficult to fight multiple people at once. Human beings were animals that displayed their greatest strength in groups. That was why humans could defeat monsters that were far more powerful than any one

individual. *With three trained soldiers fighting together, they should easily be able to deal with any one member of the Hundred*, Kimbrey thought.

There was another problem: the current queen of Farune, Frau, the Lightning Empress. She had been known far and wide as a child prodigy, and she had grown up into a brilliant wizard. Wizards were dangerous on the battlefield. They could turn the tide of battle with a single powerful spell. However, even taking into account Frau's Mages' Guild, Kimbrey had numbers on his side. Even the most skilled wizards had a limit to how much mana they could wield. As a countermeasure, Kimbrey trained his own Mages' Guild to totally devote themselves to putting up a defensive magic barrier; there was no need to fire off attack spells. He thought that, so long as his own forces weren't affected by magic, they could overcome the enemy with sheer numbers.

Finally, the largest problem was the king of Farune himself: Zero. He had used military might to seize political power, he boasted the greatest strength in Farune's arena, and he was renowned for his exploits during the stampede in Cadonia. This was probably his hero ancestry strongly expressing itself. Heroes were people who received divine protection, and they often displayed powers and abilities that surpassed those of a normal human. Kimbrey knew he might lose countless soldiers trying to defeat Zero, no matter how many he deployed at once.

So, Kimbrey borrowed the services of two members of the Champions, the group of five knights that served directly under the king of Dorssen. The Champions were renowned heroes, and Dorssen's strongest warriors, each one a match for an S-rank adventurer. *I imagine they're about equal in strength to Zero. And even if Zero is stronger, two of them at once should be enough to beat him.*

*As long as I can defeat Farune's army, Cadonia's military will also collapse.* The Cadonians had little will to fight on their own, so there was no need to deal with them. In fact, it had been easy for Kimbrey to get the lords that possessed territory in northern Cadonia to come over to his side. *Their new king is Farunian royalty, so they're primed for betrayal anyway.*

With his preparations complete, Kimbrey began the invasion of Cadonia.



**ALL** of the Cadonian nobles along the invasion route capitulated without any resistance. It was so uneventful that it was almost disappointing. There had been no enemy troops stationed anywhere, not even in the mountainous region Kimbrey had expected would be hard to break through. The advancing Dorssenian army only came face-to-face with the enemy once it tried to come down from northern Cadonia.

The enemy, the combined forces of the Farunian and Cadonian armies, awaited them on an open plain—the Brix Plain—surrounded by mountains and forest. The battle between the army of Dorssen and the allied armies of Farune and Cadonia, which would later be called the Battle of Brix, began here.

The battle started with a long-range exchange of magical attacks. As planned, the Dorssenian army put up its barrier, devoting itself to magical defense. Countless attack spells from the Farunian army pummeled the barrier. The sound of roaring thunder reverberated through the air, making the atmosphere itself tremble, and spooking some of the army's horses.

"Their magic is stronger than we expected," the mage standing next to Kimbrey explained to him. "However, we *can* block all of it. Should we wait for their mana to run out and hit them back?"

"No, that won't be necessary," Kimbrey replied. He was reluctant to attack Farune because it would open his own army up to an attack, so he ordered the mages to maintain the barrier.

Finally, when Farune's magic attacks stopped, Kimbrey shifted the army to an offensive formation. "Right flank, Third and Fourth Knight Companies; left flank, Fifth and Sixth Knight Companies! Attack!"

The right flank of the enemy Farunian army was made up of five hundred Red Knights, and their left flank had five hundred Black Knights. Against that, Kimbrey had sent four companies of knights from both flanks. Each company had five hundred knights, and each flank had one thousand, which meant they had twice as many knights as Farune.

Both sides were composed of cavalry, and they clashed dramatically. In terms of pure numbers, the Dorssenian knights should have had an overwhelming

advantage, but there was no sign that the Farunians were being pushed back.

“They’re strong...” Kimbrey muttered.

Every one of the knights he had sent on the attack was a highly skilled and experienced soldier. The enemy knights had to be a lot stronger than Kimbrey had expected to be able to hold their own against a force like that—not to mention one twice their size. However, Kimbrey had accounted for this possibility. He had obtained information that told him nearly all of the Red and Black Knights also belonged to the Hundred, so he had expected them to be Farune’s most elite units. If anything, the fact that two thousand of his knights were a match for around half of Farune’s army was a good start.

The remaining Farunian army numbered one thousand. There were also roughly one thousand Cadonian soldiers that made up the rear guard, but they were unlikely to pose a threat. Kimbrey had eight thousand soldiers yet to be deployed to the fight, including three thousand at headquarters, and five thousand in the main army—five times more than the enemy.

*This won’t be an issue at all.*

As soon as Kimbrey came to that conclusion, he ordered his main army to attack. Five thousand of them advanced, all infantry, cutting across the center of the battlefield between both flanks of fighting knights. The Farunian army soon met them in battle, but their numerical disadvantage was immediately obvious, and Kimbrey’s side was gradually pushing them back. Now, all that remained was to wait until King Zero made an appearance on the battlefield, and then to send in the two Champions. That would end the war.

*We’ve won.*

Kimbrey was certain of it.



**MARS** was satisfied with the fight the Dorssenian army was putting up. Their soldiers were well trained and they were making good use of their numerical advantage. They always used two or three soldiers against one Farunian soldier, and the main force of their army, the infantry, was specifically composed of groups of three soldiers each. One used a large shield for defense, another used

a spear to contain the enemy, and the last one had a sword for attacking. They were fighting against Mars's soldiers almost as if they were taking on monsters. Even members of the Hundred were having trouble responding to this tactic. They were being pushed back, and probably experiencing what it was like to be the monsters they always hunted.

But Mars wasn't worried about his army's struggles. Actually, he had been afraid that the top-ranking members of the Hundred would instantly crush the enemy soldiers, leaving the lower-ranking members—especially the unranked ones outside the top hundred—without a good chance to fight. That would have been a real problem.

Fighting against people was different from fighting against monsters, and fighting on a battlefield was different from matches in an arena. With how things were going, Mars didn't know when the next war would break out, so he wanted his army to experience as much battlefield combat as possible. They also had to get used to fighting as a group. This was the Farunian army's first battle under Mars, so he wanted them to rack up all the experience they could.

The commanders of the knights on both flanks, led by Warren and Chrom, were diligently issuing orders to properly check the enemy army's movements. Mars had also told Frau to hold back on attacking, and instead to make effective use of the wizards in the Mages' Guild. He knew that leaders had a bad habit of attracting attention, so he was trying to get Frau to learn how to delegate on the battlefield. As such, those outside the rankings were actively participating in the battle at the moment, and they were putting up a good, hard fight. Mars hoped that the Dorssenian army would also fight well, then get tired and withdraw—if he inflicted too many casualties, they'd end up holding a grudge against him.

As Mars was thinking, Ogma spoke: "King Zero, the men are reaching their limit. May I send in the higher-ranking soldiers?"

Ogma was right. The soldiers fighting the army in the center were beginning to look tired. They weren't accustomed to taking on multiple enemies at once, and almost none of them had been in a life-and-death struggle before.

*But I do think it's been a good experience for them,* Mars thought.

“Very well. Replace them gradually,” he said. Replacing them didn’t mean that Ogma and the others at his level would abruptly enter the battle, though. Those ranked just a bit higher went to the places that were struggling the most. Nonetheless, it was effective.



**THERE** was a man named Wan Hu in the Hundred. He was a huge man, both in terms of height and width, and he was bald, with a beard and large, sharp eyes. He was originally a woodcutter, known for the superhuman strength that enabled him to fell any tree, no matter how massive.

Wan Hu joined the Hundred relatively early on, and his appearance made him stand out from the start. For him, full-power attacks were akin to an article of faith, and he considered all other techniques to be next to worthless. No matter what, he always used swords, axes, and any other weapon as clubs to beat down his opponents. His attacks were fierce, and as a result caused significant damage even when blocked or parried.

Over time, it became common knowledge among the Hundred that in a fight with Wan Hu, it was best to simply evade his attacks—the top rankers dealt with him by nimbly moving around him and striking at gaps in his defenses. Wan Hu enjoyed a fair amount of popularity in the arena due to his superhuman strength, but his rank hovered around twenty, and he was never really able to go beyond that.

Wan Hu didn’t change his style, though, and he believed that the reason he couldn’t win was because he still lacked strength. He enjoyed eating the meat of especially physically powerful monsters, ones that resembled bears and great apes, and when he trained, he only ever prioritized his strength. His already-inhuman strength steadily increased as a result, and he earned a reputation as being the strongest member of the Hundred in terms of pure physical power.

Mars had fought together with Wan Hu, once. A few years previously, there had been a massive tree monster deep in the Forest of Beasts. It was a subspecies of a monster called a Giant Tree, but bigger and tougher than normal. In fact, this particular monster was so tough that Mars got fed up with dealing with it on his own, and he made the powerful woodcutter accompany



him to defeat it. Wan Hu was the perfect counter to the monster, which had a high defense but was pretty slow, and his strength greatly contributed to finally taking it down.

When they defeated the Giant Tree, it left behind a dark red object that was shaped like a staff. This had been the monster's core. The staff was somewhat longer and thicker than a spear, but didn't seem to have many advantages besides being hard and heavy. Mars wondered whether it could be useful, perhaps as raw material for something else, but it was dense, impossible to work with, and way too heavy to be of any use. So, he decided to give it to Wan Hu as a reward for his distinguished service in the fight.

Wan Hu was deeply moved by the gesture, and began using the staff as his go-to weapon—with no modifications. The staff earned its own reputation among the Hundred, and it was abysmal. Wan Hu was showered with criticism: the staff hurt, it destroyed any weapons or armor that blocked its attacks, it broke installations in the arena, and so on. But Wan Hu was unconcerned, and continued using the staff. It came to be called the Bloody Rod, and became just as infamous as its wielder.



**IT** was the same Wan Hu who had just stepped up to the front line in the Battle of Brix. He swung the Bloody Rod at the three enemy soldiers who'd moved into position to stand in his way. The soldier on defense blocked it with his large shield, but the shield crumpled, breaking the soldier's arm, and he fell to the ground and writhed in pain. The other two were shaken by the sudden loss of their defender, and Wan Hu took the opportunity to shower them with merciless attacks. They were helpless before the sheer bulk of the Bloody Rod in the inhumanly strong hands of Wan Hu. They tried to use their swords and spears to block it, but the Bloody Rod smashed their weapons to bits, sending the soldiers flying. They crumbled to the ground and died, their bodies mangled.

The Dorssenian army's group tactics were meaningless before Wan Hu's unexpected strength. Every time he swung his Bloody Rod, Dorssenian soldiers died. Some were blown away in twos and threes. Heads were sent flying like cannonballs through the air, leaving headless bodies spouting fountains of

blood.

And the Bloody Rod soaked it all up. The Giant Tree subspecies the staff came from had been vampiric, and its core had inherited that trait. Wan Hu didn't even know it, but because he consistently provided the Bloody Rod with fresh blood, it recognized him as its master, and passed the benefits of absorbing the blood onto him, automatically restoring his stamina and healing his wounds. Wan Hu was by no means agile, and he frequently got injured in battle, but the Bloody Rod healed him so he was able to continue fighting without worry. He was like a walking fortress, and surrounded by a cloud of blood from the Bloody Rod's effects, he terrified the Dorssenian army. They said: "That's no human—that's a monster."

Wan Hu wasn't the only one, either; the other newly deployed rankers were making full use of their power, and they had rapidly reversed the tide of battle.

## XXIII: The Champions

**WHEN** his superior army suddenly began falling back, Kimbrey was surprised. It wasn't easy to change the flow of battle when you were being overpowered by a force five times your size.

*Has King Zero stepped up to the front line?* he wondered. If so, then it was time to send in the Champions. Once warriors surpassed a certain level, it was a waste of life to send in normal soldiers to fight against them. Kimbrey sent a messenger to hurry to the front line for a report on the situation.

"The enemy's elite soldiers have been deployed at multiple spots along the front line," the messenger reported when he returned.

"Only their elites?" Kimbrey asked. "Not King Zero?"

"That's right, sir, about ten of them. Judging from their appearances, none of them are King Zero," the messenger confirmed. "However, they are quite formidable. The three-man groups are proving completely ineffective against them, and they're being entirely crushed. Those elites can't be stopped, no matter how many soldiers we throw at them."

*If they aren't King Zero, then they've gotta be top-ranking members of the Hundred.* Kimbrey had heard tales of their exploits in the arena, but both he

and his staff officers had assumed they were exaggerated as part of the entertainment—they'd sounded too inhuman to be anything else. He certainly hadn't expected a small country like Farune to have so many warriors of this caliber.

Kimbrey made a snap judgment. "Let's withdraw for now," he said. Now that the line was broken, it wouldn't be easy to reform it, and he had already made a big mistake underestimating the enemy's strength.

"But sir," the messenger protested, "the enemy has too much momentum. If we retreat now, the battle could turn into a total rout..."

Kimbrey used outstanding knights with strong powers of discernment as messengers, so he took this messenger at his word that a retreat wouldn't be easy.

*Should I deploy my knights?* Kimbrey wondered. The knightly order under his direct command was entirely made up of elite warriors. They might have been able to restore the flagging line, but in doing so, Kimbrey would be dangerously thinning the defenses around his headquarters, and he knew he was taking a big risk in the eventuality that they failed.

"General Kimbrey. We can go," suggested Matheus, one of the Champions who was standing by his side. Matheus was a graceful, handsome man with long blond hair that he tied back into a ponytail. His well-renowned lightning-fast swordsmanship made him worthy of the Champion title.

Kimbrey looked over to another man, Dante, who nodded. Dante was also one of the Champions; he was a tan, mountain of a man, and he used his tremendous strength to swing his massive greatsword around like it was nothing.

"If we stay here, we're just burning daylight," Matheus said with a grin. This lighthearted comment was probably made out of consideration for Kimbrey, whom he expected would hesitate to deploy the Champions before the original plan had called for it.

"...Very well," Kimbrey said. "I'm counting on you. You just have to buy time for the main army to withdraw. And there's no need to pursue them too far. They still have King Zero in reserve."

“Yes, sir,” Matheus said. Then, he and Dante headed to the battlefield.



**THE** Bloody Rod sang as Wan Hu swung it through the air. He was in a good mood. Victory never came easily in the arena, but here, he keenly felt how truly strong he was.

*I knew it, physical strength is what really matters,* he thought.

He could no longer count the number of soldiers he had defeated. All it took was for him to advance, and the enemy fell back by just as much. His allies, spurred on by his momentum, were shifting to the offensive as well.

*Why not just break them, right here, right now, before the top rankers even show up?*

As soon as Wan Hu had the thought, a single knight intercepted his path. He was a man, but had long, flowing hair and feminine features.

“You sure are a big guy,” the blond man said flippantly, with a smile. “Are you sure you’re really human, and not a bear or something?”

Wan Hu didn’t answer. Instead, with a grunt, he swung his Bloody Rod at the knight’s flank.

The blond man jumped, nimbly dodging Wan Hu’s attack, then spun around in midair before landing back on the ground. “No reply? I guess you don’t understand human language after all.”

“...Who are you?” Wan Hu asked. The way the man had moved while dodging his attack told him this was no ordinary foe. He was powerful enough to have been a top-ranking member of the Hundred.

“Oh, so you *can* understand me, Mr. Bear. My name is Matheus. You know what I mean when I say I’m one of the Champions, right?”

The Champions—Wan Hu knew that name. They were the five strongest people in all of Dorssen, heroes said to be able to take on an entire army. “A Champion—how entertaining!” he said. “I’m Wan Hu, of the Hundred! I’m going to smash you!”

Wan Hu changed his strategy entirely, switching to prioritizing speed over

strength. His swift staff technique and the whooshing sound his weapon made as it cut through the air were at odds with his large frame, but it was a fighting style he had painstakingly cultivated to win in the arena.

He let loose a series of strikes against Matheus. He began with a vertical blow, moved on to horizontal and diagonal sweeps, and finished with a thrust. Because of the Bloody Rod's weight, Wan Hu was confident that his attacks would deal damage to his opponent through his defenses, so long as he blocked even a single one with his sword. But the Champion dodged every single attack.

"Scary. I could break a bone if I took one of those attacks head-on," Matheus said. He had read the intention behind Wan Hu's attacks.

Taking a moment to put some distance between them, Matheus lowered his stance and drew his slim sword back.

*He's coming!* Wan Hu thought, and at that very moment, the knight vanished. Wan Hu reflexively took a defensive stance with his staff. He felt something lightly glance off the Bloody Rod and make a sharp sound, and then there was a hot sensation on his side. Looking down, he saw that his flank was cut up.

Matheus's attack didn't stop there, either. With his much-vaunted lightning speed, he continued his torrent of slashes. Wan Hu defended with the Bloody Rod, contorting his body to avoid fatal injury, but he was gradually being cut apart.

Finally, he fell to one knee.

*I'm going to die,* he realized, sensing his impending defeat. *But I won't die in vain. When he comes in for the finishing blow, I'll get off a hit of my own.*

His last-ditch plan was to purposely take Matheus's attack, allowing the blade to lodge in his own flesh, then pummel his immobilized opponent with his bare hands. Wan Hu had employed this sacrificial attack several times in the arena, and Luida the healer had gotten angry at him every time: "You'll die if you try anything like that in a real fight!" she would say. But he didn't mind falling in battle. Every member of the Hundred was prepared to die. The thought of running away because he feared death was incomprehensible to him.

*Come at me, now!* Wan Hu thought. But just as he steeled himself, Matheus

issued an order to the Dorssenian soldiers around him.

“All right, retreat!”

“Retreat? Just a bit more, and you’ll defeat that monster!” one soldier called out.

“The general has ordered us to retreat. I only came here to buy time. There are others struggling elsewhere, so I have to go around and relieve them. And...” Matheus looked at Wan Hu. “*He* still has plenty of fight left in him. It’s impossible to know what a bear will do when it’s cornered. So pull back now, while he’s still unable to move. And before enemy reinforcements come.”

The Dorssenian soldiers began to withdraw.

*Was I saved?* Wan Hu watched Matheus leave. Then, the adrenaline left him, and he lost consciousness.



**SEEING** that the Dorssenian army was retreating, Mars forbade pursuit. His army had sustained casualties as well, so he ordered that first aid be given to the wounded, and quickly. The damage was concentrated among the members of the Hundred ranked around twenty, whom he had deployed to the front lines. The two Champions had shown up and knocked every one of them out of commission.

Even Wan Hu was unconscious, but thanks to the Bloody Rod’s restoration powers and Luida’s prodigious healing, he was able to make it out with his life.



**MEANWHILE**, the Dorssenian army had sustained a stunning number of casualties. They had entered the battle with five times as many soldiers as the enemy, and *this* was how it had turned out. Just how powerful were the Farunian soldiers?

“What happened out there?” Kimbrey asked. He and his staff officers were in a tent at their headquarters, reconsidering their next moves.

Fighting Farune head-on had led to severe casualties. However, there were many ways to fight. Kimbrey’s staff officers proposed multiple plans. The

Champions and the knightly order directly under Kimbrey could spearhead a charge, or they could lure out the Farunian army and make precise, devastating attacks.

Just then, in the middle of their council, a messenger entered the tent, looking stressed.

“I have a report! Our supply unit was attacked on the way here, and it was completely wiped out!”

“Our supply unit? Did the Cadonian nobles betray us?” one of the officers asked, pressing the messenger for an explanation.

Their supply route went through the domains of the Cadonian nobles who were collaborating with Dorssen. An attack there could only mean one thing: those nobles had double-crossed them.

“No,” the messenger said. “It appears to have been attacked by monsters. Apparently, as they were passing through the mountains, a large pack of wolf-like monsters attacked, maybe several hundred of them.”

“Several hundred monsters! Why didn’t we hear about this!? This isn’t the south—there’s no way there are that many monsters up north!”

Cadonia’s southern region, which bordered the Forest of Beasts, saw frequent monster appearances, but it was rare to find them anywhere else in the country. And even though it was only a supply unit, there were still guards to contend with. It was beyond belief that there could have been enough monsters to successfully attack a whole group of soldiers.

“Farune might have been behind it, directing the monsters,” Kimbrey said after a moment of contemplation. “Don’t forget the stampede; recent monster activity has been too suspiciously convenient for Farune for it to be a coincidence.”

“Impossible! Deploying a large horde of monsters? Why, that’s inhuman!”

Some people, called tamers, could handle one monster, maybe two, but it was simply unheard of for a person to be able to control more than that—let alone hundreds at once.

“It’s simply conjecture. Always imagine the worst possible scenario,” Kimbrey said. “But that isn’t the issue right now. An army can’t mobilize without supplies. Making it out of northern Cadonia was all well and good, but that lengthened our supply route. If we can’t secure the supply unit’s safety, any further military operations will be difficult.”

Even if they brought in the next supply unit right away, it was possible the same thing might happen again unless they deployed additional fortifications. They had the option of requisitioning supplies from the locals, but it wouldn’t be easy to get enough to supply ten thousand men. If they carried it out haphazardly, Dorssen might be reviled as an invader, which would lead to political issues down the line.

“It’s time to withdraw,” Kimbrey said. “We ought to retreat while we still have strength in reserve.”

“Please reconsider, General Kimbrey! The Farunians are right there! We just have to crush them in one short, decisive battle, and the Cadonian army will surrender. Then, supplies will no longer be an issue.” All the staff officers were protesting. They knew no greater shame than retreating in the face of a lesser opponent like Farune. They believed they should keep fighting, even if it meant pushing a bit beyond their limits.

“If it was Farune that blocked our supply route, then no matter how much we may wish to finish things quickly, they’ll dig in and dedicate themselves to defense,” Kimbrey said. “In the worst case, they might even withdraw their troops and hole up in Mos. Besides, if we want to try for a quick victory, we’ll have to use my knights and the Champions. And let’s not forget that Farune still has their trump card: King Zero. It’s too uncertain.”

Kimbrey’s staff fell silent. He was right. If the Farunians barricaded themselves in Mos, it would take time to siege and capture the city. And in the most recent battle, Dorssen had learned a painful lesson about how strong the Farunian army really was. It was impossible to guess how strong King Zero might be. They had to consider the possibility that, if they deployed the Champions to the front line and one of them fought King Zero one-on-one, the Champion might lose. The officers realized just how futile their current situation was.



And so, they decided to withdraw the next morning.

## XXIV: Conclusion

**AFTER** the Dorssenian army retreated, Keely got in touch. I had put her in command of the unit of Warwolves.

“You’ve gotta hear this, Lord Zero!” she said excitedly. “My cute little doggies did amazing!”

As Keely began to tell of the Warwolves’ exploits, I could see her eyes sparkling even through the crystal we used for magic transmissions.

“...Doggies?”

*Those wolves are bigger than horses, and you’re calling them doggies?*

“They listened when I told them, ‘Stay,’ until the enemy soldiers reached the target, and then when I said, ‘Go!’ they all started running at the same time. Isn’t that just adorable?”

*She’s probably the only person in the world who’d describe an attack by a pack of over five hundred Warwolves as adorable.* However, it was precisely because she was so eccentric that she was able to come to a mutual understanding with all sorts of monsters, which was why I had given her command over the Warwolf unit.

“So, did they destroy the supply unit?” I asked.

“Of course they did! They didn’t leave a single crumb behind!”

*...Are you talking about the supplies? Or the enemy soldiers?* I was afraid to hear the answer, so I decided not to ask.

“You weren’t seen, were you?” I asked. “I still want to keep Farune’s Warwolf unit a secret.”

My reputation was already about as ragged as it could get due to all the disinformation out there. The day people learned I was using monsters as part of my army, they were liable to start treating me as an enemy of humanity. If it was going to get out, I wanted information to spread slowly, so I could get the public on my side about it first. *I still have no clue how to actually do that,*

though.

“No, sir,” Keely said. “I enjoyed the show from a hiding place, so no one should’ve been able to see me. However, Dorssen probably already knows about the doggies anyway, just from communicating over magical transmission.”

“No matter. If anything, it’s better they *do* know that their supply unit was hit. I just want to make sure this attack gets treated as an ambush by wild monsters.”

“Huh? But wild Warwolves never form packs that large.”

*She sure does take issue with the weirdest things.*

“It’s still fine, as long as there’s no evidence of Farune’s involvement. Anyway, good work. Stand by for further orders.”

“Yes, sir,” Keely said, lowering her head. I ended the transmission.

Now that Dorssen’s supply unit was destroyed, they’d probably begin to withdraw. An army as large as theirs couldn’t maintain itself without supplies. General Kimbrey was solid and reliable, so it was likely he’d choose to retreat while he still could.

Of course, if they were my subordinates, they’d probably say something like, “If we can’t win a drawn-out war, let’s just finish it with a short, decisive battle,” and go charging in at the enemy all at once.

In any case, Farune had now won the fight. I had been able to give my soldiers combat experience, and the top leaders had gotten the chance to command an army. Deploying the Warwolves had also been a success. These were all satisfactory results. We had suffered nearly no losses, and Dorssen’s army probably hadn’t sustained too many casualties either, all things considered. Now, there wouldn’t be any bad blood between us, so we would be able to come together and have diplomatic talks next time, rather than war.

As human beings, we ought to be able to solve our problems peacefully. Using war and violence to settle things was wrong. Yes, I truly believed that war should be avoided as much as possible.



“**THOSE** Dorssenian bastards are getting ready to run away! Let’s make sure they don’t mess with us again! Let’s beat the fear of King Zero into them all the way to their bones!”

The next morning, after I got news that the Dorssenian army was preparing to withdraw, I received a...*pleasant*...suggestion from Ogma.

“King Zero, Ogma is correct,” Warren said with a cheerful smile. “We ought to pursue and make sure none of them escape, as a warning to other countries about what’ll happen if they dare oppose the great King Zero. Now, let’s get ready for battle!”

“No, I have no intention of fighting,” I said. “I—”

“But of course you must, Your Majesty!” Warren interrupted. “Yesterday, you intentionally didn’t enter the battle, to help those outside the ranks and those with lower ranks. There’s no need to restrain yourself anymore! Everyone is hungry to gaze upon your gallant figure cutting across the battlefield!”

*He doesn’t get me at all.*

“As king, fighting on the front line—”

“Is only natural!” This time, Chrom was the one who spoke over me. “Your Majesty isn’t like those smug royal pigs in other countries—you’ve always stood out front and fought. That’s the attitude of a *true* king! Now, let’s show Dorssen what that means!”

*No! That’s not it at all! I was going to say that as king, it seems improper! Why does the highest commander have to fight on the front lines?! Who the hell fights like that?!*

“Zero! Zero! Zero!”

The members of the Hundred began to gather around and chant my name.

*Huh? Why are they doing that?* I looked over at Frau.

“As queen, I’ll also show myself fighting,” she said in a monotone, like her heart wasn’t even in it.

*She's hopeless—she just wants an excuse to use magic.*

“Well, we’ve already destroyed the enemy’s supply unit,” I began, “so any further fighting...”

*Won't be necessary*, I tried to say, but the voices around me drowned me out.

“So that’s why Dorssen is retreating? And now that they’re out of supplies, the king himself is going to pursue them? ...Brutal.”

“Terrifying... Lord Zero isn’t stopping at cutting off their supplies, he’s going to totally destroy them!”

“Yeah, he’s merciless! He’s making sure to break their spirit on top of everything.”

*I don't want to do any of that!*

My unpleasant reputation among the soldiers was rapidly spreading.

“That’s King Zero for you! Now, let’s go!”

I was silent. There was no longer any way for me to refuse.



**“THE** Farunian army is attacking! King Zero is at the vanguard!”

“What?!” Kimbrey exclaimed. He couldn’t believe his ears. His supply line had been cut, but he still had an overwhelming numerical advantage. This was not a situation where Farune would normally take the offensive.

“What’s the meaning of this?” he said. He looked around and saw that many of his soldiers and officers had gone pale. Now that they’d been ordered to retreat, they believed they wouldn’t have to fight anymore, and had lost the resolve to do so. In contrast, now that their king was leading their army, the Farunians’ morale would be sky high. Kimbrey knew from the previous day’s fighting that each and every individual Farunian soldier was strong. The enemy’s resolve was probably at its highest peak.

“So you dampen our resolve first, then shift to the attack! You’re a surprisingly sharp tactician, Mad King Zero!” Kimbrey said to himself. But he was no rookie either. He instantly began ordering his army to regroup—but

then, one of his aides, a mage, started shouting.

“The Lightning Empress is in the sky! That’s...Thunder Judgment?!”

Looking up, Kimbrey saw a woman floating in the sky above the Farunian army. *That must be Frau, the Lightning Empress.*

A number of bright magic circles appeared around her, and even the non-wizards could feel the extraordinary amounts of mana coming from them.

“Defensive magic, hurry!”

The wizards all started shouting and screaming. Thunder Judgment was the strongest of all lightning spells. Frau was said to be the only person alive who was able to cast it; it was how she had gotten her nickname.

“It’s coming!”

Even without the mage pointing it out, it was clear as day from the way the shining magic circles began to glow that Frau’s spell had activated.

“Everyone, get down!” Kimbrey shouted. He dropped to the ground and assumed a defensive pose.

Thunder boomed, and countless bolts of lightning struck the Dorssenian army’s encampment. The spell was like a herald of the end of the world.

After the spell finished, a moment that felt like an eternity passed, and Kimbrey got up and surveyed his surroundings. Their defense spells seemed to have had an effect to some extent, and the soldiers near Dorssen’s Mages’ Guild were mostly unharmed. However, the farther away one got from the mages, the more casualties there were, and the farthest units had been practically wiped out. Probably half of the army was now unable to fight. Kimbrey himself could feel the effects of the magic; there was a tingling sensation in his body.

“What was that magic?” he asked. “Why didn’t they use it yesterday? Was our barrier not working just now?”

His mage aide answered. “I believe they may have been saving it for this moment. Yesterday, our barrier would have protected us more from the spell, but our mages are tired from maintaining the barrier all day yesterday, so they

aren't able to sustain it at the same level of strength."

"Damn, so this was part of King Zero's plan too!" Kimbrey shuddered at the meticulousness of King Zero's strategy. "Matheus! Dante!"

"Yes, sir!" Matheus and Dante instantly rushed over to Kimbrey's side. Neither of the Champions appeared to have taken any damage from Thunder Judgment.

"I want you to take my knights and engage the Farunians—and don't hesitate to use any who can fight from the Third and Fourth Knight Companies on the right flank, and the Fifth and Sixth Knight Companies on the left flank. Take down King Zero."

"Your wish is my command," Matheus replied, kneeling. Then, he immediately stood back up, turned around, and roused the troops to action. "General Kimbrey's knights: follow me! Gather all who can fight from the right and left flanks! Hurry! We're going to defeat King Zero!"

And so, the Second Battle of Brix had begun.



**THE** Dorssenian army launched their attack. *The ones in front must be those two Champions I've heard about.*

I was running at the vanguard of my army. I had to run because my Gravity armlet made it impossible for me to ride horses, but continuing to run straight ahead like this indefinitely wouldn't have been very dignified, so I was glad for the chance to go up against the Champions.

"I'll fight the two Champions. Take care of the rest!" I called out.

"You can count on me, King Zero!" Ogma replied, and he and the rest of the soldiers headed toward the other enemy troops.

Even the enemies other than the Champions looked decently strong. They were probably the knights under Kimbrey's direct command.

"You must think quite highly of yourself, to come fight two of us Champions alone, King Zero!" yelled a man with long blond hair, holding a slim sword at the ready. The other one was a huge, tan man with a greatsword. The blond

introduced himself. "I am one of the Champions, Matheus!"

"Dante, and same." The tan man readied his greatsword.

"...King Mars of Farune," I said. I drew my own weapon, the longsword I always used. I had found it in the same ancient underground ruins where I had gotten my pitch black suit of armor. I liked it; it was a sharp, finely crafted blade, and it never chipped, no matter what I cut with it.

"Prepare yourself!" the man who had introduced himself as Matheus said. Then, he instantly closed the distance between us.

*He's fast.* His sword left behind an afterimage as he cut through the air, and it looked like he was making multiple slashes at the same time. *This must be some sort of special technique. I supposed that's what you get with a Champion. Not that I can't block it.*

I parried his attack with my sword, but then I heard an unpleasant sound. Several attacks I'd been unable to evade had grazed my armor.

*Oh? He attacked more times than I thought.* He seemed to be a swordsman who prioritized speed. *This must be the man who defeated Wan Hu.*

He was apparently the type to overpower his opponents with a combination of speed and flurries of attacks, because he continued them in an unbroken string. If I let him keep going, it seemed like he might continue attacking forever.

I closed the gap between us somewhat, forcing my way past Matheus's sword, and gave him a kick to the stomach.

"Guh?!" he grunted, flying backward. Orthodox swordsmen were weak to those kinds of attacks.

"Haaah!" Dante yelled, entering the space between me and Matheus.

He brought down his greatsword, and I blocked it with my longsword. A loud metallic sound rang out when our swords clanged together. But, even though I had stopped his sword, my body was hit by a shockwave. I felt my legs sink into the ground. *This must also be some sort of special technique. If my sword and armor were made of iron, they probably would have shattered. So he's the exact*

*opposite of Matheus—pure power.*

Dante momentarily brought his sword back, then made a tremendous horizontal sweep. I blocked that with my sword too, but it sent me flying sideways.

*It may just be a technique, but still, what power! And to think he got this far without eating monster meat.*

I immediately stood back up and recovered my fighting posture, but this time, Matheus was fast approaching. He unleashed his sword technique once again, but from a bit farther away than the last time—he was probably wary of another kick like the one I'd already given him.

Circling around to my side, Dante held his sword aloft.

As I parried Matheus's attacks with the sword in my right hand, I deployed an invisible shield from my left palm to block Dante's attack. The shield nullified both the attack and its accompanying shockwave.

"Wha—?!" Matheus exclaimed. He and Dante looked astonished.

I took advantage of their confusion to leap backward, creating some space between us.

"What was that just now?!" My opponents were both shaken.

*Yeah, that's how everyone reacts the first time they encounter the invisible shield.*

I took advantage of their hesitation to remove my armlet, the gift from Frau with five times Gravity. "I'll ask, just in case—are you sure you don't feel like surrendering?" I said.

"Don't be ridiculous. Do you think you've won because you blocked Dante's attack with some weird skill? It's two against one; you're still at a disadvantage," Matheus said. He readied his sword again, and Dante raised his greatsword as well.

"I won't be able to hold myself back anymore," I cautioned. "You're going to die, you know." With the effects of Gravity gone, my movements became too fast to control.



“How absurd... Do you mean to tell me you weren’t fighting seriously earlier? Cut the nonsense!”

Just as before, Matheus instantly closed the distance between us. But this time, just as he was trying to activate his technique...

I cut first.





“Wha...t...” Slashed diagonally down from his shoulder, Matheus fell to his knees. Without the armlet hindering me, I easily outpaced him.

“Matheus!” Dante shouted. Trying to help his comrade, he activated his own sword technique, raising his greatsword to bring it down on me.

But his technique required a large motion that left his body completely exposed—an opening I easily exploited. I stepped in and to Dante’s flank, swiping my sword sideways as I darted past him. The shockwave created by his greatsword left a large crater where I had been standing, then his body—cut in half at the torso—fell into that crater.

The members of the Hundred who were fighting nearby raised a loud cheer. They must have been watching us. The Dorssenian army, on the other hand, cried out in despair: “The Champions lost!”

That was the moment that decided the outcome of the battle.



**AFTERWARD**, General Kimbrey continued commanding the battle from the rear guard, fighting hard to allow even one more soldier of his to escape. Ultimately, though, he perished on the battlefield in a duel with Ogma.

## XXV: After the War

**WITH** the defeat of two symbols of Dorssen’s military, the Champions, the Dorssenian army lost its will to fight. The force deployed in the Dorssenian counterattack was completely destroyed, and though the rest attempted to retreat, the Hundred’s persistent pursuit and Frau’s magical attacks apparently resulted in nearly the entire army being lost. If I hadn’t stopped them, the Hundred would probably have chased them down until they were entirely wiped out.

In the end, Ogma agreed to give up the pursuit, but I wasn’t pleased with how he did so: “I see,” he said. “If we don’t let a few survivors escape, there won’t be anyone to tell stories of the terror of King Zero!”

I also commanded Keely to withdraw the Warwolves.

My army had inflicted more casualties to the enemy than I had expected, but

if that convinced Dorssen they wouldn't be able to win a war against Farune, it would lead to peace in the future, so I decided to consider it a good outcome, in its own way.



**“DAMMIT!** Those useless Dorssenians! They had the numbers, but nothing to show for it!”

“Tell me about it! Why do we have to run away *again*?!”

The two people complaining as they galloped away on their horses were the first and second princes of Cadonia.

Ostensibly, the purpose of this war was for them to take back their country, so they had come along and joined General Kimbrey's army. But it would have been bad if anything had happened to them, so they'd stayed safely in the rear guard, and when the Dorssenian army withdrew, they had been the very first ones to split. That choice had paid off, and they had managed to avoid both Frau's spells and the Hundred's pursuit.

Currently, they were riding their horses through northern Cadonia's mountainous region, accompanied by a small retinue. They had considered requesting protection from the Cadonian nobles that had sided with the Dorssenian army, but on the other hand, those dishonest nobles would probably betray them immediately, so they were making a last-ditch escape all the way back to Dorssen instead.

“Besides, it's all Kimbrey's fault for trying to withdraw just because his supply unit got a bit roughed up,” the first prince spat. He didn't think very highly of Kimbrey; the general hadn't paid either of them any mind at all.

“You're exactly right,” the second prince agreed. “Who needs supplies to fight? What a coward.” They had both expected Kimbrey to treat them more like royalty.

“For that matter, what kind of supply unit loses to a bunch of monsters? Are they even really soldiers?”

“You're so right. A stampede is one thing, but a random pack of monsters? I find it hard to imagine that they were even a true supply unit, let alone trained

soldiers.”

“If we had been leading things, we never would have been stupid enough to let that happen.”

“Next time, let’s ask the king of Dorssen to lend us troops directly. If we’d been in charge, we definitely could’ve won.”

As the princes indulged in their fantasies, they advanced along the mountain road. Soon, they caught sight of a large pile of what looked to be destroyed goods of some kind, right ahead of them.

“What’s that?” The princes hurriedly brought their horses to a halt. The pile was blocking the road.

“Aren’t these the Dorssenian army’s supplies?” the second prince said, spotting a Dorssenian emblem in the wreckage. Looking closely, he saw that it was flecked with blood. “No way, is this the supply unit that got wiped out?”

When they thought of it that way, all the goods scattered around made sense. This had to be where the supply unit had been attacked by monsters, but the bodies of the soldiers were nowhere to be seen.

The first prince started to feel uneasy. “Hey, let’s get out of here, and quickly. We don’t know what’ll happen to us if we stay—” He turned around, and then he saw it: the bodies of the second prince and his retainers, caught in the jaws of a bunch of Warwolves.

“Hel-...” the second prince faintly begged for help.

“*Eeeiiiiah!*” The first prince turned his horse around and tried to make a run for it, but all he saw in front of him was a huge, gaping mouth.



**FOR** a time, the sounds of Warwolves chewing echoed down the desolate mountain road, then eventually, a petite woman with black hair and black eyes appeared from out of nowhere.

“Aww, you aren’t picky at all about what you eat, are you? Good boy, who’s a good boy?” she crooned. “I’m going to be working you guys hard from now on, to help King Zero and Lady Frau, the gracious benefactors of my research.”

Keely smiled faintly, then disappeared into the mountain thicket, together with the Warwolves.



“**THEY** lost?” the king of Dorssen repeated, unconsciously standing up from his throne after hearing news of the battle. He never would have dreamed that his army could lose, not with ten thousand soldiers, five times as many as the enemy, and with two Champions on top of that.

“Yes, sir... And it was a terrible loss, with seventy percent casualties,” the king’s aide said with a grim look on his face.

“Seventy percent?! We lost seven thousand soldiers?!”

A seventy-percent casualty rate was not within the range of normal. Usually, even thirty percent would be considered a crushing defeat. The king had never even heard of an army losing seventy percent of its soldiers in a battle between humans.

“What happened to Kimbrey?!” the king demanded.

“Apparently, he took personal command of the rear guard, and perished in battle...”

*He must have taken on that duty fully aware he would die,* the king thought. Kimbrey wasn’t the type of man to shamelessly return alive after such a devastating defeat.

The king paused. “What about Matheus and Dante?”

“They challenged King Zero together, and were slain.”

The king collapsed back into his throne with a thud. Exhausted, he put a hand to his forehead. The losses from this war were incalculable. The remaining three thousand soldiers were probably in horrible shape. It would be impossible to get them back in fighting form quickly. This was effectively a loss of ten thousand soldiers, and it wouldn’t be easy to recover from.

Kimbrey’s death was a serious blow as well. He had been a capable and talented man, and generals that could be trusted with a large army weren’t easy to come by. Then, there were Matheus and Dante. Dorssen’s loss of two

symbols of its military was liable to influence the overall balance of power between Dorssen and its neighbors.

“I have one more piece of information to report.”

“What is it?” the king said wearily.

“The whereabouts of the first and second princes of Cadonia are unknown.”

“*Those* fools?” Compared to all the faithful subjects he had lost in the war, the king couldn’t care less about a couple of idiotic princes. “They didn’t die in the battle?” he asked.

“No, there are reports that they were the very first to run away.”

“Running’s about the only thing they’re good at... Did they go to the Cadonian nobles?”

“The nobles who took our side all appear to have been purged, so I don’t believe so.”

The king of Cadonia, Nicol, had thoroughly eradicated the Cadonian nobles that had capitulated to the Dorssenian army. It was doubtful that the princes had taken refuge with them.

“In that case, Dorssen is the only place they have left. Very well. We won’t be able to make any moves against Cadonia for the time being. Bring the princes under our protection if they show up. There’s no need to go out looking for them.”

“Certainly, Your Majesty.”

“More importantly, what about the investigation into the cause of our defeat, the destruction of that supply unit? Were you able to confirm that it was a large pack of monsters that did it?” This was what the king of Dorssen was most curious about. He had gotten a report about it from General Kimbrey, who had suspected that Farune had been behind the attack.

“The enemy has taken back northern Cadonia, making any investigation difficult. However, a complete lack of any intelligence about frequent monster activity in the area does make it appear that this would normally be an unthinkable occurrence.”



“Hm... Kimbrey was bothered by it too. First the stampede, and now this; it seems that monsters are acting in ways that benefit Farune. Paired with how strong the Farunian army is, there may actually be some truth to those ridiculous rumors about King Zero eating monster meat to grow stronger.”

“We experimented with eating monster meat, too, but every single one of our test subjects died,” the aide said. With rumors of the Hundred running rampant, Dorssen had experimented with forcing convicted criminals to eat monster meat, but they had all died, one after the other—which was because they had made the test subjects jump straight to eating the meat of a Lesser Dragon, a mid-level monster that lived in Dorssen’s vicinity.

“I am aware. However, there may be a trick to it. Continue your investigations into the matter. We’ll make peace with Farune, for now.”

“Do you mean to sign a peace treaty, Your Majesty? Is that truly in our nation’s best interest?”

“Now that we’ve lost ten thousand soldiers, we have no strength to spare for the south. We’ll recognize the current king of Cadonia and pay them reparations. A low price, if it means keeping Farune down.” These were unprecedented terms to give to a lower-ranking country. It showed how threatening the king of Dorssen considered Farune to be.

“Your Majesty. There’s no need to sign a peace treaty. If you so desire, I can kill King Zero,” interrupted a woman who hid her mouth behind a fan. She had long, wavy purple hair and a dramatic hourglass figure. Glimpses of her porcelain skin peeked through gaps in the fabric of her white dress. The word “bewitching” fit her perfectly.

“Carmilla,” the king said irritably. “Your duty is to protect the royal capital. I can’t simply deploy you. And two of the Champions have already been defeated. You may be strong, but that doesn’t mean you’ll win.”

The woman he called Carmilla wore the clothes of a young noble lady, but she was one of the five Champions. It had been disrespectful of her to interrupt the king’s conversation, but everyone was too scared of her to mention it.

“Oh, but, Your Majesty. Those two novices were Champions in name only. Please don’t group me in with them. I could easily have killed them both on my

own too, you know.” Carmilla’s expression was partially concealed by her fan, but her eyes were smiling.

The king paused. “That may very well be true,” he conceded. “But I still can’t deploy you. Sit this one out, Carmilla.”

The king knew very well how strong Carmilla was. She occupied the number-three spot in the Champions, but there was nearly no difference in power between her and the number-two Champion, while there had been a clear gap between her and the Champions in fourth and fifth place, Matheus and Dante.

However, not only was Carmilla haughty and cruel, but she also behaved in ways that belittled others, even toward royalty. The king couldn’t quite place his full trust in her. She was undeniably powerful, but it was hard to say that her character was exactly befitting of a Champion. The first and second Champions were each stationed near the border as a check on Dorssen’s neighbors, but the king kept Carmilla in the capital. If she was at the border, she was liable to fly off the handle and trigger open hostilities with another country. For Dorssen, Carmilla was a sort of wild card, and she couldn’t be used recklessly.

“That’s too bad,” Carmilla said. “I could definitely kill the king of some small country on my own.”

The royal guards standing nearby tensed up when they heard her say that. She was basically declaring her lack of qualms about killing a king.

“That won’t be necessary. Refrain from doing anything without my permission, Carmilla,” the king said reprovably. Then, he waved his hand, signaling the end of the meeting.

Carmilla didn’t reply. She only left, a smile still lingering on her face.

## Epilogue

**FARUNE** erupted with joy. The country had been victorious against Dorssen, *that* Dorssen. Although the Hundred was full of powerful fighters, war was something else entirely, and in truth, quite a large portion of the population had been nervous about whether they could really win. But they *had* won, and it had been a crushing victory. They had destroyed Dorssen's massive army of ten thousand soldiers with an army one-fifth that size, and all with hardly any casualties. Historically speaking, it was unprecedented.

Drunk on their victory, the people of Farune celebrated with a festival of merrymaking and revelry. The members of the Hundred joined in with the partying, drinking alcohol and eating meat—which, needless to say, was monster meat. Many of the Hundred even got carried away with the festivities and, looking for a challenge, ate the meat of stronger monsters than they'd normally attempt. This led to a succession of fainting episodes, and thanks to that, what should have been a joyous occasion turned into a hellish scene with what looked to be piles of corpses strewn about the hall of the royal castle.

In front of the throne where Mars sat, a pile of freshly hunted, raw monster meat was stacked high. Elite members of the Hundred had traveled deep into the Forest of Beasts to defeat a powerful dragon. Despite taking quite the beating, they had come to Mars before getting healed so he could eat the meat in as fresh a state as possible.

"Please, freely take this meat and eat it, Lord Mars," Ogma said. "You must not have had any time to hunt monsters during the war with Dorssen, so we went and hunted in your stead!" He and the others had brilliant smiles on their faces as blood dripped slowly onto the floor.

*I never asked for this*, Mars thought, fed up as always. He had thought that today, at the very least, he would be able to eat a proper meal. But Ogma was making it impossible to refuse this offering.

With no other choice, Mars picked up one of the pieces of raw meat in front of him. Immediately, an overpowering smell stung his nose. *This meat looks really poisonous, and it's probably from a pretty strong monster. They must have fought tooth and nail to defeat it. I can't believe I have to go through with this.*

Even *he* was hesitant to put the meat in his mouth, but everyone was watching him, their eyes sparkling. Readyng himself, he took a bite.

For a split second, his consciousness wavered.

*Damn, I'm going to die.* Feeling that his life was in danger, he smacked his cheeks with both hands, hard, and strove to regain full consciousness. When he came to, he saw the Hundred were all singing his praises.

"That's King Zero for you. No one else could eat that meat and survive!"

*Wait a second, are they actually trying to kill me?*

Mars felt something cold run down his spine. However, he saw only innocent delight on his subordinates' faces. So, to satisfy their expectations, he brought the meat to his mouth, and took another bite.





## Side Story I: The King of a Certain Country

I was born as the prince of a small country. As the eldest son, I was certain that I would become the next king, so there was no need for me to prove myself with accomplishments. I did as I was told, received a king's upbringing, and ascended to the throne as planned, without any events of note taking place along the way.

I was furnished with a beautiful bride as my queen, someone chosen from a lineage related to my mother's side of the family, so I had no complaints about my marriage. To prevent any conflicts over succession, I never took a second wife, either. The queen, jealous as she was, was against it anyway, but more importantly, I wanted my son to inherit the throne without any difficulties, just as I had. Having children with another princess would only create unnecessary trouble. My one duty was the continual preservation of my royal lineage; everything else was inconsequential.

Just as I hoped, the queen gave birth to a baby boy, and named him Mars. With that, the future seemed secure.

However, I had made a single miscalculation. Now that the queen was mother to a future king, her family—which had been powerful to begin with—gained even more influence. At first, I didn't think there would be anything wrong with that. After all, her family would be supporting Mars when he became king, which would lead to a more stable royal family going forward. There were some nobles who viciously criticized my wife's family, saying they were accumulating too much power, or wasting government funds, but none of that mattered to me compared to the continued existence of the royal family.

Next, the queen and her family embarked on a campaign to thoroughly suppress their opponents. I didn't particularly approve of it, but I didn't exactly oppose it either. If they seized power, the kingdom would be peaceful and secure, even after Mars's ascension to the throne. I couldn't support them outright, though—there was always the chance of something going wrong. If I

supported the queen's family and then they happened to fall from power, it would threaten the royal line itself. As such, I silently watched everything unfold.

Over time, the queen's family solidified its authority. Several years went by, and then one day, Gamarath, who had become prime minister by currying favor with the queen, gathered together all the powerful nobles who had so far maintained neutrality around the queen's family to form one large faction. Then, they pressed me to make a decision.

"We can no longer bear the queen and her family's despotism," they said. "The people are losing faith in the royal family, and if this continues, it will drive Farune to ruin. Please, we beg you for your wise judgment."

It was a veiled threat. They were basically saying, "Get rid of the queen's family." There were no two ways about it: they clearly wanted to supplant the queen's family and seize power for themselves. As it happened, though, Gamarath and his noble conspirators held more than half of the kingdom's territory between them, not to mention a more powerful army than the queen's family had. If I refused their demands, they would probably return to seize power by force. And if that happened, Mars wouldn't be able to become the next king. On the other hand, even if I accepted, it didn't seem like the faction would ever recognize Mars's ascension without complaint, because of his relationship to the queen.

After agonizing over the situation somewhat, I secured a promise from Gamarath that he wouldn't lay a hand on the queen or the prince, but I allowed them to depose her family.

Gamarath brilliantly executed the purge. He had readied soldiers beforehand, and he brought them into the castle to arrest every member of the queen's family. He used them as hostages to force their remaining relatives back in their own domains to surrender, and managed to win without any fighting.

I was relieved—if the queen's family had rejected Gamarath's orders, I could have been deposed myself. Of course, the queen was overcome by grief, but there was nothing she could do. That was what happened when someone lost a power struggle. Her family should have been more thorough and ruthless when



they'd gone after other powerful nobles.

Gamarath had nearly every member of the queen's family—men, women, and children—executed. The only two remaining members of the entire bloodline were the queen and Mars. The queen was imprisoned, and soon after, she fell ill and passed away. My guess was that she was most likely poisoned, but there was nothing to be gained from investigating it.

That was when Gamarath started pressuring me into taking his daughter as my new wife. It would make him a maternal relative of the royal family, but it would be convenient for me as well. Mars had no one to back him anymore, so even if he did become king, his position would always be unstable. It was more conducive to the long-term security of the royal family to marry Gamarath's daughter and make *her* son king instead. Gamarath's daughter, Lilia, resembled her father—so she wasn't much to look at—but that wasn't a big deal. I had to prioritize the continuation of the royal line above all else.



**LILIA** soon got pregnant, and had a baby boy—the second prince, Nicol. With that, the succession was practically decided. I felt sorry for Mars, but a king without any backers couldn't successfully rule the kingdom.

I expected Gamarath would instantly try to assassinate Mars. It was pointless even to attempt to stop him. Gamarath would just deny any accusations.

That was about the extent of the king's authority in Farune, which was why there were so many struggles among the nobility over *real* power. It was pathetic, but there was nothing I could do about it. It became an unspoken agreement between me and the nobility that Nicol would become the next king. All that was left was for them to do something about Mars, and I didn't think he had much longer.

However, Mars seemed indifferent to the expectations of everyone around him, and stubbornly clung to life. He endured repeated poisoned meals and brushed aside assassins' blades. Our royal family had descended from a hero, but where had Mars been hiding that strength all this time? I certainly didn't have any of it myself. All I could rely on was my royal blood. I regarded Mars with wonder—he was my son, but he was also something else.

Meanwhile, Gamarath refused to let Mars stand in his way. It made perfect sense. For Gamarath, Mars was just an obstacle to securing his authority long-term. He made up some perfunctory excuse, ordering Mars to take down a suspicious organization known as the Hundred. If Mars died in the process, then the plan would be a success. If not, Gamarath probably planned to have someone stab him in the back amid the chaos of the battle.

Bran, whom Gamarath assigned to Mars as a guard, had a particular grudge against the former queen for killing his family, and he certainly wouldn't have hesitated to kill Mars. Mars may have been strong, but even he would be powerless against an attack from behind by one of his assumed allies in the middle of a battle.

Aware of all that, I gave the order: "Now Mars, you'll do it, right?"

"Certainly. I shall humbly execute your command," Mars replied, then he knelt.

*Sorry, I mentally apologized, but please die, for the sake of the royal family.*



**THE** day arrived for Mars to go after the Hundred.

To take every possible precaution, Gamarath hired some A-rank adventurers—just in case Mars somehow managed to defeat the Hundred, evade the White Knights' clutches, and return to the castle. As always, Gamarath was nothing if not thorough.

The White Knights served as the royal guard, but they were also Gamarath's minions, so he knew them well enough not to think they'd be reliable in a fight. On the other hand, not one person in the entire kingdom could defeat a party of A-rank adventurers. Even the famous Lightning Empress, Frau, could never do it alone. However...

It turned out that Mars was actually the one who had *formed* the Hundred. On top of that, he had the Black Knights, the Red Knights, and even the Blue Knights under his command, all of whom he leveraged to start a rebellion. Seeing how the Mages' Guild did absolutely nothing to stop this, it seemed that Mars's fiancée, Frau, was probably also on his side.

Despite this overwhelming numerical advantage, Mars appeared in the throne room alone—and the party of A-rank adventurers Gamarath had hired awaited him there. No matter his strength, they would not be opponents he could beat on his own—or so I thought. But Mars was terrifyingly formidable, and he emerged victorious.

I was bewildered. Just who *was* Mars? Neither I, nor my father, nor my grandfather had ever had that sort of power. Not that it mattered now. With Mars, I could be certain the royal lineage would live on. I did as I was told and gave up the throne to him. It was like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders. Ever since the beginning, the crown had always been too heavy for me to bear.



**AFTER** the rebellion, I was moved to the royal villa, a residence far from the capital—and in an unexpected twist, Brahms, the father of the new Queen Frau, was sent there with me. He was one of the king’s new maternal relatives, but far from accumulating power because of that, he had been confined to the royal villa with me.

“It looks like both our kids have given us some real trouble,” he remarked when we saw each other, smiling awkwardly.

But I didn’t really consider it trouble. As long as Mars inherited the throne, nothing else mattered. I had never imagined this was how I would be deposed, though.

My one regret was that I had not yet been able to tell Mars the single teaching that had been passed down through our family’s oral tradition for generations:

*“Eat meat.”*

I had no idea what it meant. My father and grandfather hadn’t seemed to know either. I always made sure to eat meat every day, just in case, but it didn’t seem to do anything special. It would have made sense as the secret to longevity, but neither my father nor my grandfather had lived to be very old.

*Still, Mars is king now, so he’s probably feasting on meat every single day.*

Perhaps there was no longer any need to tell him.

## Side Story II: Lightning Empress

**WIZARD** or not, human beings can be divided into three categories: precocious, average, and late bloomer.

Precocious people manifest their talents early, but as they grow up, their abilities improve less and less. The talents of average people grow at a normal rate, neither quickly nor slowly. Finally, late bloomers don't show much promise early on, but once they get a little older, they come into their own and fulfill their true potential.

The girl named Frau was considered precocious. Or rather, everyone believed that she *had* to be precocious. Her magical ability was just that incredible, and from such a young age. Her first word, at the age of three, was "Lightning." After taking a book of magic from her father Brahms's library, she had uttered the word when he had found her reading it and started scolding her. And the moment she said it, Brahms was hit by a lightning spell.

Brahms shook as a sudden wave of emotion overcame him. "My daughter must be a genius," he said.

However, he was actually shaking because the lightning made his muscles twitch.

Until that point, Frau hadn't seemed at all interested in speaking, and Brahms had been worried about her development. In fact, he had been prepared to give up on the hope of her ever being a wizard. From the day of her first spell, though, he began her accelerated education in magic. He read magic books to her himself, demonstrated to her how the magic was done, and thoroughly explained the workings behind everything.

Frau instantly picked up on all the magic she was taught and made it her own. She wasn't just doing as she was told; she adapted the spells to her own style and wishes, giving them different strengths and weaknesses or imbuing them with additional effects, then she put them to practical use.

She showed more talent than Brahms had at the same age. However, while her future looked promising, he couldn't help worrying. *Isn't she a bit too good to be true?* he wondered.

A person's total mana is decided at birth, and that's what determines their talent as a wizard. As the person grows, their mana output increases to that limit. Brahms was afraid Frau had reached her limit early.

*She must just be precocious, right? But isn't she still too talented for her age?*



**WHEN** Frau turned six, Brahms brought her with him on a mission for the Mages' Guild, which answered to him. Their task was to take down a monster that was causing all sorts of mayhem nearby, specifically an Orochi. Orochis were massive serpentine monsters, and they were highly resistant to magic, though not quite as much as dragons were. They were powerful enough to give even Farune's elite fighting force, the Mages' Guild, a hard time—but Brahms was entrusting the fight to his young daughter.

Standing just in front of the Orochi as it raised its head to strike, Frau didn't even flinch. Instead, she began emotionlessly reciting a spell. The Orochi instantly noticed the small human's extraordinarily high mana, and it struck, but the split second before it could sink its fangs into her, it was hit by a powerful bolt of lightning and died, entirely scorched black.

This was Frau's first fight as a wizard, and the first of her many exceptional achievements.



**STORIES** of Frau's adept use of magic to defeat countless powerful monsters while still a child spread around Farune and to other countries. Foreign wizards even began visiting Farune to catch a glimpse of her extraordinary abilities. When they saw her using magic, they all unanimously praised her, calling her a prodigy, and an indisputable genius. At the same time, though, when they saw her perfect control over her mana, they internally suspected that she was just especially precocious, and had already reached her limit. The alternative would have been just too good to be true. It was said that the best mage on the continent, Master Matou of the Magedom of Kiel, saw Frau and said to their

associates, “She has no future.” Brahms fretted about these widespread judgments, but Frau herself paid them absolutely no mind, and silently continued studying magic.



**THEN**, when Frau turned eight, Brahms was successful in securing her an engagement to Prince Mars. The king had also seen promise in Frau’s unique and exceptional talent, and he had decided to bring her into the royal family to strengthen the bloodline. For his part, Brahms was thankful that he had been able to foist Frau off onto the king at such a high price, before her abilities plateaued. However, he hadn’t calculated that the political situation in Farune would soon change. As a result of Prime Minister Gamarath’s swift rise, the prime minister’s grandson, Prince Nicol, became the presumed future king.

“I’m canceling the engagement,” Brahms declared to Frau, wishing to wash his hands of Prince Mars right away—but he received unexpected resistance.

“No,” Frau replied, flatly refusing. This was the same girl who had, up until then, silently complied with whatever he said, almost like a doll.

To underscore his position as lord of the household, Brahms gave her a harsh scolding, but she countered with a lightning spell, the first she had cast on him since the age of three. Needless to say, it was immeasurably more powerful than the first one. Brahms instantly deployed a magic barrier to protect himself, but his mansion was destroyed, the clothes he was wearing were singed to a crisp, and his hair had transformed into something resembling a bird’s nest.

*She’s surpassed my own strength*, he thought. The incident brought home the fact that Frau had gotten out from under his control long ago, and he had good reason to be terrified by her power. Because of that, Frau’s engagement with Prince Mars continued, unbroken.



**WHEN** Frau turned fourteen, contrary to all expectations, she continued to grow as a wizard. Physically, she had stopped growing early, but for some reason, her mana kept increasing. This was because she had been emulating Mars and eating monster meat. The child prodigy, originally destined to fizzle out as simply precocious, was successfully able to extend her mana’s growth

indefinitely, thanks to her unorthodox diet.

Then, one day, Farune experienced a minor emergency. For the first time in several years, a dragon had invaded the kingdom's territory. Dragons belonged to the strongest class of monster. They had high resistance to magic, and they were the most difficult type of foe for the Mages' Guild to deal with. This was the only time that they combined their strength with the knights so the kingdom could devote its entire force to the fight.

Frau, on the other hand, simply said, "I don't need them," and went off to attack the dragon alone. Her face was expressionless as always, but it was said that she seemed happy, somehow.

Floating in the air and looking down on the raging dragon, Frau manifested numerous shining magic circles around her and recited the strongest lightning spell there was, Thunder Judgment—which was impossible to cast without both high mana and extremely strong magical ability. Thunder Judgment took the shape of countless lightning bolts that themselves resembled dragons, and they rained ruthlessly down on their target. The spell broke through the dragon's vaunted magic resistance and transformed the notoriously strong monster into charcoal.

Frau had accomplished a great feat: eliminating a dragon using only magic. Ever since then, she was known as the "Lightning Empress."



**AS** it happened, the dragon Frau defeated was female. Its mate, a male dragon, had been killed by Mars. The female dragon had invaded Farune and been wreaking havoc out of revenge.

Naturally, Mars knew nothing of this, and irresponsibly thought, *I hear there's a dragon rampaging around the kingdom or something. I saw one in the Forest of Beasts just a bit ago, too. Have there been more of them around recently? Well, I'll attract too much attention if I defeat it, so I'll just leave it be.*

At the time, the Hundred wasn't yet strong enough to take on a dragon, so in the end, it was Frau who had to clean up after her fiancé. However, she was the only one who knew this.





**AND** now, standing before Frau were the assembled armies of the nobles of Gamarath's faction. Gamarath had summoned them to the capital outskirts beforehand, to carry out his plan to kill Mars. They had heard of Mars's rebellion via a magic transmission and were now advancing toward the city.

In Farune, the nobility was more powerful than the king, so the nobles' armies surpassed the king's, numbering more than five thousand troops. That was twice as many as the Black Knights, the Red Knights, and the Hundred combined. Their masters were still in the royal castle, so they were moving feverishly to rescue them, and their commander, Cras, had particularly high morale.

When Frau saw the nobles' armies from her position in the sky, the corners of her mouth tilted up slightly—or at least, it seemed that way to the mages who were her subordinates. They belonged to the Mages' Guild, and their master had changed from Brahms to Frau only several hours earlier.



**SEVERAL** hours earlier, Frau stood in front of the Mages' Guild and said: "Starting today, the Mages' Guild belongs to me."

Most of the mages were bewildered. Certainly, Frau's power as a wizard was exceptional. However, this type of post was not decided based on pure ability; much of it depended on aristocratic hierarchy. She was the daughter of Brahms, their leader, but as a woman, it was difficult for her to attain positions of power. Many of the young mages admired Frau's strength, and they were in favor of her leadership, but one of the elder mages gave Frau some candid advice.

"Lady Frau. Lord Brahms is our master. I don't know what to tell you, but—"

Without even a glance at the mage, Frau languidly raised her right hand and shot a bolt of lightning from her palm, a spell that zeroed in on its target. Its power, direction, and spread were all perfectly controlled; the spell was nothing less than a work of art, and Frau's ability to cast it without an incantation was what made her the Lightning Empress.

*“Gaaaah!”* The mage who had spoken up screamed, writhing in pain on the floor. After a while, he must have lost consciousness, because he stopped making noise, but his body still twitched.

Frau didn’t even look at him. She just calmly gazed at the rest of the mages. Then, to make sure they were with her, she said a single word: “Okay?”

The Mages’ Guild was ranked higher than any of the kingdom’s knightly orders, and it wasn’t a stretch to call it the most vital and important institution in Farune. The mages were proud of that fact. No matter how strong Frau was, they would not capitulate to her without resistance.

The senior mages all shot looks at each other, and, understanding what they had to do, simultaneously began reciting spells. They still had to use incantations to cast them, but they were simple and quick, and took nearly no time at all to activate.

However, Frau raised both hands, and a thin bolt of lightning shot from each of her fingers at the mages. This number—ten in all—exactly matched the number of mages who were trying to defy her. The lightning bolts moved like they had minds of their own, and when they hit their targets, they left the mages unable to speak, their incantations forcibly cut short. It wasn’t the most powerful spell, but because the lightning bolts perpetually arced from Frau’s fingers, it was practically impossible for the mages to escape their damaging effects.

After some time, Frau breathed a small sigh and ended her spell. The ten mages who had gotten continuously shocked flopped limply to the floor.

Then, Frau spoke again: “Okay?”

There was no longer anyone who opposed her.



**NOW**, the mages of the Guild were Frau’s subordinates, and they were floating in the air around her. The young mages were exhilarated, but the mages who were a bit older looked at the nobles’ armies below them with sorrow. Sure, the nobles had abused their authority and tormented the people with violence, but the mages couldn’t help but feel a shred of sympathy for

them.

*Almost all of them are probably going to die*, the older mages thought. They had known Frau since she had been very young. She was a girl who was interested in nothing but magic. Naturally, that meant she didn't care about people, and she didn't care about monsters. In other words, the nobles were about to be treated just how Frau treated monsters—and she always thoroughly annihilated monsters.

The nobles' armies had seemingly gotten reports that the Mages' Guild had turned on them, because they started firing arrows into the sky. This could be an effective tactic when fighting against wizards, normally. The Mages' Guild themselves had only ever fought monsters, and never a human foe, but they quickly deployed a wind defense spell that turned aside every one of the approaching arrows. They had a wealth of fighting experience, so they were used to adapting on the fly.

Frau ascended to a height unreachable by arrows and began slowly reciting a spell. She normally spoke without emotion, and in short, simple phrases, but her spells flowed like song and were filled with color.

"Dark abyss, freeze the breath of life. Darkness, release thy power. The deathly raging gale devours all. Annihilate soul, exhaust life at its preordained time. I beseech thee to play the melody of the end..."

*She isn't casting a lightning spell? No!*

The mages' faces went pale when they heard the spell their new master was reciting, and they all looked to Frau.

This was not the magic she was best at, lightning magic—this was dark magic, which was forbidden. Not only that, but the spell had clearly been customized specifically for use against humans.

One of the mages shouted, "Lady Frau, no!" and right after that, the spell was complete.

A jet-black abyssal darkness spread like ink spilled on paper beneath the feet of the nobles' armies. This was no ordinary shadow.





Commotion spread among the soldiers as they noticed the strange phenomenon growing underneath them.

“What in the world is this?”

“Is it an enemy spell?”

“But it isn’t damaging anything...”

The soldiers were suspicious. The darkness was simply expanding below them but didn’t seem to be having any effect.

Then, in the next moment, thirty percent of the soldiers and officers suddenly collapsed.

“Hey, what’s wrong?!”

“Get up!”

“Huh? He’s dead?”

It was an abrupt banquet of death. Frau’s spell didn’t induce death all at once; it caused its targets to die at a certain rate. And as the nobles’ armies fell into a panic, Frau began to recite yet another spell.

“I release the power of the underworld and call forth the souls of the dead. By the life of the King of the Dead, thou art resurrected. Decayed corpses, pull at the thread of death and yield to my mana. For death holds no sway...”

A chill ran down the mages’ spines, and the younger ones who had been supporting Frau were no exception. After casting a darkness spell, she had now used necromancy, an evil magic that called back the dead by force and made them do the caster’s bidding. The dead that now served Frau were the corpses of the soldiers she had killed only moments earlier.

Immediately, the recently dead soldiers began slowly rising to their feet, ashen-faced and with unfocused eyes. The living soldiers felt nothing but confusion and dismay at the sudden change in these *things* that their comrades had become. Then, the dead silently took hold of their swords, their spears, and their bows, and began to assault the living with a jealous hatred.

It was pure chaos. The dead attacked the living however they could. Even if

they didn't have weapons, they clutched at their enemies. The living soldiers desperately fought back, but minor injuries did nothing to slow their undead opponents down.

Someone screamed. No one knew who. The screams, the cries, and the shouts, now uncountable in number, may have been coming from the living soldiers, or they may have been coming from the dead soldier puppets. This chorus of death resounded around the battlefield; no, it was no longer even a battlefield—it was now a forsaken land of the dead.

The mages under Frau's command averted their eyes from this hell on earth. Some of them looked at Frau. With her back to the sun and her face steeped in shadow, she looked as if she was smiling, somehow.



**AFTER** this tragedy, Frau used mind magic to manipulate the exhausted surviving soldiers, causing them to turn on each other yet again. Even a demon would probably have felt a twinge of sympathy upon seeing the soldiers crying out, "Stop, please stop!" while cutting down their comrades beside them.

The noble armies quickly surrendered. No, if anything, they were prostrate on the ground and begging for forgiveness. Every member of the Mages' Guild tried to persuade Frau to accept their terms.

"But this is such a hard chance to come by," Frau said flatly. Still, though she gave off a faint air of displeasure, she allowed the enemy armies to surrender.

The remaining soldiers thanked God for the miracle of their survival, but memories of the horrific event would plague their nightmares for years to come.



**JUST** as Frau was forcing the noble army to submit, Mars defeated the party of A-rank adventurers and put an end to the fighting. When Frau returned, she made a brief report to him: "I defeated them."

After everything he had been through, Mars looked exhausted, halfheartedly patting Frau on the head and saying, "Thanks."

Frau put a hand to her head where he had touched her, and her skin, usually white as snow, turned ever so slightly pink. She was often praised, but perhaps because of her talent, no one had ever thanked her or touched her directly.

*This isn't so bad*, she thought.



## Afterword

**THANK** you very much for reading *How I Became King by Eating Monsters*. This was the first work I posted on the novel submission website *Shōsetsuka ni Narō*.

*How I Became King by Eating Monsters* went on sale at the same time in Japan as one of my other novels, *Who Killed the Hero?* (Kadokawa Sneaker Bunko), but I wrote this first. I had the idea for the other story before this one, but I thought, *No one will like such a tedious story*, and, wanting to write a story that was fun and easy to understand, I wrote this work as my first. Then, after about a year of uploading chapters, I didn't get a single comment, so without any recognition, I lost heart and ended the story (though I did get some reviews after it was over).

To tell you the truth, I also tried entering *How I Became King by Eating Monsters* in various open light novel contests, but I never even got past the first preliminary round. Now that was quite painful. Essentially, it was like being judged as completely worthless. Naturally, I believed I had written something entertaining, and it felt like that was being completely denied.

When my next work, *Who Killed the Hero?*, reached number one on the Narou rankings, I looked at number two and thought, *Hey, I've seen this title before*, then immediately after that, I realized it was *How I Became King by Eating Monsters*—and I doubted my own eyes. As a result of *Who Killed the Hero?*'s recognition, this work also got attention, but rather than feeling happy, I felt more irritated, like, *What, after all this time?* Then, when I was approached about releasing the web novel of *Eating Monsters* as a book, I thought, *Are you sure you haven't confused this title with Who Killed the Hero?*

However, as talks progressed, the fantastic illustrator named Shiba was assigned to the book, and when I saw art for my own work for the first time, my regrets and feelings of shameful failure over how I'd ended the story gradually cleared. The cover illustration is especially wonderful. It gave me the motivation to keep working hard and write the next volume. I hope to get a super cool

illustration of Carmilla for the cover of volume two.

All that said, I want to shout it out with pride: "*How I Became King by Eating Monsters* is entertaining!"

It may not bring you to tears or inspire you, but it's fun and has its share of laughs. This may not mean much coming from me, but *Who Killed the Hero?* was well written. However, you can't read stories like that all the time, and I can't write them all the time either. Sometimes, what you want in your day-to-day life is something simple. And isn't it fine to be a meathead? It's exhausting to think deeply about things. I hope you take it easy and have a good time while reading this story.

Now, while this only applies starting with volume two, there are plans to add a great deal of fresh material in the sequels. Around thirty percent of volume two, and seventy percent of volume three will contain new material (though I haven't told my editor yet). I cut the web version short due to a lack of response, and wrote the ending as a *Reader's Digest* version of events, but with the light novel version I may be able to bring it to a proper conclusion.

This was the first work I uploaded, and I hope to write the story to the very end, so I would be overjoyed to receive your support.





## Too Strong to Belong! Banished to Another World!

By Kazuki Karasawa Illustration Akane Rica

Still Too Strong in Another World!

Sakurako longs to fall in love. Unfortunately, her super-strength scares everybody off! If only she were normal... But then she would have died long ago.



## The Do-Over Damsel Conquers the Dragon Emperor

By Sarasa Nagase Illustration Mitsuya Fuji

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## Reincarnated as the Last of My Kind

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1  
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Suzume Kirisaki  
● ARTIST  
Cosmic

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**DRAGON**  
Who Lost Her  
**EGG** to Disaster  
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