

The
Magic
in this **Other World**
is **Too Far Behind!**



Gamei Hitsuji
illustration=Ao Nekonabe


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World is Too Far Behind!

8



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An anime-style illustration of a confrontation. In the background, a tall, pale man with white hair and red eyes, wearing a dark suit with a white cape, looks down. In the foreground, a young man with dark hair and blue eyes, wearing a school uniform, looks up with a determined expression. To his right, a young man with reddish-brown hair and red eyes, also in a school uniform, looks on with a slight smile. The scene is set in a dark, industrial-looking environment with large windows in the background.

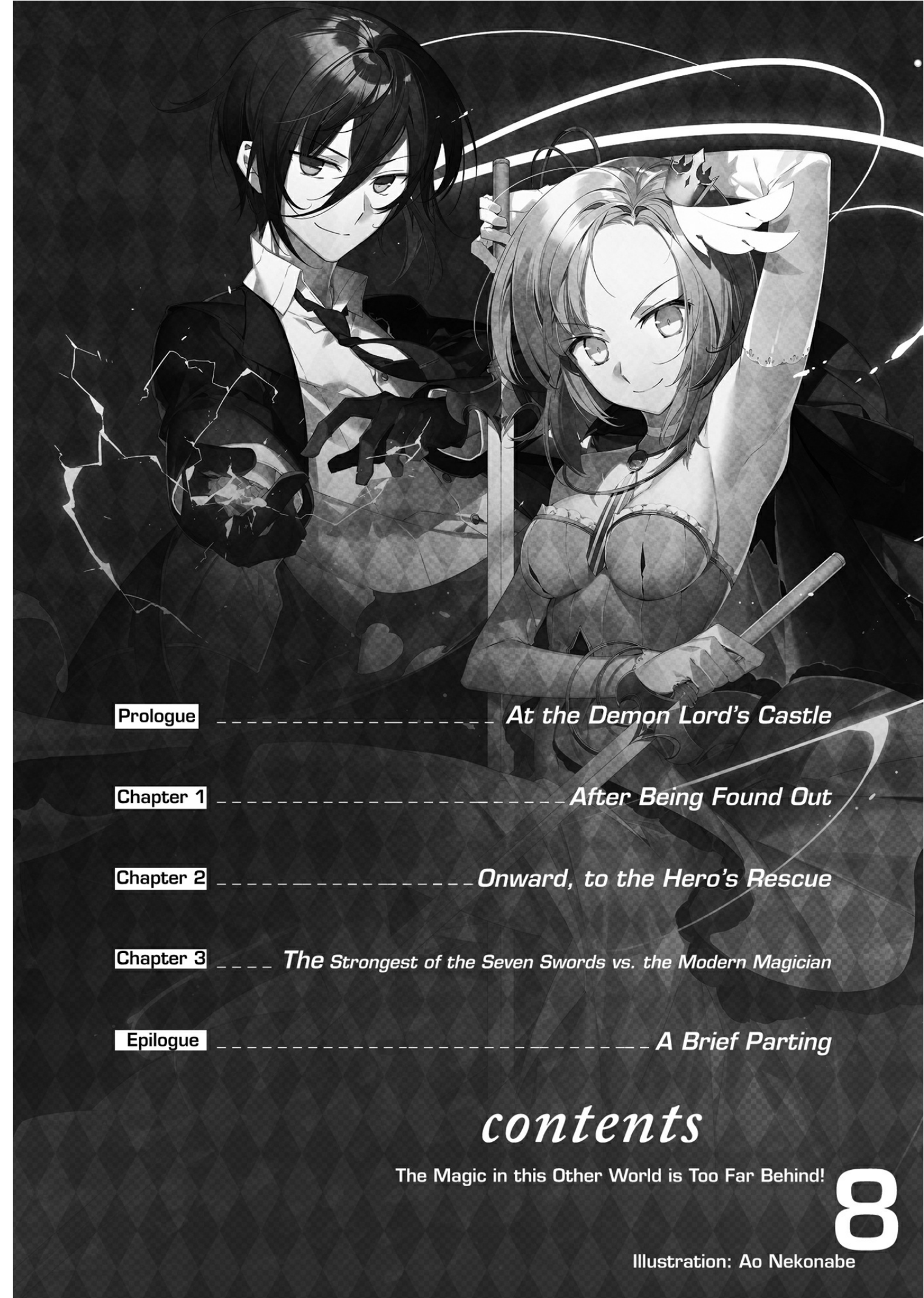
*"You aren't the only one here who can use **magic**."*

Lucas de Hadorious

*"**Suimei**, be careful!"*

Yakagi Suimei

Shana Reiji



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Prologue: At the Demon Lord's Castle

The stronghold of the demons lay at the very extremity of the northern lands. The dragonnewt Eanru had once joked about Ilzarl's "cold meals," but that was more truth than it was joke. The entire region was plunged into a neverending winter of intense snow and ice. It was completely inhospitable to humans—no, to all living things.

In short, the land was outright hostile. It was only fitting, then, that a certain breed of hostile beings called it home. Some thought that the savage demons were simply insensible to the treacherousness of the area, but that was in fact precisely why they'd made their stronghold there. It would be nigh impossible for the humans to ever push into such perilous territory.

If humans had the resilience and the mobility demons did, it would be a different story. But they were all earthbound and had no natural resistance to the elements. So in that sense, the cold northern lands really were ideal for a stronghold. And the stronghold the demons had built there was grand enough to be called a proper castle.

It had stone walls, spires, ramparts, gates—the works. All eyes that beheld it would believe it to be a castle simply based on the way it looked. It was... recognizable in a strange way. It looked oh-so familiar, reminiscent of the castles of human lands, that it was almost hard to believe it belonged to demons. But that was no coincidence. Because those with humanoid figures stood at the top of the hierarchy of demons, the architecture of their stronghold was naturally catered to them.

Deep within that castle in a dull and dim room, a sharp streak of light poured in from an opening door. It was a warm, orange light that cut right through the darkness—something that almost seemed out of place in a castle full of the dark power of the Evil God. But it was simply torchlight from the hall outside, which silhouetted a single shadow slipping in through the door.

"Pardon me."

Courteously entering the room was a female demon wearing deep blue armor and carrying a large sword. Despite her dark skin, white hair, and red eyes, she looked perfectly human at a glance. But the constant aura of bloodthirst lingering about her betrayed her. She was anything but normal.

As if they'd been anticipating her arrival, the candlesticks in the room all lit up when she set foot inside, illuminating those who were seated around the table waiting for her. The young girl with black hair and dark skin, Demon Lord Nakshatra. The man with blond bangs gloomily hanging over his face, Lishbaum. The woman with bat-like wings, Latora. The beautiful man with long, silver hair, Ilzarl. These were the players that controlled the demon world.

"So we're all finally here..."

"Long time no see, darlings."

The armored female demon's arrival was met with Ilzarl's discontented gripe and Latora's friendly greeting. However, she didn't react to either one of them. She simply offered the room a glare before kneeling down before Nakshatra.

"We have been waiting, Moolah."

"As have I, my lord and master. It brings me great honor and joy to have an audience with you once more."

The armored female demon—Moolah, the last of the demon generals—bowed her head deeply to Nakshatra. Nakshatra ordered her to be at ease, and she obediently moved to her place at the table with the others.

"I see the number of bodies to warm these seats has decreased since we last met," she commented indifferently.

"All is as it should be. Each and every one of them who suffered defeat at the hands of mere humans was unfit to fulfill the ambitions of our god. They were too weak."

"You couldn't be more right. They had exceptional power and protection from our god, yet still fell to humans... How dare they shame Lord Nakshatra's sacred name like that. Those weaklings were worse than trash and lower than scum."

Moolah's words for her fallen comrades were curt and merciless. Really, she

was declaring that power was everything, and there wasn't a soul in this world who would argue with her. They knew all too well that life was a game of rule by the strong and survival of the fittest. It was, frankly speaking, the way of the demons.

"Now, what will we do about these empty seats? Leaving them vacant leaves quite a large hole..."

It wasn't good. Even Moolah understood that. The demons were beings that strove towards a single goal, and they meandered towards it like an unruly mob. That was why the guidance of the demon generals—the vanguards of the Evil God's will—was essential. Trying to move the demon army without them would only mean chaos. If the mob were left to its own devices and the individual demons allowed to act as they pleased, they would be so disorganized that they would easily be overpowered by the weakling humans. As Moolah voiced her apprehensions, Nakshatra gave a generous nod as if she were in full agreement.

"Regarding that matter, it has already been decided. Lishbaum."

As Nakshatra spoke, she exchanged glances with the single demon who served her like an adjutant. Hearing her turn the explanation over to him, Lishbaum addressed Moolah while making exaggerated gestures.

"The answer we've arrived at is for you to take charge of several of the army corps."

"Several? I have already been entrusted with a group of pawns, as I'm sure you know. Are you saying that you plan to further increase my workload, bastard?"

"Yes. We would like you to command three or four units now."

"Lishbaum, my true purpose is to protect Lord Nakshatra. Yet despite knowing that, you insist on peddling other duties upon me. Am I the only one that finds that unreasonable?"

"We are short-handed, after all."

"As the main cause of that predicament, just what are you saying?"

Moolah shot a cold, piercing gaze at Lishbaum like she intended to kill him on the spot. It would be an understatement to say she saw through him. And certainly, there was something behind Lishbaum's smile...

"Oh my, so you're onto me. Let me just say that it wasn't a pointless expenditure. Quite the opposite—it was necessary."

Lishbaum made it sound like the entire situation had been arranged on purpose. Hearing this, Moolah's cold stare became a fiery, ferocious one.

"...Just what are you thinking? What's your game here?"

"The same as the rest of you. I wish to eradicate all life from this world. That is all."

"Does that have something to do with reducing the number of pawns?"

"Yes."

When asked point-blank, Lishbaum replied without any pretense. Moolah continued to glare at him, but was unable to decipher just what the sinister light in his eyes meant. Giving up on probing any further, however, she took her seat.

"...As I said before, it is my duty first and foremost to protect Lord Nakshatra. However, if Lord Nakshatra so desires it, I shall comply."

"It seems Moolah-sama is on board now as well. What do you say, my lord?"

As Lishbaum turned to Nakshatra, she smiled faintly. And then...

"Moolah, commander of our elite guard, we expect great things of you."

"Of course, my lord. Though I may be inadequate, I will exert myself to the fullest in your name."

"Very well. Now, are there any who object to Moolah's promotion?"

Ilzarl raised an eyebrow at Nakshatra's question.

"You're asking us? I have no complaints about the strong taking the lead."

"I'm with Ilzarl on this one. I don't have any complaints as long as she's strong, and I know she is. Besides, if we're talking about being the commander of the elite guard, she's way more cut out for the job than we are, right,

Nakshatra-sama?”

Moolah was the one to respond to Latora’s frivolous answer.

“Latora... As a proud demon general, how can you talk to Lord Nakshatra that way?”

“What, are you angry? You know I’ve always been this way, Moolah darling.”

“I am saying that you should know your place.”

“After all this time? It’s fine, isn’t it, Nakshatra-sama?”

“We do not mind.”

When Nakshatra took Latora’s side, Moolah silently accepted it without a single sign of discontent. To Moolah, Nakshatra and her word were absolute. She would never dare go against them. And with a definitive end to that sidebar pronounced, Lishbaum once more spoke up.

“Incidentally, there is something that I would like everyone to see today.”

The first to react to that statement was Ilzarl.

“Oh? So does this mean one of your damn schemes is coming to light?”

“Yes, this.”

With that, Lishbaum leaned back a little and glanced behind him. Following his gaze, the others in the room looked in the same direction, but... there was nothing there. Finding the situation suspicious, and being aware of Lishbaum’s abilities, they all observed him carefully.

Slowly but surely, Lishbaum’s shadow opened up eerily, and from within it, an even larger shadow appeared. It was a figure more grotesque than anything they’d ever beheld, even among their own kind, but it was unmistakably a demon.

It had several eyes stacked horizontally in an asymmetric fashion, and a single insectoid mouthpart dripping acidic saliva. It had enormous arms like a human bodybuilder, but they dangled down from bulging shoulders with distorted bones and protruding horns sticking out all over. Its skin was dark purple, and its swollen, lumpy body was massive. It looked as sturdy as it did grotesque,

putting even the ugliest demons alive to shame. But its most remarkable quality by far was the amount of power from the Evil God it possessed.

“Ew, this is... Seriously?”

“Oh...?”

Latora was grimacing at the sight of the monstrosity, but Ilzarl’s admiration was focused solely on its strength. They raised their voices in surprise, but Lishbaum’s sycophantic attitude remained unchanged as he turned to Moolah.

“I believe this is the answer to the doubts lingering in your heart, Moolah-sama. All the demons sacrificed up until this point were fuel for the kiln. And in that fire, fresh pawns have been forged.”

“Beings of such power... Just where have you been hiding them?”

“Within the threshold.”

“With your damn power? I see...”

Recalling Lishbaum’s abilities, Moolah quietly muttered to herself, seemingly satisfied. But it appeared she wasn’t the only one that needed convincing.

“Lishbaum, from what I see here, this doesn’t have the intelligence of the pawns we’ve been using.”

Based on the demons Ilzarl knew, winged ones at least possessed the intelligence to comprehend language. But the one Lishbaum had summoned only had violent ferocity in its otherwise empty mind. There wasn’t a hint of understanding or any other semblance of intelligence in its eyes. However, Lishbaum didn’t see that as a bad thing.

“As long as it is made obedient with power from the Evil God, intelligence isn’t exactly required, is it? If they’re strong enough, they needn’t think for themselves.”

“That’s sure a strange answer coming from a bastard like you who uses his wits as a weapon.”

“Our purpose is different. So to speak, this is a symbol of fear to the humans. If they could communicate with it, some of that fear would be negated. Not knowing what an opponent is thinking at all... That alone is something

intelligent beings fear.”

“Especially those frail humans, huh?”

Seeing Ilzarl agree with him, Lishbaum nodded in satisfaction.

“So how about it? Have I shown you something that meets all of your expectations?”

“You’re saying we’re going to be bringing these things along with us from now on? With these, couldn’t we get things done with forces far smaller than what we’ve been using?”

“Certainly, if we had more of these, those damn humans... Even the heroes would be nothing special.”

Latora and Moolah each muttered their impressions and consented, but Ilzarl once again raised a question.

“Lishbaum, there is something that I would like to ask you.”

“Is there a problem regarding what I’ve presented to you?”

“No, it’s about something else.”

There, Lishbaum seemed to get the hint and flashed a dark grin.

“In other words, you wish to ask me what happened that day, no?”

“That’s right. You seemed to know that human, so just what does that mean?”

Ilzarl looked at Lishbaum through narrowed eyes, waiting for an answer. He was asking Lishbaum about his relationship with Suimei, and Lishbaum replied with a taunting smile. This, however, was the first Latora had heard of it.

“Oh me, oh my! What’s this? You have a human acquaintance or something?”

“Yes, well...”

Lishbaum admitted it readily. He then glanced up at the ceiling like he was recalling something before continuing.

“Originally, I come from a different world, you see. But even there, I was doing something similar.”

The first to reply was yet again Ilzarl.

“Something similar, huh? But this world you’re from didn’t have the Goddess and the Evil God... In that case, you mean to say you were still exterminating offerings?”

“Though the goal was different.”

“The goal was different? Is the extermination itself not the goal?”

“To me, that is only the means. In a sense, you could say that my true goal is the antithesis of yours.”

The other generals failed to grasp the true meaning behind Lishbaum’s cryptic words. Only Demon Lord Nakshatra laughed and nodded with a knowing look.

“Hmph...” scoffed Ilzarl. “I don’t really think there’s anything for you to gain through just exterminating the offerings.”

“No, that is not the case. From the very beginning, I never wanted anything.”

Since the others present had never touched upon the many ideologies of man, they would likely never understand.

“But alas, in the end, I was defeated by that man. Since I was attached to another phase, I lost a fair amount of power and should have been buried beyond the horizon of dimensions, but... Let us just say that I was fortunate to be forced into the physical world. And that is how I am here now.”

Bringing that discussion to an end, Lishbaum turned the question on Ilzarl.

“Now, what about you, Ilzarl-dono?”

“What about me?”

“The humans are meals to you. So by killing off your food source, you’re really killing off yourself, aren’t you? So what is it that motivates you to lend your power to Nakshatra-sama?”

It was certainly as Lishbaum said. As a maneater, cooperating with the demons meant Ilzarl was intentionally helping to get rid of his own supply of food. It was a completely nonsensical, contradictory act, yet he responded with a composed air like he hardly considered it a problem.

“Food or not, with so much riffraff, aren’t they just an eyesore? If they aren’t thinned out a little, they’ll just continue to be troublesome.”

“And so you’re cooperating with us to that end? You mentioned thinning them out, but you do know we intend to annihilate them down to the last, don’t you?”

“But that’s impossible.”

Moolah was the only one who wrinkled her brow at Ilzarl’s bold declaration. But it was Lishbaum who questioned him.

“And why do you say that?”

“It’s nothing complicated. It’s just a matter of how gluttonous those offerings are. Contrary to what you might expect, they’re incredibly tenacious. Even if you kill some of them off, they just immediately surge forth from somewhere else. No matter how much you reduce their numbers and no matter how tightly you have them cornered, it happens every time. And if your objective truly is to exterminate them, you should understand that, shouldn’t you?”

So confronted by Ilzarl, Lishbaum narrowed his eyes like something had just come to mind.

“...Certainly, you do have a point about those teeming roaches.”

Lishbaum ultimately conceded, but Moolah was furious. She held the demons, particularly the Evil God and the Demon Lord, in the highest regard. And belittling them was not something she could so easily pardon. Somehow managing to suppress her urge to draw her sword on the spot, she glared at the two of them as she raised her voice.

“Ilzarl, you bastard! How dare you deny the ambitions of our God in the presence of Lord Nakshatra?!”

“What, did I touch a nerve? Despite putting on such composed airs, you’re unexpectedly short-tempered.”

“You ingrate...”

Moolah channeled all of her intense bloodthirst at Ilzarl, who treated it as if it were nothing but a gentle breeze. It would take far more than that to intimidate

him.

“It is fine, Moolah. Stand down. We united fronts with Ilzarl knowing how he felt.”

“With all due respect, even without the likes of him, we would not fall behind mere—”

“Can you truly say that you yourself wouldn’t? In reality, the majority of those who used to occupy those empty seats thought the same. And yet they fell to ‘mere humans,’ as you put it.”

“That only means that they were bad at their jobs.”

In response to Moolah’s lack of compassion for the defeated, Ilzarl looked at her with a somewhat disappointed face.

“Are you saying you’re any different?”

“Do you wish to see for yourself?”

Taking his words as provocation, Moolah began to pull her sword from its sheath. With the situation reaching critical mass, their fighting spirits met in a violent clash that released visible sparks. Things were genuinely about to get dangerous, and the one to raise their hand in mediation was Nakshatra.

“Moolah, Ilzarl, that’s enough.”

Hearing the Demon Lord’s decree, Ilzarl turned a faint smile to Moolah.

“You heard her. So, what will you do, oh commander of the elite guard? Will you defy Nakshatra’s will and fight me? I honestly don’t mind either way.”

“...I’ll remember this.”

Glaring at him in annoyance, she returned her sword to its sheath. She would not defy Nakshatra, but she was unable to suppress her hostility for Ilzarl. Her fighting spirit and bloodthirst continued to rage. Seeing her so worked up, Nakshatra offered a few words of condoling explanation.

“Moolah, to fulfill our ambitions, Ilzarl’s presence is necessary.”

“My lord, could you enlighten your poor ignorant subject as to why?”

With those words, Moolah once more knelt down before Nakshatra. When

she did, Nakshatra smirked a little.

“To compensate.”

“To... compensate?”

“That’s correct. All phenomena that occur and that are caused in this world, without exception, will have slight deviations. If you do not have the flexibility to take that into account and compensate for it, it will one day spell your ruin.”

“That’s—”

“We won’t let you say otherwise, do you hear us? That is precisely why the demons have gone so long without successfully achieving their goals. Do you understand? Our little bundle of demons is especially weak to unexpected phenomena.”

“Then, to compensate for that, Ilzarl was invited to join us?”

“Lishbaum as well. And in reality, they are doing fine work. Currently, there are foreign interlopers on the enemy side that we would be unable to deal with ourselves, and those two have become the power that restrains them.”

“By foreign interlopers, you mean the four heroes?”

“Your field of vision is too narrow, commander of our elite guard... And in that case, perhaps it would be best to have you face the humans yourself.”

As Nakshatra muttered to herself, she glared over the other demon generals who had already fought in such battles before seeming to reach some kind of conclusion. She then raised her voice so that all could hear her.

“We will now give our orders. First, Moolah. As Lishbaum informed you earlier, you will be given additional troops as a demon general. You may do as you have been until now, but you will no longer have the right to refuse command of units. As such, you will take your current pawns and push into the humans’ northern lands where they are shorthanded. If all goes smoothly, those who are lured in should answer your earlier question regarding tenacity.”

“All is as you will, my lord.”

“Lishbaum. You will throw the remaining pawns in the kiln and hurry with your work in increasing the supply of new pawns. We have the leisure of time,

but it would be a poor move to let the heroes have too much of it and build up too much strength. Do at least keep that in mind.”

“But of course.”

“As for the rest of you, you shall have some free time until the new pawns are gathered. Once everything is ready, this time, we will seriously attack the humans. Husband your own strengths until then.”

Hearing her words, everyone but Ilzarl obediently bowed their heads. Nakshatra then let her hopes for the future escape her lips with an irrepressible laugh.

“Now then, humans... Both you and your Goddess are in for a rude awakening.”

With that ominous prediction, the Demon Lord departed the room where the surviving demon generals were gathered.

Chapter 1: After Being Found Out

The clash between the Nelferian Empire and the invading demon army, before the decisive battle in the foothills could even take place, ended—rather unbelievably—with the demons’ retreat.

To the humans who were supposed to take part in the decisive battle, where a considerable amount of casualties were expected, this was great news. But the price for it had been thousands of lives on the front lines.

No, saying that was the price made it sound like those lives had been paid for. And they weren’t. They had been stolen by Lishbaum’s magicka, Cross Dimension—the magicka that made him the Greed of Ten. It had severed everything, both heads and the tops of mountains. And it wasn’t even part of the demons’ plan. It was nothing but a sideshow, a whim of Lishbaum’s as he was withdrawing. It was almost like his way of saying that the humans shouldn’t even think of his retreat as a victory. He wouldn’t even let them have that much.

Suimei and the others had been spared Lishbaum’s Cross Dimension technique, Phase Severance. As such, once the demons retreated, they ended up swamped with work in the aftermath. After the immense death toll, the encampment was drastically shorthanded and there was plenty to be done—they had to deal with the corpses of the demons, hold memorial services for the fallen soldiers, and call for reinforcements, all while remaining vigilant of the surrounding area. There was so much to do that even Suimei and the others were recruited to help, and things had only just now finally started to calm down.

While the surviving soldiers were still tirelessly running about, having been temporarily relieved of work, Suimei and Reiji were behind a tent in the middle of taking a break.

“Well, how do I put it...? What I mean to say is, you know...”

“Uuhhh, yeah, I, uuhhh...”

They were standing shoulder to shoulder with their backs against the tent. One was talking like they were scolding the other, and said other was sweating profusely. Of course, the former was Reiji, and the latter Suimei.

Things had ended up this way because it had at last been revealed to Reiji that Suimei was a magician during the conflict with Lishbaum the other day—and, moreover, that he'd been hiding it. Logically, Reiji mostly understood why Suimei had kept him in the dark. But emotionally, as his friend, it wasn't something he could stay calm and logical about

"I know I'm also in the wrong for deciding to fight the demons without even consulting you about it, but you know..."

"Y-Yeah, mmhmm! That's right! That was horrible, you know? Of all the terrible shit you've done to me, I'd put it in the top three."

In a complete one-eighty from his sheepish and apologetic attitude a moment ago, Suimei poured it on thick with a feigned triumphant expression. Reiji, however, being the honest and sentimental guy that he was, couldn't deny Suimei there.

"Ugh... That's why I'm saying I know it was my bad..."

"But you know..."

"But nothing! To keep a secret like that all this time... Isn't that just a little too cruel?!"

"What? N-No, no, no! I keep telling you there were circumstances I had to consider..."

"Even after Mizuki ended up like that? Don't you think that would have been the right time to come out to me?"

"Th-That's when I first thought about telling you, honest! Ask any of the girls; they'll tell you!"

To prove his good intentions to his best friend, he was willing to drag the others into this. And in doing so, he did himself the disservice of doing what was conventionally known as shooting oneself in the foot.

"Er..."

By the time he realized what he'd done, it was too late. Reiji was already looking at him through narrowed, critical eyes.

"Hmm? Oh yeah? That means, other than me and Mizuki, everyone knew, huh? Even Tia and Graziella-san..."

"Uhh... Sorry 'bout that. I'm super sorry."

Having backed himself into a corner, Suimei's only real option now was apologizing. Reiji was right, and Suimei knew it. He should have come clean when Reiji appeared with Io Kuzami and the Sacrament. That would have been the ideal time... And the fact that he hadn't done it was completely on him.

"Look, I know you split ways with us... And I know you. I know you did it for our sake. But, even so, don't you think you should have at least told us the truth?"

"I don't have anything to say for myself... I was just too scared."

Being confronted with such a perfectly sound argument, Suimei repeatedly apologized as he deflated into a tiny, tiny man. Perhaps somewhat gratified upon seeing his friend reduced to such a state, Reiji let out a heavy sigh. And then...

"Well, like I said, I was also in the wrong, so... let's just call it even."

With that, Reiji brought the discussion to a close. Or, at least, he tried. Suimei looked like he wasn't ready to let it go yet.

"No, hang on! Where do you get off saying those are even? What you did was way worse, you know?"

"What?! Can't you read the room, Suimei? This is where we're supposed to agree that it's all water under the bridge! But if you want to rehash it all, then fine! I still have plenty to say, you know?!"

"You think *you* have plenty to say?! Well then, buckle in, mister! This is gonna be a long ride!"

And there, they got into it for real, attacking each other with a litany of perceived mistakes and wrongdoings that went back well before they'd come to this world. About how Reiji was always swarmed by girls and how Suimei always

just abandoned him. About how Suimei had to go through all sorts of trouble because a girl who liked Reiji was bothering him. It was one stupid thing after another, and the list went on and on... Long enough that they exhausted themselves shouting at each other.

“Hahh... Hahh... Hey, could we... just stop?”

“Ughh... Well, yeah... This does seem a bit stupid...”

The heated dispute that had left both of them out of breath came to an anticlimactic end when they both realized it wasn't getting them anywhere. Agreeing to move on from the pointless quarrel, they collectively let out a regretful sigh. Disheartened after getting blasted like that by his best friend, Reiji sank to the ground where he was and looked up at the sky.

“All sorts of things have happened before today... But this is really the first time we've ever been so honest with each other, isn't it?”

“...Yeah, you're right. So with this, let's not keep any more secrets between us.”

Following Reiji's lead, Suimei also sat down with a thud. His heart felt lighter after clearing the air with Reiji; he genuinely didn't want to go back to the way things were between them. And Reiji seemed to feel the same. They shared a quiet moment under the open sky before Reiji shifted his focus to the unnaturally empty military encampment. Just a few days ago, it had been bustling. But that was before...

“Lots of people... died right here, didn't they?”

“Yeah... That was hard for you, wasn't it?”

“It's not quite that... How should I put it...?”

Reiji trailed off, mumbling to himself like whatever he was trying to say was hard to express. Just what emotions was he holding on to? Suimei had an idea what Reiji seemed unable to digest deep in his heart.

“It just doesn't feel real, right?”

“...Mm, yeah. I know it's not right for me to think of it that way, but the fact that all those people died just feels like it was a bad dream. But I even helped

with their memorial service, so why do I still feel like that?”

Reiji was troubled as to why he couldn't seem to process the sorrow of such a terrible loss of life. Perhaps he was simply bewildered. Or perhaps he was just worried that the situation didn't really allow him time to grieve. Or perhaps because so many people had died so abruptly, his emotions simply couldn't keep up. It was a difficult loss for someone who'd never experienced anything like it to get their head around. And Suimei could think of a reason that might be especially difficult in this case.

“I think it's because... this is a different world from ours. I think...”

“Because it's a different world?”

“Yeah. To put it in the simplest terms possible, this isn't our world. Everything we're seeing, hearing, and taking in... it's literally a world away from where we're from. I think that's why it all feels so surreal to us. It is a lot like a dream.”

That was it. Suimei had pinned down the unease mounting Reiji's heart. And he'd done it all too well, which made Reiji realize something.

“Does that mean... it's the same for you, Suimei?”

“Yeah, a little.”

“Even with all your experience in the occult?”

“That's just how much of a shock the existence of another world is. And it's not just me. Even the magicians of our world reject the idea of other worlds and parallel universes.”

It was just too far removed from reality—or, at least, it felt that way. It was even more remote than entertaining the idea of life on distant stars. It was a fantasy born of fantasy—pure imagination. The stuff of dreams.

“It really is like a dream, huh?”

“If it was like that this time, it will surely be the same in the future. However...”

“However?”

Though Reiji questioned him, Suimei didn't reply.

Losing someone precious to you is what it takes to wake up from that dream.

That was how it had been for Suimei. It had taken losing his father to “wake up” back in his own world. Seeing Suimei’s lonely expression, Reiji seemed to come to some sort of an understanding and reached into his pocket.

“Suimei, when it comes to the occult... Or mysteries, was it? You know your stuff, right?”

“Well, more or less.”

“Then, this... Is it really something amazing?”

“The Sacrament, huh?”

Looking at the object Reiji pulled from his pocket, Suimei let out a long sigh. The Sacrament was really what had given Suimei the resolve to come clean about his secret. And here Reiji was, asking if it was something amazing. It was clear as day to Suimei he had no idea what he was really holding in his hand.

“Fundamentally, that thing is unmanageably dangerous. Okay? But you should know that by now, right?”

“Yeah? I mean, it does feel amazing, but how do I put it...? It’s like there’s more to it.”

That was Reiji’s impression of it. He felt like he was in the dark. That there was something he didn’t know. Reiji was likely only aware of the heightened senses and physical abilities it granted, but indeed, the pinnacle of the weapons known as Sacraments lay elsewhere.

“I don’t know a lot about those things, but I have witnessed the power they hide once before.”

“And?”

“...The first time the Sacraments were used for military purposes in our world was about four years ago. From just a single use, the Sacraments blew away forces on the scale of an army division. And there were ten of them.”

“So... ten army divisions, huh...?”

“You wanna know what it was like, right? I asked that guy the same question

before. He said a single division was between ten and twenty thousand men. So, at bare minimum, a hundred thousand people died that day.”

Reiji looked completely startled at Suimei’s answer.

“A-A hundred thousand... Seriously? In a single battle? That’s just...”

“No kidding. There would have been armored and air force units too, so the damage is just unthinkably absurd, isn’t it?”

“That’s not what I mean! That’s not what I mean at all! I’m talking about people! Human lives! A hundred thousand people dying in a single battle is just way too many! I thought modern battles were unlike historical ones or the ones in this world where people just stand around and fight each other to the death!”

“Well, that’s what he said. No matter how high or wide the battlefield was, they could gain total control of an entire area with some kind of technique. And again, we’re talking forces in the tens of thousands. Maybe even hundreds of thousands, and that’s not even counting the hidden magicians, so, in short... I was shown a nightmare.”

“A nightmare...?”

As Suimei muttered that last word in a severely cold tone, Reiji audibly gulped. Yes, it was during the war that started about six years ago in Eastern Europe. It was there that the feared allied armies of the Middle East and Southwest Asia triggered the nightmare of war.

The first event. The Falling Heaven Sword that smashed heaven and earth—“The Night the Sky Fell.”

The second event. The Polar Vortex Sword that froze all hearts and fears—“The Midsummer Blizzard.”

The third event. The Tremor Sword that buried everything in sand—“The Giant Tsunami of the Desert.”

The fourth event. The Lightning-Bringer Sword that lit up the battlefield—“The Flatline Site.”

The fifth event. The Haunted Water Sword that claimed even those on dry

ground—“The Mass Drowning on the Hill.”

The sixth event. The Anvil Sword that cut through the woods and transformed everything it touched—“The Steel Forest.”

The seventh event. The Putrid Ash Sword that scattered a dust in the air that ate away at men’s insides like worms, “The Incurable Rotting Lung Plague.”

The eighth event. The Thirsty Rose Sword that sucked the blood of its foes, leaving only empty husks behind—“The Tomb of Briars.”

The ninth event. The Berserker Sword that turned all gunfire against allied troops—“The Friendly Fire Incident.”

The tenth event. The Reapers’ Puppet Sword that turned men’s own shadows against them—“The Killer Doppelganger Raid.”

That was the catastrophic series of events caused by the Sacraments and their power beyond human comprehension that had been unleashed on Eastern Europe.

“...”

Hearing Suimei recount all this, Reiji was left absolutely speechless. There were ten instances that ten thousand plus lives were lost in battle. And he was now potentially holding one such weapon.

“We got a bit off topic, but the important part is that you recognize that thing in your hand is just that dangerous. I don’t doubt for a minute it’s capable of the same kind of destruction.”

“That... That much?”

“Probably, yeah.”

Suimei had started with a great deal of emphasis and certainty, but ended on a much more ambiguous note. But even if it was uncertain, the possibility couldn’t be denied. If this Sacrament was equal or even close to the paranormal weapons Suimei knew about, it did indeed have the power to stand up to gods. And as for Reiji, its wielder, he just might be the one to bring an end to this fight. As such thoughts crossed his mind, Reiji simply stared at the Sacrament in wonder. And then, with a slightly shaky laugh, he gave his honest impression.

“Heh, if it’s that amazing, you’d think people would know about it. But that isn’t the case at all, huh?”

“In our world, anything and everything related to the mysteries is unconditionally kept from the public. Just by becoming well known, the perpetual universal theories would crumble and lose their stability. It would be a grand ole mess. Moreover, the actual number of Sacraments is relatively low. They can’t currently be manufactured.”

“Is that so?”

“I’ve heard there are places researching them, but they haven’t had any success in reproducing one. They can’t even make something similar, it seems. But if they could, it would solve the world’s energy problem overnight.”

“How’s that?”

“It’s the blue gem embedded in it—the Lapis Judaicus. I think you know that it’s the source of the Sacrament’s power, but it’s also the foundation... Well, it’s the place all consumed energy converges.”

“The place consumed energy converges? What are you talking about? Doesn’t energy vanish after it’s consumed...?”

“You’d think, but apparently that’s not the case.”

At that, Reiji cocked his head to one side and then the other. It was like he couldn’t understand what he was hearing at all, though there was no helping his confusion with a decidedly unscientific explanation like that. His groaning and head-scratching didn’t go unnoticed, however. Suimei racked his brain for a better way to put it, and rubbed his chin for a moment before taking another stab at it.

“Let’s put aside whether or not consumed energy vanishes for now. The point is that that gem can take all heat energy ever created in the world and—”

“W-W-Wait a sec! Isn’t that super outrageous?! It uses *used* energy?! All the energy the world has ever used up until now?! That’s just freaking mind-boggling!”

“I told you it was dangerous, didn’t I?”

Reiji losing his cool was rather justified. It was a mind-blowing idea, and the fact that Suimei was talking about it so casually was just as confounding. Suimei took the opportunity to once again reiterate just how preposterous the Sacraments were, but Reiji couldn't even laugh nervously anymore. The best he could manage was a dry cough.

"I guess there would totally be wars over that kind of power, huh?"

"It's already happening. In Eastern Europe."

"Eastern Europe, as in... the Third Eastern European State War?! The one going on right now?!"

"Yup."

Reiji was once again at a loss for words at Suimei's casual reply. The Third Eastern European State War—the one currently unfolding in their world—was the same war Suimei had said the Sacraments were first used for military purposes in. On the surface, it was a bloody war about race and religion. But in truth, it was over the creation of the Lapis Judaicus to develop a new energy source, and the oil export magnates who feared it. It was the Middle East and Southwest Asia who'd started a war over it.

And it had already been six years since then, but there was still no end in sight even after all this time. Due to the devilish strategies surrounding *that man*, it was a mystery why the fighting was still ongoing, but there must have been a reason behind it. They'd been thoroughly chipping away at their opponent's ability to continue fighting, and the balance between the enemy nations' military hardliners and peace-seekers was wavering... So if they hadn't been victorious yet, something else was going on behind the scenes.

Perhaps it was a magician, or someone else who held a Sacrament. Suimei had no clue, but that was neither here nor there right now. It seemed Reiji properly understood the power of what he held in his hand, and that it was something that would affect those around him. With an exhausted expression, he let out a heavy sigh.

"I have a headache now..."

"It'll be fine as long as you don't use it the wrong way, you hear?"

“I get that, but still...”

He was unable to settle his mounting unease. But Suimei had faith. He didn't think for a minute that Reiji would ever use it the wrong way. That he'd so readily agreed to take on the demon subjugation was proof enough of how straightforward, well-meaning, and earnest he was. Besides...

“Being able to use that thing is one of your objectives right now too.”

“You mean against the demons?”

“Yeah. The fighting from here will be harder than it was before. *He's* here. So a power like that may be just what we need.”

Against the hordes of the demon army, the massive destructive power of the Sacrament would certainly be useful. They would be able to take control of entire regions at a time. It was an incredible strategic weapon, and even that was an understatement. It was pretty much ideal for taking on large armies. But rather than that, Reiji seemed to fixate on something else Suimei had said.

“Suimei, by ‘he,’ you mean the demon you were talking to?”

“Hmm? Aah, yeah. Kudrack... No, he said he goes by Lishbaum here, didn't he?”

“Mm, that's how he introduced himself. And if I remember right, he also said you defeated him once before... Is that true?”

Hearing Reiji's question, Suimei closed his eyes like he was recalling something, and eventually began speaking again with a cloudy expression.

“That's right. I destroyed him. I took out his hit points and his stock of lives, and denied the unending horror he forced upon us. I even erased his bond to our world. Yet somehow, he's still alive. And well enough to take on that form.”

“‘That form’? You mean, he was originally human, right?”

“At first, yeah. He then became a magician, and then a lich, and god knows what happened after that. But now he's one of them, apparently.”

“Is he... He's strong, isn't he? How do I put it...? I didn't sense any tremendous power or spirit from him, but he did all that so casually...”

Reiji was referring to Lishbaum's Phase Severance, which had severed the heads of almost all the soldiers at the encampment and the mountain behind it. It was a gory, tremendous attack, and the fact that Lishbaum had done it as easily as breathing left Reiji with some rather outrageous apprehensions.

"Even in our world, he was completely out of control. It took a team of the best people I knew to actually, finally bring him down."

"The Demon Lord, an army of demons, that maneater, and now an undying magician, huh?"

"Uggghh... When you say it like that, I feel like cutting my losses and just going home."

"But..."

Hearing Suimei talk like he was fed up with everything, Reiji suddenly got worried. And it showed on his face. Seeing his dramatic change of expression, Suimei slapped his shoulder and laughed it off.

"Don't look at me like that. I was kidding, kidding! I'll do my part to fight too. I can't expect someone else to go cleaning up my unfinished business, after all."

"RReally? Like, really really?"

"Really really."

When Suimei gave him a firm nod, Reiji's expression became noticeably brighter.

"What?" Suimei asked skeptically.

"Ah, it's nothing. It's just that, if you're going to help out, I feel like we have the strength of hundreds now."

"Pfft! What the hell are you saying...? Aren't you being a little *too* optimistic?"

Reiji turned his trademark smile on Suimei. Seeing that far too carefree and radiant display, Suimei lost his composure for a moment, but quickly collected himself. The ever-faithful if not somewhat airheaded Reiji, however, was looking at him curiously.

"You think?"

“Hell yeah, I do. On top of all that, there’s still those Universal Apostle guys too, remember?”

“The people who came to help us this time, right?”

“Yeah, but... Just what are they thinking?”

Last time they were enemies, this time they were allies. They had no consistency in their battles. Suimei had defeated a demon general with Eanru, and Eanru had even been the one to suggest they work together. Jillbert had shown up to help Reiji and the others who’d fallen victim to the demons’ surprise attack. Sister Clarissa saved Lefille and brought her back to the military encampment. And when it was all said and done, they vanished like smoke in the wind without a word.

“In the end, we missed the chance to ask about Elliot.”

“We’re not necessarily sure that Duke Hadorious is a Universal Apostle though.”

“You’re right. Well, we’ll end up finding out soon anyways, right?”

From here, they were planning on making their way to Kurant City to save him. It was a mission they’d deferred in favor of coming to save the Empire, but with the coast clear now, it was their most imminent priority. However, when Suimei brought it up, Reiji looked uncertain.

“About that... It doesn’t seem we’ll be able to head there straight away.”

“Huh? Why not?”

“They said we can’t skip out on making a triumphant return to the imperial capital. His Highness Reanat insisted we go with them... And considering the situation, I think we should.”

“Of course... In the end, they want to forcibly claim victory, huh? I get that they don’t want to report back that they lost, but...”

“It’s just as you said before the fighting began. Famous people are walking propaganda tools.”

He knew that, but Reiji’s feelings on the matter were complicated. He didn’t particularly have any reservations about being used so long as it was ultimately

for good, but in this situation where it was genuinely hard to say they'd won after what happened, he was a bit uncomfortable.

"I'm sure you'll go back first, Suimei, but I want you to wait a bit before going to save Elliot. Tia would also like you to wait. We're dealing with a noble from Astel, so I think she wants to make sure this is handled properly."

"Ohmygosh, Tia's, like, so serious."

Though he said it in a stupid way, that was genuinely Suimei's impression of her. With her personality, she wouldn't be satisfied unless she faced him herself. He knew that firsthand because he'd been through a similar confrontation with her once.

"I know Felmenia will be with you, but I think it'll bother her if she's not there herself."

"We are dealing with a duke, after all. From a social standpoint, he's Menia's superior. If we don't have someone of higher standing on our side, we don't have a whole lot of ground to stand on."

"...The person in question is planning to do something entirely by force, though..."

"Ooh, scary. Do you think the little princess is gonna draw her swords on sight or something? No matter how you look at it, isn't that a little too militaristic?"

"Hahaha... But, even so, I think that's one of Tia's good points, you know?"

"That's a good point...?"

Suimei was left stumped at Reiji's comment. As always, the overwhelmingly good nature of his best friend was aggravating in its own way. But as their talk of saving Elliot came to an end, they noticed that the entrance to the encampment had gotten rather noisy. Suimei's ears in particular perked up.

"What's all that?"

"Looks like people are gathering. Is it additional reinforcements?"

"Now? After everything's over?"

"It doesn't really seem like it... I sense a whole lot more people than that."

“You sense them...?”

Suimei was skeptical about his use of that word, but it had a certain credibility coming from Reiji. Perhaps he was finally beginning to show signs that he’d entered the realm of the extraordinary.

Suimei and Reiji headed towards the entrance of the military encampment to investigate what was going on. They passed by soldiers who were bustling about and a fresh stack of supply crates as high as a pyramid. And eventually, they spotted Felmenia in the crowd.

“Yo! Hey, Menia, what’s all this?”

“Oh, Suimei-dono. It’s reinforcements. And a whole lot of them. A whole, whole lot.”

Felmenia turned to him with a bright smile as she answered. Since this was still technically the front line, reinforcements were always a welcome prospect. Looking at the newly arrived troops, however, Reiji seemed to notice something.

“Those people aren’t imperial soldiers, are they?”

“Hmm? Now that you mention it, yeah, you’re right. Actually, that uniform looks kinda familiar...”

Suimei felt a strange sense of déjà vu upon seeing the reinforcements. There were mages mixed in with the ranks of the imperial soldiers, who were all lightly outfitted for the sake of employing skirmish tactics. But the reinforcements who’d just arrived were all well armored, and the vast majority of them were heavy swordsmen. There were very few mages among them, and their uniforms were indeed familiar. That was because he’d spent a long time stuck looking at them before returning to the Empire.

“Yes. They came through the hick area of the Empire to the north—”

Felmenia was chattering away in such high spirits that she unintentionally said something quite rude. But Suimei wasn’t paying her any mind. His attention had been captured by a certain figure stepping out of the formation of soldiers. She had long, beautiful, golden hair, and was wearing a school uniform and red gauntlet. It was someone he knew very, very well—his childhood friend and

summoned hero of the Alliance, Kuchiba Hatsumi.

“Suimei, you been doing well?”

Approaching with a gentleness that seemed oh-so out of place in a military encampment, Hatsumi cheerfully called out to Suimei. He hadn't at all expected to run in to her here, and the surprise showed on his face.

“H-Hatsumi?! Why are you here?”

“Why? Isn't it obvious I came to bring reinforcements? Though it looks like they're not needed...”

With that, Hatsumi took a look around. She'd come all the way from the Alliance, and probably hadn't expected to walk in on the cleanup phase of the Empire's supposedly dire battle with the demons.

“Never mind that. How are things with the Alliance? Aren't there still demons in the northern parts there?”

“About that... they just suddenly pulled out. Just what are they thinking, I wonder? But thanks to that, I was able to come here to help.”

“Then what about your companions?”

“Weitzer and Gaius are watching the house, so it's just me and Selphy here.”

At that, the half-elf who had been standing behind Hatsumi removed her hood and smiled. Suimei had a little bit of a weak spot for older women, and was rather flustered for a moment by her charming smile. It didn't go unnoticed by Felmenia and Hatsumi, who both proceeded to jab him in the ribs. Hatsumi then turned her attention to Reiji.

“You must be Shana-san. This would be our first time meeting like this, no? I'm Suimei's childhood friend, Kuchiba Hatsumi.”

“It's nice to meet you. I've heard a lot about you from Suimei.”

Reiji gave her a cheerful greeting, but Hatsumi flashed something of an impish grin.

“I've also heard a lot about you. Including that little stunt you pulled 'cause the other countries wouldn't send any reinforcements.”

“Should you not send us aid or reinforcements in our time of need, I will not come to save you either.”

Suimei recalled the ultimatum Reiji had issued the Empire’s allied nations. But hearing it brought up to his face, Reiji panicked a little and fingered the true culprit.

“Th-That... You see, Suimei...”

Reiji awkwardly looked to Suimei. When he did, the lightbulb seemed to come on for Hatsumi, and she sighed in exasperation.

“So *that’s* what it was... I thought so. Suimei’s about the only one who could come up with such a devious scheme.”

“Hey, what do you take me for?”

“Someone who looks completely harmless, but is really actually a supervillain, right?”

“Huh, yeah. You’re totally right.”

Reiji reflexively agreed with Hatsumi’s assessment without a moment’s hesitation. Hearing that, Selphy was unable to hold it in and burst into laughter. Once she got a hold of herself, Selphy, who seemed to have come as Hatsumi’s aide, humbly introduced herself to Reiji as well. She then revealed something interesting.

“In truth, we planned on arriving earlier than this, but we ran into a bit of trouble on the way.”

“Trouble?”

“Yes. At first we thought that someone on the demons’ side had marked us, but...”

Selphy’s expression turned grim. Now that the demons had retreated, she wasn’t fully convinced. In fact, it was only because the demons had retreated in the Alliance that they’d been able to leave for the Empire in the first place. If the demons had really wanted to stall them, they could have just continued their invasion in the Alliance. There might be something else afoot. As Selphy fell quiet contemplating such matters, Hatsumi turned to her.

“It seems our services are no longer needed here. What should we do now?”

“That’s true, isn’t it? But as long as we’re here, creating a debt of gratitude from the Empire and forcing them to recognize their mistake would be an excellent plan, no? Heh heh heh...”

With a creepy laugh, the half-elf suggested some political maneuvering. Ready with a counteroffer, Suimei tapped Hatsumi’s shoulder.

“Well, if you don’t have anything better to do, I’ve got a little request.”

“What? If it’s some sinister plot, I won’t have any part of it.”

“It’s not, damn it! It’s a proper rescue mission.”

“Huh...?”

Hatsumi looked genuinely bewildered, which made Suimei furrow his brow.

“What is it this time?”

“It’s just... Hearing you talk about a rescue mission is a little refreshing.”

Hearing Hatsumi say that, Reiji also chimed in.

“You’re right. He’s normally the type to act like he doesn’t want anything to do with things, and then somehow or other always ends up sticking his neck out anyway. A total tsundere.”

“Damn it, you guys...”

Seeing Reiji nod repeatedly, Suimei slumped his shoulders. It would be a long day for him for more than one reason.



After talking to Reiji and reuniting with Hatsumi, Suimei took his leave of the front lines in the northern Empire and returned to his base in the imperial capital.

Originally, after returning, he and the others were planning to immediately go and rescue Elliot. However, at Reiji and Titania’s request, they were now waiting until Reiji was also able to return. They’d reported the delay to Christa, and were now left with the decision of what to do in the meantime. Felmenia and Liliana were making use of their connections to gather information. And as

for Suimei...

“Let’s see... Putting the transcribed magicka circle here and disassembling that diagram...”

He had a singular goal in mind: the quest he’d left Royal Castle Camellia for in the first place. He was currently analyzing the hero summoning circle and attempting to devise a similar one to send him back home... But things weren’t going well. In fact, at present, progress had come to a standstill.

“This part goes like this, and if I change the equation with liturgy... Ah, crap. That won’t work, will it?”

Taking the information he’d gathered in the form of various sheets of parchment from his desk, he spread them out on the floor. He was moving the sheets around, trying various arrangements and muttering to himself

“Wrong, wrong, wrong... No, that’s wrong too... It’s all wrong...”

In short, he’d hit a wall.

“It’s gonna suck if I can’t get back, and soon... I can’t just get stuck here after getting this far...”

The impatience was audible in Suimei’s voice. But he had a good reason to be in such a hurry. Despite defeating two more demon generals and taking a considerable bite out of the demon forces, it felt like there were new enemies arising at every turn. Formidable ones. In addition to the mirage man, there was now Lishbaum—the Greed of Ten, Kudrack the Ghosthide. Both of them were magicians who’d staved off Suimei. If he was going to go head-to-head with them, the fight wouldn’t be easy. Since the mirage man’s position was still unclear, Suimei couldn’t be sure about him, but that wasn’t the case with Kudrack. He and Suimei had a long history, and Suimei was determined to settle the score—determined enough that his appearance had shaken things up quite a bit for Suimei. He couldn’t just sit back and be content with the way things were progressing anymore. The status quo was no longer good enough.

Because as long as Kudrack was around, Suimei knew there would be trouble. There was no doubt that Kudrack would stand in his way. Fate dictated they would be butting heads again. It was simply a matter of when. And if that time

came while Suimei was still like this... that would be the end of him.

So Suimei needed to do something. But even now, while his companions weren't with him, he was unable to utilize the full extent of his powers. The discrepancy of the stars, the existence of spirits, the distortion of space-time, the ley lines... The circumstances of this world were just too different. Restrictively so. Even Suimei's grand Enth Astrarle magicka was only a mere shell of itself here. It could never reach its full potential in this world devoid of the stars it relied on. Here, the best Suimei could hope for was half its actual power.

And Enth Astrarle was just the tip of the iceberg. Psychic Tempest, the supreme fist Lag Line Bells, the cursed Stella Maris, and the infinite conversion of the mana furnace... There was plenty else he either couldn't use at all, or could only use in a severely compromised form.

He didn't know if he'd be able to fix that after returning to his own world or not, but at least there were guides there he could use to help him. Markers to light the way for those who dared to peek into the abyss of the mysteries. Surely such things existed here too. And if he asked someone to teach him, it might give him a clue to solving the problem or at least help him find an alternate power he could use. However...

"It doesn't exactly sit well with me to have to rely on someone..."

It was expected— No, it was only natural for a first-rate magician to solve the problems thrown at them on their own. But Suimei didn't have the leisure to mind his pride here. The situation had deteriorated, and things were much more dire now than he'd ever imagined they would be. If he took too long trying to handle things himself, it was very likely that not just Reiji, but all the people of this world would end up being annihilated by Lishbaum. But before Suimei could even think about stopping him, he'd have to master the spell to get back to his own world.

"Now, just how am I supposed to do this...?"

At hand, Suimei had a transcription of the magicka circle used to summon him to Astel, as well as a copy of the oldest known version he'd found in the northern Alliance. He compared those with his knowledge of summoning magic

in this world and spiritualism from back home. Putting it all together, he began drawing out a magicka circle of returning, but...

Just one more... I'm missing just one last thing...

Seeing that the puzzle before him was still missing an essential piece, Suimei gritted his teeth. He began unwittingly tapping his foot on the ground in irritation. He was nearing his limits. All he was missing was a definitive mental image of the way the spell would manifest. Would it be a warp gate? An opening door? A drilled hole? Or maybe just straight up teleportation? Unable to grasp the form the spell would take, he was unable to pin down that last piece.

Naturally, he could try and forcefully activate the spell as it was, but that came with a dangerously high risk of failure. Without a form, the spell was nothing but empty theory. As long as he couldn't picture the way it would manifest, there would be an element of uncertainty in the casting. That uncertainty inevitably meant instability, and it wasn't hard to imagine where that would lead. Just like that experiment in Philadelphia, the phenomena would contort and rebound, and all that calamity would fall squarely on Suimei as the caster.

"An incomplete spell is the Pandora's box of magicka."

That was the admonishing warning the leader of the Society, Nestahaim, had given Suimei a long time ago. Suimei had a tendency to place his bets on the long shot when he was in a disadvantageous situation. In his fight with Eanru, for example, he'd tried to use Infinite Light Without End. And it was precisely because he took such gambles that he'd been so warned—because he was the type to seek out hope in the mysteries, use power that was beyond his means, and end up suffering for it.

But in a situation like this where he was perfectly calm and easily able to distinguish between what was safe and what wasn't, he would never make such a desperate play. That being said, the current predicament he was in certainly felt desperate. Tackling this conundrum felt like being trapped in a dark tunnel with no light at the end.

"Aaaaah, I can't think of anything good! Everything is this damn heat's fault..."

Suimei's brain was overheated, and it wasn't just from too much thinking. It had been cold in the northern Empire, but Suimei had had a rude awakening upon returning to the city. Despite it only being early summer, a searing heatwave had rolled in. They hadn't been affected in the mountains because of the wind and elevation, but the imperial capital was positively boiling. It had spiked to an unbearable thirty degrees seemingly overnight.

As Suimei was griping about the heat, someone called to him from the other side of the door to his room.

"Oh, Suimei-donooo! Is now a good time?"

"Menia? Come on in. What's up?"

When Suimei called out to Felmenia, she quietly opened the door.

"Pardon the intrusion, but how are things going? Have you been able to make any progress on the return magicka circle?"

"None whatsoever. I'm stuck. I've hit a total dead end."

"O-Oh,ahaha... You don't say..."

Suimei slumped his shoulders in a perfect reflection of the defeat he felt, and Felmenia began laughing awkwardly like she didn't know what to say.

"There's no easy answer. This spell is eluding me. And the liturgy is too convoluted. It's not working. Also the form... The mental image just isn't coming to me."

"I understand the task is difficult. Even in this world, I do not think anyone has ever been able to create a magic circle of returning... But might I ask what you mean by a mental image in the context of summoning magic?"

"Think of it as a blueprint for the foundation. A vacuum... Wait, no, you wouldn't get that. Using an example from this world, it would be like creating a powerful current with wind magic forcefully pulling on something."

"Then why not just visualize the reverse of that?"

"No, that won't do. In the case of sucking air in to bring something to you, the arrival point is fixed and stable. But in pushing air out to send something somewhere else, it goes all over the place. We'd never be able to return to the

right location that way.”

“I see... Then how about a tunnel from this world to yours?”

“I’m worried that would just get clogged up... Damn, it really is a vacuum, isn’t it?”

When he recalled first being summoned to this world, the pull of the spell felt like a vacuum that was sucking things in. And that was a large part of Suimei’s troubles. After thinking of it that way, it was hard to unthink of it that way. He was stuck on his own preconceptions, essentially.

Suimei let out a grand sigh, but Felmenia clapped her hands together like a delightful little bell to clear away the gloom.

“Well, Suimei-dono, how about a change of pace? If you can clear your head for a time, you can come back to this with fresh eyes. That might help you see something you hadn’t before, no?”

“A change of pace, huh? You certainly have a point there... But what should we do instead?”

“Heh heh heh... Regarding that, I have a plan.”

“O-Oh yeah? Well, what is it?”

Felmenia was smiling somewhat creepily, and Suimei looked at her suspiciously. But it seemed she was doing it on purpose. In the blink of an eye, her creepy grin was replaced with a bright and cheerful one. And the first thing to come out of her mouth after that...

“The change of pace I’d like to recommend for you, Suimei-dono, is... the pool!”

“Huh...?”

And thus Felmenia Stingray announced the grand opening of the pool to kick off the summer.



Bowled over by the completely unexpected word that had come out of Felmenia’s mouth, Suimei stiffened up for a moment before his emotions

caught up with him.

“Sorry, what? Did you just say THE POOL?! Like, where you take swimming lessons in the summer and go to have fun with your family?! That kind of pool?!”

“Indeed! Before we left the northern military encampment, I heard all about them from Io Kuzami-dono! She told me that, in your world, in order to beat the heat, everyone intentionally goes into enormous containers of water to cool off their hot bodies together!”

“Please don’t speak of summer’s greatest pastime in such a tasteless way...”

Hearing Felmenia parroting Io Kuzami, Suimei was at a loss for a response. He certainly wanted to cool off, but she made it sound like they were going to go on a polar bear plunge after hanging out in a sauna or something.

“In spite of it only being the start of summer, we have this oppressive heat weighing on us. So how about it?”

“How about it? Yeah, okay, sure. Now, where exactly are we going to find a freaking swimming pool?”

“If you’ll step outside, Suimei-dono, you can see for yourself. Follow me!”

And with that, a high-spirited Felmenia tugged on Suimei’s arm. She looked like a small child trying to drag her parent along. It was quite cute. Even though Suimei had no idea what he was getting into, he didn’t resist as she escorted him outside. And when they opened the door...

“HAAAAAH!”

“HYAAAAAH!”

A great sword and katana clashed as two women both let out war cries.

“...”

Just outside, a furious exchange of blows was taking place. Beholding this unexpected spectacle, Suimei stood stock-still in surprise. There was a heated swordfight going down right outside his front door. But because Suimei’s room was soundproofed, he’d been completely oblivious to all of Lefille and Hatsumi’s shouting. And considering their skill levels, it was an especially

intense match.

One of them was wielding a massive broadsword and the other an extremely long katana. They were weapons that seemed unsuitable for the girls, but they both made wielding such tools of war look exceptionally easy. They certainly weren't lacking for speed and power, either. If some careless fool dared to get between them, they'd be rendered mincemeat in the blink of an eye. Their exchange was just that fierce. A grand display of clashing steel and fighting spirit. Absolutely nothing about it said "pool." If anything, Suimei was only getting hotter watching them fight like that.

"...So the pool was just a trick, huh? All I see is something super dangerous. Swords, swords, and more swords..."

"No, Suimei-dono! You are being too hasty! Lefille and Hatsumi-sama are just having a bout; the pool is somewhere else!"

When a disheartened Suimei slumped his shoulders and began grumbling, Felmenia reassured him that the pool was quite real. Meanwhile, the duel in the open space in front of the house—live steel and all—continued. Lefille took a stance with her large sword held aloft, and in response, Hatsumi lowered her long katana to the ground. There was a moment's pause. And then, without any warning, they both lunged at each other.

"HAH!"

"HYAH!"

A series of remarkably loud metallic clangs rang through the alleyway. Hatsumi was defending herself with her katana while Lefille was trying to create an opening by striking it repeatedly. Lefille's heavy sword eventually won out, knocking Hatsumi's katana to the side. However, Hatsumi was shrewd. She wasn't just the daughter of the fourth seat of the Sword of Swords—she was a worthy swordswoman in her own right. Her blade knocked aside, she took a graceful step to move with it, maintaining a fighting posture all the while.

"Hmm... How about this, then?"

"Your katana... It's..."

Lefille began swinging her sword anew at a different angle. But something

was different this time... There was no longer the loud, gong-like sound of clashing metal. She could see the katana with her eyes—it should have been there—but whenever she struck at it with her oversized blade, she couldn't hit it at all.

“So this is your technique?” Lefille asked, her face contorting as she racked her brain.

“It is,” Hatsumi replied with a bold smile.

The reason their swords appeared to be crossing each other but never actually made contact was because of Hatsumi's Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani techniques. Just like the name “Phantom Sword” implied, her blade was a bewitching, ethereal one. If her opponent relied entirely on their mortal sight, they would be misled. They would be too focused on the wrong things. Where the blade was going rather than where it really was, for example. For a swordswoman of Lefille's caliber, this was ordinarily something she could handle without a problem, but...

Lefi can't keep up with those sword strikes?

Suimei found it rather surprising that Lefille was dancing in the palm of Hatsumi's hand. Hatsumi was an extremely capable swordswoman herself, so it wasn't like the situation was unthinkable. But considering Lefille's skill and experience, she should have been performing better.

Hatsumi's even holding back...

Suimei could tell. He knew what kind of outrageous swordplay Hatsumi was really capable of. And he knew Lefille was perfectly capable of putting up a fight... she just wasn't. As he was pondering this, Hatsumi abruptly put an end to their duel.

“Lefille-san... Let's call it a day.”

“Yeah...”

Despite the match ending with her at a disadvantage, Lefille accepted it without protest. She was ordinarily the type to keep fighting for the win, so her silent resignation now was a telling sign that her mind was somewhere else. Putting her sword away, she shut her eyes. Hatsumi then spoke up in an

apologetic tone.

“Sorry. It just felt unmotivated.”

“Truly? It certainly seemed like your fighting spirit was overflowing, Lady Hatsumi...”

“It may be a bit rude, but I was talking about you, Lefille-san.”

“...”

Having that pointed out to her, Lefille sighed bitterly and winced. She must have thought so too. Seeing that response, Hatsumi carefully chose her next words.

“I can’t say for sure, Lefille-san, but it seems like you’re restless.”

“Restless...?”

“It’s like your emotions are taking the lead. That’s what it feels like. Of course, I’m not criticizing your form or your strength, mind you. But in our fight just now, it was like you weren’t looking at me.”

“That’s... My apologies. Even though it was our long-awaited bout, my sword was clouded.”

Her sword was clouded. The sword was like a mirror that reflected a swordsman’s heart. If they were shaken, so too was their blade. If they were weighed down with sorrow, their blade would be sluggish. And if they were restless, their emotions would run ahead of their sword, making it unreliable. As Suimei suspected, what had Lefille so agitated was nothing other than her defeat at the hands of the demons during the clash in the northern borderlands of the Empire.



“Are you alright? Is this about what happened...?” he asked.

“...I know... I know that I...”

“Lefi...”

“I couldn’t win against her. I thought I had gotten stronger since that day, but even summoning everything I had, it turned out that...”

As Lefille leaked out her vexation, she suddenly seemed to realize something and vigorously began shaking her head in a fluster.

“No, I’m sorry! I can’t talk like that!”

Attempting to brighten the mood, Lefille put on a smile. However, in the end, it was nothing but bravado. Wiping away such gloomy feelings wasn’t something that could be done so halfheartedly. The frustration of defeat was something that could only truly be overcome by devoting oneself to their art and attaining victory.

But all such discussion was interrupted by Felmenia clapping her hands together loudly to get everyone’s attention.

“I know! Lefille should also join us for some recreation! We’re going for a change of pace, and it certainly seems like you could use some refreshment yourself!”

“Lady Felmenia, but you know...”

“We all understand what’s weighing on your mind. Besides, is it not better to be surrounded by friends? Things may just work out yet. They certainly did for me.”

Felmenia was quite empathetic. She too had recently been frustrated by her lack of power. The trigger for her becoming stronger was her evolution from a mage to a magician, so ultimately, she’d obtained the power she desired by leapfrogging a few steps. But nevertheless, she was right. Lefille was in the perfect environment to become stronger. She just needed to refresh herself and get back to it like always. Yet as Felmenia did her best to cheer her up and inspire her, Lefille flashed a somewhat lonely expression.

“You’re right. I have to do the same. For only you to become suddenly

stronger like that... I feel like you've somehow stolen a march on me, Lady Felmenia."

"Oh, no, er..."

When she put it like that, Felmenia wasn't sure how to respond. At all. She was worried she'd gotten too caught up in the heat of the moment and had hurt Lefille's feelings. Seeing her in such a fluster, however, Lefille cracked a smile and began laughing.

"I was only joking. But I must say, Lady Felmenia, your reactions are as cute as ever."

"AAAAAH! You tricked me!"

Felmenia yelled out and stamped her foot, but Lefille only laughed more. Yet even as she did, Suimei felt like he could see the sorrow deep in her eyes. Maybe it was just his imagination. As Lefille took to trying to appease the unexpectedly outraged Felmenia, Selphy, who had also been watching the match, joined the conversation.

"As I suspected, White Flame-dono," she said with a serious look on her face. "You've grown even stronger, haven't you?"

"Oh? Well, yes... Stronger than before, I suppose..."

Felmenia spoke like she wasn't so sure, but Selphy seemed convinced. She likely sensed it from the aura Felmenia gave off as a mage.

"Truly, White Flame-dono," Selphy continued in a serious tone. "Right now, I can tell that you're one or two levels higher than before. You have gained something... No, you have arrived at a new stage, have you not?"

"Just by reworking some of the functions of my body a little, my output has increased. That's all. True strength will follow afterward. Or, how do I put it...?"

While Felmenia was struggling to express herself, Lefille posed a question.

"My, Lady Felmenia. Even if increasing your output is all you've done, isn't that in and of itself a remarkable increase in skill?"

"No, not exactly. For mages and magicians, mana is critical. But in order to effect grand results, so is output. I have always possessed a great deal of mana,

but my output was far too sluggish. And now that I've taken measures to correct that, I was simply able to make some other improvements."

"Hmm... What do you think, Lily?"

Glancing over her shoulder, Lefille called out to Liliana, who had been sitting on one of the patio chairs as she played with the alley cats. Setting down the cat that had been lounging in her lap, she came tottering over to the others. She'd overheard most of their conversation and, without thinking too deeply about the question, responded immediately.

"Yes, of course... Being able to produce grand results... is very important to a mage... A magician."

"Is that something that can be achieved so easily?"

"Felmenia is skilled... but the speed at which she memorizes things... is fast. Her strength... lies in her power to adapt... For me, I was only ever able... to use dark magic... so I always think of things... using that as a foundation... As a result, my spells always... end up closely resembling... what I used before. But in Felmenia's case... I believe she's tremendously widened... the arsenal she has at her disposal."

Liliana was right. Up until now, Felmenia had been limited as a magician by her output and mana capacity. But with those inhibitors overwritten, she could now easily manipulate the powers of the Elements. As proof...

"You've already perfected the eight attributes, right?"

"Yes. I've learned to call out to the Elements with a different approach, so I can use them freely now."

"You mean to say you've mastered all the attributes, White Flame-dono?!"

"Yes, well, that was the result."

"I see... That means you now have power rivaling one of the heroes of salvation..."

Hearing Selphy speak with such admiration, Felmenia was humbled. Seeing this unfold, Suimei decided to butt in.

"Aaah, don't praise her too much."

“I-I won’t let it go to my head or anything!”

“Yeah, you’re not exactly convincing with that face...”

Completely carried away in the moment, Felmenia was all smiles. She was tickled pink to be so praised. That part of her hadn’t really changed much since they’d first met at Castle Camellia. But after being called out like that, Felmenia brushed her embarrassment under the rug by completely changing the topic.

“M-More importantly! The pool!”

The first to react to that word was Hatsumi.

“Now that you mention it, the plan was for everyone to go in after we were done, huh?”

“Wait, you all knew about this?”

“Only you didn’t, you recluse.”

“Ugh...”

When Hatsumi tossed him a sidelong glance and grinned, Suimei faltered. Right now, he wasn’t sure how he felt about her getting her memories back. Of course, he knew in his heart of hearts that it was a good thing, but he couldn’t deny these little exchanges of theirs vexed him.

“Now then, allow me to reveal the pool! Everyone, please look over there!”

At Felmenia’s behest, everyone present turned to look in the direction she was pointing. There was an ostentatiously large piece of cloth laid out just a bit down the alley.

“That’s...” Suimei said skeptically.

“That’s right! The pool! Now, for the grand unveiling...!” Felmenia shouted spiritedly.

“Oooh...” Liliana cooed indifferently.

And with that, Felmenia invoked some magicka to create a gust of wind that rolled the cloth cover neatly up into a bundle. Underneath it was a stone water tank large enough to monopolize a good portion of the open area between buildings. It was also installed in such a way that it looked like it was partially

sunken into the ground.

“You really went and made a damn pool... And what’s with the size?”

“I was told that bigger was better.”

And it wasn’t just large; it was deep. It looked like Liliana could stand in it without her head breaking the surface of the water.

“But... how did you make this?”

“It was an easy feat with magicka! We just borrowed some materials from the surrounding walls, drilled into the ground, and...”

“That’s all... kinda bad, isn’t it?”

“It is fine if nobody finds out. All is well. I did not take so much that the buildings will crumble. So to use an expression from your world, Suimei-dono, ‘No harm, no foul.’”

Really...?

While he was initially unsure, Suimei didn’t honestly care if no trouble came of it. That being said, there was one major problem.

“Even if you have a pool, there’s not much we can do with it if we don’t have swimsuits, you know?”

Surely they weren’t planning on going in naked. Suimei’s heart started to pound a little just imagining it, but that obviously wasn’t going to happen.

“Not a problem. While you were busy being a recluse, we all went out to buy some.”

“Huh?! They sell swimsuits in this world?!”

“Mhm. Apparently only in the Empire, though. But I guess that makes sense. This is the only real nation that uses baths, so it’s not that much of a jump to think they like swimming too. Check it out.”

Hatsumi pulled out a swimsuit. Compared to what he was used to seeing in his own world, the materials were low quality and it was somewhat nonsensical functionality-wise, but it was indeed a swimsuit.

“But what about me?”

Suimei hadn't gone shopping with them, so even if all the girls had swimsuits, he still didn't. Or so he was worried. Immediately following up on his question, Liliana opened up the bag she was holding and showed him its contents.

"We didn't know... what you would want... so we bought... several kinds."

"Aw, you didn't have to do that for me... Wait, you're this serious about it?!"

"Of course... we are."

Liliana proudly stuck out her chest. It was just like her to be exceptionally prepared.

"With this... everyone can go in... right?"

"Then let us get changed and do so forthwith!"

Hatsumi picked up her paper bag and followed Felmenia inside. Even she seemed to be in high spirits over this whole pool debacle. But once they were inside, Selphy turned to Suimei.

"Though this is a rare opportunity, I will refrain."

"Oh? You don't wanna go in, Selphy? How come?"

"As long as the kitty cats are here, I don't need anything else."

The half-elf's heart had been stolen by the clowder of cats. She wanted to spend time with them even more than she wanted to get in the pool. And it seemed the attraction was mutual, for the mewling felines were all gathered around her. It had been this way since she'd arrived. Thanks to her magical specialty, the air around her was always nice and cool, so the cats clustered around her to escape the sweltering heat. It was a win-win relationship. And Suimei was usually the one to provide for the cats, so he certainly didn't mind someone else minding them for a time.

Hearing that Selphy was perfectly content with the cats, Liliana nodded her head repeatedly. As fellow cat lovers, they understood each other well.

"Come now, everyone! Let us get ready!"

As Felmenia summoned the others, the Yakagi residence in the imperial capital became a glorified dressing room.



Everyone seemed fairly excited about the pool and got changed in a flash before lining up left to right in front of Felmenia's manmade oasis.

First up was Felmenia, who was wearing a bikini that left her midriff exposed. It did an incredible job of emphasizing her already incredible proportions.

Lefille was also wearing a two-piece swimsuit, but a much sportier type, as denizens of the modern world would call it. And perhaps because she was getting into the water, she'd let down her usual ponytail.

Hatsumi, meanwhile, looked like she was ready to enjoy a weekend at a private beach in a tropical country. She was wearing a skirted swimsuit and even had a decorative flower in her hair. The overall effect was rather elegant.

And then there was Liliana, who was wearing a cute swimsuit with frills. He didn't know where she'd found it, but she also had on something like a bathing cap. She had even let down her hair, which was quite rare for her. But what really stood out the most was the leather innertube squeezing around her waist.

"Liliana, that..."

Suimei, wearing trunks with a strange pattern on them, pointed to her float, and Liliana averted her eyes.

"I'm, um... Swimming... isn't really my specialty, so..."

"So you can't swim?"

"I-I only said... that it was not my specialty!"

"If it's just 'not your specialty,' then you don't need the float, right? You do know how to swim, right? Right?"

"Th-This is just a necessary safety precaution... in the event of a dangerous situation! There is... absolutely no meaning beyond that!"

"Mmhmm..."

"It's true!"

Suimei looked like he didn't believe her at all, and Liliana turned bright red as

she puffed out her cheeks and desperately pleaded her case. Seeing this unfold from start to finish, Hatsumi couldn't stand it anymore. She had to say something.

"What are you picking on a kid for?"

"Huh? Uhhh, I just... You know?"

He was probably grinning too much, but he couldn't help it. It was too cute.

"...I shall remember this..."

That was when Suimei caught sight of the black aura flickering behind Liliana. It seemed she was far more bitter about her inability to swim than he'd realized. As her mana began to swell, he could feel a prickling sensation on his skin. It was psychic acid, the signature proof Liliana's mana was filling the air. Just that one little joke had set her on the warpath. Seeing that, Hatsumi whispered to Suimei.

"So, uh, Suimei... At this rate, aren't you going to end up cursed by Liliana-chan?"

"That's seriously not funny..."

"Yeah, I wasn't kidding."

When he glanced back over at Liliana, the very air around her had turned as dark as night. It was the raw embodiment of her grudge. Both Suimei and Hatsumi were trembling before the little girl's mighty rage when Felmenia cast them a lifeline.

"A-Anyway, everyone is ready now, so let us get in without further delay!"

Liliana was still brooding, but the pool was now open. The girls had all been looking forward to it, and each got in the water however they pleased. Felmenia used magicka to leap in, while Lefille and Hatsumi sat on the edge of the tub and slowly lowered themselves in. As for Liliana, perhaps because she knew the pool was quite deep for her, she only timidly climbed in after making sure that her float was secure.

"Ahhh... It feels nice to get in the water in the summertime!"

"You're so right. This kind of bath really is nice once in a while. It's all thanks

to you, Lady Felmenia.”

“Man, I never thought I’d end up wearing a swimsuit and getting into a pool in another world...”

“As I thought, m-my feet... can’t reach...”

As each of the girls gave their impressions, they began to move around and get used to the water. Once they were all in, Suimei stuck his toe in.

“Oh, it’s surprisingly cool...”

Because of the heat, Suimei had assumed the water would be on the warm side. But to his surprise, it was pleasantly cold and refreshing. Upon closer inspection, he spotted a magicka circle drawn at the bottom of the pool, and realized that it was responsible for maintaining the water temperature.

Moreover, he could tell that the water in the tank wasn’t rainwater, but fresh water created with magicka. Because of that, unlike a regular pool, there was no need to add chemical agents like chlorine. The crystal clear water was already perfectly free of impurities, and the surface of it sparkled brilliantly in the afternoon sun.

All in all, the pool turned out to be much more pleasing than Suimei had thought it would be. Admiring Felmenia’s meticulousness as she had been prudent down to the finest details, Suimei took up a position at the edge of the pool and began to use magicka to create himself a seat. While he was working on that, the girls were enjoying swimming around or just floating on the water.

“How is it, everyone? Do you like the pool I made?”

“Aah, this really has to be the best way to beat the summer heat. Honestly, it was really starting to get to me. Thank you, Lady Felmenia.”

“I was wondering about that. Is this weather tough on you, Lefille?”

“I was born and raised in Noshias, after all. I’m not used to the heat.”

“Heehee... So it was the right choice to make the pool. Let us make one every year.”

While Felmenia was resolving to make the pool a summer tradition, Hatsumi turned to Suimei.

“So you can even make this kind of thing with magicka, huh? How convenient. Hey, Suimei, when we go back, why don’t you make one in the garden for me?”

“I’m a magician, not a damn contractor.”

“I know! How about Yakagi Public Works? Oh, or Yakagi Construction? If the family business doesn’t work out, it’s always good to have a backup plan, you know.”

“Family business? Just what do you take a venerable line of magicians for...?”

Suimei was having his back-and-forth with Hatsumi, but unlike the girls, he wasn’t swimming. For him, just the fact that the pool existed was heaven... But a heaven he wasn’t fully prepared for.

“Somehow, I feel out of place...”

Perhaps it was because he was the only guy present, or perhaps it was just because he wasn’t experienced in this kind of situation with girls. But in spite of that, he wasn’t going anywhere. He was perfectly happy where he was.

All of the girls present were bona fide beauties. Moreover, they were playing and splashing about in the water... All sorts of things were on display, particularly when they bent over. The view was incomparable. And it was all his. If he couldn’t take it and walked away, he was pretty sure a portal would open up and every other guy his age would show up to kill him in a jealous rage.

As Suimei was taking in the sights, the girls who had all been enjoying themselves while swimming around were now starting to get excited about something else. For some reason, Felmenia had taken up an imposing stance at the edge of the water tank. She thrust a finger out at Lefille, who was rising out of the water’s surface.

“Lefille, I challenge you to a duel!”

“Hmph, a duel with me?”

“That’s right! Here in this very pool! A match without sword or sorcery!”

Hearing that declaration, Lefille replied with a fearless smile.

“Interesting... Very well.”

The two girls then put some distance between them. Felmenia jumped into the pool from the edge and moved away, while Lefille waded through the water towards Suimei at the opposite end of the pool. When she got closer, he called out to her in a listless tone.

“You gonna be okay?”

“There was no way I could refuse such a challenge. Battle is the very livelihood of a swordswoman like me.”

“Livelihood, huh? More importantly, what are you guys even up to...?”

That was his primary question. He had no idea what kind of battle they could be having in a pool. He’d assumed it would be a swimming match at first, but since they’d moved away from each other, it didn’t look like they were going to race or anything.

“Now, as for the rules, the winner shall be the last one standing with their upper half above the water’s surface!”

“Understood.”

“Wait, hang on, you two! Why does it have to be such a violent battle?!”

As the conversation rapidly advanced, Suimei didn’t hesitate to throw in a quip—especially not one he thought was reasonable. But when he did, Felmenia and Lefille both looked at him curiously.

“Suimei-dono, are not battles inherently violent?”

“Lady Felmenia is right. Just what are you saying, Suimei-kun? As a magician, you should understand that as well as anyone. Any true fight has a true victor—the last one left standing.”

“No, no, no! I don’t get it at all! Why are we even talking about fighting?! Just what are you two trying to start?!”

As the atmosphere in the pool grew tenser, Suimei began to panic a little. As for the two girls...

“This is a fight that I cannot lose.”

“That’s right. Our pride as women is at stake.”

“What even...?”

Suimei’s bewilderment and groaning fell on deaf ears, and he was oblivious as to what kind of pride could possibly be on the line concerning anything involving a pool. Meanwhile, the girls seemed to finish their preparations. And then it began...

“Here I go!”

With no warning, Felmenia started to amass mana. Ripples rose to the surface of the water, and within mere moments, they gave rise to a wave that caused the whole pool to undulate. Responding in kind, Lefille began to summon her own power.

“Oh spirits. Become my guardian...”

The Shrine Maiden called out to the spirits to bring forth her red wind. It swirled deep crimson around her and pushed the water away from her in ripples that mounted into a wave of their own. One that was headed for Felmenia’s side.

The two waves met in the center of the pool, crashing against one another in a glorious spray. The air was flooded with incredible tension. It was like a sudden storm was blowing through an otherwise sunny day.

It would be a real shame to let them continue like this. It would be a complete waste of the relaxing day they were finally having. As such thoughts stirred in Suimei’s mind, he shifted his attention to the remaining two girls who should be on his side about stopping such barbarism. However...

“Hey, Liliana-chan, who do you think will win?”

“Prior to today... I would have said Lefille... But based on what we were talking about earlier... with the mana furnace... Felmenia has also become quite strong... So I don’t know... who will be victorious...”

By the time Suimei turned to them for help, it was too late. They were already in spectator mode, analyzing the fight from a distance. It was clear they had no intention of interfering, meaning Suimei was on his own. He had one last potential ally, but she wouldn’t be any help right now. She’d practically been rendered putty by the cats. Moreover, being quite cunning, she’d already

moved to safety with her feline friends without Suimei even noticing.

And so the showdown between Felmenia and Lefille continued. Perhaps because Felmenia had begun gathering her mana first, she took the initiative. Pooling even more mana in her hand, she skillfully twisted the water around it.

“Here I go! Hyah!”

With a shout, she fired the water at Lefille on the other end of the pool. It was a small torrent that twisted into a vortex and stretched out like a snake as it sprung towards its target. But Lefille wouldn’t be defeated so easily. She quickly used the power of the spirits to defend herself, obstructing the incoming water with a wall of wind. However, the two forces began struggling for supremacy.

“That really is a mysterious power, isn’t it?”

Felmenia’s attack was magicka, so Suimei understood how it worked and what was going on behind the scenes. But Lefille’s was a different story. He had already established that the source of her power was the power of the spirits, but what she used that resembled magic didn’t even necessarily even use command words. She could use it for offense, defense, and even utility. Its unparalleled versatility in battle left Suimei wide-eyed. And that wasn’t even touching on how strong it could be. Even a magician like Suimei felt a power like that might be cheating, but...

“HAAAAAAAAA!”

“Urgh, that’s some serious pressure... So this is what you meant by increasing your output, is it?”

Even with the power of the spirits shielding Lefille, Felmenia’s spell seemed to be pushing her back. Felmenia’s skills were nothing to be sneezed at, and Lefille was feeling the brunt of that now. Just as she began to appreciate her companion’s true abilities, it seemed the water spell was dying down—and Lefille had endured it splendidly.

“As one would expect of Lefille. However, I still have more to go.”

“So the interval between spells is short...”

“That’s right! I have accomplished a so-called level up!”

“Even so, I won’t just stand down!”

When Lefille fired out that gallant declaration, Suimei had to wonder what she was planning to do. And while contemplating the possibilities, he suddenly found himself grabbed by the nape of the neck.

“Gueh!”

The next thing he knew, he was making a weird noise like a crushed frog. It was because Lefille had grabbed him by the neck and thrust him out towards Felmenia.

“Heh... It’s unfortunate for you, Lady Felmenia, but I have Suimei-kun over on my side.”

“Hey, who said I’m on your side?! Hey! You’re just using me as a shield!”

Suimei squirmed and struggled, but he couldn’t escape Lefille’s firm grasp. Whether it was through sheer strength alone or whether it was the power of the spirits aiding her that allowed her to wield it, Lefille’s weapon of choice was an unreasonably large sword. And keeping a good handle on one’s weapon was integral to swordsmanship, so Lefille’s grip strength was proportionally large.

“No, you’re not a shield. Absolutely not.”

“Then what the hell am I?! A hostage?! Am I a freaking hostage?!”

“You’re a reliable knight who protects me.”

“What kind of knight do you hold by the neck?!”

Before he was a knight or anything else, Suimei was a magician. But he wasn’t the only magician on the scene now.

“Grrr, to use Suimei-dono like that... What a cowardly act!”

Despite Felmenia’s complaint, Lefille’s move proved effective. Felmenia immediately went on the defensive, skillfully using magicka to create a foothold in the water and bracing herself. It was all she could do with Suimei in the way. With little other recourse, she switched up her tactics and tried going for a psychological attack.

“Lefille! Using such underhanded tactics... Do you not find that

embarrassing?”

“Sometimes you have to be underhanded in battle. You have to utilize every resource and every opportunity. Besides, Lady Felmenia, just as you used the pool’s water, all I did was use Suimei-kun.”

“Hey! You just said yourself that you’re using me! How does that make me a knight?! What kind of knight gets used like this?!”

Suimei was yelling, but Lefille wasn’t listening. She seemed to be completely ignoring him on purpose, and Suimei glared at her as she looked the other way and whistled.

“Ugh... My hands are tied...”

Felmenia began grumbling. Suimei was a little touched that she was having mercy on him, but her attacks weren’t the only thing he needed to worry about.

“Take that,” said a childish voice with little inflection.

And with that, a large wave of water came crashing down on them. The culprit was Liliana, still clinging on to her float. Being blindsided, Lefille and her shield—Suimei—were unable to defend themselves and took the attack full force.

“Pbbbt!”

“Buhaaaaa! M-My nose! Water went up my nose!”

Lefille was mostly unscathed because she was standing behind Suimei, who felt like he’d swallowed the whole wave. It really seemed like the attack had been aimed primarily at him.

“Beh! Bwugh! Pah! What the hell are you doing, Liliana?!”

Even with Suimei yelling at her, Liliana’s stoic attitude remained unchanged.

“Suimei... I told you before... that I would remember... what you said.”

“So this is payback?! That’s so mean!”

“Revenge is mine. Victory cannot be had... through mercy... or holding back.”

Liliana stuck her finger out pointedly and lectured him like a petty villain. As for Lefille who was also struck by her attack...

“Ugh, even using Suimei-kun as a shield didn’t help, huh?”

“Hey, I thought you said you *weren’t* using me as a shield! What gives?!”

“...Oops.”

Lefille had unintentionally let the truth slip, and went back to whistling again instead of answering Suimei. Hearing all this, a vein visibly popped out of Suimei’s forehead.

“Lefi, you damn...”

“N-Now it’s time for your payback, Lily! Taaake this!”

Ignoring the livid Suimei, Lefille began conjuring a sphere of water in her palm. It must have been something accomplished with the power of the spirits. Seeing it, Suimei’s face stiffened in surprise.

“Hey now, what’s with that skill...?”

“Teehee... Are you surprised, Suimei-kun? This is something I worked out just for a time like this.”

For a time like what, exactly?

Though Suimei was dying to get in a quip, Lefille took a stance like a water polo player brandishing a ball before the words ever left his mouth. The watery ball stayed with Lefille’s hand through some sort of unseen power. It looked like an orb of swirling plasma as she held it aloft. And then... it started to make crackling sounds highly uncharacteristic of water. The colorless and transparent ball then gradually turned red.

“Here I come, Lady Felmenia! Lily! Have a taste of Ishaktney’s Red Ball!”

“WAAAAAAAAAIT! You can’t hit them with that! They’ll—”

What Lefille was about to hurl at them was without a doubt a killing technique. The red hue consuming the watery ball was proof it contained the power of the spirits. And seeing that manifest before his very eyes, Suimei couldn’t help screaming. Felmenia, however, seemed to be more prepared.

“Lily! Defense!”

“Under... stood!”

Faced with Lefille's lethal attack, Felmenia and Liliana joined forces to create a defensive formation together. Just what had happened to having a fair match...?

Using magicka, they created a bulwark and awaited the incoming attack. And it wasn't long before Ishaktney's Red Ball, or whatever this alleged technique was called, collided with their combined magickal bulwark. As the powerful energies clashed with one another, they emitted such a bright light that it made the rest of the open space between buildings in front of the Yakagi residence look as dark as night. A hail of sparks rained down from the collision. It looked like there was a fire atop the water's surface. And as the two intense powers continued to vie for dominance, a shadow suddenly swooped in.

"Hyah!"

The shadow let out a sharp, spirited yell, and the red ball trying to penetrate the magickal bulwark was cut clean in two. Just what happened? As the column of water settled down and the steam from the used mana dispersed, the identity of the interloping shadow became clear. It was none other than Hatsumi, who was holding her hand out in front of her like a blade.

"Do you all plan on just ignoring me while you all play? You can't just do that, right?"

"Hmph! So even Lady Hatsumi is joining the war... Three against two is cowardly!"

"Hey, no! Don't just casually count me as part of this!"

As Suimei shouted, Lefille frowned.

"But Suimei-kun... Without you, I'd be all alone..."

"There are only two sides here! People who care, and people who don't want to be involved!"

Suimei unrelentingly continued to shout at the pouting Lefille. They were supposed to be relaxing in the pool, yet their peaceful afternoon had somehow devolved into all-out war. Frankly speaking, he wanted nothing to do with it. Lefille suddenly seemed to think of something, however, and leaned in closer towards Suimei.

“Wh-What?” he asked nervously.

“...Then how about this?”

“Urk!”

Lefille let go of Suimei’s neck and wrapped both of her arms around him, embracing him from behind. Feeling her softness pressing against his back, Suimei unintentionally made a rather strange sound. As for Felmenia and Hatsumi who were watching this happen...

“AAH!”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What are you doing, Lefille?!”

Looking like they were in complete disbelief, both girls yelled out. Paying them no mind, Lefille brought her lips closer to Suimei’s ear, and despite being a good spirit, she whispered to him like an evil one.

“So, how about it, Suimei-kun? You *are* on my side, aren’t you? Won’t you help me?”

“Uh, no... I mean, yes... Just a bit... Yeah, I’m starting to think I could try for a little bit... Yeah...”

“Mm, that’s a good Suimei-kun. You should have just said so from the beginning.”

Before the devil’s temptation, Suimei capitulated without resistance. Satisfied, Lefille finally let go of him.

“How dastardly... Unscrupulous! That is thoroughly despicable behavior from the Shrine Maiden of Alshuna who carries the power of the spirits!”

“Lefille-san! Th-Th-That’s against the rules! H-Hugging him is...”

Felmenia and Hatsumi were trembling with a mixture of anger and other feelings, both of their faces turning bright red. But in response, Lefille simply shrugged like the outcome was unavoidable.

“I simply cannot afford to lose here, and I will do everything in my power to avoid it.”

“Ugh! I’ll still win!”

“But I know you won’t raise a hand against Suimei-kun, Lady Felmenia.”

“That’s why I won’t be the one facing him!”

Bobbing up and down in the innertube beside Felmenia as she made that bold declaration, Liliana moved forward and raised her hand.

“Suimei, prepare yourself...! Behold the resentment... I feel for being teased!”

“Didn’t you pay me back for that already?! I can still feel the water in my sinus cavity!”

“One strike... was hardly enough! It’s only polite... to pay people back threefold! I will personally teach you... the fear of drowning!”

“That’s some messed up resentment!”

Realizing that Liliana was out for revenge, Hatsumi moved to her side.

“Count me in!”

“H-H-Hatsumi?! Wait, you too?!”

“Isn’t it better this way? This will help even things out if you’re on Lefille-san’s side. After all, it was supposed to be a fair match.”

“But their stupid match has nothing to do with us!”

“What fun would it be to just sit it out?”

“You can swim, yeah?! We’re in a freaking pool!”

“But, you know... I gotta say I’m still a little unhappy over you keeping secrets from me...”

“A little, my ass! Fuck me... Aah, Reiji, you really are a good guy after all...”

Reflecting on how kind Reiji had been to him after coming clean, Suimei shed a single tear. But it wouldn’t save him from Hatsumi’s attack.

“Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani! Visions of Rust!”

As Hatsumi swung her hand held out like blade towards Suimei, the illusion of an invisible slash appeared hidden behind a spray of water. It was the phantom created by her technique: an ethereal blade that bewildered her opponent’s senses. It was the same technique she’d used to disorient Lefille in their

sparring match earlier.

“Shit...”

Suimei’s eye caught a glimpse of a flicker between the countless droplets of water. It looked like the sun reflecting off a blade, but it wasn’t real. It was simply the illusion of Hatsumi’s phantom blade. Yet even knowing it was an illusion, Suimei’s senses told him he was in danger. This was the Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani, after all—a hidden technique of one of Japan’s strongest sword styles. He reflexively dodged, giving the strike a wide berth. He then heard a sudden loud noise behind him. Turning to see what it was, he saw the aftermath of the strike colliding with the edge of the water tank.

“Eep!”

“What’s with that pathetic yelp? That wasn’t some amazing skill you should be scared of, you know.”

“You... Wasn’t that supposed to be a damn illusion?! More importantly, if that had actually hit me, I’d be dead right now! Don’t do incomprehensible bullshit using your hand like a sword like that!”

“You have no room to talk. You’re the last person I want to hear that from. Seriously.”

Hatsumi cut another slice of the water with her hand and sent it flying at Suimei. She wasn’t using her special technique this time, but it was still fast and sharp. It was also enough water that it would be a considerable blow just from the impact.

“Why is everyone using crap like special techniques and magicka anyway?!”

“Isn’t that because they’re more powerful?”

“That’s not what I mean!”

“No? Then what’s the problem?”

“We’re here to relax, aren’t— Huh?!”

In the middle of shouting at Hatsumi, Suimei suddenly sensed mana near his feet. Looking down, he realized that Liliana had used her signature stealth to conceal her presence and sneak up on him. She then grabbed both his feet.

“Bububugu, buubu.”

[Negative Touch.]

As Liliana was submerged, her words rose to the surface of the water in bubbles. Her keywords, to be specific.

According to the rules of magicka, a spell would never trigger unless the proper procedures were followed. That ordinarily included activating the relevant keyword or words, which meant that a magician needed to be able to speak freely in order to cast spells. Liliana couldn't exactly speak underwater, so it seemed she'd thought this out ahead of time and made the appropriate adjustments to the spell she was using.

And that spell was Negative Touch. She'd bestowed it on his legs when she grabbed his feet, and it suddenly robbed him of the strength to stand. Unable to keep himself upright, he sank into the water.

“Uguoooo... Liliabufuubububu, uppu!”

“Negligence... is a powerful enemy... Suimei.”

Resurfacing, Liliana used magicka to pull her float to her and clung to it as she admonished Suimei. She then turned an unbelievably charming smile on him and playfully tilted her head to the side.

“What's wrong... Suimei? Could it be... that you can't swim?”

Grinning broadly, she ostentatiously made a display of her float. It was like she'd planned this all out from start to finish. It was undoubtedly her vengeance for him teasing her over not being able to swim.

Suimei was rapidly taking in water through his nose as he sank, but calmly used his own magicka to undo the effects of Liliana's Negative Touch. He got back on his feet and began coughing up all the water in his lungs.

“Blurgh... Ack, hack! Liliana... I gotta say... You have a terrible personality...”

“Thank you.”

“I'm not praising you, damn it!”

Liliana gave Suimei a thumbs up with her usual stoic expression as he shouted

out at her. Selphy's ears perked up as their little exchange carried on, though it seemed their use of magicka had gotten her attention just as much as their shouting had.

"It sounds like they're all having fun, huh? Th-Though it seems like we shouldn't get any closer... It looks dangerous, after all."

While playing with the cats, Selphy had taken to talking to them. Though, even as outdoor strays, they didn't like getting wet and were keeping their distance from the pool without being told. Things were indeed lively over there. Even with things quieting down between Hatsumi, Liliana, and Suimei, there was another battle going on that was just really starting to heat up.

"You're quite good, Lady Felmenia! Is this also because of the addition of your mana furnace?!"

"Indeed! Up until now I have been falling behind in output, but no longer!"

"Fascinating!"

"How did this turn out like some kind of battle manga?!"

As Felmenia and Lefille both rose to each other's challenges, their fight shifted into the next gear. And during that battle for supremacy, Lefille suddenly took a stance that was noticeably different from what she'd been using.

"If there isn't an obvious victor after we compare our powers, then it's time for me to find another solution... You said the loser is the first one who cannot stand, right?"

With that, Lefille raised her right arm aloft and held her hand up to the sky. Red wind began coiling around it. Just as everyone watching was thinking, "She wouldn't..."

She did.

Suddenly and without warning, Lefille swung her arm downward and unleashed the gathered red wind.

"Eat this!"

"Wha—?! Whoa!"

Lefille's red wind moved as fast as any squall. Before it, Felmenia looked like a sitting duck, but...

"H-Huh? I thought I got hit?"

The red wind should have smacked right into her, but she felt no impact. It left her rather confused. She was looking around in bewilderment as if trying to find an answer, but no one else knew what had happened either.

"Heh heh heh..."

Meanwhile, Lefille simply stood on the other side of the pool laughing creepily. Seeing this, Felmenia questioned her.

"Lefille, just what was that...?"

"Hmm, I wonder... Just what *was* it?"

"Please stop making that evil grin like Suimei-dono!"

"Hey now! Don't just go casually saying such rude things! Who's evil?!"

Suimei raised his voice in protest, but the girls continued to ignore him.

"Well, setting that aside, Lady Felmenia... You shouldn't move around so much, you know? It could be dangerous."

"H-Huh? Lefille, just what are you talking about— W-Wawawa!"

As Felmenia continued to question Lefille, there was a small swishing sound as her swimsuit top came undone. And then, with a boing—or at least with enough vigor that it felt like it should have been accompanied by such a sound effect—her bountiful breasts spilled out into the open.



“Pffft!”

With a front row seat for this unexpected turn of events, Suimei reflexively did a spit take. Meanwhile, having lost her upper layer of protection, Felmenia wrapped both her arms around her chest and slouched over slightly in an attempt to conceal herself. Naturally, she didn’t understand why her swimsuit had come undone.

“Th-This... Just what...?” she muttered in absolute befuddlement.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Lefille replied coyly.

Lefille was suggesting the answer should be self-evident, but Felmenia still didn’t understand. Lefille then cracked a rather unladylike smile, and Felmenia finally seemed to get the hint.

“Th-Then that red wind just now...?!”

“Exactly. Using the red wind, I severed only the delicate keystone of your swimsuit. Now, Lady Felmenia, you can no longer stand properly, can you?”

“L-Lefille, your behavior today has been one heinous act after another... I have doubts about your title as the Shrine Maiden!”

“It’s fine to cut loose a little when we’re relaxing, isn’t it? This is nothing, just some light teasing. Even Alshuna would smile upon it.”

Saying that in and of itself was rather inappropriate for a shrine maiden. Suimei always thought of them as women of great reverence and grace... neither of which Lefille was exhibiting right now. As he couldn’t help thinking so internally, Felmenia seemed to pick up on something else entirely.

“S-Suimei-dono?! What are you doing?! Please do not look this way!”

Suimei had been staring at them this whole time and was rightfully scolded with a scream. The far too insensible boy then, likely because of his inexperience, began to bashfully break down in a fluster.

“What? No, uh, I, uh...”

“Now, now, Suimei-kun... It’s not nice to ogle a lady like that,” Lefille said, eyes narrowed in his direction.

“Is that something the culprit should be saying?!” he argued.

However, the red-headed girl who was blind to her own shortcomings didn’t relent in her reproachful attitude at all. She simply let out an astonished sigh. Feeling backed into a corner, Suimei only grew more defensive. But protest as he might, it wouldn’t save him from the powerful wave that was about to hit him.

“Oof!”

It hit him with enough force to pitch him forward in the water. The surprise attack had come from behind, and when he turned to see who the attacker was, he found Hatsumi looking at him with an extremely severe expression.

“Suimei, you perv!”

It seemed she’d taken personal offense at Suimei staring at Felmenia’s bare skin. But since Suimei didn’t think he was really the one at fault, he began making excuses.

“I-It was just by chance! Just by chance, I caught a glimpse! By accident!”

“Don’t lie! You were totally gawking! Idiot!”

“B-B-B-B-But that’s because— Bwuh?! Wh-What now?!”

As he deteriorated into a complete tizzy, Suimei took another surprise attack. This time it came from the side, and when he turned to look...

“That one... was from me.”

“You’ve just been doing whatever the hell you want all afternoon...”

“Hmph. It turns out... that teasing you... can be fun. I now understand... why Lefille wants... to do it all the time.”

“Right?”

Coming to some sort of understanding, the two girls gave each other thumbs up. And while a teasing alliance was being formed against him, the abused Suimei...

“God damn it... You guys really need to cut it out...”

Between having his nice, refreshing afternoon interrupted by all this nonsense

and either Hatsumi or Liliana coming for him whenever he let his guard down, Suimei's patience was beginning to reach its limits. Seeing that he was suddenly accumulating sinister-looking mana, Hatsumi sensed impending danger and issued a word of warning.

"Liliana-chan! Suimei's started to snap! Look out! When he's like that, you don't know what he'll end up doing!"

"Right!"

"Don't talk about people like they're wild animals, damn it!"

But alas, yet again, the girls simply ignored Suimei. Just how many times did this make now? Before Suimei even had time to add it up, Hatsumi and Liliana initiated a combo attack together. They were moving around at an incredible rate despite being underwater.

"Scurrying around like pests...! Actually, how can you guys even move like that?! Ain't that weird?!"

"Before we made our move, Felmenia-san cast magicka on us."

"Felmenia made the pool... so with her on our side... we are perfectly prepared."

As one would expect of the meticulous Felmenia, she'd really thought of everything. She was so clumsy that she hurt herself sometimes, but despite that, she was extremely capable when it came to exercises of the mind. She was so scrupulous, in fact, that the image of her falling on her face at Castle Camellia seemed like a lie.

"Ugh, I'll really be in trouble at this rate... No, if I just steal away their freedom, there won't be a fight or any other bullshit!"

Two experienced combat specialists were coming at him underwater and trying to trip him up. Normally, a situation like that was justifiable cause for concern. Especially when one's opponents were attacking relentlessly like Liliana and Hatsumi were.

However, if they couldn't move, that would put a swift end to things no matter how tough they were. And when Suimei finally arrived at that simple

conclusion, he immediately took action.

“Oh moisture that fills to the brim far and wide. Thou art a snake given the role of rope—a rope that binds all free will. Conform all to thee and shackle them so.”

This last wave of relentless attacks had pushed Suimei over the edge, and he began seriously chanting a spell. As if floating in the water, a magicka circle expanded around him. All the water it touched rose up to the surface and began braiding itself into ropes. Seeing this, Hatsumi stopped moving and observed the strange phenomenon in bewilderment.

“Wait, what are those? Tendrils of water?”

“This... isn’t good. Hero Hatsumi, quickly evade—”

“It’s too late! Eat this!”

The numerous sinewy ropes of water hanging the air suddenly dove under the water’s surface. They quickly went to work restricting Hatsumi and Liliana.

“Y-You’re kidding, right?! Is water hardening inside water?!”

“In that case... I’ll do something... with mana.”

“No, Lily! It’s useless!”

It was Felmenia that shouted a word of warning, but she was already too late. As if to reiterate this, Suimei explained...

“That’s right; you can’t cut it. Well, you can cut anything meant to be cut, but...”

“Lily, there is no point even if you cut the water!”

That was the real problem. Even if she could sever the ropes of water, they were in a pool full of water. That realization set in on Liliana as she cut through a few of the ropes to no avail. She and Hatsumi were then both seized by Suimei’s magicka without any chance for resistance.

The binding tendrils took hold of the two girls and lifted them up out of the water. The mastermind behind all this, Suimei, seemed to be content with his handiwork. In all seriousness, he’d used a needlessly intricate spell for the

situation, but he was still pleased that everything was going according to plan. So pleased, in fact, that he began to laugh loudly like some villain.

“HAHAHA! How’s that?! You can’t move anymore, now can you?! With this, do you feel like calming down a—”

“You pervert! What kind of magicka are you using?!”

“Suimei, you’re... the worst. I’ve been... disillusioned.”

“Huh?”

Suimei was confused as to how this had suddenly gotten turned around on him. He thought it was a rather impeccable strategy, but it was just like him not to have considered that he was ultimately tying the girls up. Not that that seemed to be their main complaint...

“If you’re going to tie us up, at least do it normally! Th-The tendrils... are going weird places...”

Hatsumi was turning bright red, and Liliana was just silently trembling. After stopping to pay attention to what he’d really done for a moment, Suimei saw that the rope hadn’t just wrapped around them normally... In order to make sure the girls were fully restricted, it had wormed its way everywhere it could—in their cleavage, between their legs, under their armpits, around their waists. Upon finally realizing that, Suimei immediately dismissed his spell and tried to make excuses.

“N-No, I didn’t particularly do it with that intention, really...”

“What do you mean by ‘that’ intention?”

“After looking at Felmenia-san’s breasts, I don’t want to hear it from you, perv!”

“That’s not related, is it?!”

“Are you denying it?! Last time you also leered at me while I was naked too, didn’t you?!”

There, Hatsumi dropped a bomb. The instant she frankly admitted to it, the air around the pool suddenly turned cold.

“Suimei... Like I thought, you’re... just the worst.”

“Gwah!”

And there came the strongest blow yet—the judgment of an innocent little girl. Her words felt like a sharp knife in Suimei’s heart, but he was in for a lot more than just that. The cold atmosphere radiated out from where Suimei, Hatsumi, and Liliana were standing... right over to Felmenia and Lefille.

“Lady Felmenia, let’s call a temporary truce. We need to work together to punish Suimei-kun instead.”

“Understood. Suimei-dono, I misjudged you just a little!”

Tacking on the naive “just a little” part was just like Felmenia, but nevertheless, she joined the other girls as they all assumed attack stances. Felmenia was gathering her mana, Lefille was conjuring the power of the spirits, Hatsumi was unfurling her fighting spirit, and both of Liliana’s hands were aglow with the dark energy of Negative Touch. Feeling the pressure from all directions, Suimei panicked and began stepping back.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry! NOOOOOOOO!”

In the end, the one-on-one showdown between Felmenia and Lefille became a four-on-one brawl. You could say Suimei’s peaceful, relaxing afternoon was dead in the water.



“How did it end up like this...?”

After being worn to tatters by the four girls, Suimei was slung over a poolside chair like a piece of laundry left out to dry. When he eventually came to, the day was already over. He recalled having fun at some point, but that was long over and done with by the time he was conscious again. He was supposed to be relaxing, but now he was just spent and exhausted.

Taking a look around, he saw that the girls had changed from their swimsuits back into their regular clothes, and were currently warming themselves by the fire as they waited for their hair to dry. He was happy they were all getting along well and giggling together, but the way they’d abandoned him and left

him for dead felt cruel. However, he knew damn good and well that saying so would only earn him a punishment several times worse than what he'd just been through. So he decided to be smart and keep his mouth shut as he got up.

“Ah, Suimei-dono! You're awake now?”

“You guys... No matter how you look at it, that was just mean...”

In the end, Suimei couldn't help it. He had to say *something*, so he watered it down as much as possible. Seemingly aware they'd gone overboard, Hatsumi replied in a somewhat awkward tone.

“W-Well, I do think that we went a bit too far, but fundamentally, you deserved it.”

“But it was all accidents and happenstance! I'm innocent! Besides, all of this only happened because you guys had to have some match...”

And there it went. He'd tried to hold back, but the floodgates of his griping burst. And, as expected, his complaining was met with harsh words in return.

“Suimei, you're damaging... your manly image.”

“That's right, Suimei-kun. A man should be magnanimous about everything.”

“Uuugh...”

He knew exactly what he'd walked into, so all Suimei could do was groan while he listened to their criticisms—still standing there in his trunks, mind you. But fortunately for him, the tongue-lashing wasn't as bad as he thought it would be. Lefille and the other girls weren't that mad anymore, so they soon switched from scolding him to smiling and patting him on the head.

“Please stop patting and stroking my head.”

“Don't pout. I was also concerned that I went a little overboard.”

“After going completely wild like that?”

“At the time, I was kind of... in a trance.”

“A trance, huh?”

That was just proof of how much fun she'd been having, and ultimately it was a good thing she'd been able to cut loose and blow off so much stress. Knowing

that, Suimei bit his lip and didn't say anything else. Liliana, meanwhile, poked him in the ribs.

"I won't... forgive you though."

"That bad, huh?"

"That's right. The next time... we get in the pool... You're on," she declared, thrusting her finger out at him.

"Hey, don't point that at people."

He was joking around with her, but what she'd said made him think... If they'd be doing this again, maybe he should teach her how to swim. Flashing a slightly nihilistic smile, Liliana abruptly turned her head to the side. Seeing her like this with her hair down, she gave off a very different impression from normal. It was refreshing. Felmenia then clapped her hands together to get everyone's attention.

"Now that Suimei-dono has regained consciousness, it's about time that we clear away the pool."

"Yeah, let's. Suimei, you were last, so get changed already and get to it."

"Aren't I being treated too roughly here...?"

Hatsumi gave him zero concessions, and Suimei let out a disheartened sigh. It seemed like he was going to get the short end of the stick, but Felmenia quickly came over to help.

"Shall we extract the water?"

"How are you gonna do that? Dry it up with magicka?"

"No, no. We'll empty it out into the nearby drainage. With this and this here..."

As she explained, Felmenia used magicka to connect the bottom of the water tank with the alley storm drain. The water in the tank then began to swirl around as it slowly started draining away.

"After the water is emptied, all that's left is to smooth out the ground and return the materials to where they were before."

Surprisingly, Felmenia even had the cleanup plan in place. She must have thought this all out while she was building it.

“Menia, to orchestrate all of this... Didn’t it take quite a bit of effort?”

“Yes, well...”

She flashed a humble smile. With everything she’d done today, it wasn’t hard to imagine that coordinating it all had taken a considerable amount of forethought, planning, and work—not to mention mana, considering all the prototyping, testing, and trial-and-error she must have done in preparation for it.

“Thanks for all your hard work.”

“O-Of course!”

She seemed quite happy to have her efforts acknowledged, and brightened up immediately. Her footsteps even grew lighter. She was practically skipping as she made her way over to the edge of the pool. Her pool. It had been a smashing success, so she must have felt great about it. However...

“Hey, it’s still wet around there, so be—”

THUD!

“Uwah!”

Faster than Suimei could warn her, Felmenia slipped and fell face first. As expected, there was quite a bit of water in the area from all the splashing around they’d done. She wasn’t seriously hurt, but was rubbing her cheek with her hand. It seemed she’d scraped her face.

“Owowow...”

“...What are you faceplanting for? Here. I’ll lend you a hand.”

“Hnnngh... Thank you very much.”

After healing her bleeding cheek, the clumsy, teary-eyed magician grasped Suimei’s extended hand. Compared to when this had happened back at the royal castle, Felmenia had grown tremendously, but in the end, this part of her might never change. In a sense, it was kind of relieving. As Suimei helped

Felmenia up, Hatsumi called out to him as she watched.

“So it turns out you’re actually pretty nice when it comes to stuff like this, huh? If you were always like that, everyone would like you, you know?”

“Don’t say that like everyone hates me.”

“But you do have a lot of enemies, don’t you? Not being honest is a bad thing, you know. That’s why the other pupils feel the way they do about you, too.”

By “the other pupils,” Hatsumi was referring to the students at Kuchiba dojo. Suimei showed up from time to time, but it wasn’t like he was earnestly following the path of the sword. The other students could sense that in him. They thought less of him for it, even if he did have a good reason.

“There’s no helping me being shunned at the dojo. The instructor told me from the get-go that I shouldn’t get too absorbed in the sword in the first place because it would affect magicka.”

“But there are still ways to get along with everyone, aren’t there? I’m saying it’s not good to act like you don’t care. You don’t get that, do you? Jeez...”

While playing with her long, golden hair, Hatsumi let out an exasperated sigh. Suimei replied with a shrug.

“It’s fine. Getting along too well with normal people isn’t something magicians should be doing anyway.”

“Then what about Shana-san and the others?”

Having that shoved in his face left Suimei at a momentary loss for words. He managed to eke out a few, but they sounded like they were stuck in his throat.

“R-Reiji and the others are an exception.”

“Aah, there it is! Your tsundere side is coming out.”

“Shut it! Don’t say tsundere! I’m not one, damn it!”

Suimei vehemently denied Hatsumi’s accusation, but no one was on his side. It was a word Suimei’s party had heard before, so even Lefille and Liliana were stifling their laughter. As the pleasant atmosphere turned somewhat awkward for Suimei, Felmenia threw him a lifeline and timidly bowed her head.

“Sorry...”

“Well, I don’t mind. Look, you have water on your face.”

“Oh...”

As Suimei began wiping Felmenia’s face with a handkerchief, Lefille walked over to the two of them.

“Lady Felmenia, leave the remaining cleanup to Suimei-kun. Just grab on to my arm.”

“No, I can...”

“You’re tired, right? You made the pool and did quite a bit of clamoring about.”

Lefille too knew what kind of work she must have put into everything, and showed her consideration with an offer of support for the clumsy Felmenia.

“Then, if you don’t mind...”

Though reservedly, Felmenia took Lefille’s arm. They looked like a costumed knight and princess from an all-female acting troupe or something.

“So the rest of the cleanup falls on me, huh?”

“Duh. You’re the only one who can do it other than Felmenia-san, after all.”

“Listen, when you put it like that, I’m not so inclined to help anymore...”

When Suimei took a stance against Hatsumi, three pairs of eyes locked on to him.

“Mmhmm...”

“...”

“You...”

“...Sorry. I was just kidding. I’d love to help.”

It was Hatsumi, Liliana, and Lefille. Pressured by the three of them, Suimei immediately buckled and yielded. Feeling them stare holes into his back as he walked away, Suimei started dispiritedly tending to cleaning up the pool.

With evening approaching, Suimei squatted down in his trunks in the waning

sunlight. His shoulders were drooped and a gloomy air hung over him—he wasn't quite himself. But nevertheless, he began to drain the rest of the water from the water tank.

“Let's start with draining the water... This'll take a while since the hole is so tiny...”

Mumbling to himself, Suimei widened the hole in the water tank a little and used magicka to hasten the drainage in order to speed up the process. The remaining water in the tank began to swirl more noticeably, now draining several times faster than before. With that, it should be completely empty soon. The water was being drained nice and evenly, sucked up through the connection to the storm drain.

Hmm? Sucked up...? Why do I feel like I was thinking about something similar recently?

Those two words—“sucked up”—seemed to tickle something in the back of his mind. It reminded him of something. And it was something recent... But what was it? Was it just déjà vu? No, it was much more than that, and it suddenly dawned on him, hitting him like a revelation.

“Aha!”

Suimei unwittingly exclaimed at his realization. It was the obligatory gasp that came with any eureka moment. He finally had the missing piece of the puzzle.

“That's it! A whirlpool that can suck things up... In the shape of a mortar... No, a turning hourglass!”

As Suimei grew louder in talking to himself, Hatsumi turned a suspicious glance his way.

“Suimei? What's wrong?”

She seemed concerned, but as though he didn't have time to stand around and explain anything, Suimei sprang up from where he'd been squatting and darted off towards the house.

“Sorry! I'll clean up the pool tomorrow! Just leave it like that for today!”

“Huh? Wait, Suimei!”

“Also, I don’t need dinner tonight!”

Not a moment later, Suimei was already inside. He’d left the girls in the dust, and they stood there in confounded silence. Hatsumi was the first to break it as she cracked a wistful smile.

“Man... It’s been a while since I heard Suimei say he didn’t need dinner.”

Hearing the deep emotion in Hatsumi’s voice, Felmenia raised a curious eyebrow.

“Oh?”

“Yeah. When he says that, it means he’d going to shut himself up in his room all night. I see... Those are the nights he suddenly had some idea about magicka, huh?”

For ages, it had been a common occurrence for Suimei to impulsively sequester himself in his room. Sometimes for long enough that he’d take time off from school. But whenever Hatsumi had asked what he was so invested in, he was completely mum. She’d always been curious, but this finally explained everything. Felmenia, on the other hand, seemed to be fixating on something else entirely...

“Grrr... Hearing him tell you he doesn’t want dinner like that... It’s...”

“Well, it was always my mother’s cooking, not mine.”

“Regardless, it still means he totally thinks of you as family.”

The one to let out a sympathetic groan was Lefille. It seemed she felt the same impending sense of crisis Felmenia did. And confronted by both of them, something stirred in Hatsumi. But since she couldn’t bring herself to be totally up-front about her feelings, she grew flustered.

“H-Hang on a sec! Please don’t just let your imaginations run wild like that! I’m not particularly...!”

As Hatsumi continued to protest, Lefille looked at her through narrowed eyes.

“Then let me put it this way, Lady Hatsumi. You don’t enjoy seeing us getting along with Suimei-kun, do you?”

“Th-That’s, well... That’s true, but...”

Squirming anxiously, Hatsumi was reduced to a mumble. Seeing her so indecisive, Liliana let out a grand, near disappointed, sigh.

“Hero Hatsumi, is also... not honest... about her own feelings. It seems... she’s the same as Suimei.”

“Liliana-chan! Don’t lump me together with him!”

“That argumentative part... is also the same.”

As Hatsumi tried to sweep Liliana’s accusation under the rug, Lefille and Felmenia nodded in some sort of agreement.

“We must settle this matter.”

“So it seems.”

They continued to nod repeated in perfect sync. They were speaking to each other in stern voices as though something serious was afoot, but their expressions brightened up not an instant later.

“In any event, today was fun, wasn’t it?”

“It certainly was. It’s been a while since I’ve had a breather like this. Thank you, Felmenia-san.”

“Certainly. It seems to have helped Suimei-dono as well. Now all that’s left is to wait for Her Royal Highness and Reiji-dono.”

That evening, Suimei completed the magicka circle to return to his world... and proudly came down to the living room to announce it while still wearing his swim trunks.

Chapter 2: Onward, to the Hero's Rescue

Several days had passed since the pool escapade at the Yakagi residence and Suimei's completion of the magicka circle of returning. He was now en route to Kurant City—home of Duke Hadorious—ahead of Reiji, who was drafted into a triumphant return celebration with Prince Reanat in the imperial capital.

Originally, Suimei and Reiji's teams were planning on making the trip together, but since Reiji had been detained, Suimei was going ahead as a vanguard of sorts. The mastermind of this plan was none other than Astel's princess, Titania Root Astel. As Hadorious was a noble of Astel himself, Titania wanted to proceed as carefully as possible. They were potentially dealing with something very sinister. As such, she'd devised a diversionary tactic. She and her allies would split into two teams, one led by Suimei and one by Reiji, but not in the usual formation.

Titania was the hero of Astel's escort, meaning that wherever Reiji went, she was sure to follow. At least ordinarily. She was currently taking advantage of the fact that people would expect that, and had snuck away with Suimei's vanguard team. Felmenia had been left behind to take part in the celebratory parade in her stead as a body double to throw off any suspicions about the princess's movements.

As such, Felmenia, Lefille, Liliana, and Io Kuzami were currently with Reiji, while Titania and Hatsumi—who had also agreed to participate in Elliot's rescue—were with Suimei. Graziella had stayed behind in the capital to take care of the aftermath of the battle. And in order to avoid drawing attention by moving in too large of a group, Elliot's attendant Christa and Hatsumi's aid Selphy stayed behind to mind the Yakagi residence.

As for the first meeting between Hatsumi and Titania...

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Your Royal Highness Titania. Though a humble swordswoman like me deserves no such title, I am the hero of the Alliance, Kuchiba Hatsumi."

“Please, Hatsumi-sama, there is no need for you to bow your head to me. Please be at ease.”

“But...”

“It’s fine. A mere princess like me deserves no such formality from a hero of salvation. Besides, I have asked Reiji-sama and Mizuki to be casual with me as well, so I would love for you to do the same.”

“Then... Forgive me if I have trouble adjusting, but it really is nice to meet you.”

Once the introductions were over, their conversation took a turn from pleasantries to something more violent.

“I’ve heard that you’re quite skilled with a blade, Hatsumi-sama.”

“Whoever told you that is very kind.”

“You’re too modest. Along the way, if time permits, I would love to spar with you. Would that be alright?”

“It would be my pleasure. I’d love to see the skills of the fourth of the Seven Swords.”

They each had a great interest in the other as fellow swordswomen, and immediately hit it off. All was well between them, but...

Should cute girls really be getting excited about talking about such violent stuff with smiles on their faces?

The visual was wonderful, but the audio was questionable. Nevertheless, they all got along well on their trip. Now, fast forward a few days...

“Well, it’s about time we get to it, huh?”

It was currently late in the evening, and Suimei and Hatsumi were camped out in the forest that surrounded Kurant City. They were peeking out from the underbrush and observing the soldiers stationed along the city wall. Titania, meanwhile, made a dissatisfied expression as her face twitched.

“Why must I do something so dastardly like a petty thief?”

“About that... Wasn’t this your plan? Before we left, you said, ‘We shall have

Reiji-sama act as a distraction and secretly infiltrate that man's mansion. There, we will uncover proof of his nefarious deeds and bring him to justice! Just watch and see!' You sounded like you were totally on board then."

"But to infiltrate in such a sneaky way..."

"Isn't that the whole point of infiltrating? What did you have in mind? Surely you didn't want us to write a letter and let them know we were coming ahead of time, did you?"

"Certainly not! If we did that, the entire plan would be for naught! I was just expecting something more... tasteful."

As Titania yelled back at Suimei, he replied with an exasperated expression.

"You're surprisingly stubborn. Is that what it is? You put on that demure mask of yours just in front of Reiji?"

"Of course not... Before Reiji-sama, I am none other than myself."

Looking down and pulling up the oversized collar on her mantle, Titania half hid her face. This matter seemed far more upsetting to her than what she'd just been complaining about. Had she just gotten shy, or had Suimei hit the nail on the head? Considering she was born and raised as royalty, chances of the latter seemed much higher—or so Suimei thought.

"It's not really my business, but I gotta say... I don't believe you for a second."

"That's enough of your impudence. I'll execute you myself."

"Yeesh, women sure are scary."

Titania glared daggers at him as the moonlight reflected off of her drawn sword. Suimei grabbed his shoulders and shivered as he rolled his eyes. And while the two of them were having their little exchange, Hatsumi spoke up.



“So, what will we do? We can’t just stay here forever, right?”

“I agree. Suimei, you have some sort of plan, do you not? You must take charge from here and lead the way.”

“Yeah, I have something in mind. We’re going to sneak in from here.”

“From here?” Hatsumi muttered in disbelief as she looked up at the wall surrounding Kurant City.

They were currently positioned in the woods just north of the city. But between them and the wall, there was only an open field with no cover. Not a small one, either. There would be no way for them to make it across stealthily, even in the dead of night. The terrain was almost identical to the south as well, so switching positions wouldn’t even help them any. Moreover, there were guards stationed along the top of the wall. Security was pretty tight. Even if they tried to make a mad dash for it, there was no doubt they’d be spotted. That meant...

“Are you going to camouflage us with your magicka?”

“I could, but then there’d still be the issue of what we did once we got to the wall. Instead, let’s kill two birds with one stone.”

“And how would you suggest we do that?”

“Somehow, I have a really bad feeling about this...”

As a grim expression rose up on Titania’s face, Suimei began chanting.

“Leave this to me. You guys ready? Gravitass residito, massa reducito. Via gravitass, fingito.”

[Abate gravity, reduce mass. Gravity road, take form.]

“Huh—?”

“Wha—?”

As soon as the last word of the incantation left Suimei’s lips, the three of them began expeditiously rising into the air. Almost like they’d gone through a warp, they were up in the clouds in nearly the blink of an eye.

“Wah, wawawah!”

“Wh-What— What is this?!”

Suimei was the only one who'd known what was going to happen, and Hatsumi and Titania's minds could hardly keep up. They'd never expected to suddenly be flying through the night sky, and fell this way and that, flipping over repeatedly after their equilibriums had been thrown completely out of whack.

“S-S-S-S-Suimei! Why?! And so suddenly?!”

“Don't flail around so much. I'm in control, and I'm not going to let you fall.”

“It's not about that! It's just... It's too high!”

Titania's arms and legs were going everywhere as she screamed and wailed. Seeing her panic so, Suimei felt like teasing her at least a little, but held back.

“Just hang in there.”

“Please don't ask the impossible of me! Aaaugh... The ground is steadily getting further away...”

“It's nothing to cry over, right? Like I said, I'm not going to let us fall.”

“I'm not crying! And that's not the problem!”

“She's right! That's enough! Just get us back down! And fast! You jerk! Meanie! Numbskull!”

“You too, Hatsumi...? Don't make a fuss. Here, I'll lend you my hand...”

“Huh? B-But...”

As Hatsumi started to tear into him, Suimei drew nearer to comfort her. When he took her hand, she immediately calmed down. It was something he used to do frequently for her when they were children. He hadn't expected it to work as well now, but Hatsumi went completely silent. Granted, Suimei was oblivious as to the actual reason for that.



“E-Even if you managed to skillfully coax Hatsumi-sama into this, don’t think that you can do same to me! Now take us down at once! Right this instant! I’m begging you! Please take us down!”

Scared out of her wits, Titania’s tone was all over the place. She went from giving orders to begging and back again. Complying with her requests/demands, Suimei activated the keyword to initiate their descent.

With his spell, Suimei could stealthily take them all the way to their destination if he wanted. But if Titania had already reached her limits, he had no choice but to cut their flight short. With a sigh, Suimei cast another spell to make sure no one heard Titania’s incessant squawking as they landed atop the city wall.

“Aaand... touchdown.”

“The ground... At long last, the precious ground...”

Mumbling in a trembling voice, the princess weakly sank to the stone floor. Had she really been that scared? As for Hatsumi, when Suimei let go of her hand...

“Ah...”

“Hmm? What’s wrong?”

“I-It’s nothing!”

There was a brief look of disappointment on her face that gave way to anger. And then, as if agreeing with her, Titania suddenly became enraged.

“Suimei! How dare you do something so stupid?! If you’re going to use such tactics, then at least inform us in advance!”

“But if I’d done that, you would have refused, right?”

“Of course I would have! Had I known of this scheme beforehand, I would’ve had absolutely no part of it!”

Titania’s wide eyes gleamed with fury, and she even went as far as putting her hands on the hilts of the two swords at her waist. Seeing her so worked up, Suimei’s impishness got the better of him.

“No, don’t tell me, princess... Did you pee yourself a little?”

“Line yourself up right here, right now, Suimei. I shall rid your body of your head forthwith.”

Titania was already sizing him up and taking aim when Hatsumi jumped in.

“W-Wait! Now’s not the time for that, right?! We landed somewhere we’ll be easy to spot, and if we make a fuss, they’ll find us right away!”

“Meh. Yeah, I guess so.”

Suimei sounded completely indifferent, but even now, patrolling guards with lanterns were approaching. Hatsumi and Titania went stiff from the tension, but Suimei immediately took action.

The guards who’d come to investigate the shadows they’d spotted up on the wall didn’t even have time to call out to them. Suimei sprang forward like he was floating in the air and landed right in front of the guards. Their shoulders slumped lackadaisically, and they then turned around and went right back to their patrol without a word.

“See?”

As if saying it was nothing special, Suimei shrugged his shoulders and returned to the girls without further ado.

“What was that? Magicka again?”

“Yup. That’s all I’m good for.”

“Manipulating people is really kinda... villain-esque.”

“Says you.”

Hatsumi eyed Suimei dubiously, but he brushed her off with a wave of his hand. Meanwhile, Titania kept her eyes locked on him like a predator and held her swords at the ready.

“That won’t be the only patrol, Suimei.”

“And I’ll handle the others the same way. It doesn’t take much effort, after all. If you want, should I just take a lap and clear them out now? We can take a leisurely stroll around Kurant City’s famous landmark—its beautiful city wall.”

“Why do you sound like some tour guide?”

“Unfortunately, there aren’t any stores for me to recommend along the way. But if you’re interested, we can stop at the guardhouse.”

“No way. I bet it reeks.”

Suimei wanted to retort about how someone who spent all day in a sweaty dojo had no right to say that, but more pressingly, he realized that Titania had gone quiet.

“What’s wrong, princess? I’d appreciate it if you lowered your swords already.”

“...It’s nothing.”

“That scary look on your face says otherwise.”

It was somewhat subtle, but Titania was making a grim expression like she was imagining something unpleasant. The first to put two and two together was Hatsumi.

“After what you did like it was nothing, of course she’d be wary around you, right?”

“Well, I guess so, yeah.”

They’d slipped through the city’s defenses with extraordinary ease. Because that was precisely what they’d come here to do, it didn’t bother Hatsumi or Suimei in the slightest. But as someone responsible for the safety of this country, Titania felt differently. It was only natural that she be on guard after seeing such a well-defended city breached like that.

“Are you not also surprised, Hatsumi-sama?”

“Not really. I saw him do the same thing back at the palace in Miazen. Besides, to me, he’s an ally.”

“That’s right. Even if you’re the one here to protect us, I won’t let any harm come to you either.”

“What are you saying with such a serious face?! You idiot!”

“Ow! What are you doing?!”

Suimei meant to be dead serious, but perhaps because the line he used was just a little too cheesy, Hatsumi turned bright red and repeatedly kicked him in the shin. On the other hand, Titania eyed him with a frank gaze.

“It didn’t look like you did anything all that impressive, however.”

“I didn’t have to, honestly. Compared to sneaking into a magician’s place, this is child’s play.”

Suimei shrugged his shoulders. Not only was he used to modern security systems, but he was also used to the magickal defenses that other magicians would use. Hopping the wall of a medieval city was a simply feat to him. There wasn’t even a single trap.

“...What? You still got something else to say?”

“No, I was just thinking it would’ve been no laughing matter to make an enemy of you. If we’d kicked you out of the royal castle, I see we would have been in for a world of hurt.”

“Lucky for you, only one guy ended up in a world of hurt... No, I guess there were two people that did, huh? Heh.”

“This may be amusing to you, but it was a quite a fuss in the castle. People—mostly the nobles, really—were worried that an incompetent companion like you would negatively affect the esteemed hero. Little did they know, however, that rather than incompetent, you were a dangerous liability...”

“You’d call me that to my face?”

Suimei narrowed his eyes at her, but Titania’s only reply was a nonchalant expression. Interrupting himself, however, Suimei suddenly clapped his hands together like he’d just remembered something.

“Ah, that’s right! There’s something else we need to take care of.”

“Oh? What something is that?”

“Something extremely important now that we’ve made it this far.”

Suimei began nodding repeatedly like he was convincing himself, and started walking away from the two girls. It looked like he was going back towards the patrolling guards. Watching him head off like he hadn’t a care in the world, the

girls whispered to each other.

“I wonder what this ‘something extremely important’ is. Could he be about to raise some kind of ruckus?”

“That would be a little... Suimei may be careless, but he should certainly know better than that. Despite how he seems, his plans are nothing to sneeze at.”

“But how can we know for certain? He has a tendency to say the most ridiculous things with a perfectly serious look on his face.”

“Yeah, he does, doesn’t he? You got me there.”

Hatsumi and Titania took advantage of the opportunity to talk about Suimei behind his back. They then watched as he walked right up to the guards he’d just encountered and struck up a conversation with them, his eyes shining crimson.

“Hey, sorry to bug you, but is there an inn you’d recommend around here?”

“You’re after an inn? If that’s the case, there’s a nice place on the main road aimed at the middle class. They’ve got a big sign up, so you can’t miss it. Breakfast is included in your stay, and it’s worth staying there for.”

“Thanks a bunch. Keep up the good work on patrol.”

After somewhat facetiously thanking the guard, Suimei briskly returned to the girls, who were both staring at him in puzzlement. It seemed they’d found his perfectly casual conversation with the guard confoundingly odd.

“...What’s up?”

“So, Suimei, that super important thing you were talking about...”

“Finding somewhere to sleep *is* super important, you know. Nobody wants to stay at a crappy inn.”

“No, well... That’s certainly true, but...”

It was a bit off point, but Hatsumi couldn’t argue with him. While she struggled for a quip, Titania spoke up with an exasperated expression on her face.

“Hatsumi-sama, resign yourself. There is no meaning in saying anything to this

man.”

“You’re totally right, Titania-san. You’re my only ally here.”

“You know, you two have been super mean to me for a while now.”

And thusly Suimei’s vanguard team successfully infiltrated Kurant City.



A few days after Suimei and his team departed for Kurant City, the victory parade and celebration in the imperial city came to an uneventful close.

Thanks to her magicka, Felmenia’s Titania disguise was perfect. No one even suspected her. Their biggest worry the entire time was keeping Io Kuzami in check. Other than that, everything had gone perfectly. The only complaints they had were about their sore cheeks and aching arms from all the smiling and waving. Lefille was still the right size, and Liliana had only gotten sleepy on the job a handful of times. They couldn’t have asked for more.

And now, with all of their business taken care of in the city, Reiji and company were in a carriage bound for Kurant City. Staring out the window, he recalled his conversation with Suimei at the military encampment.

“Magic... No, magicka, huh?”

After finding out he was a magician, Suimei had told Reiji lots of things. And even after having some time to think about them, he still found them strange. Just where in their peacefully civilized world of convenience and leisure did something chaotic like magicka fit in?

Reiji couldn’t figure it out, but that in and of itself proved how artful and resourceful the practitioners of the mysteries were in keeping them disguised—like hiding a candle in the bright neon lights of the city. They had the whole world fooled into thinking magic wasn’t real.

After everything Suimei had told him and everything he’d seen, Reiji still found it hard to believe himself. He nearly laughed the whole thing off, and that was when Suimei had said to him...

“The majority of the people in our world were raised by science, after all. But why do you think that is? In truth... In truth, it’s obvious which set of laws makes

more sense, right? At the end of the day, 'laws' are just things humans arbitrarily thought of and applied to phenomena—nothing more and nothing less. But when you do something ridiculous with magicka and it fails, you can trace that failure back to something unscientific. Yet when you strive for something scientifically and it fails, people just throw their hands up and call it a failure. They say something doesn't work or it's not possible or some such. And that's the difference—nothing's impossible with magicka. It's a matter of perspective. When people are raised by science and the laws of the physical, that's all they believe in. If science is all you understand, then that's all you can gauge the world with."

That was why, Suimei said, that Reiji thought the way he did. Children of science could discover magic for themselves, but if they could never change their perspective, they would never truly understand. Even Reiji, who could use magic himself, still bordered on disbelief. Being born and raised in a world of science had functionally predisposed him against it.

While watching the flowing scenery swim by, Reiji let his thoughts wander. They eventually returned and settled on his best friend. The very one who'd taught him all this.

"Um, is Suimei strong?"

When the question came to mind, Reiji turned to Lefille, who was sitting next to him. In response, she gently pushed up the brim of her large hat to show her face.

"Suimei-kun is indeed strong. I'm a swordswoman so I can't really go into too much detail about what makes him that way, but... If Suimei-kun is weak, then I don't think you could say anyone in this world is strong."

Hearing her answer, Reiji looked over to Felmenia and Liliana, who both nodded in agreement. Lastly, Reiji turned to the other person who was looking out the window nostalgically—Io Kuzami.

"Ah, yes, my rival is quite strong. What, can you not tell that for yourself?"

"No, see... Even after finding out he was a magician, he just seems the same as ever."

Suimei had confessed that he was a magician, but at the end of the day, Suimei was still Suimei to Reiji. He acted like everything was a pain, and was in general a flippant smart aleck—just like always. He'd explained all kinds of things to Reiji, but the thing Reiji was the haziest on was what that actually meant about Suimei.

"Heh, I see my fiancé's powers of observation still have a long way to go."

"Even if it's little by little, I feel like I'm getting stronger though."

"Is that not just because you're getting familiar with the Goddess's blessing?"

"I wondered about that... Is that all it is?"

Reiji was aware that he'd made progress, but he was also aware that he was gaining ground at an unnatural speed. It left him wondering sometimes if he himself was actually getting stronger at all, rather than just the power he was given increasing.

"Reiji... what does it feel like... to receive... the Goddess's blessing?"

At Liliana's sudden question, Reiji clenched and opened his hands like a baby would while replying.

"Honestly, I don't really know myself. It kind of feels like, without doing anything, I got stronger... Or something?"

"That's your imagination... Or... perhaps not?"

"Could it be the power of the Sacrament?"

"No, that's a different feeling. When I use the Sacrament, I feel like all my abilities have been enhanced. It feels like I could fight forever. Like I'm limitless. Like my mana and stamina would never run out."

That was how it felt, at least, but he knew all too well that the power he gained from the Sacrament was only temporary. It made the feeling of using it somewhat uncanny.

"Compared to before, I feel like you've gotten stronger too."

"Do you think so, Lady Felmenia?"

"I believe it is the result of the divine blessing bestowed upon the summoned

heroes. I have heard it gradually makes one stronger, so I believe that would be what Reiji-dono is feeling right now.”

“The Goddess’s blessing is really something, huh?”

“It’s... unfair.”

While Lefille and Liliana were both busy being envious, Felmenia raised her hand like she had a question.

“Um, Reiji-dono, there’s something I’m a little curious about...”

“Something you’re curious about?”

Felmenia exchanged a quick glance with Lefille, who nodded at her. It seemed they were on the same page about something.

“Um, I’ll cut straight to the point,” said Lefille. “Reiji-kun, we were wondering if you’re angry with Suimei-kun.”

“If I’m angry with Suimei?”

“Um, this is concerning Suimei-dono keeping the fact that he’s a magician secret from you. We were wondering if that might be bothering you.”

“Aah...”

It was there that the lightbulb came on. The girls were worried that this had affected his relationship with Suimei. He looked at them to answer, but his thoughts were called back to the modern world once more.

“Back home—in our world—I stuck my nose into dangerous stuff all the time. I did all kinds of crazy things. Whenever I see someone in trouble, I just can’t help myself. I have to do something. And because of that, I ended up dragging Suimei and Mizuki who were always with me into a lot of trouble... There were plenty of times I ended up saved by some weird phenomenon or unexplainable coincidence. And I’m only realizing now that it was Suimei saving me all that time.”

Waxing nostalgic, Reiji started to ramble a little bit, but his point was clear. When he thought back on it, there were lots of things he couldn’t explain—lots of things that he now knew had to be magicka. They’d been surrounded by hoodlums once who all collapsed to the ground for no reason. Whenever

yakuza shot at them, the bullets always missed. That one swindler just happened to turn himself in. The list went on and on.

“The fact that he kept it a secret for so long is kind of a bummer, but there are rules about these things in our world, apparently. I understand why he did it. Really, I know I should be thanking him for everything he’s done... After all we went through, I’m surprised he didn’t just up and abandon me.”

“But didn’t he basically do that at the royal castle?”

“Accepting a part in the war against the demons was something I did without consulting either him or Mizuki. He had every right to stay behind. Friends don’t let friends fight demon lords, am I right? He tried to stop me for my own good. And besides, it’s not like he wasn’t going to tell us when he found a way back to our world.”

“That’s rather extreme, though.”

“That may be, but...”

In short, Reiji had rushed into the subjugation. High on the idea that he was chosen, he mistakenly believed he could do anything. Suimei had called him out for it, but hadn’t stood in his way. And it went the other way, too. Suimei had things he wanted to do, and Reiji knew that he didn’t have any right to stop him.

“It’s not like Suimei wasn’t helping. He was just doing things his own way and at his own pace. And when we met again in the imperial capital, he welcomed us with open arms. So... isn’t that enough?”

“What a good friend...”

“He’s wasted... on Suimei.”

Lefille was smiling, but Liliana had no mercy. That in itself was a sign of just how much she’d come to open up. Suimei taught her not to hold back.

“But what about you, Lefille-san? I heard that you and Suimei fled Astel together, but...”

“No, that’s not quite right. We didn’t run away together; Suimei-kun saved me.”

After hearing Lefille's answer, Reiji casually turned his gaze over to Felmenia.

"My case is a little peculiar... I picked a fight with Suimei-dono and had the tables completely turned on me."

"Wh-What? You mean you fought against Suimei?!"

"Yes, back at Castle Camellia. Um, I found Suimei-dono's actions to be suspicious, so I followed him one night unaware that I was actually being lured in."

"Wh-When did that happen...?"

"One, maybe two weeks after you and your friends arrived, Reiji-dono. Is it that surprising?"

"Honestly, Sensei, you don't strike me as the type to pick a fight like that."

"At that time, I, um... It's rather embarrassing, but I was arrogant to a fault. I believe you may have seen it for yourself, Reiji-dono."

"Aah, now that you mention it..."

Reiji recalled a certain incident. When Felmenia was chosen to be the hero's magic instructor, she'd gotten rather high and mighty with a senior court mage. Her speech then was nowhere near as polite as it was now. Reiji personally hadn't thought much of it, but looking back on it, maybe it was a sign of something.

"Sebastian took advantage of that arrogance and led me to believe that Suimei-dono was a bad man. But after Suimei-dono defeated me, we worked together to defeat Sebastian."

Felmenia sounded rather embarrassed about the first half of that declaration, but rather proud of the second half. It seemed to trigger something in Lefille.

"I-I also defeated a demon general together with Suimei-kun!"

"B-But I was the first to team up with him!"

"Unlike you, Lady Felmenia, I never fought with him!"

"You're lying! I heard that you had a little spat!"

Witnessing their increasingly loud quarrel, Reiji suddenly began laughing.

Felmenia and Lefille both stopped bickering and tilted their heads quizzically to the side.

“I see Suimei is just as popular as ever.”

“What?”

“Pardon?”

Though they’d been shouting in each other’s faces a second ago, their attention completely shifted to Reiji. It only seemed to take a few moments for them to realize the meaning behind his words.

“Um, based on what you just said, Reiji-dono, it sounded like you meant to imply that Suimei-dono has women who are interested in him even in your world, but...”

“Just what does this mean, Reiji-kun?”

“It means what it sounds like. Even back home, Suimei had girls coming to see him all the time. His childhood friend... Actually, you already met Kuchiba-san, but there was also that foreign girl, that other foreign girl, and...”

Hearing this, Liliana’s lone sleepy-looking eye grew especially narrow at the shadiness of it all.

“Suimei... is a blockhead.”

“Good grief, I agree completely. That man needs to get stabbed by someone already. Hmph.”

Even Io Kuzami chimed in with some bitter words. She was particularly harsh, but even Reiji hesitated to defend Suimei under the circumstances. On the other hand, as for Lefille and Felmenia...

“Regarding this matter, I believe we should hear it from him in detail.”

“I agree. Let’s work together to corner him.”

Despite fighting just earlier, they were now clasping each other’s hands and agreeing to work together. With their alliance, Suimei probably wouldn’t stand a chance.

“Everyone... we’re almost... at Kurant City.”

Drawn by Liliana's announcement, Reiji looked out the window towards their destination. The gates of Kurant City and the line of people waiting to get in were coming into sight. They would be there any minute now.

"If I remember the plan right, we're going to enter just like this, right?"

"Yes. After getting through... we'll find an opportunity... to meet up with Suimei's group."

Shortly thereafter, the carriage made it to the gate, and because they'd made arrangements beforehand, they were immediately welcomed through. They were officially in the city to pay a visit, and with that excuse as cover, everything proceeded much more smoothly than they'd expected. Once on the other side of the gate, everyone disembarked. After spending so long in the cramped carriage, the wide open plaza and clear sky were especially refreshing.

"I wonder where Suimei is..."

Saying that, Reiji began glancing about. Lefille turned a wicked grin his way.

"Oh my. Is Reiji-kun not worried about Her Highness Titania at all?"

"Eh? N-No, I'm also worried about Tia!"

"Hmph, instead of you always worrying about that tomboy princess, I would rather like that you show some concern for me."

"No, um..."

Even Io Kuzami jumped on board with Lefille's teasing. And in order to keep this increasingly awkward topic from progressing any further, Reiji spoke out in a somewhat loud voice.

"Th-This also applies to Suimei's group, but is it really alright to come in contact with them like this?!"

"Don't worry. Both Lady Felmenia and I are here."

"Now, Reiji-dono, let us go."

Felmenia pointed towards an opening between buildings.

"That way is... An alley?"

"Reiji-kun, there will be no surveillance on the backstreets. To avoid being

seen, we should move quickly.”

“I see.”

Seemingly convinced, Reiji nodded and then led them all into the alley. They could already sense two presences following after them. It seemed their suspicions were right and Hadorious already had spies observing their every move. Liliana served as the group’s rearguard and cast a spell behind them once they were well into the alleyway. She was gone a while before coming back.

“With that... we’re good.”

“Did you do something?”

Liliana held up her index and middle fingers in the shape of a V with a self-satisfied look on her face. To save her the words, Felmenia answered Reiji’s question in her stead.

“Concealment magicka. Even if the observers find us now, they won’t pay us any mind. Suimei-dono said it would be like becoming mere pebbles on the side of the road, though I don’t particularly understand the analogy...”

“Aah...”

Hearing her explanation, Reiji recalled a secret item from a certain famous anime that made the wearer unnoticeable to others. Frankly, it was an outrageous stealth weapon, so being able to mimic that power gave Reiji a glimpse into just how ridiculous magicka really was.

“All that’s left is to find Suimei and the others then, huh? I wonder where they are.”

With that, Reiji turned to exit the alleyway and start looking when, all of a sudden...

“Meow.”

Liliana began imitating a cat. It was as though she was trying to call out for them like one would with birds, or perhaps she’d just broken down into a childish fit of animal noises. Reiji had no idea. And it didn’t stop.

“Meow, meow, meow.”

“U-Um, Liliana-chan?”

“Meeow.”

“What...?”

As Liliana continued meowing, Reiji couldn't hide his bewilderment. He knew she loved cats, but this was incredible. Was she just bored? Was it some kind of ritual? He gave up on trying to figure it out and turned to Lefille, who was standing next to him.

“Ummm, Lefille-san, what exactly...”

“Isn't it cute?”

In response to Reiji's unasked question, Lefille beckoned like she was calling over a cat. She was smiling warmly too, almost like she was watching a small child play. It was there that Io Kuzami joined in.

“Verily, it is quite cute. As expected of a disciple of mine. She possesses sufficient cuteness and adorability,” she said, nodding repeatedly like she was satisfied.

If that was all the two of them had to say about it, was Liliana really just playing? Up until now, she'd been acting in perfect accordance with their mission without missing a single step along the way. So not only did this meowing frenzy seem to be completely out of character, it left Reiji completely bewildered. As his expression twisted in puzzlement, Lefille cracked an impish smile.

“It's a joke, Reiji-kun. This was probably the plan they decided on beforehand.”

“This is...?”

Just what was she going to accomplish by meowing? Reiji still couldn't get his head around what was happening. But as he started to think about it, this did remind him of something—Suimei's house in the imperial capital was always surrounded by cats.

While that was going on, a single black cat appeared from deep within the back alleys. Liliana stopped meowing, and the black cat came closer to her. It

looked like it was lost as it stared into Liliana's eye. They locked gazes for a moment before they began meowing at each other.



A short while later, Liliana turned back towards the group.

“Looks like... it’s this way.”

“Meow.”

As if confirming what Liliana had said, the cat turned to look down the alley and gingerly raised a front paw. It looked like it was trying to point the way. Liliana happily followed after it, and Felmenia and Lefille after them. Hurrying after the girls in a fluster, Reiji called out to Liliana.

“You can talk to cats?”

“Rather than talk... it’s more like... sharing thoughts... with them. It’s all... about feeling.”

Io Kuzami rubbed her chin and interjected, “Rather than ‘feeling,’ shouldn’t you have said ‘feline’?”

“Is... Is that supposed to be funny?”

Io Kuzami looked triumphant, and Reiji exasperated. She laughed it off, but Reiji had to wonder. That kind of humor wasn’t Mizuki’s style, not even in chuuni mode. But he didn’t have long to think about it. The others continued on down the alley without him, and he hurried to catch up.

After following the cat a ways, the group eventually arrived at an inn on the main road. It had a rather large sign out front and appeared to be plenty busy. There was a good crowd of people coming and going. If someone stopped to ask a local for a recommendation, this was definitely the kind of place that would come up.

“Um, is this the place?”

“Looks like it.”

“To hide somewhere like this...”

Reiji couldn’t believe it. Some cheap hole in the wall was usually where people went to lie low. That was the standard gig in spy movies and novels, but instead of that, he was staring at a local hotspot. It was the most unhidden place he could think of for someone to try and hide.

“Perhaps that... was the entire point.”

“Because nobody would think we would be hiding here, or something like that?”

“Yes. Though... having said that... knowing Suimei... he’s probably not worried... about anything like that.”

Despite what it may have sounded like, Liliana’s words were in praise of his abilities. With his power to manipulate people via magicka, he didn’t much need to worry about who saw him and who didn’t. He was exactly the kind of guy you didn’t want as an enemy.

While Liliana was thanking and petting the cat, everyone else went inside to look for Suimei and the others. And the search didn’t take long. Rather than holed up in their room, they were seated at a table on the second floor that could be spotted from the entrance, enjoying some lovely afternoon refreshments.

“Yo.”

As they ascended the stairs and got closer, Suimei looked over and raised a hand in an extremely casual greeting. Reiji couldn’t tell whether they were just resting or discussing their plan, but one thing was clear. Suimei was sitting around drinking rose water with Titania and Hatsumi. It was about as conspicuous as it got.

“Well, you seem to be enjoying yourself,” Reiji couldn’t help saying with a bit of exasperation.

“You bet I am. There’s absolutely no reason why we can’t have a little fun while we’re hiding out. As long as our concealment is perfect, then it doesn’t matter what we do.”

“You call this concealment?”

“Strictly speaking, we’re blending in. But who cares if no one can tell who we are?”

There, Suimei drank down some of his rose water as if to refresh his mouth from the bitterness of his own cynicism. Following up after him, Hatsumi turned

a smile to Reiji.

“Good job. Looks like it went well on your side.”

“Mm. Thanks for babysitting Suimei, Kuchiba-san.”

“Hey, I’ve been taking things seriously this whole time, so why do you have to go and say that kinda crap?”

Seeing Hatsumi’s smile, Suimei shot a sour look at Reiji. Really and truly, he couldn’t take a joke. And as he was glowering, Titania spoke up in a harsh tone.

“It’s because of your habitual behavior, is it not? I’m afraid it’s too late to save face. That’s where your reputation stands—rock bottom.”

“Hey, are you still holding some damn grudge against me? No one cares that you peed yourself—”

“I did not! I won’t stand for such lies!”

Titania turned bright red as she shouted at Suimei, then turned to Reiji to reiterate that Suimei was making up stories about her, trying to make her look bad, et cetera. She was trying to safeguard her image, but Reiji honestly thought it was refreshing to see her so flustered.

Meanwhile, Hatsumi let out a sigh as she watched all this unfold. Titania eventually calmed down, and when she did, Reiji moved to asking her about the next steps of their plan.

“So, Tia, what do we do now?”

“I apologize for putting you to work after you’ve just arrived, but we take action tonight. Allow me to explain...”

Titania then gave everyone a rundown of the night’s mission.



A new moon rose quietly on the horizon the evening Reiji’s team arrived in town. That was why Suimei and Hatsumi had requested to bump the plan up a little and take action immediately. Reiji would go knock on Hadorious’s front door while Suimei and the others snuck inside.

In order to balance out the parties, Liliana joined Suimei’s team for a total of

four members, all of which were making their way to the back of the duke's mansion currently. During their earlier meeting, Hatsumi and Reiji had both raised doubts about using the back entrance because of the dense patrols there. But Suimei had insisted that the simpler the area, the easier it would be to cast magicka. And with no further objections, their route was decided.

The back of Hadorious's mansion had a hedge maze staffed by mercenaries who worked as his private guard, but they never saw Suimei's magicka coming. So far, the infiltration was going off without a hitch. Naturally, there were magical traps and barriers along the way to prevent trespassers, but...

"Too easy. Way too easy."

Suimei had no trouble making his way through them. But rather than destroying them, he decided to tamper with them as he came across them. The creepy laugh he let out while doing so made it clear it wasn't by necessity, either. It seemed he was just getting some petty revenge against the duke. Upon finally reaching the building, Suimei quietly broke a window and climbed in. Hatsumi, who followed afterward, looked at him skeptically.

"You kind of look like a burglar."

"Shouldn't you say secret agent? Why do you always pick some shady-ass comparison?"

"Well, you know..."

"Let me say it for Hatsumi-sama: it cannot be helped when your actions so resemble that of a scoundrel."

Titania shot a reproachful gaze Suimei's way as she indirectly scolded him. He scoffed. If they really thought this operation was so seedy, they didn't have to volunteer for the infiltration squad. Really, he knew that breaking and entering didn't suit a hero and a princess, so he understood why they were resistant to it, but still.

"Hey, Liliana, say something to these guys. They're making fun of your specialty, you know?"

"Liliana-chan is cute, so it's fine for her."

“Drop dead. That’s got absolutely nothing to do with it.”

As Hatsumi started to puff out her cheeks in a pout, the main topic of their conversation—Liliana—was carefully surveying their surroundings. She seemed to be concerned about something.

“What’s wrong, Liliana?”

“No... Let’s go.”

Liliana shook her head and began walking down the mansion hall. Suimei let it go since he was quite sure she would have mentioned it if it were something important. They continued to move through the first floor, mindful of their surroundings and wary of any guards.

“Actually, it’s a lot more modest than I thought.”

Taking stock of the mansion’s interior, Suimei shared his impression of it. He’d expected a duke’s estate to be over-the-top luxurious. Nobles were like that, after all—they were all about pompous, ostentatious displays of their authority and affluence. They were demonstrations of their superiority, as if to say, “Behold my wealth. This is what power looks like.” They were sort of like flaunting peacocks in that sense.

However, despite being a duke and a personal friend of the king, Hadorious’s estate wasn’t gaudy or flashy at all. At least not in decoration. The mansion itself was three stories, and the front door opened into a sweeping entrance hall. It was obvious just stepping inside that it was no normal house.

But one way or another, the inside of the mansion was neat and tidy, and the group continued to proceed down the immaculately maintained hallway. There were sconces dotting the white walls between the paintings, and the red carpet underfoot was plush. The dark, sectioned wooden doors lining the hall looked distinctly like chocolate bars, and there were even mana lamps set up here and there for additional lighting. The interior of the mansion may not have been pretentious, but it was still stately.

When they carefully opened one of the doors, a white table in the shape of a cross came into view. The room was otherwise full of chairs and sofas with soft-looking cushions. The effect was rather classy. Hadorious may have been a bad

man, but he at least didn't have bad tastes. They continued to check out one room after another in much the same fashion, but Hatsumi stopped in front of a particular door.

"Hatsumi, what's up?"

"This room..."

She was muttering like her attention had been captivated by something. She must have sensed something deeper in the mansion.

"Hatsumi-sama, is there something with this— Hmm?"

Seemingly noticing something as well, Titania's body stiffened for a single instant. In response, Hatsumi smiled.

"Sorry, I'm the one who noticed first, so I'll be taking this one."

Without another word, Hatsumi approached the door and opened it. Suimei and Titania both called out to her...

"Hey, Hatsumi!"

"Hatsumi-sama!"

"Go on without me. I'll take care of this myself."

But Hatsumi leaped through the door and was gone before they could stop her.

"What in the world?"

"It was only a slight presence, but one sharp like a sword."

"So what? The first one to sense it gets dibs or something?"

Titania had also sensed the fighting spirit of a swordsman in the depths of the mansion, and it certainly made sense to go after anyone who may have noticed them. Taking out witnesses was the most basic of stealth basics. So in that sense, Hatsumi had made the right move, but it was highly likely that her real reason for going was because her spirit as a swordswoman had been excited.



A little before Suimei's team infiltrated the mansion, Reiji, Felmenia, Lefille,

and Io Kuzami were at the front door, face to face with the owner—Lucas de Hadorious. It was crazy to show up at a nobleman's mansion at such an hour and demand an audience, but it was even crazier for Hadorious to accept and come out without a single escort.

Duke Hadorious was dressed like a proper noble, including a polished sword artfully hanging at his waist. He was an imposing man with greying hair, a well-groomed beard, and a large scar that ran from his brow to his cheek split his face diagonally. He was nearly two meters tall, and despite his relaxed posture, he had a daunting air about him.

Hadorious first addressed Felmenia in a somewhat critical and disappointed tone.

“To call for me at this hour without any notice. How inconsiderate of you, White Flame-dono.”

“My apologies, Your Grace. I humbly beg that you forgive us for the intrusion.”

Felmenia put her hand to her chest and bowed deeply, but Hadorious scoffed as if to say that didn't make him feel any better.

“Oh? That's hardly what it sounded like when you arrived on my porch demanding to see me. Is that really the way a young lady of House Stingray should be behaving?”

“But surely you must understand that the matter is urgent, Your Grace. That is why you accepted and came to speak with us despite the rudeness of our visit, is it not?”

“Hmph... Now, that is Hero Reiji with you, is it not?”

Changing subjects, the dissatisfaction that Hadorious had been exuding vanished and the daunting air about him lightened up. He and Felmenia had exchanged greetings in an awfully roundabout manner, but as if to say it was all standard and expected, he acted like it was nothing. It seemed that was simply the way nobles communicated. But after their test of formalities was over, Reiji stepped out in front of Hadorious.

“It has been a long time since we last spoke, Duke Hadorious.”

“Hero-dono. I am not unhappy to receive you, but just as I said before, an unexpected visit at this hour is most unorthodox.”

Hadorious couldn't openly complain about the hero visiting him, but both his words and tone of voice were pointed. Naturally, since Reiji was quite irritated himself, he was secretly pleased to be an inconvenience to the duke.

“Your Grace, there was something I must speak with you about no matter what. That is why we've come under such circumstances.”

“You wish to speak with me? My apologies, but despite all appearances, I'm a busy man. I'll have to ask that you keep it short. If it will take much longer than that, you'll have to come back another day.”

“No, by all means, I'd like to talk right here, right now.”

“Incidentally... where is Princess Titania?”

“Her Royal Highness is currently busy with another matter,” answered Felmenia. “But she is being escorted by a most trustworthy entourage, so you have no need to be concerned for her safety.”

“I see.”

Hadorious continued to eye Felmenia like he was watching for some kind of hint. The Felmenia he knew would let her secrets show on her face, but Felmenia as she was now was easily strong enough to maintain her composure even under such pressure.

“Your Grace, may I ask you something?” Reiji then asked.

“What is it, I wonder?”

“Elliot Austin. Do you know anything about his whereabouts, Your Grace?”

Hadorious's darkened for a moment before snapping back to normal.

“The hero of El Meide is having a sojourn in my mansion. We're doing everything we can to show him Astel's hospitality.”

He readily admitted that much, but that was no surprise. It didn't give away anything more than what Christa had been able to tell them.

“The magic priest that served as his attendant came to me looking for help.

She believes that you have him confined. I'm sure it's some kind of misunderstanding, but if you don't mind, I'd like to see him."

Reiji drew getting to the point out as long as possible. Primarily, this was all a ruse. They were trying to distract Hadorious while the infiltration team did the real work.

"I'm afraid I must decline."

"Why is that? If he's simply here on a sojourn, I do not believe he'll mind the visit. And if he's already retired for the night, then we can come back tomorrow, or even the day after—"

"My answer will not change, and I have no need to explain myself to you."

As the duke became obstinate, Felmenia raised the stakes.

"With all due respect, Your Grace, from what you are saying, it seems to me that you are admitting by your own will that you are unjustly confining Elliot-dono as his attendant fears."

"If so, what then?"

Hadorious was flaunting his authority, which left Felmenia at a loss for words. The situation was especially sticky for her, and she didn't know how to respond to a social superior pulling rank on her like that. In her stead, Reiji didn't hesitate to scowl at Hadorious.

"Then I will force my way in."

"By force, will you?"

Parroting Reiji, Hadorious snickered. Reiji had expected the duke to sneer at him for resorting to such savagery, but that unexpected response left him bewildered. And then, the clincher...

"So be it, Hero-dono. If that's what you desire, shall I be your opponent?"

"...Tch!"

As Hadorious unleashed his intense fighting spirit, Reiji reflexively leaped backward. Felmenia cut in front of him as if to protect him, and Lefille and Io Kuzami who had been hanging back came running over.

“Your Grace, do you truly intend to turn your sword on Reiji-dono?”

“Fret not, White Flame-dono. I merely intend to assess the hero’s power.”

“I do believe that not even Your Grace would escape criticism for this unprecedented rudeness. The hero is not a toy for you to test your strength against.”

“Are you saying that the hero is too weak to fight me, White Flame-dono?”

“Surely this cannot be allowed...”

Though Felmenia was stymied for a moment, she did not yield her position in front of Reiji. Seeing this, Hadorious smiled.

“As for you, White Flame-dono... Allow me to introduce you to your opponents.”

The duke snapped his fingers and an armed group of men suddenly appeared out of nowhere. They looked quite similar to the men he’d had with him in the woods before their brush with the demons not far from Kurent City months ago.

“You’d send your private soldiers to fight me, Your Grace? However...”

“Yes, I can see that you would be too much for them as you are now, White Flame-dono. But surely you don’t mean to say that you plan to fight against us seriously.”

“Ugh...”

As Reiji expected, challenging an influential noble was exceptionally difficult. Felmenia gritted her teeth at his latest roadblock. It was admirable that she’d stood up to him at all considering her position. It was a big deal for two nobles to openly declare hostilities against each other. There were plenty of examples of it happening all throughout history, even between nobles who served the same king and kingdom.

But there would be certain backlash if a fight actually broke out under such circumstances. They already knew that Elliot was being kept inside the duke’s mansion, but without evidence it was unlawful confinement, they couldn’t say definitively that Hadorious had committed any real wrongdoing. And if

Felmenia were to attack a duke without sufficient proof, never mind the headache it would cause her family, it could potentially be seen as treason. Not even Titania would be able to help her if it came to that. As Felmenia hesitated before the mercenary soldiers, someone firmly grasped her shoulder.

“Lady Felmenia, step back. I will take care of this. There’s no opponent I need to hold back against.”

“Lefille... I’m sorry.”

“You... You’re Alshuna’s Shrine Maiden of Spirits, are you not?”

“That’s right. And I am unbound by the decorum of your country. Moreover, I have a personal grudge against you.”

Felmenia stepped back as Lefille upbraided Hadorious, who looked at her curiously in return.

“I don’t recall doing anything to earn your enmity, young lady.”

“That time you set demons upon a certain trade corps? I just so happened to be there. I’ll have you know you put me through hell.”

“I see. Certainly, in that case, I can understand your dislike for me. However, as for your opponent...”

“What?”

A single shadow appeared from the formation of private soldiers. It was a young girl—a figure Felmenia and Lefille both recognized.

“That’s...”

“Thoria’s hero...”

She wore a white robe and held a sword ready in each hand. And she didn’t respond, no matter who called out to her. It was the same young girl they’d faced off against in the Alliance.

“As we suspected, Your Grace is connected to the Universal Apostles...”

“Oh? I don’t know where you heard it, but if you know that name, I suppose that means you know her already... But yes, you’re exactly right. I am one among those who have sided with the Universal Apostles. Among their

company, I am known as Crimson Pain.”

As Hadorious plainly confessed his involvement, Reiji and the others were unable to disguise the tension they felt.

“Now, I do believe it’s time for you to face me, Hero-dono.”

Hadorious made that declaration like he was issuing a challenge, and suddenly, Io Kuzami stepped forward next to Reiji.

“Shall I lend you a hand, fiancé of mine?”

“No, I will take care of him myself.”

“You’re certain?”

“Mm.”

As Reiji drew his orichalcum blade and took a stance, Hadorious flashed a delighted and fearless smile.

“So it’s come to this... I’m pleased that you have the backbone to accept a challenge on your own, Hero-dono.”

And with that, Hadorious thrust his sword into the ground.

“What...?”

After declaring they were going to fight, it looked like Hadorious was insulting Reiji by giving up his blade. However, Felmenia, who was still racking her brains over how to handle the private soldiers, called out a warning.

“Reiji-dono, take heed! That is Duke Hadorious’ dancing sword style!”

The instant her voice rang through the air, Hadorious stepped forward with graceful footwork.



Rogue Zandyke was observing his target from the umbra of his own shadow.

The light of only a few sparse candles dimly illuminated the bare room with no windows and but a single door. It was a dead end within the mansion. And now locked inside of it was the young hero of the Alliance who remained vigilantly on guard, Hatsumi Kuchiba. She had a thin figure that made her look

breakable. Truly, she looked to be nothing more than a frail teenage girl.

But judging her by appearance alone would be a deadly mistake. In spite of how she looked, her very presence was draped in the unmistakable aura of a master swordswoman. Her fighting spirit was so sharp that it alone threatened to cut down anyone who would dare approach her. It was similar to that of the Twilight Beheading Princess, Titania Root Astel, but calm rather than bloodthirsty.

As an extension of their very person, a swordsman's aura was like a window into their inner self. If a swordsman was looking for a fight, for example, their killing intent would be readily discernible. Or, at least, it should be. Something was clearly different with Hatsumi. Despite the fact that it was obvious she was on guard and ready for a fight, her aura betrayed nothing.

She carried herself like a pristine mirror or a perfectly still body of water. Despite radiating fighting spirit, there wasn't a single stain of bloodthirst in it. In fact, Rogue couldn't perceive the slightest ripple of emotion at all. Fighting her like this would make her very difficult to read.

She wore clothes from her world, decorated here and there with ruffles and frills. But in stark contrast, she carried an elegant katana she'd commissioned from the dwarves. With her long, golden hair flowing behind her, she was quite a sight to behold.

But there wasn't a single opening to behold in her stance. Like a pristine mirror, she would reflect her opponent unerringly without betraying herself. Like a still body of water, she was perfectly serene. It would be whoever approached her that created ripples—not her.

Considering her apparent level of skill, Rogue was still working out how to keep her confined as he observed her. The master of the mansion had requested that Rogue personally assess the abilities of any heroes that infiltrated the mansion, but...

To think they snuck their way in here so easily...

Security in the duke's estate was tight and thorough. He had a small army of private soldiers—each and every one of which was a highly-trained mercenary—stationed throughout the mansion. Not even a cat would get past them.

Rogue was quite sure that it would be no small feat for even he himself to breach the mansion as it was. Yet nevertheless, these children had seemingly gotten in with ease.

That told him, first and foremost, that he wouldn't be able to confine them as he'd imagined. Guarding the mansion wasn't actually Rogue's job, so the lapse of vigilance in the duke's private soldiers wasn't of particular concern to him. That is, it wouldn't have been were it not for the girl standing in the room with him now. Rogue's mission was specifically this: in the event another hero infiltrated the mansion in an attempt to rescue Elliot, he was to detain the hero and their companions while getting an idea of their power.

But for this group to have infiltrated the duke's mansion so effortlessly, Rogue knew that Suimei Yakagi must be among them. He knew firsthand that Suimei, who waded in an abyss of magic unknown to this world, was virtually immune to all forms of material security. His skills, by Rogue's assessment, were extremely valuable.

As I thought, it was right to entrust that child to him...

And if Suimei was here, that meant a certain someone else was as well—Liliana. A smart, diligent girl like her would make an excellent accomplice on a stealthy mission like this. Rogue had caught a glimpse of her already. He wasn't surprised to see her face, but he was surprised to see that life and hope had returned to it. She was a different girl from when he'd seen her last. From what he could tell, she'd also stopped using dark magic. Moreover, he couldn't sense any trace of the dark power that had held such a firm grasp over her in the past. From what he could see of the skin around her eyepatch, even the dreaded brand that marked all petitioners of the dark arts had completely vanished. It seemed she'd been freed of that curse.

And upon realizing that, Rogue came to appreciate the bullet he'd dodged. His job was to detain the hero and her companions. Dealing with them all at once would have been both difficult and dangerous. It also would have made it significantly harder to get an accurate read on their individual abilities—particularly the hero's. Working together, they may have even eluded him. However, fortunately for Rogue, Hatsumi had come at him alone.

To think she would charge in like this of her own accord...

Rogue couldn't stop smiling at this unexpected turn of events. It wasn't a sinister, ridiculing smile, either. It was a joyous, lofty one. Hatsumi had come alone because she'd sensed the fighting spirit of another swordsman. Rogue was thrilled. It was the highest compliment he could receive.

But he was also keenly aware that the hero's abilities couldn't be underestimated. Judging just by Elliot Austin of El Meide, the heroes summoned this time around far surpassed the norm. And Hatsumi appeared to be no exception. Normally, heroes were largely recognized as vessels of the Goddess's power. And looking back at the heroes summoned in the past, that was mostly all they'd ever been.

But something was different about this generation—or at least these two. They had their own powers and were already making great strides in the fight against the demons. Hatsumi knew sword techniques so powerful they defied reason, while Elliot had a special knack for both the blade and magic. Considering their inherent power, the one to bear the brunt of the Goddess's favor had been the hero of Astel, Reiji, but...

"I can't see him..."

The hero's murmuring shook Rogue from his idle thoughts. Standing in the dead center of the room, she appeared to be perplexed at finding herself ostensibly alone. Her words just now indicated she knew quite well that she wasn't the only person in the room. She'd undoubtedly sensed the fighting spirit Rogue was emitting—that was why she'd come in the first place, and why she had unleashed her own keen fighting spirit. It was a force to be reckoned with, and even the minimal furnishings in the room began creaking as she slowly pushed it outward. It was like she was inviting Rogue to make his move anytime—if he didn't, she would find him soon enough at this rate.

This is certainly quite intense.

The situation piqued Rogue's interest. Perhaps this was his destiny as a man who walked the path of the blade...

My inner swordsman wants to fight.

But it seemed to be bad timing for that thought to pass through his mind. Sensing the hero's killing intent suddenly swelling, Rogue swiftly darted from one shadow to another to get away.

"There!"

"...!"

Not a moment later, Hatsumi's katana came down where Rogue had just been. It seemed she'd felt the subtle shift in his emotions and subsequently his fighting spirit, which gave his location away. And now that she'd clearly identified the source of the fighting spirit that had eluded her so far, Hatsumi corrected her stance and spoke out boldly.

"I don't know who you are, but you're rather good at hiding your spirit, aren't you? It's quite commendable."

"...It's an honor to receive such praise from a hero of salvation."

Judging that there was no longer any reason to completely conceal himself, Rogue spoke up from the shadows. After he honestly accepted her praise, Hatsumi stood up straight as if to show her opponent respect.

"Then you must already know who I am... But allow me to introduce myself to you as a swordswoman. My name is Kuchiba Hatsumi. If you have no objections, I would like to hear your name as well."

Hatsumi introduced herself in keeping with good swordfighting etiquette, but though it pained him, Rogue couldn't return the gesture. His silence told Hatsumi what she needed to know, and she then spoke up again in a somewhat disappointed tone.

"...So you won't do me the honor, huh?"

"If this were any normal match, I would be happy to. But the circumstances being what they are, I must refrain. I am duty-bound not to reveal myself."

"In that case..."

Hatsumi sullenly lowered her head. It appeared she was rather let down over this development, but her seemingly low spirits suddenly exploded into a burst of fighting spirit.

“Then there’s no reason to be reserved, right?!”

The moment she yelled out, Hatsumi swung her katana from where she was standing. Rogue was well outside the range of her naked blade, but unexpectedly, he sensed imminent danger from it. He ducked low in the shadows and heard something strike the wall just behind him.

“—!”

Hatsumi was still standing in place, her eyes closed, as if she was some living monument to the attack she’d just unleashed. Daring to look away for a moment, Rogue glanced over his shoulder. There was a clean cut in the wall like sharp blade had sliced right through it.

“This is...”

It was a perfect demonstration of Hatsumi’s rumored skill with a blade. It was said that the entire Alliance army was in awe of her slashes that were unrestricted by the physical length of her sword. She used a technique that judged everything before her and punished it by the justice of her blade. It was...

“Yes, this is the definition of a secret killing art.”

It sounded as though Rogue was returning Hatsumi’s praise from earlier, but she took no pride in it. Instead, she shook her head with a humble smile.

“Not even close. If you think *that’s* a secret killing art, you’d fall right over if you saw someone like my dad in action.”

Rogue could sense that her humility wasn’t in jest. And if what she was saying was true, then the hero’s father had surpassed even her tremendous ability. At that thought, Rogue could feel his blood run cold. It was just like the chill a skilled warrior would feel run down their spine upon sensing danger.

“If that’s not a bluff... then he must be quite a terrifying man.”

“He is; you don’t have to take my word for it. He’s not like a certain someone I know, but he’s long surpassed human limits. More importantly...” There, Hatsumi paused and began looking around the room as if she was searching for something. “This technique of yours that renders you invisible is a little insane,

but... doesn't that kind of thing normally wear down gradually once your presence is discovered? How are you keeping it up?"

"I apologize, but I can't reveal the secret, you see..."

"Of course not."

Hatsumi could understand that much, and didn't pry any further. She knew asking someone to reveal a secret technique was a tall order. If she truly wanted to know, she would have to ask with her sword and unravel the answer as the two of them clashed. Rogue, however, didn't seem to think it would be that easy. He was excellent at keeping secrets, and had no intention of giving away one he'd cultivated personally. He hadn't earned the title "Sword Master of the Lonely Shadow" for nothing.

But he couldn't say for sure that he wouldn't have the tables turned on him. He was up against a hero, after all. As for Hatsumi, her strange clothes and golden hair fluttered this way and that as she vigorously whipped about, scanning the room. She was in constant motion scouring the place for her opponent, and her movements were liquid smooth as she turned one way and then the next.

This may yet be a back-breaking job...

As that thought crossed his mind, Rogue couldn't help the smile that crossed his lips.



Behind closed doors in the duke's mansion, Hatsumi held her katana ready at eye level, vigilant of an opponent she couldn't yet see.

She was a proud student of the Kuchiba school of the Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani. Even in such a situation, she wouldn't let her guard down. And she wouldn't let her emotions get in her way, either. Right now, her heart was concentrating on one thing and one thing alone—her sword.

As Hatsumi continued to scour the room for her opponent, her shadow danced around her, mirroring her movements. She knew he was likely hiding somewhere within the darkness, but because she hadn't the powers of a magician, she couldn't identify where. There were sconces on each of the four

walls of the room, casting multiple shadows in every direction. She knew any one of them might be hiding her opponent. Such a technique was extremely mysterious to her, but perhaps this was normal for those who manipulated the mysteries. She continued to turn in circles, the dim candlelight glinting off of her long mithril blade.

The reason Hatsumi had charged in here on her own in the first place was because she'd sensed the presence of another swordsman. It was but a flash, like an invitation for someone to come find it, which had stoked her interest. She'd responded as a swordswoman and come alone for a fight, but upon arriving in the room, her opponent was mysteriously absent. He appeared to be nowhere and cloaked his presence, which made it seem like he wasn't after a fair fight after all.

As a swordswoman, Hatsumi was somewhat dissatisfied, but she didn't think this was a worst case scenario. From their brief conversation, she could tell that her opponent was indeed a proud swordsman, so even if they weren't having a proper fight, she didn't think he would do anything that strayed from that path. That also meant that, even if he was fairly defeated, he wouldn't have any regrets or hold any grudges over it. And to have encountered an opponent like that, Hatsumi was grateful.

That voice... Must be some sour old man, huh?

From what she'd heard of his voice, she estimated that her invisible opponent was somewhere around her father's age. Of course, it wasn't really fair to compare anyone to her unusually spry father who always managed to seem youthful despite his years, but this man's serious and composed tone was not unlike her father's. True strength wasn't measured by physical strength alone. No matter how much fighting spirit Hatsumi unleashed, this man stayed perfectly poised and hidden, not making a single ripple that would betray his location. There wasn't even the slightest hint of fear in his voice when he spoke to her.

She'd made a bold play with an opening attack to try and drive him out of the shadows, but he'd kept his cool and his cover even then. She still had no idea where he was hiding, but it wasn't as if she had no way of dealing with techniques like this. They were quite something extraordinary in this world, but

in the world she hailed from, there was a certain sword style that was similarly based on making things seem invisible.

“The Soundless Sword of the Quiet Bower... At least this is better than having those silent shots coming at me, huh?”

Just like the Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani, the Soundless Sword of the Quiet Bower was one of the sword styles counted among Japan’s Five Great Hidden Kings of the Sword.

To escape the prohibition imposed on martial arts training in postwar Japan by the SCAP, the Five Great Hidden Kings were unusual schools of sword styles that secreted themselves away from the general populace and had remained that way even to the present day. From what Hatsumi understood, they were the Severe Acala of the Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani School; the Soundless Sword of the Quiet Bower School; the Flying Swallow of the Soaring Ceremonial Law School; the Quick Flaming Swords of the Illusory Fire Twin-Sword Style; and the Icy Skies of the Inugami School.

And one of those in particular came to mind now, for the Soundless Sword of the Quiet Bower involved a family of techniques similar to what her current opponent was using.

“The Soundless Sword is a completely silent style—in more ways than one. Its strikes, seemingly without form, shape, sound, or even bloodlust, come flying out of nowhere as if fired from a deadeye’s bow.”

The Soundless Sword was, in a sense, a sniping sword style. At each and every turning point of history throughout the ages, it was an assassin’s sword that consigned the villains of the world to the shadows of oblivion. That was the power of the Soundless Sword. Hatsumi had been told that, at its most extreme, it was a sword that truly seemed to fly through the air as it severed the head or pierced the heart of its target in a single unerring strike.

There was no such flying terror coming at her right now. But with the boundary between light and shadow wavering with every flicker of the candles on the walls, sword slashes were coming at her from seemingly anywhere. The fact that she couldn’t see the sword producing them made it almost as dangerous as the Soundless Sword.

Whereas the Soundless Sword drives the senses mad by cloaking a user's intent, this man has actually hidden himself... As I suspected, he must be using magic too...

While dodging her opponent's attacks, Hatsumi tried to unravel his techniques in her head. Any swordsman worth their salt could conceal their presence at least to a certain degree. But the way this man made himself completely invisible was unnatural, even for a master swordsman. It had to be magical. On top of that, taking into consideration the sharpness of his strikes and their timing...

My opponent is quite skilled. Does this mean he's about on par with me after receiving the divine blessing of the hero summoning? What's with that? This is totally unfair. Like, cheatsville unfair.

Hatsumi began griping internally. If anything, however, when looking at the bigger picture here, she was the one who was "cheating" considering she had a secondary source of power. That being said, such grumbling discontent upon clashing with a surprisingly strong opponent was only normal. What really didn't sit well with her in this situation was...

Like I thought, he's holding back. There's no genuine bloodthirst in these strikes. This is probably the sensation of a wooden sword...

Even though it was supposed to be a real fight, her opponent was radiating a fighting spirit that indicated no thirst for blood. On top of that, the slashes she was blocking didn't have the heft of a metal blade behind them. It felt more like she was having a practice fight in the dojo than the real thing. Everything being thrown at her was nothing but a test.

It was possible this man was simply stalling her, keeping her from rescuing Elliot. But because he was only confronting her and not the entire group, she couldn't be sure.

"If you're not taking me seriously, I'll just have to make sure you get serious."

"I was hoping you might overlook that. If you and I both got serious, Hero-dono, this would not end quietly."

"My, my... Even though your opponent is a hero that the people of this world

seem to be pinning their hopes on?”

“Of course.”

“That just makes me want to make you get serious even more.”

Hatsumi shifted from a defensive stance to an offensive one. Waiting for the next slash that came at her from the threshold between shadow and light, she struck out at its origin. The same as her first attack, she couldn't feel it connect with anything, but...

“Wha—?”

She was at least able to surprise her intended target. He was likely confused that the blade he thought he'd be clashing with was suddenly somewhere else. There was no mistaking it; the moment his sword should have struck Hatsumi's, he saw a hazy illusion of rust as it vanished. That was the Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani's Visions of Rust—a technique that used Hatsumi's fighting spirit to create an illusion of her blade, causing her opponent to lose sight of the real thing. And the sharper a user's senses were, the more eye-catching the illusion.

“That's... This blade is...”

The swordsman in the shadows was unable to see through the technique and unwittingly muttered to himself in bewilderment.

Visions of Rust created an illusion similar to the patina of copper—the jade green tarnish that coats many a ten yen coin and large Buddha statue. The illusion the technique produced would mimic the glint of steel—or, in Hatsumi's case, mithril—to catch an opponent's eye, then crumble away like the tarnish of copper or the rust of iron would. That was where it had gotten its name.

“You've got an invisible sword. I've got an unseeable strike. Now then, I wonder which is stronger?”

“Heh...”

Hatsumi heard what sounded like satisfaction and amusement from her opponent. It seemed her curious technique had further piqued his interest as a swordsman. The path of those who pursued martial arts naturally led them to

compete with and test one another. “Just how well have I cultivated my own skills? Will this work against my opponent?” The mind of a swordsman was always alive with such thoughts.

And Hatsumi’s opponent had just taken a keen interest in her blade. The moment she realized that...

“My heart is the phantom of my sword’s blade, and becomes the technique to break the three kleshas that poison the heart of man. Cast my body aside like a rock, and give my life to the steadfast Kurikara...”

Calming her heart for a moment, she recited the dharani. It was a mantra originally used to hail Acala, but the words she just chanted had no mystical powers. Yet because Acala was a wrathful deity, he naturally inhabited swords. And because he was a Wisdom King, it was said that any blade he possessed held the mysticism of truth.

Hatsumi’s heart was then perfectly settled. Seeing her silence as an opportunity, her opponent moved from the flickering shadows.

The moment she sensed him coming, she raised her blade and the sound of metal crashing against metal assaulted her ears. It took both arms to stop the invisible weight assaulting her. To keep it from pushing her back, she made use of the Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani’s Dripping Snow.

In the same fashion a tree branch would spring back up when accumulated snow began to fall off it, Hatsumi momentarily relaxed her strength and allowed her opponent’s blade to slip down hers. And then, focusing all her strength into her core, she unleashed a grand roar.

“HAAAAAH!”

As his blade slipped, Hatsumi released all the power she had been accumulating. Twisting her arm, she magnificently twirled around his sword and struck where she estimated his right shoulder should be. However, as expected, without being able to grasp her opponent’s position, her strike missed its target. She was quite sure she’d hit where a normal person would have been, but her blade only caught shadow.

Because she’d missed, she left herself open in the follow-through of her

swing, but the candlelight didn't flicker. Her opponent wasn't going to carelessly leap out at her. Because she was starting to catch on to his ways, he had to be more careful now.

He'd seen her blade coming—it cut a red line through the air as it reflected the candlelight. But he'd remained cautious and dodged it rather than blocking it. The way he danced around the dimly lit room was just like a one-man martial arts demonstration, and Hatsumi had yet to catch him.

All she could do now was continue to swing her sword until she drew blood. She knew if she put her mind to it, she could slice even a drop of water or a pebble in two. As for the technique she'd need to do it...

"If I can't catch you, then I'll just have to cleave the whole room, huh?"

With a bold voice, Hatsumi channeled a bit of Acala herself.

"HAAAAAAAAAH!"

The Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani's Summit of Zen, the Long Sword of Enlightenment. A slash that could reach even eternity cut through the room until it was no longer recognizable.



While Suimei's team was searching the mansion, Hatsumi had parted ways with them seemingly in pursuit of her own mission. She'd entered a particular room, but when Suimei and the others tried to follow her, she was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps she'd found her way deeper into the mansion, but it was like she'd vanished into thin air. With their resources, it likely wouldn't take too much work to find her, but...

"Well, that would be a little boorish, huh?"

Hatsumi had intentionally left on her own. That could only be because she believed that she alone would be sufficient to handle whatever it was that she was getting into. If Suimei came after her anyway, that would be like saying he didn't believe in her. But he had faith in his childhood friend, and so quickly relinquished the idea. Titania, however, had a pronounced wrinkle in her brow.

"What do you think, Suimei?"

“Not a whole lot. Let’s go.”

“Go, as in... leave her?”

“We came here for a reason, right? To rescue Elliot.”

“But if we leave, then Hatsumi-sama will...”

Titania was forcing the issue out of concern for Hatsumi, but Suimei replied as if that was wholly unnecessary.

“Hatsumi will be just fine. She bisected a demon general in the Alliance—good luck to anyone trying to take her out. Besides, she ran off on her own.”

It was true that Hatsumi had rushed headlong into whatever fight lay ahead of her of her own free will. Titania was surprised to learn she had an aggressive side. She always seemed to be so calm and docile, but hot blood ran in her family. The moment she set her sights on a strong opponent, she wanted to fight them. She was just like her father, Kiyoshiro, in that regard; they both believed that the only way to attain strength was to actively pursue it. But none of this would bring Titania any comfort.

“Even so, wouldn’t it be better for us to find Hatsumi-sama first?”

“If her opponent was really *that* dangerous, she would end up cutting the whole mansion down. Besides, it would probably be a giant waste of time. She may come running back before we ever find her, you know?”

“The whole mansion, you say...?”

“I totally believe that she would and could... Though, yeah, the thought is terrifying.”

Suimei stuck out his tongue, grabbed his shoulders, and trembled in an exaggerated fashion. He looked like he was joking, but what he said was the truth.

With a single swing of her katana, Hatsumi could cleave the entire three-story mansion. Anybody in their right mind would likely say such a feat was impossible, but that was simply the unreasonable level of power that true sword masters held. Hatsumi was the heir of a man who could split a skyscraper vertically with but a single blow. A mere mansion would be child’s play for her.

And that being the case, it would be better for everyone else to prioritize looking for Elliot. If they spent their time looking for Hatsumi instead, they'd never accomplish what they'd come here to do. Moreover...

"If Hatsumi finishes what she's doing and we still haven't found blondie by the time she gets back, who knows what she'd do to us..."

"Well, if you insist, then I shall object no further..."

Unable to hide her astonishment, Titania adjusted her high-collared mantle and proceeded down the hall. Suimei followed after her, but quickly realized Liliana hadn't budged. As though she was worried as well, she was still staring at the door Hatsumi had disappeared through.

"Liliana, what's wrong?"

"It's... nothing."

"I hear you saying that, but you sure don't look like it's nothing."

Liliana then tottered forward, opened the door, and took a good look into the empty room. After confirming that there really was no one inside, she quietly closed the door again and explained.

"Somewhere in the mansion... I sense a presence... much like the colonel's magic."

"Rogue-san's?"

"Yes. It's sort of like... it has the same feel to it... or..."

Liliana was being uncharacteristically imprecise. She was practically fumbling for words, which gave Suimei a sense of the profound loneliness inside her. Her longing for her foster father made her especially keen to his presence, but it seemed she couldn't bring herself to admit it was him.

"So what do you want to do? Go take a look?"

"No... Let's prioritize... the search for the hero."

"All right."

And so, with their mission agreed upon, all talk of Hatsumi's disappearance came to an end and the three of them began moving down the hallway again.

They proceeded cautiously, vigilant of their surroundings. And eventually, Suimei called out to Titania, who was leading the group.

“Tia, do you know much about this mansion?”

“I have visited it once before, but the interior has changed quite a lot since then. It is likely that it was arbitrarily modified without the permission of the royal family, but... in general...”

She did know a bit about it. As a princess, she knew all manner of things about the more important nobles. It seemed their residences were all designed according to some standard, so they didn’t deviate all that much from one another in their construction. However...

“Suimei, I have no way of identifying hidden rooms. Might that be something you can do?”

“I’ve been checking since we first entered, so it shouldn’t be a problem. Actually, I feel like it’s weird that I haven’t found any yet. I’d expect a bad guy to have more than just a wine cellar and basement.”

“Is that so? Then—”

The moment she was about to say something, Suimei’s magickal surveillance net detected something.

“Stop.”

“?!”

“...”

Upon hearing Suimei’s suddenly chilled voice, Titania stopped dead in her tracks. Liliana, on the other hand, knew exactly what that tone in his voice meant and quietly slid a small, compact staff out of her sleeve. The hall ended in a wall straight ahead of them before turning left.

“Is there... someone ahead?”

“Around the corner. They don’t seem to be moving, though. Maybe they’re lying in wait.”

“What... should we do?”

“Well, all we can do is move ahead. We’ll figure it out as we go.”

If there was someone lying in wait, that meant their little stealth operation had been found out. There was a certain apprehension to proceeding under the circumstances, but as long as they didn’t know who lay ahead, they couldn’t just blindly attack. And without confirming Elliot’s condition, it wasn’t even like they had good cause for trespassing yet. There was also no telling who else might be in the mansion.

In the worst case scenario, if they preemptively attacked, the duke could claim they’d broken into his estate with nefarious intentions. That would just make things hairier. Of course, there was also the possibility they might be attacked as soon as they rounded the corner, but Suimei took defensive measures to try and shield them from any possible danger.

And just as Suimei had said, there was someone waiting for them when they turned the corner—a single maid with a taciturn expression. Seeing her, Suimei started to approach her with an air of relief, but for some reason, Titania held him back. After a long moment of silence, the maid addressed them sternly.

“This is the mansion of Duke Lucas de Hadorious. To enter here without an invitation from His Grace and skulk around so... Who might you be? Burglars and petty thieves?”

“I am the first royal princess of the Kingdom of Astel, Titania Root Astel,” Titania replied in an equally stern tone. “Should you doubt my identity, then I shall have no choice but to prove it with these two swords. Is that understood?”

Titania flew her fighting spirit high like a flag as she introduced herself. The princess was known to be a member of the Seven Swords, after all. And it seemed to work. The maid acknowledged her royal display of spirit and kneeled down on the spot.

“My deepest apologies, Your Royal Highness. I am but a simple servant in the employ of this mansion. I humbly beg your forgiveness for the crude insult of even suggesting that you might be a burglar.”

“I have come because I heard that the hero Elliot Austin was staying in this mansion. Is he here?”

Titania questioned the maid without relenting in the slightest. It sounded as though she meant her tone to convey she wouldn't humor anything less than a full answer. She wasn't actually expecting the maid to cooperate, but...

"Regarding that matter, I have already been given orders by the master. Please come this way."

"Oh?"

It wasn't actually an answer at all, but it might turn out to be even more helpful than that. Suimei and Liliana were equally perplexed at this development, but Titania kept her cool as she encouraged the maid to lead the way. She then turned to her two companions.

"Suimei, let us proceed."

"If you think this is fine, then it's fine, but..."

Suimei was unable to shake his doubts about the present situation, but for the time being, he decided to trust Titania and followed her. He then turned his questions to the maid.

"So, miss, what did you mean when you said that you've already been given orders?"

"In the event that Her Royal Highness Titania were to appear in the mansion, His Grace told me that I should hide nothing from her."

So she was simply doing as she was told. Suimei tossed a casual glance Titania's way and saw her eyes narrow in displeasure. He knew good and well that she didn't care for the duke, but rather than them being on bad terms, it was starting to seem like the hostility was mostly one-sided.

"Does this mean the duke anticipated my arrival?"

"I was merely instructed how to handle the situation should it arise. I must say, I was quite surprised to find that you actually came, Your Highness."

Despite what she said, the maid's taciturn expression didn't betray the slightest hint of surprise. As the domestic of a noble, she was likely trained to keep her composure.

"I see. That at least means he anticipated that we would infiltrate the

mansion.”

The duke had Elliot detained, so it was only reasonable to assume someone may come to try and save him. Titania was Reiji’s escort, so it was public knowledge she had a connection to the heroes. In that sense, it was also perfectly reasonable to assume she may personally show up one way or another.

However, it was still strange to think that the duke would relinquish Elliot so readily. Still unsure of exactly what was going on, Suimei turned to Liliana, but she simply shook her head.

“I don’t really get it,” he said to her quietly. “They lured Hatsumi away, but they’re taking us to Elliot? It doesn’t really feel like a trap, though...”

“I also cannot get... a read on the situation.”

“The fact that there’s no consistency between his purpose and his actions is consistent, at least...”

Suimei continued to ponder this hazy development in an already hazy situation, and eventually the maid stopped in front of a certain door that appeared to be their destination. The maid knocked, and the voice of a young man answered from the other side. It was a familiar voice, and judging by the sound of it, the speaker appeared to be fine. The maid then opened the door.

Inside—casually sitting on a sofa and sipping on a cup of tea—was their target, Elliot. Upon realizing who had come to visit him, he put on his usual nihilistic smile and greeted them.

“My, I didn’t think you would be the ones to come—particularly you,” he said, eying Suimei.

“And I didn’t think you would be so chipper and healthy...”

“Ah, yes. Well, as you can see, I have been treated hospitably.”

There, Elliot brushed his golden locks out of his face in a pompous manner and waved his arm to the side in an exaggerated gesture. He meant to demonstrate that he was indeed perfectly fine, but that only made things more confounding. As Elliot returned his cup to the saucer in a haughty manner, he

checked his attitude and courteously turned to Titania.

“Allow me to apologize for causing you any undue worry, Princess Titania.”

“No, I’m glad to see you well, Elliot-dono.”

After their short exchange, Suimei cut back in to the conversation.

“So? What are you just sitting in here for?”

“I have nothing else to do, you see. I cannot get out of here.”

“You can’t get out? Why don’t you just leave? You don’t look like you’re being restrained, and it shouldn’t be all that hard for someone like you to force your way out of the building, right?”

“Certainly, if I put my mind to it, I could do just that. However, if I do, he threatened to bring harm to Christa.”

“I see. That’s why you haven’t done anything.”

As long as the two of them were separated, the duke could use them against each other. And as long as Elliot wanted to protect Christa, his hands were tied. But hearing this, a vein protruded from Titania’s forehead as she laid bare her indignation.

“He’s damned if he thinks he can use a priest of the Church of Salvation as a hostage.”

“He doesn’t seem to be a truly noble noble, much less a man of faith.”

“So?”

“I was told I only had to wait here for a time. It is annoying, I admit, but I had no choice other than to comply.”

“Why does he want you here?”

“Who knows? When they caught me, I was wondering just what they were going to do with me, but since then, the duke has been nothing other than an exemplary host. Just what is he thinking, I wonder? I tried asking, but was politely declined.”

Elliot groaned a little as he shook his head from side to side. Not even he knew the reason he was being held.

Was his goal only to detain him? No... Just what could he accomplish by doing that?

The obvious answer was that the duke was attempting to restrict Elliot's actions, but that didn't fully make sense to Suimei. It would imply that he meant to keep Elliot from doing something, and based on the timing...

"The clash with the demons in the Empire?"

It seemed as though the duke had wanted to keep Elliot from participating in the battle.

"Now that I think of it, Hatsumi also said that she was stalled on the way there, didn't she?"

"But Hero Reiji... was there... without issue."

"Does that mean they wanted Reiji-sama to defeat the demons?"

What Titania was suggesting was possible. Reiji very well may have been able to defeat the demons on his own, but...

"No, that can't be it. In the end, they just made it look like he won. Those guys from the Universal Apostles showed up to help and everything. And not even that makes sense..."

"It sounds like you've learned all sorts of things."

"We'll explain it all later."

In the end, things just weren't adding up for Suimei. The Universal Apostles had made it clear their intention was to kidnap the heroes, not help them.

Did the plan change somewhere along the line? Maybe they don't need to kidnap them anymore? But the timing is just too...

As Suimei drew deeper and deeper into thought, mumbling unintelligibly to himself, Elliot turned to the maid.

"May I leave now?"

"Yes, you may do as you please."

"You're releasing Elliot-dono?"

“Those were His Grace’s orders. He said that if Your Highness wished for his release, we were not to object.”

“So he still maintains his obedience to the royal family, does he?”

As Titania let out a sigh, Suimei addressed the maid.

“Just what’s going on here? What are you guys thinking?”

“I confess I know nothing in regard to His Grace’s ambitions.”

“This isn’t because of some grudge against Astel, is it?”

“That would be impossible, sir.”

“Of course,” Titania agreed. “The likes of that man would never lose control of himself like that.”

As Titania spoke in a somewhat sullen manner, Suimei turned a skeptical gaze her way.

“So despite all this incomprehensible nonsense, you still have some faith in him, huh?”

“I would rather you say that I am a reasonable judge of character. Even if it is someone that I despise, I am capable of evaluating them objectively.”

“This doesn’t sound like the same princess who was gloating about uncovering his nefarious deeds and shoving them in his face.”

“My, did I ever say anything like that?”

“Mmhmm, it must be awfully convenient to have a brain that forgets things like that.”

Suimei shrugged as he poked fun at Titania. With this, they had fulfilled their objective. They could afford to goof around a little. However...

“Tia, take care of Elliot. I’m going outside.”

“What are you going to do outside?”

“I have a personal score to settle. I thought I’d go clock him one and ask a few questions. It seems the fight has already started out there.”

“Has it? But I don’t sense...”

“It seems like they’re concealing it on purpose... I suspect it’s the work of the guy Hatsumi chased down.”

Suimei could tell something was afoot. Since a large number of people were on the move, it likely meant that Hadorious’s private army had been put into action. But as Suimei turned to go join the fun, Titania called out to him.

“In that case, please give the duke my regards as well and clock him twice.”

“You got it. Take it easy until I get back. I’ll leave the rest to you, Liliana.”

“Understood.”

Suimei then turned to go again, but Titania called out to him once more.

“Suimei, allow me to warn you beforehand... If you plan on confronting the duke with a sword, do be careful.”

“What, is Mr. Big-Shot Noble strong?”

“Lucas de Hadorious is the first of the Seven Swords. He is the strongest swordsman in this world.”

“...Wha?”

While making a rather idiotic expression, Suimei looked to Liliana for confirmation. She nodded.

“Duke Lucas de Hadorious stands... at the apex of the Seven Swords... That makes him... at least the strongest man... in the northern continent.”

“Y-You guys! You gotta tell me this kinda crap sooner!”

As he yelled, Suimei ran at full speed towards where Hadorious and Reiji were fighting.

Chapter 3: The Strongest of the Seven Swords vs. the Modern Magician

Not long before Suimei's group found Elliot, in the courtyard of Hadorious's estate...

"As I suspected, Hero-dono... Your sword is still immature, it seems."

"Ugh...!"

Hearing the disappointment in Hadorious's voice in the middle of their fight left a bad taste in Reiji's mouth. It was the taste of humiliation. It was as if Hadorious meant to say this was all just to test Reiji, who was currently down on one knee.

And it wasn't because Reiji had underestimated his opponent. No, he was taking his bout with the duke quite seriously. Yet in spite of that, in spite of being a proud hero divinely blessed by the Goddess herself, Hadorious stood towering over him unfazed like this was all a game to him.

But, though it pained Reiji to admit it, Hadorious had every reason to be so full of himself right now. When Reiji attacked, he would evade his strikes without even bothering to lift his blade. Conversely, when he had Reiji on the defensive, Reiji didn't have a prayer of dodging his attacks. It took everything he had just to block them. Despite the fact that he hadn't been struck once, his legs were already giving out under him.

That was thanks to Hadorious's fluid and varied techniques with a blade—what Felmenia had called his sword dancing—combined with his herculean strength, refined form, and magic spells. The duke seemed to have an overwhelming advantage, and that was painfully clear now. Reiji cringed at the terrible taste it left lingering in his mouth.

Hadorious dismissed the lightning that clad his sword and examined it in the light of the mana lamps like a work of art. Was there a chip in the blade? Or was he scrutinizing the murkiness of his own heart reflected in his weapon?

Whichever it was, he quickly lowered it and turned his attention back to Reiji.

“All of your victories up until now have likely only been attained by relying on your gift. That’s why, when you’re put before someone with actual experience and skill, your plating cracks as easily as hardened lacquer and crumbles. Behold your current condition.”

Hadorious spoke of the Goddess’s protection as plating, and the analogy was rather apt. The power that protected Reiji was not his; it was like a borrowed set of armor. However, precisely because of that...

“Is that anything someone from the country that summoned me should be saying?”

“Is that not obvious? If you mistake the Goddess’s power for your own, it is our duty to enlighten and correct you. To be complacent because you’re worshiped is its own form of idolatry... Not that I’m worried about *you* becoming too prideful.”

That seemed to be Hadorious’s conclusion after trading blows with Reiji. But then...

“So, Hero-dono, how is it? The Goddess’s power, I mean. Have you gotten used to it?”

“What difference does that make right now?”

“It makes all the difference. If you’ve gotten used to it already, that’s just a sign of how quickly you’ve degraded into the Goddess’s pawn.”

“Pawn...?”

“That’s right. I told you this once before, but the very existence of the demons serves a higher existence, and their sole purpose is bringing about the ruin of all other races—including humans. Do you recall, I wonder? The answer you received from the demon general called Rajas after you asked him what meaning there was in humans and demons slaughtering each other?”

“That’s...”

Reiji had indeed once asked Rajas why the demons attacked humans—why two sentient races had to be so violently at odds. When he’d spoken of the

matter with Hadorious, he'd said that Reiji's question had no meaning. Reiji hadn't understood what he meant at the time, but it seemed to behoove Hadorious to explain now.

"That's right. That's why your question was a hollow and empty one. If the demons were created by the Evil God only to kill, then there is no way that we can coexist, is there? Our quarrel with them is nothing more than a struggle for exclusive possession of the world. But not for us—for the higher powers that control us. We are simply pawns on the grand game board that is the struggle between the Goddess and Evil God, which pits humanity and heroes against demons and demon generals."

"Pawns... on a game board..."

Hearing those words, Reiji suddenly recalled the conversation between Suimei and Lishbaum after the clash with the demons in the northern Empire. Lishbaum had said that the demons were pawns of the Evil God, and in order to make room for stronger pawns in their army, they had to clear out the weaker ones. It was just like a strategy game...

"..."

Reiji was somewhat dumbstruck at the uncanny similarity, but Hadorious appeared to see right through him.

"By the look of it, it seems that—even if only a little—you are now beginning to comprehend my meaning."

"That's..."

"That's enough of your gum-flapping prattle, human."

"Io Kuzami-san!"

Slipping through Hadorious's private soldiers, Io Kuzami approached and inserted herself between Reiji and Hadorious. Reiji didn't know why she suddenly sounded so indignant, especially considering the gravity of the conversation.

"Hero-dono's friend... No, I see. You're—"

"Take this!"

“I won’t abide such interference!”

As Io Kuzami closed in on Hadorious with mana accumulating in her right hand, he expeditiously retrieved a gem of some kind from his pocket and threw it at her.

“Ugh, this is...”

Io Kuzami attempted to twist her body to evade it, but the gem grazed her shoulder as it flew past her. It shouldn’t have been much of an attack considering the small size of the gem, but she immediately dropped to her knees. And with Io Kuzami taken care of, Hadorious turned back to Reiji.

“So, Hero-dono, how does it feel to learn what you truly are?”

“Y-You’re saying that I’m just a pawn too?!”

“Precisely.”

“But—”

“If you’re not, then explain to me how it is that you just suddenly felt so compelled to help the people of this world. Where exactly did those feelings come from, hmm?”

“That... That’s...

Reiji had agreed to save the people of this world because they’d asked him to. After summoning him to Royal Castle Camellia, they begged him to subjugate the demons. With the power he’d acquired, he felt like he had to do something. Even if his ego were somewhat inflated over being hailed as a hero, he had chosen to help them. It was something he’d decided for himself. It was his own free will.

“I’m helping the people of this world because I want to! It was my decision!”

“Is that not just what you keep telling yourself?”

“You’re wrong! I took up a sword to fight of my own volition! I’m not being manipulated!”

Reiji was roaring at this point, but Hadorious simply shook his head in exasperation.

“I see El Meide’s hero has a much better grasp on reality...”

“What does that mean?”

“The time for questions is over, Hero-dono. It’s now time we finish our dance.”

There, Hadorious took up a fighting stance. However, unlike before, he didn’t conjure lightning around his blade. Did he mean to hold back? The unfettered fighting spirit he was radiating didn’t indicate so, and he certainly wasn’t showing any openings. Then, once more, he thrust his sword into the ground.

“Now, let us begin.”

Reiji thought for a moment that Hadorious was falling forward, but he simply leaned over and smoothly pulled his sword from the ground. With it came a rising slash. Reiji saw it coming and knew he stood a good chance of dodging it, but if things went awry, he also knew that slash had the power to cut him to pieces. His hesitation got the better of him and he dashed in a poor attempt to evade. The price was a fine, red streak of blood across his cheek.

“Urgh...!”

Hadorious spun around like he was dancing, and the moment he finished swinging his sword, he thrust it back into the ground. He then fluidly retrieved it again to attack once more. The speed of his slash was terrifying, and it was all Reiji could do just to catch it with his own sword.

How... How is he able to do this so quickly despite stabbing the ground?

Hadorious clearly left himself open every time he stopped to thrust his sword into the ground. But that didn’t make any difference to Reiji when he was kept so decisively on the defensive. He couldn’t attack even if he wanted to, and even if he tried, he could already picture Hadorious gracefully turning to the side like he knew exactly what was coming. He’d then take the opportunity to counterattack, putting Reiji in more danger than if he’d done nothing at all.

And it seemed there was nothing for Reiji to gain by staying on the defensive and waiting for his chance, either. Hadorious’s blade left no room for counterattacks. He would step forward with confidence as if stepping into a ballroom, and thrust his sword in front of him in furious, fluid attacks.

But he was a perfect gentleman in combat. He danced beautifully on his own, but if Reiji extended his sword as if asking for a dance, the duke would happily comply. Their blades would tango, but Hadorious would always come out on top as the better dancer.

“How...?”

Reiji unwittingly let his doubt escape his lips, and Hadorious replied with a smile.

“It’s nothing mysterious, really. Those lacking in elegance are simply doomed to be immature swordsmen. And since you know nothing of the elegant way of the sword, you can only flail about in confusion. That’s all it is.

“Elegance...?”

Reiji didn’t understand the connection. Elegance was merely a matter of aesthetics. What bearing did it have on their fight? How would it better prepare him to deal with Hadorious?

Hadorious focused his stance and unleashed a wave of attacks on Reiji. Reiji blocked with his sword and endured as best he could, but the pommel of Hadorious’s sword caught him from below.

“Cra—!”

That single strike made Reiji’s grip lapse, and he involuntarily let go of his orichalcum sword. Hadorious immediately zeroed in on the opportunity.

“Take this as a warning about your own immaturity!”

Hadorious lifted his sword to strike, and the unarmed Reiji now had nothing to defend himself with. The speed and sharpness of Hadorious’s blow wouldn’t allow him time to try and dodge, either. Reckoning with that, Reiji prepared himself for the worst.

“Reiji-dono!”

“Reiji-kun!”

“Tch! Reiji!”

Felmenia and Lefille yelled out, and Io Kuzami raced to cut in between them,

but...

“Elegance, huh? I guess that’s not too dissimilar from what my father would call romance... Whatever. The reason Reiji’s sword can’t touch you is because ‘he doesn’t have the skill to keep up with the dance,’ right?”

An unexpected voice suddenly came from behind Hadorious—one that seemed to immediately comprehend what had eluded Reiji—along with a sharp stone.

“Urgh, who’s there?!”

Hadorious turned around with a furious challenge to see...

“Just little old me, friend numero uno of the hero over there. You *do* remember my face, don’t you?”

It was Suimei, clad in the green vest he usually wore in this world. But just where had he come from? None of the doors or windows to the mansion were opened, and no one had heard a sound. He’d seemingly appeared out of nowhere in absolute silence. Even the stone he’d thrown seemed to have come out of nowhere. But despite the mystery, Suimei acted as if this were all perfectly normal.

“You’re...?”

“Suimei-dono!”

It appeared as though Duke Hadorious didn’t recognize Suimei after all. The clue that he was Reiji’s friend didn’t seem to ring any bells either, but when Felmenia called his name, Hadorious suddenly looked rather bewildered.

“Suimei...? Suimei Yakagi? Why are you here?”

“Why? What else? I came to rescue the hero.”

Hearing those words, a deep wrinkle appeared on Hadorious’s brow. There was a stark moment of disbelief at the thought that Suimei had infiltrated his estate, but that was to be expected. He hardly knew what Suimei’s magicka was capable of.

“I see... The hero was just a distraction while you snuck into the mansion. Was that it? I must say, I’m honestly surprised you managed to get through all my

security.”

“Yeah, well, it wasn’t exactly hard.”

There, Suimei burst into capricious laughter. His insouciant attitude seemed to irritate Hadorious all the more at this interruption. With the mood killed, his confident expression twisted into a scowl.

“Nevertheless, I won’t have you standing in the way of my match with Herodono. Kindly step aside.”

“Aw, don’t be so cold. Let me join in on the fun. You’re a big-shot noble, right? Show me a duke’s hospitality, will ya?”

“I have nothing to show rabble like you. Second squad! To the front!”

Hadorious hurled orders at his private soldiers currently engaged with Felmenia and Lefille. A portion of them broke away from the fight and approached Suimei. In response to that, Suimei replied with his usual exasperation and an exaggerated shrug of his shoulders... then started cracking his knuckles.

“Wow, calling me rabble? That’s harsh, man. I think I just might cry. I mean, my bad. Sorry for having such a mediocre face...”

“Suimei, now’s not the time to be joking around! Put some—”

“Nah, there’s nothing for me to get worked up about here.”

Even before the soldiers closing in on him, even with Reiji trying to warn him, Suimei simply grinned like he was about to have some fun. It wasn’t a joyful smile, but a fearless one. He was sneering at those who dared to challenge him. Reiji had seen that look before and he knew what it meant—these men were about to learn their lesson.

A bright flash then flickered behind Suimei like a lightning strike, creating a dazzling ultramarine light in the blink of an eye. It was a spread of small magicka circles lining up systematically behind him.

“Wha—?!”

“This is...!”

Those synchronized voices of surprise came from Reiji and Hadorious respectively. Both of them were floored to see the fifty some magic circles behind Suimei, each one imprinted with some unusual equation... and each one gathering mana like a charging laser. Really, with all of them assembled behind him, Suimei looked like some kind of magickal gunner with an impressive arsenal. All he'd have to do was pull the trigger—or, in this case, say the magic words.

“Illustre carmen ad operationem simplicem. Armat ad quinquaginta et passive diducit, invocato Augoeides. Strategic Bombing.”

[Illustrious spell at simplified operation. Arm from one to fifty and deploy randomly, invoke Augoeides. Strategic Bombing.]

The moment he finished his chant and swung his arm down, Reiji's expectations became reality. The magicka circles concentrated their light and fifty brilliant rays shot out, racing towards the soldiers approaching Suimei. Unlike the clear, soft light of a flashlight or torch, these rays looked like dense pillars or flickering spears. Reiji didn't even need to imagine what would happen to someone struck by one.

The instant the beams made impact, there was a dazzling lightshow. The mercenaries' formation became a stage of explosions and sparks flying every which way. It was hard to even tell what was happening underneath it all.

The terrifying scene sent chills down Reiji's spine. He felt like he was frozen in place—he didn't dare move. And it was for his own good. If he stepped forward carelessly, he too might get caught up in the unceasing barrage of flashes and sparks. He was best off staying put.

When the pandemonium began to die down, it left an afterimage in the eyes of all who beheld it like a fading strobe light. It took a few seconds for them to see that every single one of the soldiers in the formation was now collapsed on the spot.

They weren't visibly injured, but their armor was scorched and crumbling. It was all too obvious they'd been struck with a great and fiery force. Paying no mind to the felled soldiers who weren't so much as twitching, Suimei turned a fearless and provoking smile towards the rest of the mercenaries. He then stuck

out his hand and curled his finger towards himself as if to say, “Come and get it.”

But all the remaining mercenaries read in his cocky attitude was, “You’re all worthless. I don’t care how many of you there are—you can’t take me.” Understandably insulted and incensed, they all rushed at him at once. They closed in quickly, lunging at Suimei with swords and spears. In response, he simply jumped in the air to dodge their blades... and then snapped his fingers.

It was a casual and graceful gesture. And as soon as the snapping sound rang out in the air, the air itself exploded in front of him, blowing all the mercenary soldiers away. Suimei then made a reckless and daring landing right in the middle of their formation. He crouched down and placed his right hand on the stone tiles of the garden and unleashed a tremendous amount of mana all at once.

Pure mana had its own power, but when not channeled into magicka, it wasn’t a particularly effective attack. Yet when enough of it was released, even the mysteries in the surroundings would run wild, and that was exactly what happened here. Suimei’s mana pressurized the atmospheric aetheric to its extreme, causing an explosion.

Of course, Reiji didn’t understand what was happening. All he saw was an explosive burst of flame swallow the soldiers and Suimei alike. Eventually, the fire and smoke vanished, blown away by an unnatural wind. What was revealed in their stead... was a magician now conspicuously in a black suit. He swung his arm as if swatting away the lingering embers like flies and let out a bored sigh.

This is...

Reiji was in awe of the disastrous scene he’d just witnessed, and even more in awe of his best friend who’d caused it. All of it, down to the last detail, was beyond his imagination. He was floored when he saw Felmenia use magicka, but this surpassed even that by leaps and bounds.

When Reiji first heard of magicians, when he heard the stories from Felmenia and Lefille, he thought he understood the extent of the power they were talking about. Suimei used techniques that were literally out of this world, and they were what Felmenia had used to become stronger—that was all. That was the

impression he'd been under. But now that he'd gotten a closer look at the real thing, he realized how utterly wrong he'd been.

Reiji and Suimei had had something of an unprecedented heart-to-heart that day at the encampment. Reiji had confessed the strange sense of surrealism he felt at the death of so many soldiers, and Suimei had understood it perfectly. He said it was because this was a different world, that it would always be harder for things to hit home for Reiji here. He said he knew how Reiji felt because he felt it too, so Reiji had walked away from that conversation feeling like they were at last on the same page.

But this—this stunt that Suimei had just pulled—crushed that feeling flat. How could someone who was this powerful understand what someone like Reiji was feeling? If Suimei was that powerful, how on earth was it that this backwater world felt surreal to him? The world they were from—the world that had produced Suimei—must have been far, far more mystical.

Just how dangerous... is our world?

If Suimei needed this kind of power to get by, it must secretly be a blood-soaked nightmare. That was all Reiji could think when he saw this stupendous display. That, and just where in their ostensibly peaceful world were people like him hiding? Reiji couldn't believe it... And he could hardly believe his eyes. But it was precisely because his friend had been fighting in their own world that he was able to fight like this here. And when that realization fully dawned on him, he couldn't help laughing.

"You know, Suimei... this is really kind of unfair."

"Huh? Look who's talking, Mr. I Instantly Got Stupid Strong When I Was Summoned Here. You make me look like an idiot for spending twelve years getting to this level, you jerk."

Suimei glared daggers perhaps a little sharper than normal at Reiji. It was his pride as a magician showing.

"Menia, Lefi, you alright over there?"

"I'm just fine, Suimei-dono! Don't mind me! Please give all your support to Reiji-dono!"

“I’m okay over here too! Just holding them back is no problem!”

“Alrighty then. Sorry to ask, but could you push the rest of ’em all the way over there? They’re in the way scuttling around here.”

The two girls seemed to have no trouble complying with Suimei’s request. With their red wind and white flames, Thoria’s hero and Hadorious’s private soldiers were pushed back beyond the bounds of Suimei’s battle so they wouldn’t get in his way. Once that was taken care of, Suimei shot a cold glance Hadorious’s way.

“So? Is that all for the opening act? For treating people like peons, that was a pretty poor showing, wasn’t it? Right, Mr. Big-Shot Duke?”

When Reiji looked, he saw that Hadorious’s composed expression had twisted into one of surprise. Much like Reiji, he was aghast at the extent of Suimei’s abilities. Or perhaps it was simply that he couldn’t believe them...

“Ridiculous. Forget using magic without hailing Elements, to think you could even fight... I thought you were just some powerless coward.”

Seeing Hadorious’s disbelief, Suimei made a mockingly stupefied expression.

“Aw, gee... That’s how it is, huh? Well, you are from Astel, aren’t you? Man, I can’t believe that’s what you thought of me...”

The people of Astel had been badmouthing Suimei as gutless since he was first summoned. Of course, that was only because he’d been hiding his powers all this time. Not even Duke Hadorious had any idea what he was really capable of.

“I see... So you’ve deceived the good people of Astel, have you?”

“Hey, *hey*! Can you not make it sound like I’m the bad guy here? I don’t even wanna hear that kinda crap from you. Sending an entire fucking army of demons after a trade caravan of innocent people... It was a real chore beating the shit out of all of them, you know?”

“Then you’re the one who... I see, you’re the man in black that demon general was yelling about.”

As if to answer Hadorious’s suspicions, Suimei flipped open the long, black

coat he wore over his suit. The instant he did, a strong wind swept through the courtyard, making the manicured hedges and shrubs dance. At the arrival of some unknown mystical presence, it was like the natural balance of power was suddenly tipped. The mana lamps began to flicker ominously. And then...

“That’s right. The guy Rajas cursed probably until his last breath? That was me —Society magician Yakagi Suimei.”

The moment he said that, a piercing chill condensed in the air... and it was aimed directly at Hadorious.





After Suimei forced his way into the fight in the courtyard, he conjured all his dormant mana and relieved Reiji in his fight against Hadorious.

Suimei was now radiating mana, fighting spirit, and all the lingering anger he'd been building up over the past few months.

This asshole... Doing nothing but fucking around with people...

Throwing that kindling on an already raging fire, he fanned the flames growing in his heart. And it showed in his increasingly intimidating aura.

As for his opponent, Hadorious was still surprised that Suimei could even use magic. Slowly coming to grips with the situation, however, his face relaxed into the composed expression he'd worn while fighting Reiji.

"Very well, Suimei Yakagi. This simply means that I underestimated you."

"What a blunder, too... I wonder just how much it's going to tighten that noose around your neck."

"Shut that impertinent mouth of yours. Even with you here, all it means is that the number of opponents in this bout has increased by one."

"This bout, huh?"

Shutting down the prospect of any further frivolous conversation, Hadorious broke into a sprint and drew the sword he had thrust into the ground. Sensing impending danger, Suimei jumped to the side and felt a shockwave fly past him.

He could hear the shockwave keep going accompanied by an odd tearing and crackling noise, and when he glanced over his shoulder, he saw that the stone tiles on the ground were smashed to pieces in a straight line behind him. Of course, it wasn't Hadorious's sword that had done it. Not directly, anyway.

"Hey, whoa... A sword wave? And one that destructive?"

A sword wave was a technique different from the Long Sword of the Absolute Edge that Hatsumi used to attack outside of her physical range. It generated a whirlwind that flew out with a quick slash. Throughout history, it had been heralded as a technique capable of piercing even the clouds in the heavens

above.

“Careful, Suimei! That’s not all there is to the duke’s sword!”

“Hmm?”

Hearing that the duke knew more than once dance, the corners of Suimei’s mouth suddenly curled upward into a fearless smile. He then pulled out a vial from he pocket as if drawing a sword.

“Permutato, coagulato, vis existito.”

[Transform, coagulate, become power.]

Seing this unfold, Reiji called out to his friend in an anxious voice.

“W-Wait, Suimei! Isn’t that mercury?!”

“Yeah, and? What about it?”

“‘What about it’?! Isn’t that dangerous to touch?!”

“Ah, yeah...”

Reiji was appropriately worried. Mercury was toxic, and would even emit a dangerous vapor at room temperature. It was something they’d always been warned about when using mercury thermometers in science labs at school. But unlike Reiji, Suimei didn’t seem at all concerned.

“Aww, don’t worry little Reiji. Daddy’s keeping himself safe with magicka, okay?”

“A-Anything goes with magicka, huh...?”

“This is nothing, honestly.”

Reiji looked dumbfounded for a moment, and then immediately concerned again.

“Moreover, Suimei, be careful! The duke can use magic on his—”

Before Reiji could even finish his warning, Hadorious rushed forward with a demonstration. He muttered a few words and his sword became clad in green lightning that sparked and crackled. Suimei flicked his extended mercury sword as if shaking off blood from it and held it out in front of him, awaiting

Hadorious's arrival.

"Hmph. So you've got more than sword techniques up your sleeve, huh?"

"Of course. You aren't the only one here who can use magic."

Hadorious swung his sword, and Suimei deftly prepared to counter it. He thrust his katana through a tiny magicka circle that appeared in the air, and it lingered on the blade as he waited to intercept Hadorious's attack. But when the two swords collided, in an unexpected turn, it was the mercurial blade that was pushed back by the lightning-clad long sword.

"Wha—?!"

"Hmph!"

This time, it was Hadorious that had caught Suimei by surprise. But Suimei wouldn't be defeated so easily. He kept his guard up and skillfully evaded the next few slashes the duke threw at him. Hadorious was grinning ever so slightly, and Suimei furrowed his brow.

"It's not an enchantment...?" he muttered to himself in bewilderment.

It certainly looked like Hadorious had clad his blade in magical lightning—Reiji had even tried to warn him about it. So why did a counterspell that nullified enchantments not work on it? Just what had Hadorious done to it?

Whatever it was, he didn't give Suimei much time to think about it. Hadorious quickly began swinging his sword rhythmically again, but this time Suimei raised his golden shield instead of his sword.

"Primum et secundum moenia, expansio localis!"

[First and second rampart, local expansion!]

"Hmph! A magic defense? Too bad!"

"Wuh?! H-H-Hey!"

When sword and shield clashed, Suimei couldn't suppress the shock over what he was seeing. The tip of Hadorious's lightning-clad blade was sinking through his magicka circle. It was like the light given off by the golden ramparts was slowly being penetrated.

“Tch, it’s even shaving away at the fortress’s defenses...?!”

It seemed that Hadorious’s magic power and fighting spirit were coalescing in his attacks to overcome Suimei. His safest option for now was to get some distance. And to that end, he muttered a spell. The golden magicka circle began to rotate and blew Hadorious back, but he gracefully landed on both feet without so much as breaking his posture. The still intact ramparts protected Suimei against the sword waves Hadorious unleashed next. But they weren’t what Suimei was focused on...

“What’s going on? That just now really wasn’t an enchantment...?”

Of the techniques that applied mystical powers to mundane objects, the most common was enchantment. Enchantment could be used to enhance or augment any number of things, including swords. But Suimei had watched as Hadorious’s blade began boring through the second rampart, which defended against magicka. That shouldn’t have been possible. Just what did it all mean?

While keeping his guard up against the dangerous opponent in front of him, Suimei’s thoughts ran wild. Acting on imprudent conjecture would be an extremely poor move, however. And since he didn’t have much to work with right now, any conclusions he came to would merely be conjecture. While Suimei was pondering this crossroads, someone—someone rather unexpected—threw him a bone.

“You’re wrong, Yakagi Suimei. That man has not bestowed his sword with magic,” said Io Kuzami.

“Wuh?”

“You heard me.”

Suimei corrected his posture and held his mercury katana up as he looked from her to Hadorious. His sword had just been clad in green lightning... but now it was gone.

“Huh? It vanished?”

If it was an enchantment, it should have been continuous as long as there was sufficient mana to keep it going. But it seemed what Hadorious had done was only a temporary effect. And it seemed Io Kuzami knew what it was.

“The people of your world would say it’s something like possession, no?”

“Possession...? Oh, duh, that’s what it is!”

It finally dawned on him. Possession was an art of spiritualism, which wasn’t totally unfamiliar to Suimei. And the moment he thought he knew what he was up against, he decided to put his theory to the test and dismissed his ramparts. Seeing the ramparts vanish, Hadorious arched an eyebrow, but seemed to accept the invitation and quickly closed in.

Now it was only a matter of timing. Since his opponent was a trained swordsman, Suimei had to take into account how quickly Hadorious could reach his max speed from a standing position or else he’d be cut down before he could lift a single finger in his own defense, much less try to dispel the mystery before him. Knowing he had to get this just right, Suimei tightly gripped his mercury katana. Hadorious once more clad his sword in lightning. Suimei leaned in, focusing his magician’s eyes. Seeing through the rising slash that could compare to even Reiji’s, Suimei struck out with his own sword.

And just as the high-pitched clang of metal hitting metal rang out in the courtyard, he muttered...

“Return, woman, back from whence you came.”

“Urgh!”

Hadorious was quite surprised to see what looked like a female spirit leave his sword and the green lightning fade in response to Suimei’s chant. But he didn’t let it slow him down. Without faltering, he immediately repelled Suimei’s mercury katana with sheer strength. But Suimei was a magician—his sword was only of secondary consequence to him. While Hadorious was dealing with Suimei’s blade, Suimei thrust out his other hand and unleashed a splendid, satisfying snap.

“Gah...!”

There was a sudden burst between the two of them as mana pushed outward in all directions, but Suimei stood there unfazed—fingers still extended—in the aftermath of the explosion. Hadorious, meanwhile, had taken the brunt of the attack at point blank and was thrown all the way to the hedges. Nevertheless,

however, he immediately shook his head and corrected his posture. Perhaps the hedges had broken his horizontal fall, though he seemed quite sturdy to begin with.

“Yeah, okay, I get it. You didn’t magically enchant your sword at all; you conjured a phantom of the Elements and channeled that into your sword to make use of its power, right? Hahh... So you’re a skilled swordsman *and* a spiritualist, huh? That’s quite a range, buddy.”

As Suimei praised Hadorious in a slightly provocative tone, Hadorious’s expression turned grim. Naturally, it wasn’t because of Suimei’s tone, but because he’d hit the nail on the head.

“To think you would see through my secret art so easily... But don’t think you have me bested just yet.”

“Of course not. However...”

Suimei launched a flash of light at Hadorious. Rather than harm him, it was to force him to evade.

“That’s enough with swords. I’m a magician, after all. I don’t really feel like fighting in your own arena, see? As for you, Reiji, what are you doing? Why don’t we tag-team this?”

“Y-Yeah, you’re right!”

When it finally dawned on Reiji that there was nothing preventing them from fighting Hadorious two-on-one, Reiji promptly hustled over to Suimei’s side. Suimei couldn’t tell whether he was just that absentminded, fascinated, or exhausted—or maybe all three. To be on the safe side, Suimei muttered a healing spell.

“Wh-Whoa...”

As a green magicka circle rose up at Reiji’s feet, the breath of the land washed over him. His body was wrapped in a gentle breeze, and the green magicka circle became threads of light that vanished on the wind. When it all faded, Reiji was back to feeling how he was before his throwdown with Hadorious.

“Is this restoration magic?! It’s amazing! My wounds are all healed!”

“It’s healing magicka, but yeah. And you weren’t hurt that badly, so it really ain’t that amazing. It’s certainly not my specialty, that’s for sure.”

Suimei cracked a small smile, but with this, the two of them were in prime fighting condition.

“You may have me outnumbered now, but...”

Even before two opponents, Hadorious didn’t seem to have any intention of backing down. He once more took a fighting stance and held his sword at the ready, but he was gushing even more fighting spirit than before. This was the mettle of a swordsman faced with a challenge. The aura he was exuding made him look two—no, three times bigger than normal.

“Looks like he’s finally motivated huh?”

“Seems so. So this is what he’s like when he’s serious...”

This blatant display of power told them he’d been holding back while fighting them individually. His immense fighting spirit was so intense that it rattled even their surroundings. The hedges began snapping one after the other and the broken fragments of stone tiles on the ground began dancing around in a clatter.

“Now, now... I can’t have you forgetting about me.”

Proclaiming her presence in a haughty tone, Io Kuzami approached.

“Oh, yeah, you’re here.”

“Bastard, despite the aid I lent you in that heated battle, you dare speak to me so? Remember this and remember it well... I certainly will.”

“Er... I’m actually pretty maxed out right now, so could you cut me some slack?”

With a dark gaze and even darker voice, Io Kuzami threatened Suimei, who shrunk back a little. He genuinely didn’t want any more trouble at the moment.

“Suimei.”

“Yeah.”

But Io Kuzami aside, Reiji and Suimei couldn’t let their guards down. They

turned their attention back to their opponent, but just as they were about to go on the offensive, something swooped down on them. A shock ran through the ground and a giant cloud of dust and dirt billowed upward in the middle of the courtyard. It was like a building had collapsed. As the rapidly expanding dust cloud threatened to engulf them, Suimei and Reiji swiftly leaped back.

“Tch... What now?”

“Something big came down from above, I think...”

Reiji didn’t sound entirely certain; he’d only caught a glimpse of it with his enhanced dynamic vision. However, the dust cloud cleared before too long, revealing what had landed between them and Hadorious.

“Hey, hey now...”

“That’s...”

“Oho?”

Suimei, Reiji, and Io Kuzami all responded in synchronized surprise. For what had appeared before them had the figure of an enormous man, but was made out of earth polished black. It was a golem.

In total, it was about five or six meters tall. It had no discernible waist, but it had articulate fingers on each hand. It was clad in mana dense enough to visibly glow red. It was apparently quite strong, as that was what was holding it together.

“Is this the duke’s doing? No...”

That didn’t seem to be the case. Hadorious looked to be equally confused by this sudden arrival, and was staring up at the roof. Moreover, this golem didn’t look like the ones Suimei had seen so far in this world, which meant...

“So that’s the deal, huh?”

All of the speculation that had been brewing in the back of Suimei’s mind took form. He now knew for sure that Hadorious had kidnapped Elliot because he had some kind of connection to *them*. Having figured that out, Suimei smirked and dusted himself off. Meanwhile, Reiji took a brave leap forward.

“A mere giant made of dirt, is it?”

“Yo, wait, Reiji! Hold your horses! Don’t be so rash!”

Reiji simply assumed the golem would be an easy opponent, and that was certainly an easy trap to fall into. If it were simply an automaton made of dirt, it should be no match for Reiji’s orichalcum sword backed by the power of the Goddess. He could probably cleave it right in two—if it were a golem of this world, anyway.

But Suimei’s warning came a second too late to stop Reiji’s assault on the giant. He struck it with all his might, but the blow didn’t make a sound. In fact, Reiji didn’t feel like he’d hit anything at all.

“There’s no... Urgh!”

As if swatting away a pesky mosquito, the golem indifferently swung its arm. Reiji leaped to the side to evade. Having missed its mark, the golem’s arm smashed into the ground with a fearsome shock that rattled the pit of everyone’s stomach like the low rumble of distant thunder. It spat a cloud of dust, dirt, and pebbles into the air in its wake. Reiji then took decisive action without showing any fear. Aiming for the golem’s sluggish arm—judging that its joints would be the easiest target—he swung his sword boldly, but...

“Th-That doesn’t work either?! What’s going on here?!”

Just the same as before, the golem was unaffected by Reiji’s sword. Just the same as before, it retaliated by swinging its arm like it was swatting away an insect. And just the same as before, Reiji dodged the listless motion by a wide margin. If this continued, it would be a difficult opponent to take down.

When fighting an automaton, it was standard practice to defeat it by taking out its master. That said, there was no sign of its master in sight. It didn’t seem to be Hadorious, so going after him wouldn’t help. Moreover, if they tried to, the golem would likely cover for him. It seemed to be his ally.

That being the case, Suimei determined that their first priority should be knocking out this golem that was much tougher than it appeared to be. He went to take action, but when he did, Io Kuzami stepped in front of him, her arms fearlessly folded and her red muffler blowing in the wind.

“It’s about time that I take my turn— Huh?”

As Io Kuzami gallantly stepped forward to support her friends, she suddenly cowered down on the spot.

“Hey, what’s wrong?!”

She was shaking. Something had clearly happened. Judging that she was in harm’s way where she was, Suimei rushed to her side. By the time he got to her, she stood up...

“...Huh? What?”

Sounding a lot like a baffled Mizuki, she began looking around in bewilderment. Seeing this, Reiji called out to her as he continued dodging the golem.

“Io Kuzami-san? What’s—”

“WHAAAT?! Reiji-kun, how could you?! You know you’re not ever supposed to call me that, even as a joke! You do know that, right?!”

“H-Huh? Could it be... Mizuki? Is that you, Mizuki?”

“What are you talking about? Of course it’s me! More importantly, where are we? Weren’t we in a cave in the Alliance...?”

It seemed Anou Mizuki had at last made her return, and she’d chosen quite the stage for it. But... just what had happened to Io Kuzami? Reiji was plumb flummoxed, Mizuki was completely bewildered, and Suimei was absolutely dumbfounded.

“Mizuki, what the hell kinda timing is this? Wait a sec, is this revenge for what I said just now?! Your personality is too damn evil, you mysterious spirit!”

Suimei started yelling, but his words never reached Io Kuzami, who had seemingly vanished. Mizuki, however, heard him loud and clear.

“Hey, what’s up with you two all of a sudden?! Why are you talking about me like that?! Wait, why the heck is Suimei-kun even here?! In a suit, no less... Actually, the suit with the long coat is pretty cool...”

As expected, Suimei’s black suit tickled Mizuki’s chuuni heart. She beheld him with a fond gaze before something rather large caught her attention. That something, of course, was none other than the golem.

“Wh-Wha...?”

There was a moment of confounded disbelief. Her mind was unable to process the enormous thing in front of her, and she stiffened temporarily before growing excited again.

“Huh? Th-Th-This is a golem! What’s going on? Seriously, what?! What is this?! Suimei-kun, explain!”

“I will, but later! For now just shut up and be quiet! Also, get outta the way and fall back!”

“I-I’d like to, but...”

“Ah, damn it!”

Mizuki was still somewhat frozen up and still rather disoriented. She hardly knew which way to turn. Suimei let out an irritated groan, but used his magicka to gently pick her up and pull her towards him before taking her in his arms.

“Wow, you’re pretty strong, Suimei-kun, huh?”

“Shut your mouth. You’re gonna bite your tongue.”

Suimei then suddenly jumped back a great distance and prepared to use his magicka.

“Reiji, step aside!”

After shouting a warning to Reiji who was still engaging the golem, Suimei began the chant for one of his strongest spells.

“O flammae, legito. Pro venefici doloris clamore. Parito colluctatione et aestuato. Deferto impedimentum fatum atrox. Fiamma est lego. Vis Wizard. Hex agon Aestua Sursum. Impedimentum Mors.”

[Oh flames, assemble. Like the cry of the magician’s resentment. Give form to death’s agony and burst into flames. Bestow the one who obstructs me with a dreadful destiny.]

With the last verse of Suimei’s chant, Reiji took a great leap backward. Fiery magicka circles were already appearing around the golem. They grew brighter in the blink of an eye, and all of a sudden Hadorious’s courtyard was lit up like it

was mid-afternoon.

“Itaque conluceto! O Ashurbanipalis fulgidus lapillus!”

[So shine! Oh Ashurbanipal’s dazzling gem!]

Suimei then activated his keywords, and the cursed flames flooded the golem. They shot out of their magicka circles like flamethrowers, and the golem was instantly set alight. The golem was so tall that the flames that reached its shoulders looked like they threatened to catch even the night sky on fire. It took several moments for them to die down, but when they did... the golem was still standing as if nothing happened. Ashurbanipal’s flames were largely meant to be used against living beings, but...

“Fuck! It didn’t work at all?! Are you telling me that thing’s the real deal?! Nobody ever said anything about this kinda crap being here, damn it!”

“Wh-Wh-What?! That’s amazing! Suimei-kun just used magic! Amazing magic! Just when did you learn to do that?! Hey, hey! Tell me—”

“AAAAAAAAAH, DAMN IT! SHUT UUUUUP! I’m super busy right now, so seriously just keep quiet, okay?”

“But, but, but—you know, you know?”

“I don’t know! And no buts!”



Mizuki seemed to grow more and more excited in Suimei's arms. It was clear he'd had enough, but she didn't show any signs of calming down. In fact, she flashed a grin and spoke up again in stark defiance of Suimei's across the board gag order.

"Heeheehee... Oooh, Suimei-kun! Reiji-kun! Shall I teach you the weakness of a golem?"

The first to react was Reiji.

"You know this thing's weakness, Mizuki?!"

"Of course I do! A golem's weak point is the most basic of basic magical knowledge, you know? Tsk, tsk, tsk..."

Mizuki waggled her finger left and right like a doctor's assistant explaining something obvious.

"Okay, listen up. On the golem's forehead, there should be a talisman engraved with the word 'emet.' That means 'truth,' and that's the trick to the whole thing. See, if you take away the first letter, it becomes 'met', or 'death.' If you do that, the golem is no more! You can see its forehead, right? The talisman's right there."

Mizuki thrust her finger out so enthusiastically that Suimei felt like it should be accompanied by some cheesy sound effect. But she was right; there was definitely something affixed to the golem's forehead with characters carved into it. Reiji noticed it too.

"I see... Then if we can skillfully cut that talisman..."

"Nope, it's useless. Look carefully."

"Huh?"

When Suimei flatly denied what Mizuki had just suggested, Reiji was rightly confused. Mizuki seemed to be as well as she stared at the golem's forehead.

"But, um..."

"Huh? It's different from what Mizuki said? The letters are..."

"That's right. The power word is 'אל-מת.' This sucker wasn't created to have

anything to do with the truth.”

“Wh-What? But golems are supposed to...”

“How do I say this...? It seems you’re under all kinds of misunderstandings. What you’re thinking of is ‘emet’ written with English characters. And in Hebrew, it’s true that if you change ‘אל-מת’ to ‘מת,’ the original power word loses its... well, power. But do you really think anyone would use such an easily hackable password for their golem?”

The manufacture of golems and the spells to move them were considered secret arts. To freely make use of either technique required incredible skill. But the old “emet” trick was so outdated that even Mizuki knew about it. That being said, the gist of the idea was still valid—there was still a trick to the way they worked. But makers of golems and other automatons would use all manner of schemes to keep them from being easily overridden.

A standalone golem didn’t have the flexibility of one puppeted by a caster. They could mostly only perform preprogrammed actions and were thus fairly unreliable against magicians. As such, they were usually given general orders to attack or defend. And in this case, this particular one...

“S-So what does this one say, Suimei-kun?!”

“Just as I said before, it’s ‘אל-מת.’ There’s a line there that you don’t see in English that connects the words ‘God’ and ‘dead,’ so it’s more like ‘God is dead.’ It never was named after the truth, so even if you reduced it to just the ‘death’ part, it wouldn’t do anything.”

At least for the time being, it seemed that what Suimei was saying was getting across to Mizuki. That said, she was none too pleased about Suimei showing her up in the obscure knowledge department and folded her arms in displeasure.

“Wait a sec, i-is that even a thing?! Unfair! That’s totally unfair!”

“Shut up! Don’t make a fuss over every little thing! Besides, there’s no such thing as fair and unfair when it comes to magicka!”

There, Reiji spoke up with a serious expression.

“Then, Suimei... We can’t defeat that thing using the method Mizuki

suggested, right? What should we...”

“Forget that for now! It’s coming right at us!”

When Suimei looked in the direction Mizuki was suddenly pointing, though it was relatively slow, he saw the golem was closing in on them at a steady pace. Reiji once more charged in to engage it, but there was still no effect when he struck it with his sword.

“Shit, whipping out such a bothersome piece of crap... And ‘God is dead’? What’s with that? Nietzsche? Gimme a break. Is this supposed to be the *übermensch*?”

Suimei ran through his thoughts in a grumbling fashion, and he continued to let his gears turn as he watched Reiji tangle with the golem.

Last time it was Ars Combinatoria, and this time it’s a golem mimicking the übermensch? What the crap...? What’s going on here? None of this clicks together...

The caster who created the golem was likely the mirage man who’d appeared in the Alliance. Suimei had had a guess as to his identity, but this seemed to throw a wrench in the gears. Yet even so, if he used *Ars Combinatoria* which was descended from *Ars Magna Raimundi*, then there should really only be one possibility...

“No, I get it. If it’s influenced by Nietzsche, then it has to be relatively modern... Is that why it’s incorporating that?”

While Suimei continued mumbling to himself, Mizuki was starting to grow worried about their prospects in this situation.

“S-Suimei-kun, Suimei-kun! What about, um, backing up Reiji-kun or something?”

“Nah, that wouldn’t help— Yo, Reiji! Get away from that thing for a bit!”

Suimei shouted loudly at Reiji, who was also racking his brains about how to cope with the golem. He quickly complied and fell back, however, when he heard Suimei’s voice. Since the attacks from his glowing orichalcum sword weren’t working, he must have also understood that there was no point in

continuing this way. Suimei also fell back, carrying both himself and Mizuki to some cover. Before long, Reiji came jumping over to join them. Crouching down as low as they could, they put their heads together in a secret huddle.

“What a thing for Duke Hadorious to bring out...”

“No, it wasn’t him. Its master is probably somewhere else—that’ll be the guy who did it.”

“So someone else is involved?”

“Yeah, as we thought, that asshole is connected to those stupid Universal Apostles. On top of that, the spell used to create that trash heap isn’t from this world.”

As Suimei had noted, there were certainly golems in this world, but the one currently marauding in Hadorious’s courtyard was different. The Hebrew on its forehead was proof enough. When it had first appeared, Suimei had also caught wind of a strange mana presence—one unlike the people of this world. It was likely that man was watching the fight between Reiji and Hadorious from somewhere nearby, and had sent the golem out when it looked like Hadorious was at a disadvantage.

“Suimei, Mizuki was right when she said that thing was a golem, right?”

“Yup.”

“Of course I was! I mean, look at it! It totally looks like a golem! It couldn’t be anything but a golem!”

Mizuki both proudly and defiantly folded her arms. Suimei found her innocent attitude rather cute, but he had other things to focus on right now. Namely...

“Yeah, that’s a genuine golem. The one that comes up in the Old Testament, the invincible giant brought into being by a rabbi.”

“Invincible?”

“Giant?”

When the two of them questioningly repeated his words, Suimei nodded back at them. He then glanced over at the golem, which seemed to have stopped moving. Without any immediate targets, it was likely just idling. The reason it

wasn't assertively coming after them was probably because, just as Hadorious said, this was a bout. In other worlds, they were only testing the abilities of the hero and his companions. As Suimei was pondering that, Mizuki turned to Reiji.

"Reiji-kun, what was attacking it like?"

"W-Well... Even when I put all my strength into my swings, I didn't feel any feedback. It hardly felt like hitting anything at all, much less something hard."

"Exactly."

"Huh?"

"I said it just now, but that thing is invincible. If you felt feedback, that would imply there was a reaction. In other words, impact and shock. So if you felt none of that, it means that one centimeter or even one millimeter before you hit it, your strike was being suspended in the air."

"Wh-What?! Does that mean that nothing's going to work on it?!"

"No, it's not that serious. But I doubt any regular attacks will do any good. If we want to do some real damage, we'll have to compromise its invincibility before attacking."

"Do what...?"

"Yup, that's just how special it is."

Indeed, this golem was special. If it were any normal golem, they would have plenty of options. But this one was close to the original. And on top of that, if it was imitating the übermensch, then it meant that no human would ever be able to compare to it. Nietzsche had said that man must fall for the sake of the übermensch, meaning this golem was designed to have men fall before it.

Since twilight syndrome denied the existence of eternity, there was no such thing as immortality. One day, anything and everything would meet its destined ruined. By extension, there was also no such thing as true invincibility.

"But it's a damn pain that it's so close to it... Fundamentally, everything we try and do will end up nullified."

Mizuki's expression clouded over with unease upon hearing that grim prediction.

“How are we supposed to compromise its invincibility if everything we do ends up nullified?”

“No, if we can compromise that, everything’s fair game.”

“I see... So there’s some hope, huh?”

Even if it was only a little, Mizuki looked relieved. Reiji then turned his gaze on Suimei too. It was a reassuring, straightforward, refreshing, strong gaze that could bewitch anybody’s heart. And naturally, there was only one reason he was looking at Suimei that way.

“Suimei, Mizuki and I have no idea what we’re doing here. I want you to teach us how to defeat that thing.”

“Yeah, I got it.”

Suimei replied with a light smile as if telling him not to worry, and Mizuki laughed with a broad grin.

“It’s your job to come up with the strategy, after all. Right, Suimei-kun?”

“That’s right. Heh, it kinda feels like we’re back to old times.”

“That’s just a nice way of saying we get caught up in way too much troublesome crap. Have mercy, you guys...”

In response to his friends’ laughter, Suimei looked somewhere between exasperated and exhausted. But they were right. The tactical role naturally fell on Suimei, so he pulled himself together and began explaining. Taking a small twig in his hand, he whipped it about like a pointer as he spoke.

“Looking at that Hebrew word on the golem’s forehead, there’s no mistaking that it’s something from our world. And if it’s moving around without the help of trust, for the most part, that means it is relying on ruach.”

“Ruach?”

“That’s the Holy Spirit! It’s the Holy Spirit, right?!”

Reiji was completely lost on the subject, but the word seemed to conjure something in Mizuki. She excitedly waved her hand in the air like she knew the answer.

“No, not quite. Mizuki, the Holy Spirit you’re thinking of is ruach kadosh.”

“Whaaat?”

“The ruach I’m talking about certainly does come up in the Old Testament, but... Here it’s referring to the original meaning of the Hebrew word, or the many ruachs. The golem is modeled after a clay doll, but by breathing ruach carrying a rabbi’s wisdom into its nose, it is given the ability to breathe like a living being. It can also move around.”

Ruach was something like the power of magicians. Strictly speaking, it was categorized as mana containing a spell or a charm, and used breath to give orders. There were also golems that were powered strictly by power words like “emet,” but when a standalone golem was powered in such a way, it became a mostly unintelligent doll that didn’t know how to take commands. One powered with ruach, however, could be as intelligent as a living being.

“Hey, hey, Suimei-kun. This is super late, but...”

“What?”

“How do you know this stuff?”

It really was a late question, and Suimei was unable to stop the sigh that came in response.

“That’ll have to wait.”

“Mm, that will have to come later, huh?”

“Y-You two... That’s mean...”

As Suimei and Reiji flatly denied her any explanation, a teary-eyed Mizuki groaned. Reiji then seemed to turn his thoughts to coming up with his own way of defeating the golem.

“To make a robot stop moving, you need to do something about its legs or cut its motor... We need to pull the plug, basically, and do something about its energy source.”

“But as long as it is invincible, you won’t be able to hurt its legs or even attack its ruach directly. You can’t just put something heavy on it or physically bind it to get it to stop moving, either. No, the first thing we have to do is make its

existence inconsistent.”

“Wait, wait, Suimei-kun! Hang on! It still has a talisman, right? So can’t we just do something about that?”

“That also won’t work.”

“Why not?”

“I mean, it’s obvious... Like just now, it’s the first thing anyone would think of.”

“Huwah?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, duh. Literally, it’s the first thing anyone would think of. Do you really think they wouldn’t take countermeasures against that? The first thing a magician would do is make absolutely sure you can’t just rip the talisman off, and then they’d shore up the defenses in that area just to be safe. Also... That’s right. Just like certain movies, it could be treated like a microwave oven or an ally’s body or something.”

“A booby trap, you mean...”

“Bingo. The moment you put your hand on it, BANG! That might even be why something as obvious as ‘אל-מת’ is carved there—it’s a trap.”

Suimei pressed the twig he’d been holding against his forehead and pantomimed an exploding motion. The conversation reached a lull there, and Suimei immersed himself in thought.

“Think, Suimei... You’ve already got all the hints you’re going to get. It shouldn’t be that hard to defeat it. The real target isn’t the golem. It isn’t the motor behind the golem’s movements, either. It’s what defines its existence, the very idea that powers it. ‘God is dead.’ Those are Nietzsche’s words, and if that thing is the personification of the übermensch who slights the existence of God, it means it’s the avatar of an ideology advocating the rejection of God. There is no truth or good or evil in the world; only by living selfishly can the übermensch be created. Living properly in accordance with God’s teachings isn’t the true meaning of living properly. Disperse those that would stop you.

Trample over the poor and needy. Earnestly run forward for the sake of happiness. So... what's the counter to all that? An aged man who invites sleep? Or a child who pretends to be a badger? A monster who manipulates gravity? None of that's right, huh? The thing that opposes it in the most simplified way possible is—"

Ressentiment—something created by Christianity to affirm the coexistence of God and the wealthy. It was the notion of the false happiness attributed to the poor, a curse which gave a vested interest to the masses. Nietzsche spoke of it as the gnashing one's teeth in powerlessness, the curse of society. People would torment themselves over inequality until the day they died; it was an unbelievably deep form of resentment. *That* was what threatened Nietzsche the most.

That was the answer, but it felt weak. As long as the concept of resentment did not exist in this world, Suimei wouldn't be able to bring it about easily, and it wouldn't be accompanied by much power. That said, there was a good analogue. Yes, the pent-up resentment and envy of this world that the fanatically corrupt used...

"Liliana... I'll be borrowing your magic."

In short, it was dark magic. Misunderstood as an Element by Liliana and the mages of this world, it was magicka that made use of a concentrated body of malice. After telling Liliana not to use it as her mentor, Suimei dabbling in it would be setting a bad example, but this was a special case. After Suimei had been muttering to himself, his friends grew concerned over his sudden silence.

"Suimei?"

"...Yeah, I've got my thoughts in order. Reiji, I'll prepare the spell to compromise the golem's invincibility. You go on out and make sure you can line up a clean strike. I want you to move around and keep it busy. You got that?"

Using the twig as a pointer again, Suimei thrust it towards Reiji with a snap. And Reiji nodded back at him.

"Mm. If it's just moving around, then I'm fine. It's pretty slow and easy to read."

“Good. For the time being, I’ll start firing off some magicka to make them think we’re desperate. Things are probably gonna get a little chaotic...”

“W-Wait a sec! What kinda plan is that?! You said you’d prepare a spell, but you haven’t actually told Reiji-kun what he’s supposed to do?”

“Do I have to? If the spell works, it won’t be invincible anymore.”

“Yeah. And if it doesn’t work, we’ll just think of another way.”

“E-Even so...”

Mizuki still seemed reluctant, and Suimei spoke up as if he knew what she was thinking.

“You know, Mizuki, what am I gonna accomplish, exactly, by telling Reiji what to do? Do you want me to give him a play-by-play on how to slice and dice his opponent?”

“That might be difficult... I was kinda just hoping you would let me freestyle it.”

“Okay, fine... You boys are always like this.”

Mizuki let out an astonished and defeated sigh after hearing their little exchange, but seemed reassured. Really, this was nothing to be astonished about. Whenever they ran into trouble back home, this was basically the lax strategy they’d adopt. And as far as Suimei was concerned, they’d spent enough time on tactics. He poked his head out from cover and peeked at Hadorious.

“As I suspected, it seems the duke doesn’t intend on moving.”

“That guy said that he was testing me, so I don’t think he has any intention of really harming us. Since the golem has arrived as a new measuring instrument, I bet he won’t make a move until it’s defeated.”

Hearing that, Suimei snapped the twig he was holding in two.

“Alright, let’s defeat it lickety-split and slug him in the face. Twice.”

“Okay, sounds good.”

“Strategy meeting adjourned.”

“Then I’m off. Suimei, I’ll be counting on you for that spell. If it doesn’t work,

you owe me one.”

“Oh, leave it to me.”

Hearing Suimei’s confident reply, Reiji jumped out of cover and charged at the golem all according to plan. Watching him go, Suimei shot a flash spell at it too, but didn’t give any word of warning to Reiji. And Reiji never looked back. There was no need—they trusted in each other completely. After everything they’d been through together, they were battle brothers.

If it’s Suimei, even if he’s a cynical jerk, once he makes a decision, he’ll follow with everything he’s got. So if he’s the one supporting me, I know he has my back.

If it’s Reiji, once he puts his trust in someone, that’s absolute. He’d never doubt or falter, and that’s why he won’t look back... He’ll simply keep trusting in me and pushing forward.

It would be the bond they shared that gave them the upper hand here. Reiji was leading the golem around by the nose, and Suimei was slowing it down with magicka. Hadorious, on the other hand, wasn’t doing anything at all. The mirage man was likely around somewhere, but didn’t seem to be doing anything either. Was it because they genuinely thought Suimei and his friends were desperate? As the golem grew slower and slower, it seemed like things were starting to turn in their favor.

And with the absolute trust between Suimei and Reiji, there wasn’t a single opening to be had in their teamwork. They acted in perfect coordination like they’d planned the whole thing as they worked together towards the same goal. There would be no stopping them as long as they shared that connection.

“The golem, one of the ultimate arts of the Kabbalah... At first it was an artificial human created by a rabbi. It’s a being that faithfully obeys its creator’s orders, the result of the endless desires of man... And to fulfill your master’s desires, you were made to appear as perfection— No, to test our power and knowledge, you manifest the thoughts of Nietzsche.”

Unprompted, Suimei began deciphering the existence of this golem. It was like he was reinforcing his own ideas, strengthening the foundation for the phenomenon to come.

“God is dead... Those words from a dream—until today, those words have been interpreted in every possible way. They affirm the free will of man and deny his sins. Its foundations lie in the restraint of one’s swelling vested interests, and it’s a certain step in guiding humanity down a new path. And what brings that to the fore is that grandiose idea advocated by Christianity. That which is meant to encourage the weak, and makes them resent the strong—yes, resentment.”

Yes, what Christianity continued to imprint on the masses was exactly that. They used the discontent of the poor to confirm the existence of God. “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” The strong go to hell and the weak to heaven. The same idea was used to justify disparities in wealth. Poverty is righteous. Honorable. And in that sense, Christianity teaches ultimate righteousness.

It sounded good when using it to console and encourage the poor, yet it was really nothing but a means to quell any uprisings in regard to vested interests. It’s fine to resent the rich, but remain honorably poor. That will get you into heaven, and there you can at last look down on the rich in hell.

And so the poor would remain poor until death. Nietzsche despaired at that thought. He understood that living in this world meant such suffering, and in order to overcome that, he declared that God was dead. Honorable poverty would never bring the poor happiness. If the toil of those who worked their hands to the bone went unacknowledged, they too would go unacknowledged forever. And so he denied the traditional Christian values of the Western world.

In that case, the very idea of resentment was the binary opposite of his approach. Malice, envy, hatred, and the dark magic made of them would be the enemy of this golem. If the foundation of dark magic was the bitter emotions of the world, the envy of the weak towards the strong would definitely be included in that.

“Come, come, follow me. Use my blasphemous voice as a guide down your path. Oh swirling and surging wills that all in the world find abhorrent...”

After quickly putting a defensive circle at Mizuki’s feet, Suimei once more unleashed his mana to increase the effect of his magicka, raising his rank

temporarily. Drawing an inverted pentagram with his hand held out stiff like a blade, the mana that had been filling his surroundings was devoured by the awakened malice. It turned darker than the black of midnight, and from that black curtain of despair, more darkness bubbled forth.

Those dark bubbles were crystal clear manifestations of malice. They were the mystical force behind dark magic, and as more of them appeared, a dark murmuring began swirling in the area.

Those voices were... They were the shrill shrieks of a woman yelling out her bitterness. The hoarse voice of an old man taken by envy. The thick and vulgar voice of a man eternally embroiled by deep resentment. The irritable voice of an infant wailing.

Assaulting everyone's ears, the cacophonous torrent of voices pierced their brains, rang out, and transformed Hadorious's courtyard into a grim concert hall. When the audible malevolence fell around Reiji, he finally called out to Suimei with sense of urgency.

"S-Suimei! I know you mean well, but this is a little intense!"

"Suck it up! If I don't do this much, there won't be any effect! You have that divine protection of that Goddess or whatever, so I'm pretty sure you'll be fine!"

"You're *pretty sure*?! It won't be funny if you defeat your ally before defeating your enemy, damn it!"

As one would expect, even Reiji had apprehensions about what Suimei was doing. But while he continued to complain...

"Oh Darkness. Thou art the fleeting black that paints this world far and wide. Mix into magnificence, transform it all to sinisterness, and pluck all sprouts of fate. Eva, Zurdick, Rozeia, DeivikUSD, Reianima..."

And then came the keywords, extolling despair like a eulogy...

"Transient Hope."

What Suimei used to compromise the golem's invincibility was the very dark magic that Liliana had once used. And with his own rhetoric and savage names,

he strengthened it even further.

The darkness then bubbled so thickly that it crowded the air. The bubbles then turned sharply and all closed in on the golem. And just as Suimei planned, each one pierced the golem's body. As if its footing had suddenly become unsteady, the golem abruptly shook violently as it staggered. Seeing this, Suimei yelled out to his friend locked in combat with the automaton.

"That's it! Now, Reiji!"

"Yeah!"

Reiji shouted back in confident reply, and then...

"HAAAAAAAAAH!"

Reiji's piercing battle cry rang through the courtyard. With his sword at the ready like he was about to shoot a rifle and his back lowered, he let out a great roar. It was as if he were unfurling great fighting spirit or mana. He then fell quiet and silently pierced the golem's body with his brilliant orichalcum sword.

"—!"

Now he was only roaring in his heart as he slew his foe. After severing the desperate arm that swung at him in a single stroke, his sword penetrated the golem's enormous chest. It plunged deep into what he assumed would be the golem's core.

"RAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Reiji then let out another roar as he thrust his sword even deeper. The golem squirmed and tried to come at Reiji with its remaining arm, but Reiji poured everything he had into taking the mechanical beast down and paid it no mind.

"S-Suimei-kun, wh-what about backing him up...?"

"Nah. If I fired off a spell now, it would be dangerous for Reiji. Besides, the only one who could finish that thing off is Reiji."

"Only Reiji-kun...?"

"That's right. The ones who deny Nietzsche are consequently the idols of God. In the end, Nietzsche's focus was held captive by God, after all. And since Reiji is

divinely blessed, he's kind of the embodiment of that."

Indeed, Reiji bore the divine blessing of the Goddess Alshuna. He wielded a fraction of her power, which was a direct challenge to the idea that divinity was dead. Even in this world, the fortune and misfortune of the people was determined by a higher power. God or Goddess, it didn't really make a difference.

"Reiji! Drive it in! Drive it in and slam your mana into it!"

As if replying to Suimei's cry, Reiji focused all his mana into his sword and used it as an intermediary to drive it into the golem. Under the tremendous pressure, his shining orichalcum blade snapped where it was stabbed into the golem.

"A-Agh, my sword!"

"Reiji!"

In the middle of the shower of sparks like a lightning shower, Suimei used his magicka to tear Reiji away. The golem then regained its balance and stood up again.

"Ugh, it's no good. Just one more push... We're just one push short!"

"Making it so damn tenacious... Wait here a sec. I'll make a sword."

Pulling the vial of quicksilver from his suit pocket once more, Suimei was just about to conjure his mercurial katana again, when...

"No."

"Reiji?"

Without reflecting on the danger, Reiji stepped forth. Just what was he trying to do? Did he find that one push they needed to win? Or was this just the foolhardiness of a desperate hero? The answer soon came out of Reiji's own mouth...

"Give me power... Sacrament, answer my desires once more!"

As Reiji clenched the Sacrament tight in his hand, his body was swallowed by the blue light coming from the Lapis Judaicus.

Victory was certainly within grasp. The plan Suimei had worked out was perfect. He'd given them an opportunity to take out the earthen giant. All that was left was to take the final step and do it.

But Reiji hadn't been able to finish the job. The giant was still moving. In short, he alone didn't have the power to do it. There was only that one step left, but he fell one step short.

And so he prayed. He prayed for the Sacrament to answer him. He wanted it, and he wanted it badly. Once more—just once more—he wanted it to answer his voice.

Not a moment later, a world he'd never seen before washed over him.

It wasn't the long, long tunnel filled with muddy darkness he'd witnessed before. He should have been standing in the courtyard of Hadorious's mansion, but he now found himself in a wheat field bathed in the golden glow of the sun. It was like a scene straight out of a Western painting.

"Just where..."

When he looked around him, there was wheat as far as the eye could see. Far in the distance he spied a mountain through a hazy fog. He couldn't even be sure if it had a base that touched the earth. A mild breeze would sometimes blow, putting gentle, rustling waves in the ocean of sheaves.

Reiji slowly began walking with no particular destination. He had no guide to show him the way, but as he proceeded through the wheat field, a white arbor eventually came into view. It was just like some historic ruin that had fallen into decay. He got closer to take a look and saw a pure white pillar that had collapsed. There was also a white canopy made of stone, as well as a single table and a few chairs left behind.

"Just what is this...?"

Bewilderment seized him and he stood there stock-still in the midst of it all. He raised a hand and touched one of the pillars, and a sensation like the shock of a weak electric current ran through him.

The pure white pillars appeared to be made of stone, but contrary to his expectations, they weren't stone at all. They were metal. The moment he

touched one, he understood. For he recognized the sensation... It was the same thing he felt when he gripped the Sacrament.

“Then, all of this white stuff...”

The entire arbor was made of the same of the same material as the Sacrament’s blade. It bore a resemblance to white porcelain, but it was decidedly metallic. Reiji stared at it all in wonder, and his eyes fell upon the collapsed pillar...

“Oh my, to think a visitor would come here... No, in this case, I suppose I may be the visitor myself.”

Reiji suddenly heard a youthful voice from somewhere very nearby. He turned around to see a Scandinavian-looking man with a single scar running straight across his brow leaning back in one of the chairs.

How long had he been there? Reiji certainly hadn’t seen anyone when he’d first arrived. It was like the man had appeared out of nowhere, but it was also like he’d been sitting there forever. His arms and legs were all stretched out like he was simply relaxing.

The man with the scar had short, blond hair and blue eyes. He wore select pieces of armor over a white military uniform and held a spear in one hand. His figure was impressive and imposing. His left ear was long like an elf’s but split in three like a fork, while his right ear looked perfectly human.

“Ah—”

It suddenly set upon Reiji. He abruptly understood that this man wasn’t human. He had a humanoid figure, certainly, but his very presence was different... larger. The man seemed to find Reiji’s bewilderment interesting, however, and looked at him from several angles. Reiji simply stood there, perplexed by his gaze, but the man seemed to come to some kind of realization. His eyes suddenly went wide and he clapped his hands together.

“Oho! You’re a human youngster, huh? To think someone as earnest and straightforward as you would be chosen... It’s seriously the end of the world. Well, I suppose that was already in motion eons ago...”

The man with the scar seemed to find some oblique joke of his own making

quite funny and began chuckling to himself. Reiji was still rather confounded, and couldn't help asking...

"Um, who are you?"

"Me? I'm the owner of that thing you have. Well, if you're here, I suppose I should say 'former owner,' but I'm sure you get the point."

"That thing...?"

"Yes, that thing you're holding in your hand right there."

When Reiji looked down to where the man was pointing with his finger, he saw he did indeed have something firmly gripped in his hand. He was unconsciously holding on to it with all his strength. Reiji then looked up at the man, who nodded in response. He then looked down again and slowly uncurled his hand.

"The Sacrament..."

"That's right. The crystal sword Ishar Cluster."

It was the mystical weapon that had saved him when he fought against Ilzarl and again against Grallajearus—the Sacrament. It was a weapon he'd obtained in the strange world he'd been summoned to, and one Suimei had warned him was incredibly dangerous. It was currently in its ornamental form, just like it had been stored in the self-governed state for ages. This man claimed to be its former owner... but that was a bit hard to swallow.

"I heard... that the former owner of this artifact had passed."

"Yes, that's right."

"Is it...? Then if you're here right now, just what are you?"

"I wonder. But, as you said, there's no mistaking that I died. I remember it well. The vestiges of it are all in here."

The man tapped on his forehead with his index finger as he mustered a humble laugh. Reiji was a little perplexed at this man's openhearted frankness, but in a complete one-eighty, he suddenly looked very serious.

"Now, whether I'm dead or alive has nothing to do with you. More

importantly, come in.”

“S-Sure...”

The man gestured Reiji over to a chair, which he sat down in awkwardly. Coming into contact with the metal, as expected, he felt that small charge of current run through his body. The man then unrestrainedly plunked down in the chair across from him.

“Let’s see... Back in my time, this kind of thing didn’t happen, so it’s quite interesting to me. I suppose even in this form, I can still experience all kinds of things, huh? You may be witnessing something quite rare, you know?”

The man laughed heartily with a know-it-all gleam in his eye, but Reiji then moved straight to the point.

“Um, where is this?”

“Here? I wonder... I don’t really know myself. It could be the dead center of the Astral Line, or it could be inside the Sacrament’s blade, or it could be the twilight awaiting everyone at the very end of all things. I never got to find out. However, without a doubt, this is where those who are chosen by the source inevitably arrive. You and I are both here. That’s all it means.”

“The source...?”

Thinking back on it, Suimei had said something quite similar when they talked about the Sacrament. He said the Sacrament was where all consumed energy in the world arrived, that it would be the key to saving the world from heat death.

“Wait... Could you be a commoner? Fie! What’s with that?! A brat who isn’t even fully grown and knows nothing at all got a hold of that? And was *chosen*? Haaahh, it’s seriously the end of the world.”

“Um...”

“Take a look over there.”

Reiji had no idea what the man was going on about and simply waited patiently for an explanation. The man then let out a grand sigh and pointed behind him. Following his finger with his gaze, Reiji spied a black monolith.

“Is that... a gravestone?”

“Don’t call it that. Call it an inscription, an inscription! It should be a record of the guys who are still alive.”

Rising from his chair, Reiji went to take a closer look. He saw the word “Lapis” written in blue letters, as well as many other words written in all manner of languages. They seemed to fall into two categories: ones that were glowing and ones that weren’t. One glowing set of words captured Reiji’s attention in particular.

“This... This is my name.”

Indeed, Shana Reiji’s name was engraved on the black monolith in brilliant blue letters.

“That’s what you guys would call an acceptance, and a contract is now in place.”

“Acceptance? Contract?”

“That’s right. With this, when you up and die, you’ll happily be going over there to get swallowed by the whirlpool of blue light. That, or you’ll be sent to the well of twilight with those other guys...”

Reiji again had no idea what the man was going on about. He could intuit that it was extremely important, but deciphering it and finding any further meaning in it right now was completely beyond him.

“Hey, this is totally unrelated, but is the Kingdom of Zelvana still around?”

It was a name Reiji recalled hearing before.

“Yes. If I remember right, they’re still in the middle of a war.”

“So it’s still around, huh? Then it’ll probably be fine. As long as the knights are still kicking, things’ll work out somehow.” The man then chuckled to himself again. “So, just what did you come here for, boy? No, that’s a stupid question. You all come here for the same thing—the power to rebel. That’s what you’re looking for too, isn’t it? Power?”

He was right on the mark. Reiji had prayed to the Sacrament so that he could take down the foe he faced, and that was how he’d ended up here. That was it exactly, which seemed to indicate that the man before him now was none other

than the answer to his prayers.

“Um, I’d like you to teach me how to use this. I can’t seem to do it freely...”

“Use it, huh? And freely? How ambiguous. Do you want to master it? Do you want techniques from it? Or maybe you simply want the signature spell behind Ishar Cluster’s sword? You have to be more specific than that.”

“...I see...”

The man meant to say that Reiji’s desire was too abstract. Hearing those rather blunt words, Reiji’s shoulders fell. The man suddenly looked rather exasperated and spoke up once more.

“Hey, hey now... Don’t go making that kinda face. You’re a swordsman that made it all the way here, right? You came here with a single purpose, right? Besides, it’s not like you’ve reached a dead end in getting stronger, right?”

“To overcome the menace that threatens me... I want power no matter what. It doesn’t matter what it is, I just need the power to fight.”

Reiji spoke his true intentions—his heart—without the slightest hint of deception. The man responded with a grand sigh as he rubbed his ear.

“I guess there’s no helping it, huh? It’ll be a shame for you to go back empty-handed, too... Huh, I know. How ’bout I give you a single technique to take back?”

“A technique?”

“That’s right. But, hmm... the Circle Sept might be too advanced for you though.”

“Wha...?”

“Never mind, I’m sure Alpha Strike should be suitable enough.”

“Alpha Strike?”

“That’s right. It’s a technique that uses the residue of the Sacrament’s ability, you see.”

“Its residue...?”

That didn’t sound good, and Reiji’s skepticism showed on his face. Seeing it,

the man put on a bold smile.

“Well, even if it’s residue, it’ll still be an outrageous technique for you as you are now. Here, lend me that for a sec.”

The man held out his hand, and Reiji readily handed over the Sacrament. When he did, a dazzling blue light overflowed it and took the shape of a sword. In mere moments, the ornament had transformed into the Ishar Cluster.

“Look carefully now.”

Saying that, the man took on a posture that didn’t look like a stance at all. It was extremely casual... yet also sharp like an invisible blade. The man then gave a bold smile and the blue gem inside the Ishar Cluster, the Lapis Judaicus, unleashed a blue light. The two white rings of the sword also quietly began moving.

Just as Reiji thought the directionless wind in the area seemed to be gathering around them, a sound like thin ice cracking rang out. In the blink of an eye, several enormous pillars of blue crystal rose into the air. The man aimed for the center of them and thrust out the sword. And then, accompanied by a pale lightning, crystals began gathering at the tip of the blade and formed an enormous crystalline structure with the sword at its center.

With a thunderous roar that felt like it would shatter his eardrums along with the hands he was using to shield them, a shockwave erupted. Shifting over his attention to the enormous blue pillars of crystal, they were now smashed up, and dancing around in the air like diamond dust.

“Crystallized Las Shiara. It encases your enemies in crystal and then violently smashes them to pieces. Well, it’s a simple technique that doesn’t require much figuring out.”

“That’s... the Ishar Cluster’s Alpha Strike?”

Completely aghast at the display he’d just witnessed, Reiji stood there dumbstruck as a violent gust blew suddenly blew through the wheat field and the scenery began to grow hazy. It was like a portent of awakening from a dream.

“Whoops, looks like time’s up. You got what you wanted, so it seems like our

business here is settled. To say goodbye right after finishing my duty is a bit of a pain, but oh well...”

“T-Time’s—”

—*already up?*

He’d hardly scraped the tip of the iceberg. And as that panicked thought ran through Reiji’s mind, the man spoke up like he’d guessed precisely what Reiji was thinking.

“Don’t be so anxious. It’s a simple matter. If your opponent is strong, you just have to smack him with something even stronger. Easy peasy. Besides, your pal already set the stage to put an end to that rampaging doll, didn’t he? All that’s left is for you to let loose with all your might.”

“How do you—”

“You don’t gotta worry about that kinda thing right now. The Sacrament is a sword that can cut through all things—the only exception is the bond between people. Remember that.”

There, the man let out a delightful laugh. But after being told time was short, Reiji laid bare the anxiety still lingering in his heart.

“But the opponent this time around isn’t that easy...”

“Are you still worried about the charm on that doll? My goodness. Think it through, will ya? It takes quite a bit of effort to put something frayed back together, no? Just sock it to ’em before they can do it. Just like I did now, thrust forth the Sacrament, confine it in crystals, and smash ’em. End of story.”

The man seemed to be implying their conversation was over too, but Reiji still had more questions.

“What was that Circle Sept you mentioned earlier?”

“You’ll find out eventually. If you don’t have enough power, desire it. Wish for it and lend an ear to your inner voice. As long as you’ve been chosen by the source, the source will definitely respond to you.”

And with that, the man handed back the Ishar Cluster back to Reiji. Once he forcibly put it in Reiji’s hand, his figure gradually began to grow hazy. It was a

sign their time was indeed up. This dream would end shortly.

“P-Please wait a minute! I still don’t know how to turn this into a weapon!”

The man sighed.

“So you don’t even know that, huh?” His body was quickly growing hazier, but it seemed he could still speak. “I’ll only say it once, you hear? Listen carefully.”

And then...

“My crystallized spirit that glimmers with the blue light of the Lapis... Oh Crystal Sword, manifest in the parted world.”

“When you want the sword, just say that.”

“Manifest... in the parted world?”

“That’s right. When you give that answer to your inner voice, that thing will become a weapon.”

The man then flashed a knowing smile. It was time to go. However, he pointed his finger over his shoulder like he’d just remembered something.

“I’ll give you one last warning, alright? From here on, you may end up getting involved in some outrageous battles.”

“Outrageous battles? You mean against the Demon Lord and Evil God?”

“Unfortunately, that’s not what I meant. Demon Lords, Evil Gods, and things... If you try hard enough, you can defeat them all. What I’m talking about is something far more outrageous.”

“Something far more outrageous than Demon Lords and Evil Gods?”

Just what could be worse than those? A bewildered Reiji was at a loss for words.

“Well, maybe. There’s a teensy inconsistency in cognition between you and me, after all. Maybe—just maybe—the world I was in and the world you’re in are different. If not, however, it’ll be quite serious.”

With that, the man waved his hand and began walking off into the wheat field. Hot on his heels, Reiji called after him.

“Um...!”

“What? There’s more? I told you time was up, didn’t I?”

The man looked back one last time with a troubled expression. As for the final question Reiji asked him...

“Um, my name is Shana Reiji! Could you please tell me yours?!”

It was a question one normally asked at the beginning of a conversation rather than the end, but Reiji yelled it out with all his heart at the very last minute. The man stared at him in wonder, then burst into laughter.

“Bwah— BWAHAHAHA! My oh my, you got me there... That was an important detail to leave out, wasn’t it? My name is Ryzeia Rubern, but I won’t be too mad if you forget it. It’s a name that you have no business with anymore, after all.”

“Thank you very much, Ryzeia-san! I’ll never forget your name!”

“Then it’s Sir Ryzeia. If you’re going to use my name, then address me like a knight, boy.”

And there, Sir Ryzeia began walking again. His figure grew hazier by the second as he seemed to vanish into the blue light.

“Take care of my partner there. Do your best to put it to full use.”

Hearing those final words from the knight, Reiji’s consciousness too was drowned out in a blue light.



The overflowing blue light that Reiji’s shout seemed to summon immediately calmed down. Just what had happened? Suimei squinted his adjusting eyes to see Reiji standing exactly where he had been before.

“My crystallized spirit that glimmers with the blue light of the Lapis... Oh Crystal Sword, manifest in the parted world!”

Reiji then began shouting again. He was shouting to something or someone, but the object he held in his tightly-clenched fist responded. A blue light burst forth from his hand and took the shape of a sword.

“H-Hey! Just when did you learn to do that?!”

“Reiji-kun, is that be the legendary weapon we were talking about?!
Woooooow, it’s so cool!”

It was a porcelain white blade embedded with a blue gem—the sword adorned with the Lapis Judaicus, the crystal sword Ishar Cluster. It emitted a cold blue mist and pale sparks of lightning, and Reiji still held it firmly in his hand. It was overflowing with a quiet yet preposterous power.



“Reiji!”

“I’ll finish it off with this! Suimei, fall back with Mizuki!”

“Wait! We don’t know whether or not that thing can be finished by a Sacrament!”

“It’s alright! So go!”

“I appreciate the confidence, but where exactly is that coming from?!”

Suimei furrowed his brow and let out an agonized groan. He knew good and well he couldn’t stop Reiji when he was like this. Mysteriously full of confidence, Reiji jumped towards the golem that had started to recover itself without hesitation. A concerned Mizuki then turned to Suimei.

“Suimei-kun, do you mean Reiji-kun might not be able to defeat it with that weapon? It looks totally powerful and amazing and perfect...”

“The Sacrament is outrageously powerful, yeah. But that thing has a Lapis Judaicus embedded in it.”

“A Lapis what?”

“That blue gem around the hilt. It’s connected to the source, and it can take a small amount of mana to pull out all the energy that has ever been consumed in the world. It’s like an infinite, cyclical battery for the universe.”

“The source? Consumed energy? Battery for the universe...?”

Suimei was explaining things at the speed of light, and Mizuki could hardly follow along. She ended up with more questions than answers. A small trail of smoke trickled out one of her ears and her eyes started to spin. She looked like she’d simply broken down. Suimei then sighed and tried to dial it back.

“In short, the golem that Reiji is trying to finish off embodies some of Nietzsche’s ideology. And the weapon Reiji’s currently using affirms some components of that ideology...”

“So... that’s bad?”

“I don’t know. Just now I used the something opposed to Nietzsche’s ideology to compromise the golem, but now Reiji’s presenting it with something that

reinforces it. If Reiji can finish it off before the Lapis Judaicus can do that, we'll be fine. But if its invincibility is restored and we have to do that all over again..."

"Wait, it might restore it?"

"In the worst case scenario, compromising it won't work a second time after it's been reinforced and we'll be out of cards to play."

In the middle of explaining things to Mizuki, Reiji hastened his advance. He was charging straight at the golem. It looked as though he meant to attack it earnestly from the front without any attempt whatsoever to feint or throw it off. And, as if answering each hastening step, the Sacrament began pouring out its power.

"Hey, hey, hey! I told you that thing was super dangerous!"

"Wh-Whoa, that's...!"

A stiff wind blew through the courtyard. No, it was far too intense to call a wind. It swirled in around Reiji and gathered the blue light given off by the Lapis Judaicus before shooting off into the surroundings. Crystallized pillars then began to shoot up around Reiji and the golem as if to form some kind of icy temple. It was like watching upside-down icicles form at hyperspeed.

Pale lightning then started coming out of the tips of the enormous crystal pillars, crowning the icy temple. The golem was slowed enough by the lightning that its massive earthen body became trapped between the pillars. The icy temple was more like a prison for it. The bars were as transparent as crystal clear water, but shone blue like the brilliant Lapis Judaicus.

Now that his foe was trapped, Reiji suddenly pointed the sword at it and the blue light began to swirl. Blue crystals started to appear on the blade of his sword, eventually growing to form one large, sword-shaped crystal. Then...

"Crystallized Las Shira!"

The golem encased in crystal had no way of evading the attack. By that inevitable and absolute strike from the crystal sword, the golem and crystal alike were smashed to pieces as pale lightning scattered through the courtyard.

"He did it!"

Witnessing the golem's defeat, Mizuki raised a joyous cry. She and Suimei then approached Reiji, who was staring at the falling crystals with a satisfied expression.

"For the time being, good work."

"Mm, but..."

"Yeah, all we've defeated is that troublesome golem... I still haven't slugged that douchey duke, huh? And I've got a whole lotta questions for you, mister."

"Haha... yeah."

At that, Reiji's satisfied expression became gloomy for some reason. Suimei wasn't sure what was going through his mind, but when he turned to look at Hadorious, he also had a grim expression on his face.

"To break that man's technique... You've exceeded my expectations."

"Don't be stupid. You can't say we broke it. You set it up intentionally so that its weak point would be the hero's power, didn't you? Start to finish, this was nothing more than some damn test..."

It was too convenient that the golem's weakness would be the hero's divine power. That had to have been on purpose, and Suimei figured it was likely that they were simply using it as a means to see how much the hero's power had developed. He was fuming to himself in irritation, but suddenly stopped and stood up straight.

"Suimei?"

Ignoring the confused Reiji for a moment, Suimei spoke up in a courteous tone.

"I think it's about time that you make an appearance. Or, by hiding yourself, do you perhaps mean to say that you don't yet acknowledge our abilities?"

Reiji, Mizuki, and Hadorious all looked around in confusion. But in response to the courteous magician, the man Suimei was calling out to—the mirage man—quietly replied.

"My, my... Allow me to say that was well done, disciple of Lord Nestahaim. It is only proper that I give you my praise for finding the answer faster than I

thought you would.”

Offering those words of praise, a man with long, wavy, light purple hair and a large build appeared on top of the roof of the Hadorious mansion. He promptly jumped down and gently landed on the ground with none of the impact one would have expected from such a leap. He then went and stood next to Hadorious.

“Gottfried-dono...”

It seemed that Hadorious hadn’t expected to see him—or, at least, hadn’t expected to see him reveal himself—and stood there with a surprised look pasted on his face. Seeing him like that, the mirage man—Gottfried—pointed his light purple eyes at Suimei, and responded to Hadorious in a composed manner.

“If he conforms to etiquette, then I must oblige and show myself. There is no need for you to be timid, Lucas.”

As Gottfried stepped forward, Hadorious answered him with a light bow. Suimei, meanwhile, put his right hand across his chest and took a step forward, his red eyes meeting Gottfried’s violet gaze.

“My name is Yakagi Suimei. Alongside the great magician king Nestahaim, progenitor of our magicka, I am one of many seeking the transient truth. Though it is discourteous to ask the name of a master and pioneer of the ways of magicka, I would like to inquire your name.”

And in response...

“My name is Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz... Though my body is soaked in great mystery, I am one whose name has withered.”

“The philosopher who used God...”

Suimei grit his teeth when he realized he’d been right on the money. He’d had an inkling after their encounter in the Alliance, but that was exactly the name he was expecting to hear. He was far superior in rank than Suimei, a magician who could be classified as one of magicka’s forerunners. A magician who could rival the Greed of Ten. The mirage man, Gottfried, flashed a calm, thin smile.

“It is fine for you to step aside, disciple of Lord Nestahaim. As you are now, you cannot keep me company. If you wish to face me, take back your original power or obtain a suitable one before you come to me.”

“Are you telling me to come then?”

“Of course. This is my path in this world. If you wish to get in my way, finish what it is you must, and then come stand before me.”

After those words to Suimei, Gottfried turned his gaze over to Reiji. Or rather, to the Sacrament in his hand.

“Hero, that is Sir Ryzeia’s sword. Use it with care.”

“You know about this... No, do you know that man?”

“Yes. That man and I were both summoned here.”

Gottfried flashed something of a nostalgic smile, and Reiji continued to question him.

“Why are you people doing this?! Do you think it’s alright for this world to fall into the demons’ clutches?!”

“I do not think that at all, but it is still too early to give you all the answers.”

“Too early?”

Suimei raised an eyebrow.

“If you answer now, then it will become an obstacle?”

“Quite so,” Gottfried replied with a nod.

“So it’s not like you’re lending a hand to the demons or anything, right?”

“Certainly not. We recognize the demons and the Evil God are things that must eventually be destroyed.”

“Can I believe you?”

“Indeed. However, if you would like to hear more, then...”

They should once more put all their strength into standing. And while they were in the midst of this exchange, everyone else—Felmenia, Lefille, Liliana, and even Titania, Elliot, and Hatsumi—all appeared.

“Tia!”

“Reiji-sama, is this the mastermind?”

As Titania came to Reiji’s side, she pinpointed Gottfried as the ringleader and narrowed her eyes at him. Gottfried had a particular indescribable atmosphere to him, which was probably what had led her to this conclusion. But her gaze quickly turned to the man standing next to him.

“Your Royal Highness.”

Hadorious quietly bent a knee, and Titania glowered.

“Duke Hadorious, if you stand with this man, I shall take the liberty of assuming you now stand against my father?”

“I swore never to serve two masters. My only lord will forever be His Majesty King Almadious.”

In response to Hadorious’s serious reply, Titania stayed completely silent as she assessed the situation. Gottfried then turned to address her.

“You are the princess of this country, then?”

Titania remained silent. Gottfried then nodded.

“It is just as Lucas said. His sword is proudly sworn to your king and no one else. If I were to turn my blade on your father, Lucas would turn his on me without hesitation.”

Hearing those words, Titania was quite unsure... Perhaps she didn’t want to, but she begrudgingly accepted.

“Let us withdraw.”

“Withdraw?”

“There is nothing else we can do here. Though we may judge the duke, there is nothing to punish him for. Elliot-dono stayed of his own accord in the end.”

Reiji was slightly bewildered at Titania’s suggestion, and turned to Suimei.

“Suimei, do you think that’s alright...?”

“Honestly, I don’t know what we should do. I still want to punch that guy, but

now that we're standing on ceremony, I'll have to wait. This situations' far too complicated."

"But is this okay...?"

"This ain't just about winning or losing. What was the victory condition here in the first place? We've accomplished what we set out to do, so anything else will just be excess meddling. If we were carrying our momentum from before, it would be one thing, but..."

The fight had died down and they were now talking things out—for the most part—like rational adults. There was no socially acceptable excuse to escalate things again. As Suimei made a bitter expression, Gottfried turned to Reiji.

"Hero, allow me to give you a single warning."

"What is it?"

"If you do not want to lose yourself, then rebel against the will of the Goddess. There is no other path before you than that."

"I'm fighting by my own will! There's nothing more to it than that!"

Having had a similar confrontation with Hadorious early, Reiji unintentionally shouted in response. Meanwhile, a concerned-looking Felmenia turned to Suimei.

"Suimei-dono..."

"We're done here. We really can't do anything more. Let's go, everyone."

Suimei looked at each of his comrades in turn, and Hatsumi let out a dissatisfied sigh.

"What a stale stalemate to end on..."

"We don't have a choice. We'll have to save slugging that man for some other time."

Lefille too sounded disappointed with this outcome. Like Suimei, she'd also been looking forward to giving Hadorious a good beating. But collectively acknowledging that there was nothing to be gained from staying, they all agreed to leave.

Gottfried stepped aside, and after calling out to Hadorious, the two of them entered the mansion. Seeing them withdraw, Reiji turned to Suimei.

“Suimei, he said Leibniz or something, but he didn’t mean...”

“That’s right. The mathematician and a philosopher who, to prove his own theory, became known as the man who used God.”

Even if that name wasn’t particularly famous, he was still an icon of his age. On the surface, he was a mathematician, philosopher, and scientist. And behind closed doors, he was a practitioner of mysteries—a genuine renaissance man of intellectual pursuits. Yes, that was Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, the inheritor of *Ars Magna Raimundi*. The very same man who advocated *Ars Combinatoria* to the world.

Epilogue: A Brief Parting

In Kurant City, Suimei and the others managed to accomplish their goal of rescuing Elliot. And after confronting Hadorious and Gottfried, they knew they stood a good chance of fighting them... but were faced to retreat when the opportunity eluded them. It felt like a defeat, and the group of them so returned to the imperial capital.

They were all stewing on the happenings at Hadorious's mansion in their own way, though no one seemed brave enough to dare a word on the subject. But once they were back in the capital, they all gathered at Suimei's base. They were joined by Elliot and Christa, and even Graziella, who had finished up with her post-combat obligation.

"I truly cannot thank you enough."

Attired in her religious robes, Christa humbly lowered her head before Suimei and Reiji. She was disheartened over having to stay behind and wait for their return, but when Elliot came back safely, her heart was quite relieved.

"Yes, we ended up causing you quite a bit of trouble this time, so I would also like to show you my gratitude. Thank you."

Elliot also offered his thanks as he went around shaking everyone's hands. He eventually came to Reiji.

"In any event, I'm glad you're alright, Elliot."

"I'm in your debt. I will repay you properly and in full one day, so do call on me if you need anything."

"Haha, it was the other way around last time, so let's just call it even."

"That will not do! It would tarnish my honor if allowed my debts to go unpaid. Besides, the one who owes me for that is not you, but—"

Elliot stopped there and turned a grudging gaze towards Suimei.

"What? Don't I get a handshake?"

“What’s that? You want to shake hands with *me*?”

“Yeah, you’re right, I’ll pass. Maybe if you were a cute girl...”

“Hmm? Despite looking like you have no immunity to women, you’d say such a thing? Could it be that you’re forcing yourself?”

“Shut it! Sorry ’bout that!”

Elliot sneered a little, but Suimei shrugged his shoulders. Elliot then regained his composure and shook his head sullenly.

“But to think that you would be the one to save me... This must be the biggest blunder of my life.”

“Sure is, pal. With this, we’re even over that thing with Reiji, you hear?”

“You really do have an uncouth way of speaking.”

“Shut it, prettyboy. Unlike you, I was raised normally.”

There, Elliot and Suimei began trading insults. Elliot had more to say with his aloof attitude than Suimei did with his foul-mouthed sharp tongue, but judging that this would never come to an end on its own, Reiji intervened.

“Now, now, both of you, let’s leave it at that and move on to the main event.”

“You’re right. I must say I’m quite curious about this.”

“It *is* the reason we all gathered here today.”

Elliot and Suimei both seemed amenable to the change in topic, and the group collectively walked over to the far end of the open space outside of Suimei’s house. It was the same place where Felmenia had constructed the pool previously, but right now, rather than a large water tank, there was a large magicka circle on the ground. Graziella had only heard about Elliot’s rescue so far, so she squatted down in front of the magicka circle and gazed at it with deep interest.

“This is... the magic circle to return you to your world, is it?”

She must have investigated similar formulas before, because she identified it almost immediately. Graziella read through the magickal inscriptions in the circle and reached out to touch it. The one to respond to her, naturally, was

Suimei.

“Yup. So don’t go taking advantage of the fact that I’ll be away to tamper with it or erase it, you hear me?”

“You’re the shrewd man who came up with this. You’ve already established a way to come and go, no?”

“Well, yeah.”

When Suimei had completed the magicka circle of returning, he’d made a mental note of the coordinates so that he could come and go as he pleased. If he’d simply relied on the magicka circle remaining undisturbed even outdoors, he likely would have been stranded. And to prevent exactly that from happening, he had to set up several failsafes, some of which were quite troublesome.

“But I honestly never thought the pool would give me the last piece of the puzzle I needed...”

“We must thank Lady Felmenia for that.”

“Yeah, but it’s kinda ironic.”

Felmenia was the one who summoned them to this world, and she’d also been the one to complete the picture for them to return home. Suimei didn’t know quite what to say about it. But upon hearing Lefille say she deserved thanks, Felmenia...

“Suimei-dono! Please praise me!”

She wagged her tail and bounced up and down like an excited puppy. Suimei gave a fed-up sigh.

“Hey, I praised you plenty already, didn’t I? Is it still not enough?”

“Heehee, I think once a day would be perfectly fine. Simple praise will cost you nothing—rather, it will yield you a profit.”

Suimei didn’t quite know what he’d be making a profit off of, but he was already quite sick of thanking her about ten times a day.

“Yeah, yeah, thanks a lot... As one would expect of the great White Flame

Felmenia-sama...”

“Hmph, that is far too halfhearted!”

Felmenia flailed her arms about wildly upon not getting her way. After Suimei’s identity as a magician was revealed, it seemed she was no longer concerned about appearances in front of the others, and quite often let her inner child shine through in moments like this.

“Well, anyhoo... Hey, cheer up already, will you, Mizuki?”

Setting aside Felmenia for the moment, Suimei turned to Mizuki who was in a full-fledged pout. Her cheeks were puffed out as far as they could go.

“Hmph! Suimei-kun, you dummy! Idiot, moron, jerk! Just blow up a spell and drop dead already!”

Indeed, Anou Mizuki could hardly contain her resentment. Hearing it, however, Felmenia spoke up in a somewhat bitter tone.

“Mizuki-dono, that would be somewhat problematic... We are going along with him, after all.”

“I don’t care. I’m sure he can blow just himself up with pinpoint accuracy.”

As Mizuki insisted that Suimei should meet a terrible fate, this time Lefille was the one to fold her arms and speak up in a troubled tone.

“But still, if that happens, we wouldn’t be able to return anymore...”

“I still don’t care! In fact, I don’t even care what it is! I hope something horrible happens to him—and only him!”

Suimei let out a grand sigh upon realizing Mizuki’s mood was showing no signs of improving. After the fight at Hadorious’s mansion, the mysterious spirit hadn’t returned and Mizuki was back to her usual self. Suimei had then had to confess he was a magician, and this was the result.

It was predictable, really. The day he’d told her, she naturally didn’t listen to anything else he said on the carriage ride back. In fact, she’d only just started talking to him again a few hours ago. The fact that he’d kept being a magician a secret for so long... Or was she just angry that he’d rejected her chuuni heart all this time? He’d been monopolizing cool stuff and hiding it from her, and that

was unacceptable. It was apparently an offense punishable by death, and for that, Suimei had been apologizing nonstop.

“That’s why I said I’m sorry. Come on, forgive me already...”

“Shut it! Keep apologizing to me! Until you die! No, forever!”

“That’s a little...”

“Ugh, you jerk! Meanie, scrooge, buttmunch!”

After disparaging him like a child, Mizuki once more went back to pouting. When she fell quiet, Elliot turned to Suimei again.

“So, are you going now?”

“Yeah. We’re headed back to clear up some anxieties that have been building for a while.”

“Yeah, like school...”

“And friends...”

“Mm, and our families...”

Hearing Suimei talk about building anxieties, the ones who reacted were none other than Reiji, Mizuki, and Hatsumi. There were things they were all worried about... Things they’d actually been trying not to think about until just now. What would await them back home? It was difficult to imagine. And while they were all contemplating this, Lefille spoke up.

“Sorry. We said that we would all go together, but I think I’ll stay behind.”

“So suddenly...? What’s... wrong?”

Liliana opened her lone eye in surprise, but Lefille returned her a determined expression.

“Nothing. I was just thinking I should pick up on the training I’ve been missing out on.”

“You’re going to stay behind and train?”

“Yeah. If I’m going to take care of my own anxieties, I don’t think there are any shortcuts. As a swordswoman, the only way for me to get stronger is swing

my sword.”

She had a very logical point, but Suimei disagreed.

“No, you should absolutely come along with us, Lefi.”

“Why is that?”

“Nothing big. I just think you should meet with the instructor.”

“Instructor?”

“My dad?”

Suimei nodded to both Lefille and Hatsumi in turn. The instructor Suimei was talking about was Hatsumi’s father, and the head of the dojo that Suimei went to. He stood at the peak of the Hundred Swords of the Martial World, and was one of the Four Great Sages of the Arts—the Sword of Four, Kuchiba Kiyoshiro. If Lefille really wanted to achieve greatness with a sword, she definitely could stand to learn a thing or two from him.

“The instructor is one of the monsters from my father’s generation. I think you’d probably get something out of even just talking to him.”

“I agree.”

Hatsumi, who had fought Lefille before, backed up Suimei. This seemed to spark Lefille’s interest, and she turned to Hatsumi with a keen expression.

“Lady Hatsumi’s father, is it? I’ve heard mention of him from time to time, but... how strong is he really?”

“Come on...”

“Yeah, it’s hard to put into words...”

Suimei and Hatsumi both averted their eyes. The head of the Kuchiba School of the Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani, Kuchiba Kiyoshiro. He was an uncommon swordsman who could perform the inhuman act of cleaving a high-rise vertically with a single swing of a katana. He was so far beyond simply “strong” that it was indeed difficult to articulate.

“So that’s how it is. You’re coming, Lefille. It’s already been decided”

“I got it, I got it.”

Grabbing Lefille's arm, Suimei pulled her over to the magicka circle. When he did, Felmenia hopped over with light steps as well and stood next to him too.

"I am looking forward to seeing Suimei-dono's world."

Following after her, Liliana and Hatsumi also walked over.

"I'm also... looking forward... to seeing it."

"We've got a ton of animals. When we get there, should we go to a zoo?"

"A zoo...?"

"It's a place where they raise all sorts of animals from all over the world."

Hearing Hatsumi say that, Liliana's lone eye shot wide open and seemed to sparkle. There was already a long list of places that she could think of that she wanted to go. The zoo, pet shops, petting zoos, cat cafes, the works. And while the girls were getting excited about their future prospects, there was a single good-for-nothing who couldn't read the room and dumped cold water all over the mood.

"We're not going there to play around. It's fine to relax a little, but we're not going to be sightseeing. We're going to—"

"Suimei, you're... so thickheaded."

"Yeah, Suimei. You're as dense as bricks. Get a clue."

"This is definitely no good... But it's also so very Suimei-kun."

"Suimei-dono, I am sorry, but I cannot defend you here..."

"Dummy! I told you he's a dummy!"

"Ugh..."

Hearing the others shower Suimei with criticism, Mizuki joined in. Reiji was the only one who took a lighthearted approach to the situation.

"Haha, come on, Suimei. Don't be so serious."

"Shut it, you. Must be nice to awaken sparkly new powers out of nowhere and have it easy."

Suimei had never expected Reiji to whip out the Sacrament's power at the

eleventh hour and achieve an exceptional level up. He now had an artifact in addition to the Goddess's power. It felt like it was getting kind of cheaty. However, Reiji didn't seem to think so. His expression clouded over somewhat at the mere mention of it.

"I don't really think I had it all that easy though..."

"Even though you're now able to use that ridiculous power?"

"...Am I really hearing this from you, Suimei? After that stunt you pulled?"

Reiji pointed a reproachful gaze on the hypocritical Suimei, but it hardly sounded like there was any energy in his voice. Deep within Reiji's eyes, Suimei could see that he was brooding over something.

"Hey, Reiji, what's wrong? You've got no pep to you, you know?"

"Nothing. There's just something on my mind."

"Something on your mind?"

And Suimei had an idea of what that something was.

"You worried about what that guy said? That's just a common psychological scare tactic, you know? I don't think it's something you actually need to worry about."

"That's probably true, but it's still sticking around in the back of my mind."

Suimei was referring to Gottfried's warning about Reiji losing himself to the Goddess. Suimei didn't personally quite know what to make of it either. The subjugation of the Demon Lord had been foisted onto them so quickly... It was entirely possible the heroes had been manipulated or toyed with. Thinking about it that way, Suimei felt like there was plenty of cause for concern, and he could only imagine it was that much worse for the person in question...

"As I thought, you should go back too. Come back home and smell the roses, and you'll feel better in no time."

"I'm sure I will, but..."

"This may sound strange coming from me, but rest is important, isn't it? I had a chance to relax before heading off to Kurant City and it made a world of

difference. It was all thanks to Menia, actually.”

“Saying it was all thanks to me is a little... Eeheehee.”

Felmenia started chuckling with a dopey smile on her face. Ignoring her, Suimei focused on Reiji.

“So come on. Let’s go back for now, okay?”

“I understand what you’re saying, but I still have to stay behind. If we go too, there might not be enough forces here to stop it if something serious goes down.”

“But you know...”

“Sorry. Let me be selfish here.”

Reiji was being much more stubborn than Suimei had expected. Was he just that worried about this world? That was probably part of it, but Suimei couldn’t help wondering if this was related to what Gottfried had said. But as long as Reiji had made up his mind, there was no point in trying to dissuade him.

“Yeah, okay... If you’re sure, then it would be unfair of me to argue, huh?”

“Mm. Thanks for understanding.”

Reiji gave his best friend a smile. Suimei nodded, then turned to the still-pouting Mizuki.

“Mizuki, are you sure about this? You don’t want to go back either?”

“I’m staying. Reiji-kun is staying, so I’m staying.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

Mizuki offered the apologetic Reiji a smile, and Suimei spoke once more.

“Everything is back to normal, so I think it’s a good time to go back though.”

Suimei wasn’t sure what was wrong with his casual remark, but Mizuki’s face suddenly went pale. It took him a second, a second longer... And then it clicked. He quickly averted his gaze and apologized when he realized what had Mizuki so horrified.

“Er, sorry... Forget what I said.”

“Enough! Please, I don’t want your sympathy!”

Covering her face with both her hands, Mizuki hung her head. The source of that sorrow was, obviously, *that*. Suimei and Reiji knew exactly what *that* was and didn’t say anything more, but naturally, those who didn’t know of Mizuki’s past in detail were curious.

“What is it, Mizuki? Is Io Kuzami, Holy King of the Heavens, all that bad?” asked Graziella.

“We had some hardships, but Io Kuzami-dono saved us more than once. I also do not have all that bad of an impression of her,” echoed Titania.

Since they didn’t know that the Holy King of the Heavens “Io Kuzami” was part of a past Mizuki wanted to forget, their attempts at being considerate only came off as cruel. Meanwhile, Mizuki being Mizuki, she started hyperventilating as she repeatedly breathed in and out. And even as she was doing that, the two girls continued to try and console her when they really should have just stopped...

“Io Kuzami’s magic was—”

“Mizuki, there is nothing to be ashamed of about being possessed—”

“NOOOOOOOOOOOO! Graziella-san! Tia! For the love of god, don’t unravel any more of my BLACK HISTORYYYYYY!”

Unable to bear it any longer, Mizuki burst into tears at her wits’ end.

“No? But you played such a great role...”

“Yes, you did.”

“Great role?! What role?! Just what did I do?!”

Mizuki begged for answers, but Graziella and Titania...

“Um, you see...”

“That’s, well...”

“Don’t avert your eyes now! All your persuasive power vanished at once!”

And while that was going on, Reiji looked towards Suimei with a bitter smile.

“Hey, Suimei’s got a pretty good impression.”

“Hold the phone, Reiji! Don’t you dare put me the spot like that!”

“No, no, I heard it myself back at the encampment. You had that maniacal laugh and everything.”

There, Mizuki hit her limit. Her eyes rolled back into her head and she collapsed on the spot, frothing at the mouth.

“Stop... Don’t dig it up... If you don’t stop, I’ll die. I’ll just die...”

Realizing the extremity of the situation, Suimei knew things really would get bad if they didn’t change the subject.

“Well, whatever... It’s about time I activate it.”

“Wait a sec, Suimei! Are you running away?!”

“I’m not running or anything, I just have to go—so bye! Be nice to Mizuki while I’m gone!”

“Wait, you coward!”

As Reiji yelled at him, Suimei stuck out his tongue at him and urged Felmenia on.

“Menia, I’ll leave the assistance up to you. Let’s get going before it gets weird, alright?”

“Y-Yes, leave it to me.”

Ignoring that things had already gotten weird, Suimei and Felmenia activated the magicka circle together. Selphy, who was there to see Hatsumi off, waved to her.

“Have a safe trip, Hatsumi.”

“Yeah. Once I finish what I need to do over there, I’ll come right back. Give my regards to Gaius and Weitzer in the meantime.”

In complete contrast to the other exchanges taking place, the mood between them was rather calm and gentle. Reiji finally relented when he saw the

magicka circle beginning to glow, and turned a much softer look on Suimei too.

“Take care. I know I’m imposing a bit, but I’m leaving things on that side to you.”

“Suimei-kun, you should know already, but you better bring me a souvenir! How good it is will determine the number of apologies you owe me!”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it.”

Both sides—both on and off the magicka circle—waved goodbye to one another. And before long, Suimei and the others were swallowed by a blue beam of light that would carry them all the way from this strange world to the strange modern world of Planet Earth.

Afterword

It's been a while, everyone! Gamei Hitsuji here.

I'd like to offer my sincerest apologies for making everyone wait so long this time... Er, I mean, making you wait so long again. I'm sorry every time it happens.

In any case, our story this time around is *the* swimsuit edition as well as Suimei-kun and Reiji-kun's first tag battle. Also, there's Reiji-kun's second stage awakening! Of note other than that, this is my first volume with a new editor. I suggested maybe doing a swimsuit story to the illustrator Ao Nekonabe-sensei, who immediately retorted, "I think the editor will definitely reject that, right?!" (Ha!)

Anyway, the enemy this time around is the guy everyone wants to punch, Duke Hadorious. Mizuki also makes a return and goes back to being dead weight. And then, and then, there's the impossible arrival of a golem! (Cool, right?) This time it's a golem exhausting the techniques of the Kabbalah, which ends up being quite a troublesome enemy, huh?

I know that we're all probably sick of enemies that show up and end up being small fries or standard fare, but I felt like writing about a Kabbalah golem... so I made it a little extra powerful.

This time around, I also touched on Christianity and Nietzsche. These things aren't my personal philosophies, they're just here to set the stage and heat up the story, so don't read too much into that. Take them as the philosophies of the characters in this world.

It's not like it's completely off the mark, really, but in the end, it seems like it gives off an absurd impression, so...

Now then, next time we'll be rushing into the long-awaited modern day arc! Look forward to it!

But for now, let me offer my thanks. To my new editor Y-sama, the illustrator

Ao Nekonabe-sama, the designer cao-sama, and the proofreading company
Oraido-sama, thank you all so very much.

-Gamei Hitsuji

Introductions and Interviews

Part 1: Felmenia and Lefille

On a certain day at his base in the imperial capital, Yakagi Suimei was sitting together with his best friends Shana Reiji and Anou Mizuki. They were all seated on one side of a long table, facing the door to the room and with their backs to the window. It looked like they were preparing to give job interviews.

“Okay... Next person, come on in.”

There wasn't an ounce of enthusiasm in Suimei's voice as he called out to someone in the hall, who quickly opened the door and entered. It was Felmenia Stingray, looking somewhat nervous. She stood before the three friends, took a deep breath, and—in an unexpected turn—pulled up her hood and pulled out her staff, which she rarely ever used.

“I'm Felmenia Stingray, sixteen years old! I'm a former court mage of the Kingdom of Astel, and actually a former mage in general! I'm a beginner who's only just taken my first steps on my magickal journey, but I'm aiming to become a great magician capable of both chanting and fighting!”

“Why do you sound like you're about to sing and dance for us...?”

Felmenia was so cheerful that it completely detracted from the serious stage she'd set. And, eyeing her with a completely indifferent stare, Suimei didn't fail to comment on that.

Really, Suimei had no idea how things had come to this in the first place. It was only just the other day that he'd revealed his secret identity as a magician to Reiji. Shortly thereafter Hatsumi had arrived, and now Mizuki was finally back to normal too. Life in another world had simply been one long string of unexpected developments recently, and it was getting hard to keep things straight.

As such, Reiji had suggested that everybody reintroduce themselves. It was a

nice, friendly way to make sure everyone was on the same page. Of course, with Mizuki around, things could never be that simple. She'd put her own spin on Reiji's idea, and suggested they make things a little more interesting than just boring old self-introductions. And that, in a nutshell, was how things had escalated to their current state.

"Was that alright?" asked Felmenia.

After reintroducing herself, Felmenia lowered her hood and looked to the faux committee for feedback. Mizuki spoke up first, giving her a wink and a thumbs up.

"Yeah! Good job, Felmenia-san! That's exactly what I wanted!"

"Th-Thank you very much, Mizuki-dono. What do you think, Suimei-dono? Reiji-dono?"

"Um, yeah, I think it's great that you're so cheerful."

"No, no, no. It's all wrong. The cheer doesn't match your vibe at all. You looked so serious and cool at the first, you really gotta stick with that. Or just go cheery from the start and skip all the edgelord mage stuff."

"Erk..."

Felmenia looked utterly grief-stricken under the weight of Suimei's criticism. Reiji couldn't help noticing, and turned to his best friend.

"Hey, uh, Suimei... aren't you being a little nitpicky?"

"Hell no. This is serious business for a magician. I'm doing her a favor."

"Okay, okay! We've got more to go, so let's have the next in line!"

Urged on by Mizuki, who was in all too high spirits about this, Felmenia moved to an empty seat in the room as the door opened once more. As for the next victim on the chopping block...

"I'm Lefille Grakis, a swordswoman from Noshias to the north. I carry the blessing of the Goddess Alshuna, and can use the power of the spirits. I also have full confidence in my skill with the blade. Allow me to demonstrate—HYAH!"

Lefille moved calmly and briskly through her introduction before she whipped out her sword and began swinging it around.

“Wh-Whoa, Lefille-san! We’re indoors here!”

“Oh, sorry. I got a little too into it.”

Seeing Reiji’s panic, Lefille immediately put away her giant blade.

“Lefille-san really is talented with a sword... Oh, ooh! You can also use that sweet red wind, right?!” Mizuki inquired enthusiastically.

“Indeed. You mean Ishaktney’s Red Gale, no?”

With those words from Lefille’s mouth, a sparkling crimson wind whipped through the room even though neither the window nor the door were open.

“Wow! That’s so cool!”

Mizuki was frantically clapping in excitement like she was watching some staged magic show. Meanwhile, a much calmer Reiji turned to Suimei.

“That isn’t magic, is it?”

“Hmm? No, it’s a mystery called telesma. Unlike magicka, it’s not based in theory. It’s something classified alongside mana as a sort of energy—”

“Suimei-kun, that all sounds really complicated, but the point is that it’s amazing, right?”

“Ugh... You’re being *really* liberal with this, but yes. It’s something that all modern magicians desire, and it would be no exaggeration to say it’s also our natural enemy.”

“Hear that, Reiji-kun, Lady Mizuki? So if you ever wish to chastise Suimei-kun, feel free to let me know. I’d be happy to be of service.”

“Ahaha... Yeah, maybe sometime... Haha...”

“Ooh, ooh! Me! I want to chastise Suimei-kun right here, right now!”

Mizuki still had a rather large chip on her shoulder over Suimei hiding the fact that he was a magician from her, and was accordingly eager to take Lefille up on her offer immediately. Seeing that Lefille was nodding like she was about to agree, Suimei knew he had to get a word in edgewise.

“Oh, Lefille, you left out a tiny little bonus feature of yours. Y’know, becoming tiny and all that.”

“That’s absolutely not relevant!”

And so, with Lefille’s introduction and interview over, the committee moved on to its next victim.

The Magic in This Other World is Too Far Behind!

Glossary

Cross Dimension

The space-time manipulation magicka used by Lishbaum, Demon Lord Nakshatra’s right hand and Suimei’s archenemy, a.k.a. the Greed of Ten, Kudrack the Ghosthide. After learning a wide range of spatial manipulation arts from schools like druidism and Chinese Taoism, he began using modern magicka theory to consolidate, adjust, and optimize them.

It’s dreadfully deadly magicka that he can freely wield to do anything from teleport to trap enemies within a barrier by causing phases to slip. One of its most extreme spells, Phase Severance, even creates a vacuum to cut space itself.

The Eastern European War

The gruesome war that began six years ago in Eastern Europe, and the first time that the regulations set in place by the Thousand Nights Association regarding matters such as the mobilization of magicians and the use of mystical armaments in times of war were all broken. It is being called the bloodiest battle in history, and is ongoing even to this day.

Officially, it is known as the Third Eastern European State War. Three years ago, Suimei made the trip there at the request of the Society and fought against a great many of the criminal magicians responsible for the conflict.

Lapis Judaicus

One of the three types of philosopher's stones, it is a jewel that unleashes a mystical blue light and serves as the core of the Sacrament.

Because of its connection to the source, it is a catalyst that can generate enormous output from but the smallest input. The common theory is that it's the emerald that warded off evil set in Lucifer's crown at the time he was banished from heaven. Once it was separated from the crown, it's said to have lost its vividness.

The Source

Also called the origin, the truth, the zenith, et cetera. It is the place where all material and energy in the world originates, and where it all returns after being consumed. Finding a way to connect to the source has been one of mankind's grandest pursuits—much ink has been spilled on the matter—for it is said that the source holds the potential to create an endless energy cycle, making it the only way of saving the universe from inevitable heat death.

At least, in theory. Mankind only possesses the means to reproduce the Lapis Judaicus—the only known means of connecting to the source—imperfectly, meaning the universe can't realistically be saved this way. Fundamentally both similar to and different from the Akashic record that Suimei and other modern magicians are seeking.

According to literature, the source embodies eternal recurrence, so Suimei had his doubts about whether it could actually repulse the übermensch.

Japan's Five Great Hidden Kings of the Sword

In order to escape the prohibition imposed on martial arts by the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, these highly specialized sword schools went into hiding in postwar Japan out of necessity. They are styles designed to cut down evil, protect the country from invaders, and so on—losing them would have been a devastating blow. As such, they have continued to remain secretive even after the prohibition was lifted. To this day, they are unknown to the general public.

In this series, Hatsumi's Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani is one such school. The remaining four are the Quiet Bower School, the Soaring Ceremonial Law School, the Illusory Fire Twin-Sword Style, and the Inugami School

Suimei's Magicka

As a modern magician, there's a great deal of Suimei's magicka that he cannot use in this world. This was alluded to back in volume 2, and Suimei personally regards it as a serious annoyance.

The reason for the disparity is that this world lacks the stars he calls upon, as well as many of the religious faiths and ideologies his spells are based on. Even a simple difference in environment can have a serious effect on magickal ability. In short, the grandest power Suimei is capable of producing in this world is but a shadow of what he's capable of in his own world. Unless he can return to the modern world and find a means to overcome this, he'll never be able to bring his full power to bear in a different world.

For example, the Curse of Stella Maris spell that came up in the web novel is one such problem magicka. Because the star Sirius simply doesn't exist in this world, it's impossible to manifest the full extent of its power. Should he actually rectify this problem, people will likely come to think of Suimei as the magician with an atomic bomb in his back pocket.



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The Magic in this Other World is Too Far Behind! Volume 8

by Gamei Hitsuji

Translated by Hikoki Edited by Morgan Dreher

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