











Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Prologue: The State of Reiji's Camp

Chapter 1: The One Calling Out to Reiji

Chapter 2: Grotesque Demon

Chapter 3: To Right Back Where It Began

Chapter 4: Death Comes for Everyone

Epilogue: The Man Who Laughs at Dreams

Afterword

Bonus Textless Illustrations

About J-Novel Club

Copyright

Prologue: The State of Reiji's Camp

Upon waking up early in the morning, Shana Reiji was assaulted by the drowsiness that came from a lack of sleep. Still lying on a borrowed bed, he shook his head, trying to clear the fog in his mind. Regardless, his thoughts remained hazy and slow, his body not quite feeling like his own. He didn't feel fully awake yet either, like somehow he was still dreaming.

Maybe it was best to just go back to sleep and stop thinking. How long had it been since he'd wanted to stay in bed like this? He couldn't help coveting the warmth of his blanket. But why was it that he still found himself unable to resist such laziness? He hadn't stayed up late enough that he'd lost out on a good night's sleep. But he was still so terribly drowsy.

In this world, he didn't have television or games or studying or his phone—nothing to keep him up late—so he generally went to bed early. If anything, here he'd adopted the routine of a modern worker; he slept early and woke early so that he could practice swordplay or magic as soon as possible.

So why did he feel like he hadn't slept? Was he simply in poor condition? Or was it stress? He hadn't exhausted himself to the point of being in poor health, nor did he have anything on his mind that would worry him. The only real problem lately was whether Suimei's group had successfully returned to his old world, but that wasn't something he was particularly concerned about.

The magic circle had been meticulously prepared by none other than Suimei. Reiji couldn't even picture his friend, always so cautious in everything, failing. Had his magicka failed, they could've been sent somewhere else entirely or just been annihilated on the spot. Those possibilities came to mind, but Reiji didn't associate any danger with such thoughts.

If anything, whenever Suimei messed up, he was sure to stumble carelessly into yet another silly episode of his life. Whenever it came to important stuff like this, it was as if some magic or miracle worked behind the scenes to smooth it all over. Suimei was a magician, so maybe it was only natural for him to get

away with such marvels.

"I should really get up..."

Judging by the light pouring through the window, it had been morning for a while. All the dust in the room seemed to glimmer with sunlight. Reiji glanced at the desk. It was horribly cluttered—covered in weird gadgets, undecipherable scribblings, and failed magic circles.

Reiji was currently staying in the Yakagi residence located in the Nelferian Empire. Several days had passed since Suimei's group had returned to the modern world. In the meantime, Reiji's group was borrowing the place and had been entrusted with its care. There were more than enough rooms here for everyone to have their own personal space. What's more, unlike in Astel and the self-governed state, they even had a bath. With recent television news in Japan going on about how cramped homes were getting, Reiji wondered how much this place must've cost.

As for Graziella...

"I need to keep an eye on you lot."

With that announcement, she'd claimed one of the rooms in the Yakagi residence. Despite sleeping in the castle upon first returning to the Empire, she'd inexplicably started staying here instead. Reiji had no idea what had compelled her to do so, but her decision had made it easy for him to see her whenever he wanted to. Passing information had gotten far more convenient too.

Titania, on the other hand, was unhappy about Graziella's decision for reasons Reiji couldn't figure out.

It was with those thoughts stumbling around in his sluggish mind that Reiji walked down the corridor. He couldn't hold back a yawn, even though he was fully standing and mobile. He was sorely tempted to just go back to bed, and without paying too much attention to what he was doing, he opened the door in front of him. He was under the impression it was the door to the living room. He couldn't remember that this was, in fact, Titania's room. As a result, it wasn't Reiji but the room's occupant who suffered for his carelessness.

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"Huh...?"
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"Oh..."

Reiji first saw a girl with light-blue hair evenly cut above her shoulders and eyes of the same color, shining like gems. Though she was somewhat petite, her body was supple and well-balanced, and her breasts were modest yet still ample. Just like her breasts, her butt was small but beautifully shaped. Her slender limbs had Reiji once more question how the laws of physics allowed her to wield her two swords with such expertise.

Reiji had opened the door exactly when Titania had finished taking off her underwear. She was as naked as the day she was born, all her important parts laid bare. In an instant, she flushed red all the way to the tips of her ears and immediately turned her back to him.



"R-R-R-Reiji-sama! U-Um...!"

Her reaction served to immediately snap Reiji out of his stupefied state.

"S-Sorry! I didn't mean to!" he exclaimed.

"R-Right," Titania stuttered. "I doubt you would ever purposefully do such a thing. Something must have happened."

"Y-Yeah..."

"U-Um, are you... staying?"

"Right! Sorry! I'll close the door right away!" Reiji yelped.

With that, Reiji slammed the door shut, sealing inside not only Titania but also himself.

"Um..." Titania mumbled.

"Wha?! No!" Reiji spluttered. "That's not what I meant!"

"No, if that is what you intend, then I'm already prepared! Please, go ahead!" Titania replied.

"Uhhh..."

Titania threw herself on the bed, posturing herself to receive him, even if somewhat shyly. She covered her breasts with an arm and had her knees pressed together, her eyes averted and her face bright red. She looked so sweet and innocent. Reiji found himself nearly stumbling toward her, like a moth to a flame, but stopped himself.

"Y-You've got it wrong!" he yelled. "That's not what I meant! I'm sleepy and not in my right mind!"

"Um, it's my first time, so please be gentle," Titania said.

"That's not my intention! I really, really didn't mean to!"

The entire Yakagi residence felt the building shake from Reiji's scream, followed by the loud slam of a door and the sound of panicking footsteps.

By the time Reiji regained some composure, all the residents of the building

were gathered in the living room and seated at the table. Each of them were tending to themselves—drinking tea, cleaning their nails, looking into a hand mirror, and the like.

Anou Mizuki was Reiji's close friend who'd been summoned to this world alongside him and Suimei. She'd been with him ever since the summoning, and she'd used her magic to help him. She had a gentle expression that brought peace of mind and long black hair that was well cared for. She wore an out-of-season red scarf and fingerless gloves whose origin was a mystery. She was unique, to put it lightly, and not too long ago, she'd been a never-ending source of trouble. Now, she was back to normal. At her core she had an innocent, light personality, so just seeing her smile naturally filled Reiji with energy.

Titania Root Astel was the princess of the Kingdom of Astel—the country that had summoned them to this world. During their stay in Astel, she'd always worn a dress, but now she favored clothing more suitable for traveling. Not too long ago, she'd been very reserved and graceful, but ever since confessing to being a master swordswoman, she had an air to her, a stillness—the silence of a dark lake, the sharp edge of a razor. Due to the earlier ruckus, her face was still somewhat red. Reiji had trouble even meeting her eyes.

Graziella Filas Rieseld was the princess of the Nelferian Empire. Typical of the upper classes, she had a haughty attitude prone to belligerence, but also had a certain wildness about her. Yet she was equally possessed of a great kindness and a strong sense of responsibility. Her blonde hair was wavy, framing mature features for her age, and she wore a military uniform, the coat over her shoulders inlaid with a magic circle. She gave off an aura of military might and majesty at all times.

These three made up Reiji's usual group, but they weren't the only ones at the table. Elliot—the hero summoned by El Meide—and his attendant Christa were also here.

"R-R-Reiji-sama, g-good morning?" Titania greeted him as he walked up to the table, a strange inflection in her voice.

"M-Morning, Tia! It's a good day today, huh?!" Reiji replied.

"Yes! It's a wonderful day!"

They both tried to pretend that nothing had happened, but naturally, everyone could see through their painfully awkward act.

"Despite it being such a wonderful day, that was quite the ruckus you two made," Graziella commented harshly.

"I know, right?" Mizuki agreed. "I was seriously wondering what happened."

"Well, that was, you know..." Reiji said, panicking as both Graziella and Mizuki turned critical eyes on him.

"I don't know. What was it?" Mizuki prodded.

"Well, ummm..."

Reiji tried coming up with an excuse, but he couldn't think of anything. He could simply sum it up as an unfortunate accident, but each time he tried opening his mouth, Mizuki's glare sharpened, forbidding him from doing so.

"What an unbecoming blunder," Elliot said, sipping his tea and sighing deeply.

"Ugh... I know," Reiji said.

"Reiji, there are proper steps to entering a lady's room," Elliot continued.

"You can't just barge in irresponsibly with all the force of a drunkard. Unless you enter with the full intent to take her, it's simply rude to Princess Titania."

"H-Hey?! What the heck are you talking about?!" Reiji protested.

"The readiness to take a lady, of course?"

"I didn't mean to do anything like that!"

"Then that makes it even worse. A man must take proper responsibility."

"Well..." Reiji muttered, turning to Titania.

"R-Reiji-sama..."

"Tia, um..."

As the two just stared at each other, undeniable tension seeped into the room.

"W-Well, it's no big deal," Graziella cut in, her voice somewhat shrill. "There's no need to blame him so much."

"That's right, it was just an unfortunate accident," Mizuki agreed, trying to end the conversation in a hurry. "Yup, an accident. If you didn't mean to, then all is forgiven."

It was hard to believe that, just moments ago, both of them had been criticizing him.

"Wh-What are you two doing?!" Titania yelled. "The mood was just getting good!"

"Tia, the mood is still good," Mizuki retorted. "Are you misunderstanding something?"

"That's right, Princess Titania," Graziella joined in. "Can't you quit your persecution complex act for once?"

Mizuki was suddenly back to her cheerful self, while Graziella, for some reason, gave a smile that could only be described as provocative. Titania, on the other hand, looked truly vexed. She ground her teeth, as if the game-winning goal she'd desperately needed had just been blocked.

"At any rate, you had to be in a serious daze," Graziella said, turning to Reiji. "I don't believe anything like that has happened before. Are you unwell?"

"I couldn't agree more," Reiji said. "Seriously, what's wrong with me?"

His head had been in an inescapable haze. Despite him waking up, it was as if his mind had been elsewhere entirely.

"Hm. You can hold a conversation properly, but your complexion seems poor," Graziella commented.

"Well, it's nothing serious," Reiji said, not quite sure why he seemed to be so tired either.

That was when Reiji noticed Graziella's appearance. She was groomed, her hair properly combed, and she wore a faint hint of makeup. It must have taken her some time to do—she had to have woken up early this morning. Reiji couldn't help but admire her, for getting up and getting ready in the morning was a far simpler thing for him to do.

"Reiji-kun, not getting enough sleep?" Mizuki asked, cocking her head cutely.

"Yeah, seems so," Reiji answered. "I was pretty sure I got enough, though."

"Ah! Maybe you have SAS!"

"SA-what?"

Reiji had no idea what she was on about. Mizuki folded her arms and smugly arched backward a little. So what could this acronym stand for? Reiji sank into thought for a while before coming upon the answer.

"Do you mean... sleep apnea syndrome?"

"You sure are smart, Reiji-kun!" Mizuki exclaimed. "Exactly that!"

"Mizuki, couldn't you just have skipped the obscure acronym?" Reiji asked, exasperated.

"Heh heh heh... I never really get the chance to use them over here."

Mizuki smiled, as if caught in the act red-handed. It was just like her for her remnants of chuuni to show up at times like these. Although... not too long ago, Reiji had been forced to taste the fear of having it on full display at all times.

At any rate, Reiji didn't recall contracting a sleep disorder. He was still young, and he didn't have any of the bad habits that would typically lead to it developing. Apparently, it had nothing to do with weight, but he'd heard it was related to the muscles around the neck.

"Reiji, how about taking a seat?" Graziella suggested, pulling back a chair. "Over here."

"Huh? Sure."

Reiji headed over to the seat Graziella offered, when suddenly, a sharp light glinted in Titania's eyes.

"Reiji-sama, there's a spot here too," she said. "Please go ahead."

"Huh? Uhhh..."

Titania gracefully pulled back the chair next to her. Where was he supposed to sit? He remained perplexed as the two girls mysteriously stared daggers at each other. Mizuki noted this and forced her way between them.

"Don't go bothering Reiji-kun like that, you two," she told them.

"Mizuki, are you sure you can be saying such things?" Graziella said. "Aren't you falling behind in the race?"

"That's right, Mizuki," Titania agreed. "Your generosity is virtuous, but aren't you being a little too carefree?"

"I-I-I-It's not like I'm really w-w-worried or anything!" Mizuki exclaimed, trying to act composed. "Just—being in the closest seat isn't going to change anything!"

"That's quite the line to spout when you're so clearly flustered," Graziella commented.

"I mean, if it was that easy, none of us would even be competing by this point, right?" Mizuki retorted.

The two of them fell silent at that.

"Right? Both of you think so too, don't you?" Mizuki prodded.

"You certainly have a point," Graziella agreed. "It completely slipped my mind how formidable an opponent he is."

"Indeed," Titania added. "Perhaps we weren't taking it seriously."

This vague and incomprehensible explanation seemed to convince both of them.

"What're you three talking about?" Reiji asked.

"Something an insensitive sleepyhead will never understand," Mizuki answered. "Don't worry about it."

"Mm. Don't let it bother you."

"She's right. Please don't pay it any mind."

All three of them were in harsh unison.

"Whaaa...?"

Reiji felt like he had fallen short somehow. He turned to Elliot, who took an elegant sip of his tea before sighing scornfully.

"How do I put this...?" he said. "Are you and that man actually brothers by

blood?"

"Do you mean Suimei?" Reiji asked. "We aren't. Why do you think so?" "Well... Don't let it bother you."

Elliot let out another big sigh, muttering things to himself like "This is pretty severe" and "Everyone has it so rough." Reiji had no idea what was going on. Maybe it was because his mind still wasn't fully functional. He took a random seat at the table, receiving discontented looks from Titania and Graziella.

"Reiji-sama, I have a suggestion," Titania said, turning to him in a formal manner. "Or perhaps... a request."

"A request? Oh..."

That immediately brought to mind what had happened earlier.

"I'm sorry! I'm really sorry!" he cried. "I'll be more careful! I'll knock before entering! Even if I mess up, I'll leave right away!"

"N-Not about that!" Titania yelled. "I mean something else entirely!"
"S-Sorry!"

"That isn't really bothering me, just so you know!" Titania cleared her throat, then got back to her original point. "Um, I would like us to return to my home... to Metel, as soon as possible."

"Back to the capital?" Reiji asked.

"Yes. I must report Duke Hadorious's case to my father. Seeing as you were involved, I was hoping you could accompany me."

"True, we do need to do that."

She had a point. Elliot had been unjustly restrained, leading Reiji to infiltrate Duke Hadorious's manor with Suimei's group. There, they'd discovered that the duke was connected to the Universal Apostles. They had to report this to the king and ask him about the duke as well. There were no means of long-distance communication here, so they needed to make their way back to Astel's capital to do so.

"I apologize for asking you to go all the way back, but I humbly ask that you

do so," Titania said.

"Sure, I don't mind," Reiji said. "If anything, we should get back as soon as possible."

"Lucas de Hadorious..." Graziella mumbled, an air of annoyance in her voice. "What a troublesome foe."

From the way she firmly tapped her finger, it was easy to see how irritated she was. The duke had outwitted her too, so she wasn't completely uninvolved.

"A lord with territory adjacent to the Empire who possesses a powerful army at his beck and call, all the while commanding considerable personal strength," she added. "How truly troublesome. It's no simple matter to make an enemy of him."

"Ummm, Tia... He's one of the Seven Swords, like you are, right?" Reiji asked.

"Yes," Titania confirmed. "He is the gentlest of the Seven Swords, wielding a dancing blade in battle. He is known as the Lord of Swords."

"We only managed to beat him thanks to Suimei..." Reiji said.

"He can be quite the bother as an enemy," Graziella added. "His strength plays a major role in keeping the Empire from making any significant moves."

Kurant City was Astel's main defensive point, located along the border with Nelferia. His custody over the territory made it simple to imagine how talented the duke was. Graziella had a fairly high assessment of him too.

"Tia. You once said he would never betray the king. Is that really true?" Reiji asked.

"Yes. I guarantee it," Titania said. "That man will never betray my father."

"You have an awful lot of trust in a man who turned his blade on one hero to bind the movements of another," Graziella commented.

"No. Rather than trust, I would say it's my conviction as a swordswoman."

"Hmm?"

"Tia, what do you mean by that?" Reiji asked.

"If there is any hesitation in his heart, it will be reflected in his sword," Titania

explained. "Especially so for a man who serves two masters. However, to date, that man's sword has never been clouded. I doubt he's been connected to the Universal Apostles for less than three years. He must've made contact with them far before then. I've crossed swords with him multiple times these last three years."

"Meaning the duke didn't show any signs of hesitation during those bouts?" Reiji asked.

This was something only fellow masters of the sword could understand. Being new to the battlefield, Reiji had no way of knowing how it worked.

And Titania possessed a strong sense of rivalry toward Hadorious; her dominant hand was clenched tightly as she spoke of him.

"So, Reiji," Elliot joined in, "when are you heading to Metel?"

"Let's see... I'd like to head out as soon as possible."

"Then I suppose we'll follow in your wake after we're done reporting in."

"Huh? You're going to Astel too?"

"We planned to go there to greet the king to begin with."

Now that he mentioned it, Elliot had been on the way to Metel before getting captured by Hadorious. That was why, upon being rescued, he'd canceled his trip and withdrawn to the west, into the Empire's borders.

"Regardless of my treatment at the hands of Duke Hadorious, I have questions I must ask Astel's king," Elliot added. "I need to know what kind of man the duke is and what his ideologies are, after all."

"True..." Reiji murmured.

He had a lot on his mind too. They couldn't grasp the duke's character without more information, let alone figure out what his objective was.

"And things have just calmed down for you..." Reiji commented.

"The same goes for all of you," Elliot said. "You came from Astel and now you're going right back."

"Ah!" Mizuki exclaimed, clapping her hands as if suddenly remembering

something. "But if we go, nobody will be left to look after the cats! What do we do...?"

"Oh yeah, Liliana-chan asked us to do that..." Reiji said.

Liliana Zandyke had asked the group to look after the cats who'd taken up residence around the house. They were all strays, so they didn't really *need* looking after, but Reiji wanted to do what he could to meet Liliana's expectations. Both he and Mizuki sank into thought for a while before Graziella presented a suggestion.

"Then I'll make arrangements," she offered.

"You sure?" Mizuki asked.

"There are only a few who live around here, yes? It's a trivial matter."

"That's Graziella-san for you! You're so reliable!" Mizuki exclaimed cheerfully.

"Naturally."

Now that things were settled, Elliot turned a serious look to Reiji.

"Reiji, this might just be me being meddlesome," he started.

"What is it?"

"The demons haven't been moving lately. But just in case, you should be careful."

"You mean they might be making a move behind the scenes precisely because they're being quiet?"

"Something is amiss if they aren't making moves when they clearly could."

"I guess so."

"There are times when all the minions take a while to mobilize," Elliot admitted, "but with something like the Evil God behind them, we can't be careless. There's nothing better than being overly prepared, but even so, these are the kinds of enemies who come up with outlandish ideas."

"Outlandish how?" Reiji asked.

"Like dragging things out to be painfully slow, or taking time to gather enough

power to crush us in one fell swoop," Elliot explained.

"Meaning they're definitely plotting something," Reiji remarked.

"Exactly," Elliot confirmed. "As for precisely what they're scheming..."

Hm? Didn't I...?

That was when Reiji suddenly remembered something. Elliot's statement had triggered his memory. He'd heard a conversation about this before, and he already knew the answer. He then tried to dig deep into his memories—and suddenly lost consciousness.

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"Reiji-kun?!"

"Reiji-sama?!"

"Hey! Reiji!"
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Darkness overcame him. His eyelids became curtains, shielding his eyes. He felt as if he were sinking into the depths of a deep lake. He could almost hear some kind of screaming. From afar, voices seemed to be calling his name, over and over.

Before long, he realized he was in Graziella's arms. The screams he'd heard were coming from the girls. It appeared he'd lost his balance and fallen from his chair.

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"Be more careful," Graziella said. "What's wrong?"

"Huh? Oh, sorry."

"I don't mind. Are you truly alright?"
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"I'm fine. I just got a little dizzy."

Reiji stood back up with Graziella's help.

"Reiji-sama, it might be better for you to get some rest," Titania suggested anxiously.

"No, I'm fine. It's really nothing."

"Really, Reiji-kun?" Mizuki asked. "That didn't look like someone falling over from anemia. It was more like you ran out of batteries, or like your switch was suddenly flipped off..."

"I'm telling you I'm fine," Reiji insisted. "Look, there's nothing wrong with me."

Reiji spread his arms wide and smiled to put the girls at ease, then noticed there was something in his hand.

What the...?

There was something hard there, and at once, an indescribable anxiety assaulted him. He slowly turned to look. He moved, stiff as a rusted puppet. As he slowly opened his palm, his eyes focused, revealing white metal and a glowing blue gem.

"Reiji-kun, is that the Ishar Cluster?" Mizuki asked.

"Mm-hmm..."

"When did you take it out?"

"Well..."

He hadn't been holding it before falling over. It should've been inside his jacket pocket this whole time. And yet, here it was, in his palm. He lowered his eyes to the azure glow.

Suimei talked about it...

He heard a voice whisper in his head. He tried to remember the conversation. Suddenly, it seemed to be of the utmost importance to remember what Suimei had said.

"Elliot," Reiji said.

"What is it?"

"The reason the demons aren't making a move is because they're making new demons," Reiji said. "They're culling the weaker demons to make stronger ones, so that more power from the Evil God can be granted to each individual."

"Are you certain?" Elliot asked.

"Mm-hmm. They're still in the preparatory phase, so it won't be long before they invade again. That's what the demon responsible for this plan told Suimei."

Reiji had overheard it during the demon invasion of the Empire. Suimei had made this prediction, and the demon named Lishbaum had confirmed it.

"Elliot-sama," Christa said, her eyes filled with anxiety. "What does that mean?"

"Demons are born of the Evil God's power," Elliot answered. "The Evil God determines their strength and numbers through its capacity. This is limited, so they're throwing away the existing unsuitable vessels to create better ones. They're probably at the stage where they're prioritizing quality over quantity."

"Meaning even more powerful demons will appear next time?!"

"That's right."

Lishbaum had explained it as if it were a tactic in a strategy game: high-quality units required more funds and upkeep. Also, if a map had a limit, space had to be made for them. In a way, it made perfect sense.

"But, but, why fuss over quality?" Mizuki asked, raising both her hands high. "In a battle on such a huge scale, don't numbers provide more of an advantage?"

"Considering three countries have already fallen, they've likely decided there's no need to depend solely on sheer numbers," Elliot answered. "Small fries take up time, but any good soldier can handle them with sound tactics."

Elliot paused there, then suddenly sensed how dangerous the situation was getting.

"This is bad," he continued. "If it's true, we've played right into their hands."

"Even so, it's not like we were in a position to *not* kill them," Graziella commented. "It was a poor move to do as they wanted, but if we did nothing, we would've suffered even more casualties."

"You're right," Elliot agreed. "Things are only going to get harder from now on."

"However, it isn't all bad news," Graziella said. "If they're focusing on quality over quantity, our forces will have fewer places they have to cover. I believe things will work, so long as we can crush them wherever they show up."

Yet that idea required significant strength. Did Reiji possess enough power to overwhelm these stronger demons?

"But if there's too many of these improved demons, that won't work anymore," Reiji said.

"They aren't there yet, though," Elliot said. "In other words, this is the decisive hour."

"We need to gather our forces and prepare," Reiji agreed.

"I'd like to strike quickly, but we don't even know where the demons' base is," Elliot added.

They would have to look into that. It would be best to sever the problem at its root. Not that Reiji had the faintest idea of how to accomplish that.

"It seems the fighting will only get harder from now on..." Reiji said.

"Yes, for both of us," Elliot agreed.

The two heroes shook hands, and each began making their own preparations.

Chapter 1: The One Calling Out to Reiji

In a sparse, candlelit room stood a woman, her bewitching figure clad in a knight's outfit, a sword strapped to her waist. Her hair was white and she had dark skin, with eyes the color of blood. On their own, these features wouldn't be rare for a female knight of Astel or Nelferia. However, the small horns on her head and her tapered ears set her apart from such humans—she was a demon. It was no exaggeration to say that she was the demon general whose form most closely resembled a human's.

Maybe coming here was a mistake...

The demon general Moolah deeply regretted coming here. She shouldn't have agreed to such a summons. She should've left the castle and devoted herself entirely to the upcoming battle. Feeling exasperated at her serious, upright personality that prevented her from doing so, she let out a dispirited sigh.

Her summoner was the sole reason for her concern: Lishbaum. In the demon army, he was something like a staff officer. A slim man with golden hair and a pair of twisted horns, his origins were a complete question mark, and so were his abilities. As a fellow child of the Evil God, she had a general grasp of his power, but far too much of him remained a mystery.



Demon Lord Nakshatra's declaration to invade human territory was still fresh in Moolah's mind. With the timing deemed appropriate, a date for the invasion had finally been set. That was when she'd gotten this summons from the most suspicious of men.

"Oh? I see you've arrived ahead of me."

She heard a voice playing dumb from just outside the room. She directed her hostility through the door, but Lishbaum paid her anger at his late arrival no mind.

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"Good day, Lady Moolah."

"Hmph."

"Oh my, it seems I'm rather hated."

"Of course you are. My liege is the only one who favors your existence."

"I can't even imagine what makes you hate me so."
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"How shameless. Put a hand to your chest and give it some thought," Moolah spat out in disgust before cutting to the chase. "So? Why have you called me here?"

"You'll be commanding the upcoming battle, yes?"

"You know that. I hear you're the one who proposed this damned plan to Nakshatra-sama to begin with."

"I apologize if I've offended you. I was simply thinking of having you take the Evil God's new children with you."

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"The ones you unveiled the other day?"

"Yes."

"Do you have Nakshatra-sama's approval?"

"I do."

"Then I don't mind... So? Where are these new children?"

"Right here."

"What?"
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A visible change occurred in the room. The veil of darkness in one of the corners was suddenly peeled back, as if a curtain had been there from the very beginning in order to put on this ostentatious display.

What was revealed was an utterly grotesque monster. Its figure was asymmetric and misshapen, possessing a ferocity and fiendishness entirely without intelligence. A human would certainly faint upon seeing such an ominous, repulsive figure.

Though it was the second time Moolah had seen one, she felt like she was never going to get used to it. Even a demon born of the Evil God found it so horribly disgusting. Within its hideous form lay an irrepressible potential for destruction; the demons she'd commanded before couldn't possibly compare to its power—they were like babies to this thing. It was simply that powerful.

"Also, there are several changes regarding the upcoming battle," Lishbaum said.

"What changes?"

"It wasn't my personal decision, just so you know. All is by our liege's will." With that, Moolah could no longer refuse.

"Our liege would like you to directly invade the human nation," Lishbaum explained.

"Directly? What does that mean? It'll take a month for a small army of winged

"No. By using my magicka to connect space, it'll be possible to invade immediately. And directly to their capital at that."

"Impossible. Such a thing can't be done," Moolah refuted. "Your bravado knows no bounds."

"I'd rather you not make light of my power. But you'll see it for yourself soon enough."

"Truly...?"

Lishbaum nodded. Despite his confidence, she still had doubts. If such a thing was possible, why hadn't he done so before this?

No, she didn't need to ask. He'd made it easier to cull the unnecessary demons.

She understood, but there were still some aspects of this she found hard to swallow. Lishbaum's approach was far too roundabout. If he possessed such power, he could've attacked the humans far earlier. If he chose not to, it was because he was scheming something.

"Lishbaum... What the hell is your objective?" Moolah asked.

"My objective? To attack and take down a human nation. That is Nakshatrasama's wish, is it not?"

"Not that."

"You mean to say I have another goal?" Lishbaum inferred. "I do believe I've been working toward the destruction of the human race."

Moolah fell silent. The demons' greatest ambition was to eradicate every last human from the world so that the Evil God's desire could be fulfilled. To that end, it was only natural to take down humanity, country by country. The approach wasn't wrong, but she couldn't help but think he had some other plans. She sensed it wasn't anything that would put the demons at a disadvantage in their upcoming war, but something about this man's thoughts seemed to hold an eerie fixation on total destruction—as in, he expected not only humanity but everything in existence to be destroyed.

"I'd rather you not look at me with such animosity," Lishbaum said.

"Then stop being so shady. It's repulsive."

"Nothing can be done, then. I'll have to put up with your enmity."

Moolah's glare intensified at his joking behavior. She was practically out for his blood, but Lishbaum paid it no mind. He even smiled gently, as if he found her hatred charming.

"I'm surprised you can maintain such composure," Moolah said. "Do you think you can simply spur that demon into action?"

"Not at all. As you are now, you're not able to pose me any threat."

"Are you saying I can't kill you?"

"I am. After all, in my case, simply killing me isn't enough. You need to kill me utterly and completely."

Lishbaum stifled an ominous laugh at this.

"Utterly and completely?" Moolah repeated.

"Yes. Exactly." Lishbaum paused, then added in a theatrical manner, "Magicians aren't ones to die from being killed once or twice."

Moolah didn't understand what he was saying. He didn't seem to mean his words figuratively.

"So, what? Are you saying you can't die?" she asked.

"Not at all. I can definitely die. However, I'm simply hard to kill."

Moolah fell silent again.

"If you detest me so much, keep that in mind."

This was the reason this man was so eerie—his seeming omnipotence. He possessed seemingly common knowledge Moolah didn't understand, and spoke words from languages she didn't know.

He was *far* too mysterious. His depths were fathomless, like trying to understand an ocean simply by sticking a hand in and groping in its shallowest waters.

"Come," Moolah said, shifting her gaze from Lishbaum to the demon.

With that one word, the demon Lishbaum had created obediently followed her. Seeing this, Lishbaum smiled in a way that was awfully arrogant and suspicious. That smile seemed to clearly suggest he was hiding something and enjoying her reaction.

"Have a safe trip," he said. "I expect much from your victory."

"Don't waste your breath on unnecessary words."

A while after Moolah left the room, Lishbaum muttered quietly to himself.

"To welcome the new, space still has to be made. Creation requires the old to be destroyed. Birth needs suffering. Even if that leads to the destruction of everything."

Lishbaum stifled a laugh, enshrouding the room into even further darkness.

With the demons' plan at the front of their minds, Reiji's group made the journey from the Nelferian Empire to the Kingdom of Astel as quickly as possible, pushing their horses to the very limit.

Upon their first arriving in this world, such a forced march would've been impossible for them. Traveling by horse took an unexpected amount of stamina. Though much better than traveling by foot, riding still required the occasional break.

Back in those days, they'd made frequent stops and been troubled with all the aches and pains horseback riding entailed. However, Reiji's physical abilities were now augmented by the Ishar Cluster, while Mizuki's endurance had been improved by the journey itself. Thanks to that, they were able to endure a forced march and ride their horses without any issues. Getting Graziella into the country had taken a fair amount of time, but they'd still managed to get to Astel's capital in half the time of their previous journey.

After they passed through the city gates, the royal capital spread out before them: buildings painted in calm hues, while stone pavements, trees, and flower beds lined the main street, leading to another set of walls that hid the palace. It was far softer on the eyes than the alabaster townscape of the imperial capital.

"Mm. This is where we were summoned..." Mizuki said, recalling her arrival in this world.

The hustle and bustle of Metel's main street was mild compared to Filas Philia's. It was still lively, but due to its smaller scale, it just wasn't the same.

"Hmph. How modest it is compared to the imperial capital," Graziella pointed out harshly, saying what they were all thinking. "The main thoroughfare is far too narrow, leading to fewer varieties of shops."

"Oh dear. Astel is a nation that respects history," Titania retorted. "We don't value policies that are inconsistent with our culture."

"If you continue to disdain mainstream trends, you'll end up left behind one day."

"Do be careful not to lose all your citizens to emigration."

The imperial princess looked down on the city, while the royal princess admired it. Since they participated in their respective countries' legislatures, they were far from gentle as they exchanged stinging remarks. The others had come to learn recently that this was just them joking around with each other, so they'd stopped trying to arbitrate between them.

"Oh yeah, is anyone coming to get us?" Mizuki asked.

"Yes, over there," one of the guards answered, pointing to what looked like a chamberlain, who bowed respectfully in turn.

"We contacted the embassy to avoid too much fuss," Titania explained. "An uproar would be a nuisance, so there won't be an overblown reception like there was upon our departure."

"That's good," Mizuki said. "That was pretty crazy."

"Yeah. One or two parades is enough for a lifetime..." Reiji agreed.

The two of them let out a big sigh of relief. Being the center of a parade made them keenly aware of what it felt like to be animals in a zoo. Just having others watch their every move was tiring in its own way.

"Oh yeah, I wonder how Gregory-san and the others are doing," Reiji said.

"They must be here in the capital too," Titania said. "I believe they should still be recovering."

The knights who'd accompanied Reiji upon their departure from Astel had required medical treatment after the incident in the self-governed state. According to Titania, they'd gone straight back to Astel to recover.

"We'll have to visit them later," Reiji commented.

"Yeah. I hope they're doing well," Mizuki said.

Around that time, Reiji noticed Titania was staring at his back.

"Tia?" he prompted.

"Now that I think of it, are you not going to wear that mantle?" she asked.

"That mantle...? Oh."

This reminded Reiji of something he would have preferred to forget. He'd once defeated the specialists of every attribute of magic at the Mage's Guild, and in reward, the guild master had granted him both a title and an incredibly gaudy mantle.

"That's, um, a little... you know?" he said with a disconcerted expression.

"Hm?"

"Isn't it fine?" Graziella joined in. "Why not wear it?"

"Well, there are some profound circumstances behind that..." Reiji muttered.

"Why the grimace?" Graziella asked.

"That's just the mood I'm in," Reiji added, visibly distracted, staring off into the distance with undeniable melancholy. He didn't really mind wearing a mantle, but he couldn't accept something so strangely colorful. The design was like something out of some retro superhero show, a thing whose sole purpose was to be flashy. The idea of wearing it made him cringe. That was why he tried to brush it off now.

But here was the one girl who refused to read the room and, by doing so, completely obstructed his plans.

"Reiji-kun, I think it's pretty cool," Mizuki said.

"Th-Thanks, but... you know?"

She had to understand. He tried to give her a subtle hint as to how he truly felt, but he was cut off by a merciless declaration.

"I understand that you do not really favor it," Titania said. "But either way, I do believe it is expected of you to wear it on formal occasions."

"Noooooooooo!"

Reiji's sorrowful scream resounded down the royal capital's main street.

They'd sent word ahead of time that they would be visiting the palace, so they were able to arrange an immediate audience with King Almadious. After a short wait in the reception room to coordinate things, Reiji's group was guided

to the throne room, where two people were already waiting for them.

King Almadious sat on the throne while the prime minister stood to his side. Having only talked to the prime minister one or two times, Reiji had regretfully forgotten his name. He did, however, remember Suimei calling the man "a disagreeable-looking barcode baldy," so Reiji recalled his rather unique features.

Reiji shifted his focus to Almadious. He was an old man with white hair, with a crown on his head and his scepter of office in one hand. He gave off a very gentle impression. Nelferia's emperor and Hadorious always had a severe edge to them, but much like during Reiji's initial summoning to this world, the king's severity was combined with a gentle demeanor, making him seem far friendlier.

To Reiji, a head of state—a king—had to be unapproachable. A man whom no one took seriously wasn't fit to lead a country. However, Almadious seemed to command the respect of practically everyone around him. Was this because of his abilities as a leader? Or was there something else that maintained his authority?

Reiji bowed before the king, and before long, he was greeted by a voice from the throne.

"Reiji-dono. Mizuki-dono. It has been a long time."

"Your Majesty, it is good to see you again. Thank you for making the time to receive us despite our sudden visit."

"I-It's good to see you again! Your Majesty!" Mizuki added, still not used to such formal occasions. She hadn't been this tense in the waiting room, but she started panicking when it came time to speak up.

"King Almadious, it is a pleasure to stand before you," Graziella said, skillfully covering for Mizuki's nervousness. "I am truly honored to be granted an audience."

"Mm. It is wonderful to see you in good health, Your Imperial Highness."

"I see you haven't changed much, Your Majesty," Graziella added.

"Hahaha! How harsh," Almadious replied, laughing merrily.

Considering their ages, Graziella was still a little girl to him. Her sarcasm didn't affect him in the least; he warded it off naturally, like a willow standing in a gentle breeze.

"I must thank you for going to the trouble of visiting us," the king said.

"We have our own reasons for doing so too," Reiji replied.

"Hmm. Is that so? By the way, how is Suimei-dono doing?"

"Father, Suimei has returned to his world," Titania answered.

"What? So Suimei-dono truly found a way back!"

"Yes. However..."

Titania looked somewhat perplexed by Almadious's reaction. She had noticed something unexpected, and so had Reiji—the king spoke as if he was certain Suimei could return to modern Japan.

"Your Majesty," Reiji said. "Do you perhaps know that Suimei is a magician?"

"Indeed," the king answered. "A lot happened before he left the capital. By the looks of it, you and Mizuki-dono are aware as well."

So he really did know. During their stay in this castle, there'd apparently been some kind of incident. As for what exactly had happened, much like when Reiji brought this up with Suimei, Almadious didn't go into detail.

"Hmm. So Suimei-kun told the king. Hmmm..."

Mizuki puffed her cheeks. She was clearly displeased, remembering the fact that Suimei hadn't told *her*. She started mumbling to herself about stuff like "I won't forgive you unless you bring back souvenirs" and "Rice and miso are the bare minimum." To borrow Mizuki's own words, she was exuding a dark aura.

"I would be right to assume Felmenia has also gone to that world?" Almadious asked.

"Yes. She accompanied him for his return," Titania answered.

"I see. I can picture her swooning over the sights of another world." Almadious smiled in good humor, predicting how Felmenia would behave over there.

"I think she'll be fine," Reiji said.

"Yes. The White Flame is very talented," Titania agreed.

The two of them were brimming with confidence in Felmenia.

"I've been wanting to ask this for a while now..." Graziella said, throwing them a quizzical look. "Why do you have such an inflated opinion of the White Flame?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Titania said. "She's such a capable woman."

"I admit she has skill and talent," Graziella conceded. "But how do you explain that disappointing side of hers?"

"Disappointing? Disappointing how?" Reiji asked, raising a brow.

"Princess Graziella, are you not mistaken?" Titania said. "I understand Suimei being disappointing, but I can't allow such slander against the White Flame."

"Wait. Are you actually being serious?" Graziella asked, clearly perplexed by this.

It was as if she was only just realizing how different her opinion of Felmenia was from the others'. And as her confusion intensified, someone suddenly burst into laughter.

"Pfffft!"

Reiji looked around him, wondering where the sound was coming from, but he didn't see anyone laughing. He then faced forward to see Almadious looking the other way. The king's shoulders were trembling, and he had a hand to his mouth.

"It appears King Almadious is well aware of what I mean," Graziella commented.

"Father? What's the meaning of this?" Titania asked.

"Hmm. I do believe Suimei-dono once described Felmenia as a klutz," Almadious explained.

"Huh...?" Reiji muttered.

"A klutz?!" Titania yelled.

Reiji exchanged looks with Mizuki, but she shook her head, not knowing where this was coming from either. Titania, on the other hand, was enraged.

"How do I explain?" Almadious continued. "Despite praising her curiosity and ability to learn, he said that she has such a side to her too."

"Hmm. Suimei usually doesn't say stuff like that about other people unless he really doesn't get along with them..." Reiji commented.

"Unforgivable. I'll have to make things clear once he's back..." Titania mumbled darkly.

"Hm...? Titania, you appear to have grown awfully harsh when it comes to Suimei-dono," Almadious said. "I don't believe you were like this before departing the capital."

"Huh? No, well..."

Titania averted her eyes. Seeing that he wasn't going to get anything out of his daughter, Almadious intentionally changed the subject.

"I suppose that's enough idle chatter over our reunion. Let us cut to the chase. Reiji-dono, your letter mentioned that you had something to ask me."

Almadious focused carefully on Reiji, and a moment later, Titania ordered the room to be cleared.

"Father," she said, once they were alone. "We wish to ask about Duke Hadorious."

"About Lucas...? We've already received reports of the trade corps he used as bait. Forgive me, but I cannot punish him harshly over that case. I can place certain restrictions on him, but it's difficult to do any more, especially as I am aware of Suimei-dono's power."

"No, it is not regarding that matter."

"Hmm. Then what is it?"

"Are you aware that Duke Hadorious had El Meide's hero confined?" Reiji asked.

"Lucas confined El Meide's hero?" Almadious said. "No. According to the

reports, he provided the hero shelter to relieve his fatigue."

"The truth is he threatened Elliot and put him under house arrest. But setting that aside, there's something we need to know."

"I see. Reiji-dono, you have other concerns, then?" Almadious asked.

"Father," Titania continued in Reiji's stead. "Have you heard of the Universal Apostles?"

"No. Not with what information I have," the king answered.

"It is the name of a group that's been plotting behind the scenes of the northern continent," Reiji elaborated. "They lent us a hand during the war against the demons in Nelferia, but during Elliot's confinement, they stood against us."

"And from what I can gather from this conversation, you mean to say Lucas is involved?" Almadious asked.

"Yes," Reiji said. "He's connected to the Universal Apostles's leader, Gottfried. We believe Elliot's confinement was part of some plot."

"Lucas is my sworn friend," the king said, his eyes narrowing in disbelief. "I'm not excusing his crimes, but there must be a reason for him to do such a thing... Titania?"

"I'm of the same opinion," Titania said. "But I think we must keep a careful eye on his movements."

"I suppose so," the king agreed. "Reiji-dono, have you spoken with Lucas before?"

"With the duke?" Reiji asked. Almadious nodded. This had happened a while ago. "I was called to the duke's manor to talk during our stay in Kurant."

"And what did he say?" the king asked.

"He asked me why I fight. He also told me about the Goddess."

"Meaning Lucas has conveyed part of his reasons to you already. It's probably related to what he said. But still, the Goddess...?"

Almadious sank into thought. Before long, he seemed to find an answer.

"Lucas must have apprehensions about the world's current order. Those concerns will eventually engulf Astel. That is probably why he is maneuvering behind the scenes."

"I believe the duke is uneasy about the Goddess," Reiji agreed.

"I see. In that case, this information can't leave this room. Reiji-dono, I understand your suspicions of Lucas, but do you believe he stands in your way?"

"No. It was more like he was trying to test me. To warn me about something."

"That sounds like him. If he truly wished you harm, you wouldn't have gotten off so lightly."

"Yes..." Reiji said, voice trailing off. "He forced me to realize that too."

"So he turned his blade on you?"

"In nothing more serious than a test, though."

"That can't be overlooked, but... Hmm, Lucas can probably say he asked you for a bout and get away with it."

Almadious predicted what Hadorious's excuse would be, then suddenly looked at Reiji.

"Despite fighting Lucas, you act like it wasn't a big deal," he said.

"Well, Suimei was with us at the time too."

"I see."

"Honestly... Suimei is capable of overwhelming even the duke," Titania cut in. "He isn't that skilled with a sword, but with the way he fights..."

"Hmm? Then, Titania, did you have a bout with Suimei-dono too?" Almadious asked.

"U-Umm, well, yes..."

"And the result?"

"Th-Th-That's not really worth mentioning..." Titania answered, clearly dodging the question.

"But I'm curious."

Almadious wasn't letting her get away. He looked like a father who enjoyed teasing his daughter. Titania, on the other hand, looked like she'd bitten a bitter bug, and the taste was still lingering on her tongue.

"I lost," she admitted. "But he resorted to cowardly tricks!"

"Suimei-dono isn't a swordsman," Almadious said. "He won't fight you 'fair and square' the way you believe a fight should be conducted. Every master has their own tactics in battle."

"I know that, but still!"

"I wonder if you'll ever grow out of being a sore loser," Almadious said, sighing at his daughter's inadequacies.

"F-Father!"

And that was where their audience with the king came to an end.

After their audience with the king, Reiji's group was escorted to their room within Castle Camellia. It was the same room they'd used during their previous stay in the palace. A mix between a hotel room and a parlor, it was a spacious guest room furnished with two beds, a closet, a large work desk, two sofas, and a coffee table.

The sweet and gentle aroma of late-blooming gardenias filled the room upon their entry, fresh enough to perhaps have been placed there just ahead of their arrival. The party entered and got themselves settled in: Titania sat on one of the sofas and helped herself to some premade tea, while Graziella sat on the opposite sofa, spreading her arms over the backrest and folding her legs. Mizuki sat backward on a chair, hanging her arms over it and lazing about.

Reiji looked out the window. He could see soldiers in the middle of training. Though their spirited shouts and the clash of their wooden swords could be heard, it wasn't so loud as to be unpleasant. After watching them for a while, he sat down on the bed.

"The king hasn't really changed, huh?" he commented.

"I know, right?" Mizuki agreed. "He's so gentle. It's calming."

It wasn't like the king was entirely devoid of austerity, but his broad-minded attitude really put one at ease.

"I can't see the strength he hides at all," Graziella said, folding her legs the other way and turning a meaningful gaze to Titania. "I take it you inherited that from him?"

"Both my father and I are simply conducting ourselves in our usual manner," Titania responded calmly, quietly sipping her tea.

"Huh? Tia, is the king strong?" Reiji asked.

Seven Swords."

"Yes. He possesses significant skill with a sword," Titania answered.

"However, due to his standing, he cannot participate in the ceremony for the

"That's why Duke Hadorious participated in his stead," Graziella added.

Just as Graziella said, Reiji couldn't see that side of the king at all.

"Reiji-kun, does he look strong to you?" Mizuki asked, thinking the same thing.

"I can't tell. Suimei might be able to... Or maybe not. Suimei didn't really look at him like that either, so I wonder."

"A fair amount of time has passed since he's retired as a swordsman," Titania said. "It's possible he's deteriorated somewhat compared to his active days...

Not that I believe it."

"I'm pretty sure Suimei-kun called him a sly old fox," Mizuki said.

"M-Mizuki, that's a little rude..." Reiji said. "It does sound like Suimei, though."

"Right? Suimei-kun is definitely calling him that behind his back. There's no mistaking it."

At any rate, if he truly possessed such skill, then Almadious's authority made sense. He didn't maintain it by pressuring those around him. He did so thanks to his background as a powerful swordsman. That was how he maintained a

proper pecking order in his court.

"More importantly, Suimei!" Titania suddenly yelled. "Of all things, to call the White Flame a klutz... How can he slander her like that when he relies on her every day for his housework?!"

"I'm sure he's referring to the past," Graziella said with an exasperated sigh. "Besides, he's the one teaching her right now. Even you would be overjoyed if a little housework was all you needed to do to learn a master's techniques and secret arts, yes?"

"That would reflect poorly on the royal family's dignity," Titania objected.

"If you would lose dignity over such a trifling thing, you're better off not having any to begin with," Graziella retorted.

"Oh? Then, Princess Graziella, would you do housework to learn Suimei's magicka?"

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't reluctant, but to become his disciple..."

"How unexpected," Titania commented.

"It's only natural. I can't be selfish, especially when it comes to matters of national interest. His power is simply that valuable."

Reiji was surprised by Graziella's high estimation of Suimei. She always cursed about him as much as Titania did, so he'd never expected to hear praise from her like that.

"Graziella-san, you assess Suimei rather highly, huh?" he commented.

"You must know the extent of his abilities too," she responded. "In all likelihood, he possesses significant power, even compared to the people of his world. I can easily picture the ones who went with him in shock at how highly everyone in his world regards him."

"Princess Graziella, isn't that going a little far?" Titania said. "Suimei is far from a great man. Well, I suppose... there is a small—a *very* small—part of him that can cut a *somewhat* heroic figure."

"We'll find out the truth of the matter once they return," Graziella said. "It was a highly contested topic among them. Liliana will tell us right away, at the

very least. She's as much of a sore loser as you are."

"I-I'm not a sore loser!" Titania protested.

Just then, a knock came at the door.

"I come bearing a message," a voice said from the other side.

"What is it?" Titania asked as she answered the door.

"Ma'am! I bring word from His Majesty the King. There will be a modest banquet this evening. He requests that everyone here attend."

"Ooh, a party," Mizuki said, her eyes glittering.

"I guess this sorta thing is nice every now and then," Reiji said.

"Right?! We've been so busy lately. It's been disaster after disaster..."

"Yeah. I guess you're finally self-aware, Mizuki," Reiji said, pretending to wipe a tear from his eye.

When she heard the strong emotions behind his voice, Mizuki's expression turned fiendish.

"Rei. Ji. Kun?"

"Oh! Sorry!" he cried. "It's nothing! That was a slip of the tongue!"

"That's way too big a slip! It's like hydroplaning when it's not even raining and crashing into someone!" Mizuki rocked her chair back and forth, puffing her cheeks in anger.

"Hahaha..." Reiji laughed. But his delight didn't last long. "But is it really alright for us to be going to a party at a time like this?"

Their current situation made him anxious. They had to make a move to defeat the demons. Did they really have time for this? Wasn't there something else they should be doing? Though he wanted to take it easy, his sense of responsibility felt like a weight in his chest.

"Reiji, it is a hero's duty to replenish his spirits too," Graziella said. "At any rate, those who left for the other world are sure to be taking a breather themselves."

"Reiji-sama, you're already far more active than you believe yourself to be," Titania added. "From that demon general called Rajas to the man-eater in the self-governed state to the army of demons who invaded Nelferia to Elliot-sama's rescue, you've done practically nothing but fight."

"That's right! You need to have some fun!" Mizuki joined in.

"Yeah... Mm. You're right."

Their words helped dispel his anxieties. Truly, Reiji was so grateful for his companions. Just as he was about to agree to the banquet, darkness suddenly overwhelmed him.

"Huh?"

It was as if the lamps had suddenly blacked out in the middle of the night. No. It was worse than that. In this darkness, there weren't even afterimages. Even cutting the power to a monitor wouldn't be like this. It was as if he had become one with the darkness; he couldn't even see his own body. He was reminded of an urban legend, one about a white string hanging from his ear.

"Everyone?! Tia! Mizuki! Graziella-san!"

He yelled in a fluster, shouting out to those who'd just been with him, but nobody answered. No matter how much he shouted for them, it was in vain; his voice simply vanished into the darkness. He'd been completely shut out from the outside world.

"Wh-What's going on...?"

Was something happening to him personally? Or was this some sort of attack? All kinds of possibilities came to mind. And as he agonized over this in the darkness, he was struck by a sudden headache.

"Guh?!"

It was like a throbbing pain had grabbed his head and wrapped his skull in agony, reaching from one ear to the other. He then heard a familiar voice coming from nowhere.

"Are you worth getting such a warm welcome?"

"Huh?"

"Have you accomplished anything since coming to this world?"
"I..."

"How can you accept such things when you haven't done anything noteworthy?"

"…"

The voice from the void was criticizing him. It was bitter and harsh in pointing out his failures, but Reiji couldn't say anything in his defense. How could he? After all, it was the indisputable truth.

He'd defeated Rajas because Suimei had weakened the demon general ahead of time.

He'd been powerless before the man-eater Ilzarl.

Even during the invasion in Nelferia, if it weren't for Felmenia, he would've been in trouble.

In the fight against Duke Hadorious, if Suimei had not arrived, he would have lost utterly.

No... Those last three weren't strictly correct. In the fight against Ilzarl, against Grallajearus, and against Hadorious, he'd done something to break out of the situation. He hadn't used his own power, but the power of coincidence. He'd used his connection to this voice calling out to him from nowhere.

Reiji suddenly felt something in his right hand. Now that he thought of it, the same thing had happened that morning before leaving the Empire. He opened his hand, unleashing an azure glow that pierced the darkness. It was as if the gem in his hand was luminescent—as if it was telling him to look at it, calling attention to itself and telling him to use it if anything happened.

"That's right. If you want it, ask for it. Demand more power. Crave it. Lust for it. So that you can win an unshakable future... So that you can open the door to possibilities..."

Did he *have* to ask for more? To become the hero he pictured in his mind, did he have to implore this azure glow for more power?

His lips moved on their own. It was as if a marionette's strings were attached to the corners of his mouth, like someone else was forcing him to talk.

He couldn't say it. He couldn't cross this line. Once he did, there was no going back. Even with such thoughts in mind, his mouth refused to obey.

"I want..."

And just as he was about to say it...

"Reiji-kun? Reiji-kun? What're you zoning out for?"

He suddenly heard Mizuki's voice. Immediately following that, the darkness surrounding him was gone, and the room he'd been in before was back.

What had just happened? Had it all been an illusion?

"Huh? Oh, sorry," Reiji said, flustered, as the three girls looked at him with concern in their eyes. "It's nothing. I'm fine."

"You sure?" Mizuki asked. "You were just sitting on the bed in a daze. Are you not getting enough sleep?"

"No, I'm totally fine!" Reiji insisted. "I was just thinking a little. Besides, I got more than enough sleep today *and* yesterday."

"Reiji-sama..." Titania said. "It really might be best for you to get some rest."

"I'm really okay!"

"No, we're the ones putting you through such hardships," Titania said. "We can't have you pushing yourself too much."

It seemed they were all really worried about him now. Even Graziella was looking grim.

"Ummm... Anyway, we were talking about going to the party tonight, right?" Reiji said, getting the conversation back on track.

Mizuki cocked her head. "Hwuh? A party? What party? Reiji-kun, who's having a party?"

"Uhhh, what party?" Reiji said. "Didn't one of the castle's people just come over and invite us to a modest banquet?"

"Reiji-sama, what are you talking about?" Titania asked. "I haven't heard anything about that."

"Wha? I mean, we came to this room, talked about the king and Suimei, then someone knocked on the door..."

"Reiji, we only just entered the room," Graziella said. "I was in fact about to bring up King Almadious, but..."

"What's going on...?" Reiji muttered.

The three of them looked even more worried now, but in a complete turn, Mizuki clapped her hands together and approached Reiji with sparkles in her eyes.

"Oh! Oh! Reiji-kun! Did you awaken to precognitive powers?!"

"Huh? No... I'm pretty sure that's out of the question," Reiji said. He paused to think about it. It definitely wasn't the case. He went back over what had happened since they'd entered the room. "Right. So we came in, then talked about the king being strong but never joining the Seven Swords ceremony because of his position, then something about Suimei calling him a sly old fox, then we talked about Felmenia-sensei."

"It's true my father hasn't participated in the Seven Swords ceremony due to his status..." Titania commented.

"And Duke Hadorious did in his place," Reiji said.

"Yes. It's exactly as you say..." Titania looked more worried than shocked.

"Hmmm... It's far too detailed and accurate for a wild delusion," Graziella commented.

"Suimei-kun would totally call the king a sly old fox behind his back!" Mizuki added.

"After that, someone knocked on the door..."

Just as Reiji got to that, a knock suddenly came at the door. The tension in the room immediately spiked.

"I come bearing a message," a voice said from the other side.

Everyone in the room exchanged looks. Titania then slowly rose from her seat and answered the door.

"About the banquet?" she asked.

"Oh! You're already aware! Forgive me!" the chamberlain at the door said.

"It's fine, I don't mind. Have the details been decided on?"

"No, not yet. Another chamberlain will come by to go through the details later."

"Understood. Thank you for delivering the message. You may stand down."

"Excuse me."

With that, the chamberlain left. A surprised silence filled the room for a short while.

"Reiji-kun, that's amazing!" Mizuki exclaimed, her eyes sparkling once more. "You've got a crazy weapon and now you're an esper!"

"Well..."

"Reiji-sama, I don't know what powers are at work here, but it is tremendous to be able to see the future," Titania said.

"Indeed," Graziella agreed. "If we use it properly, we might be able to handle matters even better than before."

"That's..."

They were full of expectations, but Reiji couldn't help but see this as a bad omen. He opened his right hand, and just as expected, the Sacrament was there. Had it just been an illusion? Or had he truly seen the future? The thought filled him with unease.

Despite experiencing that strange vision, Reiji decided to attend the party. Today's festivities were kept modest to help relieve them of fatigue, but there was an inevitable level of pomp and circumstance they couldn't prevent. The party was a stand-up buffet with nobles in attendance.

"I'm assuming those attending are seeking your favor."

That was what Graziella had told him beforehand. It appeared the nobles had forced their way in when they heard a banquet would be held. Reiji couldn't help but smile bitterly at Graziella's comment.

"They have nothing to gain by making themselves known to the likes of me, though," Reiji mumbled to himself.

He knew he was being a little self-deprecating, but it wasn't like he had any money or authority here. What did anyone get from being connected to him? Not to mention that he was from another world entirely; once he went back, all of their desperate scrambling would be pointless.

Reiji stood in the corner of the venue, mind whirling with such thoughts, before he turned aside to Mizuki. Mizuki usually wore a uniform and muffler, but today she had put on makeup and borrowed a dress. She looked far more mature than normal. It was a side of his friend Reiji hardly saw, and it made his heart throb. The fact that it was a black dress had to be because of her personal tastes.

"Maybe the nobles think you're planning to stay here," Mizuki said.

"Me? In Astel?" Reiji asked.

"Mm-hmm." Mizuki nodded. "If not, I doubt they would've come to this party."

"I guess so," Reiji agreed.

If they thought otherwise, they wouldn't be trying so hard to make a connection with him.

"R-Reiji-kun, what do you think?" Mizuki asked in a sudden fluster. "D-Do you actually want to stay in this world?"

"Huh? No, I'm planning to go back," Reiji answered. "I've got family there too."

"R-Right! That's right!" Mizuki raised her voice, then let out a big sigh of relief.

"But I'm thinking of coming back once or twice a month," Reiji added. "If Suimei can teach me the magicka to come and go, we can do it whenever I want."

"Yeah. Or we can get Suimei-kun to drop us off and pick us up."

"If we do that, I can already hear him saying, 'Don't use me as a goddamn taxi!"

"Me too."

The two of them continued teasing their absent friend. Reiji truly did want to visit several times a month. *After* the world was at peace and the demons were finally defeated, of course.

"Besides, just saying, 'Okay, bye,' to the people we've met here after defeating the demons is kinda sad," Reiji added.

"Yeah," Mizuki agreed. "We've gotten so close to Tia and Graziella-san too. I don't like the idea of having to say goodbye to them."

"Mm."

Titania in particular had been with them from the very beginning, and the three of them had all supported each other through many hardships. Separating from her would be truly difficult.

As the two friends talked about the future, Reiji noticed some familiar faces approaching. It was a group of three: an older man, a gallant woman, and a youthful man, all dressed like knights. These were the escorts who'd accompanied Reiji on his journey.

"Hero Reiji-sama, it has been a long time," Gregory said as he reached Reiji, giving him a picture-perfect salute.

"Gregory-san! Luka-san! Roffrey-san!" Reiji responded.

"It's good to see you again," Luka greeted him.

"Reiji-sama!" Roffrey said. "I'm so sorry for all the trouble we caused!"

These three had left to recuperate after the incident in the self-governed state, but they were now here to see Reiji.

"How is your condition?" Reiji asked.

"As you can see, our wounds are healed," Gregory answered. "We're perfectly fine."

"Thank goodness," Reiji said.

"Mm... I'm so glad you all recovered without trouble," Mizuki agreed, her expression full of relief.

Due to her personality switching to Io Kuzami, she'd heard about what happened to these three after the fact, and she had been very worried about them. Watching Mizuki take Luka's hand, Reiji couldn't help but smile.

"I'm truly ashamed all this happened while we were by your side," Gregory said, bowing deeply.

"Don't be," Reiji told him. "I'm just glad you're all okay."

With that, the three knights bowed apologetically once more. They were all very serious by nature, so this must've weighed on them.

"Are the three of you also attending the party?" Reiji asked.

"No," Gregory answered. "We'll be taking part in securing the grounds."

"Aww. I wanted to talk more," Reiji said.

"Hahaha, thank you very much," Gregory replied, laughing. "I'm sure we'll have other opportunities to speak. Besides, if you talk with us now, you'll be too tired for what's to come."

"I guess so," Reiji said with a nod.

Gregory was most likely suggesting the slew of nobles Reiji had to inevitably talk to, and Reiji just couldn't control his face at the thought. Mizuki and the knights all burst into laughter at his reaction. With that, the knights left the banquet hall.

"Talking with nobles, huh?" Reiji muttered. "What'll you do, Mizuki?"

"I'm just a s, so I guess I won't pay it any attention," Mizuki answered. "I'd only get nervous. I think I'll just stand by you and nod like your own personal accessory."

Mizuki gave off a very energetic and cheerful impression, but she was actually pretty shy around strangers. Reiji also couldn't deny that, even if she wasn't going to devolve into a panic, she might end up doing something weird if she

talked. Her decision to be quiet was to prevent making such a mistake, a self-defense against her own tendencies.

And just as Gregory predicted, when the atmosphere in the room seemed right, several nobles began to approach. At the same time, however, a figure appeared from the opposite direction, and the approaching nobles immediately backed off, as if pushed by some external force.

The new arrival was none other than Graziella. Much like Mizuki, she was wearing a dress, likely also borrowed. She usually wore a primarily white military uniform, but now, in a figure-hugging red dress, elbow-length gloves, and an ornament in her hair, she looked like a princess with the seductive aura of a dancer. She approached without hesitation, and Reiji and Mizuki walked up to meet her.

"Graziella-san," Reiji greeted her.

"I don't like wearing dresses, but the castle's maids kept nagging me..." Graziella said. "It doesn't really suit me, does it?"

"No, it suits you very well," Reiji said.

"I-Is that so? Hm, that's good, then..." Graziella scratched her cheek shyly.

The praise seemed to embarrass her a bit, as she proceeded to cross her arms like she usually did. But this time, because of her dress, the motion only served to push up her already considerable breasts.

"Whoa?!" Reiji yelped at the sight.

"O-Oh, um..."

Graziella immediately shifted her arms to cover her chest. Mizuki's eyes were as sharp and severe as daggers, but Reiji chose to ignore this.

"So what's the star of the party doing in the corner?" Graziella said after clearing her throat, changing the topic as if nothing had happened. "Men aren't suited to be wallflowers."

"Standing in the center will just stress me out, so I was wondering what to do..." Reiji said.

"You'll get accustomed to it the more you do," Graziella told him.

"Was there a time when you weren't used to it, Graziella-san?" Mizuki asked.

"No," Graziella answered. "To me, a party is no more than another battlefield. Losing focus will lead to being devoured. There was no time to worry about being accustomed to it."

"Wow... I'll never get used to that..." Mizuki mumbled in despair.

The hurdle now seemed impossibly high. But since this was a onetime thing and they'd been given plenty of consideration and support, Reiji didn't think Mizuki needed to worry about it that much.

"If you dislike the idea that much, you can simply intimidate everyone around you," Graziella said. "By doing so, only those with considerable spirit will approach you. You'll have fewer people to deal with."

"That'll mean the people who *do* come will be really stubborn," Reiji refused. "Won't that tire me out even more?"

"That depends on your perspective," Graziella said, waving aside Reiji's anxieties.

Another familiar figure then entered the banquet hall through the main doors. It was Titania, also wearing a dress. She approached the group with elegant strides.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," she said, joining the group diffidently.

"Making the star wait *and* arriving last?" Graziella commented candidly. "Is that truly appropriate for the host's princess?"

"Oh my, I was preparing so that Reiji-sama could enjoy himself that much more," Titania retorted. "I believe my efforts balance things out perfectly."

"Hmm?"

Titania twirled on the spot. In complete contrast to Graziella's, her dress was a light blue. It had a halterneck style with a wide-open back, emphasizing her slim curves. After showing off her figure, she slid toward Reiji and looked at him with upturned eyes.

"H-How do I look?" she asked.

"M-Mm. Beautiful... It suits you very well," Reiji said, repeating his previous words of praise.

"Hngh...! Thank you very much!" Titania smiled brilliantly.

As Reiji reflected over his complete lack of vocabulary, he noticed Graziella was stifling a laugh. Both he and Titania turned quizzical looks her way.

"Heh heh, what splendid dorsal muscles," Graziella said.

"Huh? Wha? My back's not that muscular!" Titania yelled.

"Really? It's far lumpier and more rugged than I imagined," Graziella told her.

"Th-That's not true! R-Reiji-sama! I don't have that much muscle, right?!" Titania turned her back to him in a panic, as if insisting he check for her.

"Ah. No. You're fine," he said. "You have a very beautiful and tight back."

"See?! Reiji-sama says so too!" Titania shouted.

"He's obviously just being considerate," Graziella said, maintaining her smile.

Graziella seemed to take great fun in teasing Titania about her back, since she couldn't see for herself. Mizuki, meanwhile, was simply watching the two with that "Aah, there they go again" look.

"P-Princess Graziella!" Titania yelled rebelliously. "Compared to *your* splendid abdominal muscles, my back is but a trifle!"

"I-I don't have any abs!" Graziella yelled back at her. "You've never even seen them! Don't spout such rubbish!"

"Oh? Is that so? Since you're a close-combat specialist, don't you have a six-pack?" Titania asked teasingly.

"Th-There's no way..."

Graziella denied it, but her reaction was a little too over-the-top. Judging by her suddenly flustered state, the way she was trying to dodge the topic, and her tight corset...

"Um, Princess Graziella? Don't tell me you actually—" Titania started to say, her smile vanishing.

"That's enough of that topic!" Graziella shouted, forcefully bringing the conversation to an end.

Even Reiji wasn't dense enough to press on here. He tried to think of another topic, when suddenly, Graziella drew nearer to him.

"Um... Do you dislike muscular women?" she asked.

"Huh? No. Isn't it fine?" he answered.

"I-I see! That's good, then..." Graziella muttered.

"Huh? What was that?" Reiji asked, not quite able to hear her.

"No, it's nothing!" Graziella exclaimed. "Ahem! It's about time to get going."

"So I really hafta go..."

Somewhat forced by Graziella, Reiji moved to the center of the banquet hall. If he actually saw such muscles, Reiji thought to himself, what would he actually think? And with those thoughts in mind, he walked none too willingly into the banquet.

The day after the party, Reiji's group was having breakfast with Almadious when unbelievable news reached their ears.

The castle's servants were in a complete panic. A chamberlain burst into the room, forgetting to even knock, let alone follow etiquette, before practically collapsing to a knee.

"What's going on?" the king asked.

"I-I bring grave news!" the chamberlain shouted in a fluster. "A demon army has been confirmed within our borders!"

The room was at once flooded with tension. The time had finally come. If that was the case, the man's discourtesy was reasonable.

"Understood," the king replied calmly. "How are the northern defenses doing?"

"No, the situation has already escalated beyond that point..."

"What is it? Speak plainly," the king commanded.

"Sire! The demon army has already arrived in the vicinity of the capital!"

For a moment, Reiji had no idea what the man was saying.

A demon army was in the vicinity of Metel.

He repeated those words in his head, analyzed them, and repeated them once more. Only then did he understand what had been said. Titania realized at around the same time and shot up to her feet, knocking back her chair.

"What do you mean they're near the capital?!" she yelled.

"Ma'am! The demon army is already within seventy kilometers of the capital! We're still confirming the scale of their forces!"

"What?!" the king shouted, unable to maintain his composure any longer.

"That's impossible..." Graziella muttered, also in an astonished daze.

Everyone in the room was speechless for a while.

"I-Is that really true?" Titania asked.

"Yes! At their current speed, we estimate they'll be at the walls within two days," the chamberlain answered.

"What are the nobles at the border doing...?" Almadious said. "They can't possibly have missed a demon invasion."

"We're currently waiting on word from them," the chamberlain said.

"According to eyewitness accounts, it's as if they suddenly appeared out of nowhere."

"What's going on...?" Almadious muttered. "Never mind, you're dismissed. Once you find anything out, report to me at once."

"Sire!"

With Almadious's permission, the chamberlain excused himself from the room. Silence sank over them once more, and after a short while, Mizuki raised a trembling voice.

"R-Reiji-kun! A demon invasion?!"

"Yeah..." Reiji said. "I don't know what's going on, but I'm sure it's true."

"And less than a hundred kilometers away?!" Mizuki shouted.

"Yeah..."

There was no time to waste.

"Your Majesty," Reiji said, turning to the king.

"It's hard to believe, but I doubt it's a lie," Almadious said. "Nobody would mistake such a sight for anything else."

"It's far too foul for a joke. It would warrant a beheading," Graziella commented harshly.

Almadious nodded stiffly back to her.

"Now isn't the time for breakfast," Reiji said. "Tia."

"Yes. Let's head to the tower for now," Titania said. "If they're seventy kilometers away, we should be able to see them from there."

"Reiji-dono, we shall confirm the situation as quickly as possible," Almadious said, his expression grave and stiff. "If the time comes, please lend us your power."

"Yes! Of course!" Reiji replied.

On Titania's suggestion, Reiji's group left their meals for later and ran for the tower.

News of a demon invasion was so sudden that it didn't seem real, but Reiji and the others still followed Titania to the highest tower in Castle Camellia. Looking out the window, they saw the capital sprawling out before them, the mountains far off in the distance, and...

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"That's..."
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"No way..."

A black mass was squirming about. This was, of course, not a mountain. Nor was it a forest. The black mass was composed of individual beings moving about: an army. They appeared like a swarm of insects gathering for warmth in the winter.

What's more, the thundercloud-like masses in the sky were yet another army. Reiji squinted to try and get a better view. He formed a ring with his thumb and index finger, then looked through it. While he couldn't make out the fine details, he could see individual silhouettes. There was no mistaking the cloudy black power that was characteristic of demons. What was gathering in the sky were clearly winged demons.

"Well?" Graziella prompted.

"It's definitely demons," Reiji said.

"How fast are they advancing?" Graziella asked.

"Well..." Reiji wasn't sure how to answer that.

"It's difficult to say from here, but a normal army would only need two days," Titania conjectured. "Demons come in many shapes and forms, so taking that into consideration, we might have three or four days at most."

"But where did they come from?" Graziella said, clearly bewildered by this. "It should be impossible for them to get this far without anyone noticing..."

She had a point. The nobles defending the borders would've noticed such an enormous army's advance. It was doubtful that they'd forgotten to send word or been annihilated before being able to do so. So why were they here? How was this possible?

But Reiji already had a clue as to how this impossible advance had been accomplished. Yes. Suimei had once spoken of a demon who could manipulate space. Perhaps that ability could connect the demons' territory to the middle of Astel, allowing them to instantly transport an army. Considering the amount of power that had to be exhausted to accomplish such a feat, it probably couldn't be done at a moment's notice, but it didn't sound impossible.

"The demon from the last war...he may be responsible," Reiji said.

"Reiji-kun. Reiji-kun. What do you mean by that?" Mizuki asked.

"The demon who showed up during the invasion in Nelferia," Reiji elaborated. "The one with horns and gold hair."

"That one... You mean the demon who spoke with Suimei," Graziella said.

If Reiji remembered correctly, the demon had identified himself as Lishbaum. Suimei had called him Kudrack.

"But why now?" Graziella continued. "If they were capable of such a feat, they could've done so far sooner. They could've done it during the invasion in Nelferia too."

"I don't know," Reiji said. "But that's the only thing I can think of with the information we have."

"I suppose there's no point asking how or why at this point," Graziella said.

"They're here now. That's an undeniable fact. Princess Titania, what's the status of Astel's army?"

"The army is mobilizing," Titania answered. "We've requested reinforcements already. More soldiers are gathering from all local regions, so they should be arriving sooner or later."

"We can only pray for sooner," Graziella said, her expression even more grim than during the last war.

"Graziella-san..." Reiji said.

"This'll likely be a siege," Graziella added, turning to him.

"A siege..." Reiji repeated.

That would mean holing up in the castle or the city and fighting from there, a first for Reiji. Since he had only fought in open fields and mountainous areas, this would be completely different than what he knew.

"There's no need to worry that much," Graziella reassured him. "We don't need to annihilate the enemy. In a siege, we only need to hold out long enough for our reinforcements to reach us."

"It looks backbreaking to stave off that many of them, though," Reiji commented.

"Princess Titania, how confident are you that the capital can be protected?" Graziella asked.

"It has been decades since Metel was last attacked," Titania said. "There's no telling what will happen."

In other words, nobody currently alive had any knowledge or experience of sieges. It was definitely going to be a harsh battle.

"This just had to happen while Suimei and the others are away..." Reiji muttered.

"It's been a week or so since Suimei-kun went back, right?" Mizuki said. "They might've even returned already."

"Let's send word to the Empire right away," Reiji said.

"Indeed. We don't have a moment to waste," Graziella agreed. "If he returns, things should work out one way or another."

They started to feel hope. Suimei would be able to get here from the Empire in an instant... and if not, he would at least be able to do so very quickly using his magicka. Reiji simply believed this to be the case.

"Reiji-sama," Titania said. "I believe you will be asked to participate in the vanguard of the initial battle."

"Mm." Reiji nodded. "To improve morale, right?"

"Y-Yes. Exactly," Titania confirmed, somewhat bewildered.

"What's this? You seem more composed than expected," Graziella said with an unexpected look.

"Yes. I have this," Reiji said, pulling the Sacrament from his pocket.

It was the mysterious white ornament embedded with an azure glow. Anyone who didn't know about it wouldn't see it as a weapon even if they were told it was one. This was a Sacrament, a paranormal armament that had been brought to this world by one of the heroes who'd been summoned here in the past.

"The Ishar Cluster, was it?" Graziella said. "A terrifying weapon. I can certainly see why you're confident."

"Ah! The legendary weapon!" Mizuki exclaimed.

"Yeah. I doubt I can lose so long as I have this," Reiji said.

"Right?! You even defeated that huge golem!" Mizuki said. "A demon army will be nothing!"

It was just as she said. With this power, it wasn't out of the question to battle an entire army. Suimei had told him of exactly such a thing happening in their own world. If one of these could contend against all the weapons of the modern world, it wasn't likely to fail against a demon army. Besides, holding it in his hand, he felt confident that he could fight anything, though he had nothing to base it on. He simply had a feeling that he could fight against anyone for as long as he wanted. However...

Reiji stared at the Lapis Judaix embedded within it. The gem radiated an azure glow that felt like it could suck him straight into its light. Staring into it made him feel like he was looking into a bottomless lake or an endless blue sky. Had the voice within this gem, the one calling out to him all this while, known that this battle would happen?

"Crave it. Pray for it. Reach out and take it."

When he closed his eyes, he could hear the voice repeating in his head.

Chapter 2: Grotesque Demon

The demon army immediately closed in on the capital, trampling the fields and burning the forests in their wake. They were already in battle formation just twenty kilometers away from the walls. Why weren't they attacking yet? Were they waiting to see what the humans would do?

Astel's side had also gathered soldiers from the area. And even beyond the military, they'd mobilized the militia and the Adventurer's Guild. Nevertheless, they still didn't have enough personnel.

The flat plains surrounding Metel provided zero geographical advantages, so they resorted to digging trenches, camps, and barricades around the city with magic. But these were hasty constructions, and so not very reliable. Considering they were facing demons, it was unclear whether they would be of any help or not. These defenses seemed, overall, quite flimsy.

The city's defense could be summarized thus, in Graziella's words: "It's better than nothing."

The goal in a siege was to defend the city and buy time. Any delays in the enemy's offense granted more time for reinforcements to arrive. When enough reinforcements had been gathered, the city could shift to the offensive. The enemy army would then have to face an attack from two fronts—a tough situation in which their supplies would incur massive losses, and they would therefore be forced to retreat.

It was unclear whether a demon army even cared about supplies, but the theory seemed sound enough to apply to this situation. The initial clash over the plains, however, was a different story.

"Why do it this way?" Reiji asked. "Isn't it easier to fight by barricading ourselves inside the city?"

"Mages can't be put to proper use in urban warfare," Graziella explained. "It's possible to fire magic from the walls, but since some of the demons can fly,

placing the mages there would make them an easy target."

"I get it now." Reiji nodded.

During the war in Nelferia, they'd marched forth to meet the demons in a mountainous region. Reiji remembered witnessing entire formations of mages firing their magic as one unit. But if such a thing was done within the city, the nearby buildings would be severely damaged, possibly destroying their only cover. With that in mind, it was typical to use magic where there were no obstacles. They could whittle down the enemy forces as much as possible that way before retreating behind the walls.

Reiji's party was currently standing within a battle line, getting ready to clash with the demon army.

"Why aren't the demons trying to encircle us?" Titania mused.

"Who knows?" Graziella said. "There's no telling what goes through a demon's head."

"Is that weird?" Mizuki asked.

"Yes, very much so," Titania said.

"Why's that?" Mizuki asked.

"It's simple—if they split their army into three or four groups and encircle the city, we'll be forced to retreat within the city walls," Titania explained. "Encircling us would also make it more difficult for us to quickly contact any allies outside the city."

"So they don't want us hiding within the walls either?" Mizuki said. "The demons would have a harder time fighting us if we did?"

"That's entirely possible, but there's far more to gain for our attackers by forcing a siege," Titania said. "The defending side still maintains an advantage either way, though."

"Hmmm."

"What I don't understand is why they're moving in such a way that allows us to evacuate our civilians," Titania added. "It's as if they want us to retreat. Why exactly are they attacking like this?"

"It's not like they want the territory," Graziella commented. "The demons aim to destroy humanity... And yet they're being so lax on the offense and aren't encircling us."

Both Titania and Graziella were befuddled by the demons' bizarre plan of attack. From their perspective, it looked like the demons were holding back. Currently, the demons were in formation directly to the front and to one side of the city. Astel's army had set up barricades to face them, but the demons far outnumbered them. Compared to the swarm of approaching demons, the city's defenses seemed unreliable.

It was unlikely for them to attack in scattered formations, like Reiji had once witnessed. More likely they were just waiting for the right time to charge as one, a clear sign they were being well commanded.

"How's the evacuation going?" Reiji asked.

"Very slowly," Gregory answered. "And not as we hoped."

"Why's that?" Reiji asked. "The demons are already right outside."

"Everything happened so suddenly that people found it hard to believe," Gregory explained. "So they dragged their feet. Only now, when things have reached this point, are they beginning to realize the gravity of the situation. They're panicking."

Unlike the modern world, information traveled very slowly in this world. Unexpected developments were often poorly handled. The thought of a demon invasion was so unrealistic that the people's first thoughts were often "It'll probably be fine" and "It'll pass." And there were limits to what the nation could do to force an evacuation. The civilians had to travel a long distance and a lot of the men had to stay behind, so it had to be complete logistical chaos.

Reiji was thinking all this when the ground suddenly started trembling.

The demons were on the move.

"It's finally starting..." Mizuki said.

"Mizuki, if it's too hard on you, you can stay in the city walls," Reiji suggested.

She shook her head. "No. I'll fight too. I can't let you be the only one going

through all this."

"Mizuki..."

"We shall protect Mizuki-sama with our lives," Gregory said.

Roffrey and Luka nodded in agreement, and in that moment they appeared incredibly reliable. After thanking them, Reiji headed over to Titania.

"I'll launch the first strike," he said.

"Reiji-sama, our lives are in your hands." Titania bowed low, far more reverently than usual.

Reiji stepped forth to cut down the vanguard. The soldiers before him opened a path. Their faces were lined with clear tension, but seeing Reiji advance, they found their courage, their expressions softening with a slight air of relief.

It pleased Reiji to see how others took heart in just his presence. Bathed in the soldiers' encouragement, he eventually reached the front, the empty boundary that had sprung up between the two armies. It was as if someone had taken a ruler and drawn a perfectly straight line to neatly divide the two forces.

To the front was an enormous demon army. This was the second time Reiji had been faced with so many enemies. Despite having prior experience, he found himself trembling. How many of them had to be defeated? How long would they have to fight? Those anxieties pressed on him like a sudden weight in his chest.

Reiji slapped his cheeks to drive such thoughts away. Lines from a movie he'd watched suddenly came to mind.

"Fear is nothing but an illusion of the mind. It doesn't strike from without. It is something your mind creates on its own. It is a product of your own weakness. You can't let it overcome you."

Yes. I'll prove that right here and now. Somewhere out there was a voice questioning his worth—criticizing his existence. To silence that voice, Reiji brandished the Sacrament and was just about to transform it into a weapon... when a single demon stepped forth.

The demon was a woman with horns. She wore a knightly outfit and had a

sword at her hip. With white hair, bloodred eyes, and dark skin, she looked far more human than any other demon Reiji had seen.

"Would you be Astel's hero, Reiji?" she asked, drawing the sword at her waist and pointing it at him.

"I am," Reiji answered.

"I am Moolah, the general who leads this army."

It seemed she'd stepped forth in answer to Reiji's advance. Such a move indicated immense confidence in her own strength. Still, this was unexpected. Reiji had seen demons with human features before, but this woman was almost indistinguishable from a human. Only her horns and the Evil God's power identified her true nature. Excluding those features, she was actually quite beautiful.

But Reiji couldn't afford to hesitate. Before him was the enemy leader who'd come here to kill every human in the city. She may have looked extremely human herself, but Reiji had to discard any and all doubts from his mind.

"Coming to battle empty-handed?" Moolah said, a hint of irritation in her sharp gaze. "What the hell are you planning? Did you actually approach to get yourself killed?"

"I've got a weapon right here," Reiji said.

"What-"

Listening to Moolah's bewildered voice, Reiji spoke the words Sir Ryzeia had taught him.

"My crystallized sword spirit which glimmers with the blue light of the Lapis. Crystal Sword... manifest in the parted world!"

An azure brilliance surged from Reiji's hand, becoming large enough to envelop his whole body. Before long, the Ishar Cluster's hilt was in his palm. It had transformed into a slender straight sword, one suffused with a chilling aura.

"What a strange weapon..." Moolah said. "That's not the Goddess's power."

And with the Sacrament's transformation still lingering in the air, Reiji charged.

"Let's go!" he shouted.

Moolah moved to intercept him.

"Don't look down on me!" A wisp of black miasma coiled around her straight sword like a worm, quickly amassing size and strength.

Reiji struck with a downward slash, but Moolah caught the blow with a horizontal slant of her sword. The clash created a shock wave that swept down on demons and humans alike. One side was frozen in place by the overwhelming pressure of the Ishar Cluster, while the other was demoralized by the concentrated power of the Evil God Moolah emitted.

With their blades suddenly locked, Reiji started pushing Moolah back.

"Well, well..." she muttered.

"I'm not done!" Reiji cried out.

He was definitely pushing her back gradually. At this rate, he could cut her down. Even with such hopes in mind, Reiji quickly revised his estimations—he *might* cut her down. Seeing the immense power of the Evil God building within Moolah's body, Reiji leaped back to put some distance between them and prepared his next move.

"Ishar Cluster!"

He called out to his sword and unleashed the Sacrament's power. The azure light created crystalline, icelike clusters in the air. With a swing of his sword, the crystals shot out and extended like spikes into the surrounding area.

Despite the rain of crystal spears, Moolah fended off the attack splendidly. Some she cut down in midair, some she parried to the side—all through pure swordsmanship. She didn't use a fragment of the Evil God's power. Her talent for the blade was enchanting. In close combat, it was probably impossible to put up any kind of fight against her without at least being as strong as Titania.

Meanwhile, a part of the battle line behind Moolah had been caught in the crystal flood. The giant spears shattered on impact, dispersing into smaller, still-sharp crystals and piercing any demon in the vicinity of impact. The attack created a large hole in the demon formation, as if a portion of the horde had

been scooped out by an enormous spoon.

The soldiers behind Reiji cheered at the sight of so many defeated demons, but other demons packed in and filled the gap immediately, then widened the line. They were putting space between themselves to defend against future projectiles.

Reiji decided to resort to his ultimate strike. At the very moment he made the decision, however, Moolah closed in at terrifying speed.

"Guh!" Reiji grunted.

"How careless it is to sink into thought in the middle of battle, hero!"

Both the intense strike of Moolah's sword and the dark power enveloping it sent Reiji flying back. But he couldn't stay on the defensive. Even in midair, he immediately formed more crystals to counterattack. He sent a rain of projectiles the size of pebbles and restrained Moolah's movements. Reiji took advantage of Moolah's temporary distraction to regain his balance, digging his heels into the ground to bring himself to a stop. He looked up to see Moolah standing there imposingly, already finished with deflecting the crystal barrage.

"So strong..."

This was Reiji's honest opinion of her. She was powerful in a different way from Ilzarl. Ilzarl had displayed pure brute strength, but Moolah wielded tremendous technique. Naturally, the Evil God's power within her was far beyond any of the other surrounding demons. If anything, Reiji considered, hands still numb from their earlier clash with Moolah's sword, it was greater than any demon Reiji had ever faced.

And then, with no explanation, Moolah suddenly sheathed her sword and turned on her heels. She did nothing to defend her back from Reiji—as if leaving in disappointment.

"What's the meaning of this?!" Reiji yelled, unable to maintain his composure.

"That's enough of this warm-up," she said.

"You think you can just turn your back on me and leave?!" Reiji shouted.

"Hmph. Don't you have more important things to worry about?" Moolah retorted.

"Wha-?!"

The demon army immediately moved as one. A beat later, Reiji heard voices shouting behind him.

"Intercept them with magic!"

"Brace for battle!"

Mana built up as chants broke out like a chorus. Following the tremendous undulation of mana, flames covered the sky like a living curtain, and crashed upon the demons like a waterfall. Black and white smoke rose in the air, mixing with clouds of dust to obscure the already gloomy sky. A shock wave immediately followed, sweeping over Reiji. He felt like the sudden gust of heat would not simply burn him but carbonize his flesh if he reached out just a little too far.

"Reiji-sama, please back down for now," Titania said, suddenly appearing behind him. "The magic attacks will only intensify from here."

"Got it." Reiji nodded, then retreated with her.

The simultaneous magic attack was powerful. In the medieval wars back in his own world, this part of the battle would probably entail volleys of arrows, but here, they used magic. The plan was to blow up a good chunk of the enemy forces magically before engaging in more direct battle.

"Sh-Shouldn't I fire too?!" Mizuki yelled in a panic.

"Preserve your strength," Titania told her. "Please support Reiji-sama."

"S-Sure...! Anyway, this is amazing," Mizuki said. "Can't we defeat all of them like this?"

"No, it's useless," Titania said. "It'll end soon with nothing more than burning their front line. It'd be a different matter altogether if the effects of our magic lasted longer, but I'm sure they have some sort of countermeasure."

"Ah, they do have the Evil God's power behind them..." Mizuki muttered.

The demons were likely using that to resist any and all magic.

"But is fire magic the only thing we're gonna use?" Mizuki asked. "Aren't there other kinds of magic that'll work?"

"Fire and lightning magic are particularly destructive," Titania explained.

"Besides, magics of different attributes will clash and weaken each other. At worst, they can even cancel each other out."

For the magic to be stronger, then, it was best for all of them to be the same.

"Once the magic barrage is done, the archers will follow," Titania continued. "Once that is done, the demons will be upon us. Reiji-sama, Mizuki, get ready to fight."

"Mm." Reiji nodded.

"Yeah!" Mizuki replied energetically.

"Reiji, the scale of my magic is vast," Graziella said, slamming her fists together. "Don't advance too far and get caught in it."

"It's alright," Reiji told her. "My crystals won't lose to it."

"Let's see you back that up," Graziella said.

They watched as clouds of dust rose farther into the sky. Reiji was still incensed about Moolah turning her back to him. Neither of them had gone all out, though, so that had to go both ways. He eventually leashed his irritation and watched as the demons rushed through the curtain of smoke. Magic, arrows, and rocks poured down on them in an attempt to halt their advance. Reiji wielded the Ishar Cluster to add crystal volleys to the effort.

Okay, it's going fine.

All his combat experience so far allowed him to read the demons' movements somewhat. He fought back the demons on land using the Ishar Cluster's blade and created crystals to cover against the demons in the sky, launching icy spears to shoot them down. So long as he was careful about the miasma polluting the area, he wasn't going to get caught off guard unless something extraordinary happened.

Being able to freely wield the Ishar Cluster played a major role in his ability to

maintain superiority in this battle. By weaponizing it at will and fully manifesting its abilities, he vastly expanded his combat options.

"At this rate..."

He could do it. It was, of course, impossible for him to defeat the entire demon army, but he could cull their numbers significantly in preparation for the siege.

He could fight. He wasn't falling behind. He wasn't worthless.

Just as Reiji's heart started filling with hope, he was assaulted by a tremendous urge to vomit.

"Guh?!"

What's going on? Is this a demon attack? Unable to answer those questions, Reiji buckled over, as if to hurl the contents of his stomach. Upon witnessing Reiji in such a state, Titania immediately ran over to his side, flustered.

"Reiji-sama! What's the matter?!" she screamed.

"I-I…"

He was feeling sick because of a certain presence. It was repulsive. It was as if something dreadful—something tens or even hundreds of times more concentrated than the miasma around Moolah's sword—was somewhere out there.

"What's wrong? You don't look like you were hit," Graziella said, concern clear in her voice.

"R-Reiji-kun..." Mizuki said, her eyes filled with anxiety.

It seemed none of them were affected.

"Don't you feel it?" he asked them.

"Feel what?" Titania asked in return.

"From over there..." Reiji muttered, stumbling over his words. "I can sense something really, really bad over that way..."

And just then, an explosion thundered from somewhere along the defensive line. One beat later, Reiji's party turned to face it.

There was now a gaping hole in the ground. Not a single soldier stood there, only a puddle of blood. Reiji understood the sight immediately—something had completely pulverized the soldiers. Body parts were scattered all over.

But the demons still hadn't broken through the line. Did that mean something else had launched that attack?

"Ugh..."

Just as chaos began spreading through the area, Reiji sensed a repulsive and powerful presence. The cloud of smoke and blood dispersed, revealing a demon who looked far more disgusting than anything Reiji had ever seen, some horrid mash-up of insect and beast. Standing about two and a half meters tall, with long arms and tightly packed claws, its body overall looked like someone had glued together parts from various plastic models, random and irregular.

"That's..." Titania said, trailing off.

"Tch. I've got a really bad feeling about this," Graziella said.

Both Titania and Graziella sensed it now too. Sweat ran down their brows and backs.

And as Reiji's party remained frozen at the sight of the grotesque demon, it moved toward the soldiers nearest to it. Though the soldiers met the demon in groups, a single swing of its claws tore them all apart. The demon moved gracelessly, the swipe a simple gesture, as if swatting a fly—the soldiers may as well have been air. Its movements were so crude and casual, it wasn't clear whether the demon was cognizant of the presence of others at all.

Regardless, the grotesque demon proceeded to crush all the soldiers who came before it. No one seemed able to stop it. The fight was one-sided. Hopeless. It wasn't even a fight; it was just a massacre.

"Aaaaaah?!"

"S-Stay back! Stay baaaaaack!"

The soldiers' screams spread fear among the others. The entire area was quickly overcome with terror. And as some soldiers stepped back, the grotesque demon headed toward its next victims.

Reiji could see how things would play out: Blood fountaining in the air. Torn limbs and heads flying all over the place. Though these were only mental images, in a matter of seconds they seemed likely to become reality.

"Stooooop!"

Before he knew it, Reiji was screaming, running toward the grotesque demon, weaving his way through the ranks of soldiers. He ran with powerful strides, pushing the Goddess's blessing within him and the Sacrament's power to their full extent.

Moving at nearly the speed of light, he forced his way between the grotesque demon and the soldiers, brandishing the Ishar Cluster high in the air. However, the misshapen claws moved faster than he could.

I'm too slow!

Noticing this in an instant, Reiji immediately held the Ishar Cluster horizontally to block the grotesque demon's claws. He believed the Sacrament's power was enough to stop it; when he wielded it, his power was amplified exponentially. He'd even been a match for an outlandish demon. He was definitely going to prevail.

"Gaaah?!"

Upon contact, Reiji was assaulted by an unbelievable impact. Unable to withstand the blow, he was blown back a great distance—and so, too, did his blind faith in the Ishar Cluster vanish. He momentarily lost consciousness, preventing him from landing on his feet.

"Ugh... Gah..."

All the air was expelled from his lungs. He was without oxygen. He couldn't breathe. Every pore in his body was producing a cold sweat. His vision warped like a marble ball as he watched the grotesque demon approach.

Crap. Crap! This is bad. I have to stand up. I'm going to die.

As those fears ran through Reiji's mind, the Lapis Judaix in the Ishar Cluster glowed even brighter. And then came Graziella's voice.

"Heed my desires! Fly in from the beyond to the one who refuses an audience

with me! My hail detaches you from the world's entangled and inseparable laws! Become a power that surpasses all reason! Devigi Konekti!"

A hole opened in the sky, and from it emerged an enormous boulder. Like a mountaintop flipped upside down, it crashed into the grotesque demon. The ground trembled, as if under the effects of a major earthquake, and the sight of the demon was quickly replaced by a massive gray rock.

"Reiji-sama!" Titania screamed, rushing over to him. "Are you alright?!"

"Y-Yeah... Somehow," Reiji answered through ragged breaths.

He still couldn't breathe properly. His pulse was skyrocketing. If Graziella's magic had been a second late, he would've died.

Reiji took a quick look around. Even now, the grotesque demon's vile presence hadn't vanished.

"Tia! It's coming!"

"Gh! Right!"

Right as Titania acknowledged Reiji's warning, the enormous boulder Graziella had summoned burst open as if shattered by dynamite. Reiji immediately stepped in front of Titania and used the Ishar Cluster to create a crystal shield.

The shield looked made of glass, seemingly so flimsy a pebble could shatter it. However, no matter how many stone fragments crashed against it, it didn't even crack. On the contrary, every stone that made contact with the shield pulverized into dust.

The grotesque demon was closing in. Reiji kept a close eye on it and strengthened his crystal shield.

"Reiji-sama?!" Titania yelled.

"Tia, fall back!" he shouted back to her. "Quickly!"

The grotesque demon threw itself at Reiji in a reckless charge. The brute simplicity of the attack was exactly what granted it unparalleled power. But the crystal shield was now more than twice as thick as before. It wasn't going to break so easily.

Even so—in complete defiance of Reiji's expectations—cracks formed along its surface.

"Wha?! This isn't enough either?!"

Reiji immediately switched tactics. He stretched the shield to the side on a slight angle to try and divert the ramming attack. It was like a sideways slide. Just as planned, the grotesque demon was incapable of controlling its own strength, losing its balance and tumbling to the ground.

Reiji didn't waste a moment. He immediately yelled to the soldiers still in the area, "Get away. You can't handle this thing!"

The soldiers scattered. Due to the demon's immense mass, a ditch had been carved through the earth by its fall, creating a cloud of dust that obscured all vision.

"Reiji!"

"Reiji-sama!"

Graziella and Titania ran over to secure Reiji's flanks. Before long, the grotesque demon slowly rose from the ditch it'd created from its fall. Through the dust cloud, Reiji could see the evil glimmer of its eyes swaying about.

A freezing chill ran down his spine. It felt like an icicle had been jammed down his shirt.

"What is that thing?" he muttered. "It's as strong as that demon general we fought before."

"No, I honestly think it's far more terrifying," Titania said. "I can't really explain it. I can feel a fear building in the depths of my mind that's far greater than what I've felt from any other demon."

The grotesque demon was far too powerful. What it lacked in intelligence compared to other demons, it made up for in brute strength and the sheer pressure of its presence. However, judging by the ramming attack they'd just witnessed, it wasn't able to fully control its strength. It didn't know how to moderate its power to suit the situation. It was simply an instrument of reckless destruction that attacked everything before its eyes. That lack of control made

it all the more troublesome to handle.

What do I do?! What should I do against an enemy like that?!

Reiji's mind went sluggish before such a display of raw power. He kept repeating those questions in his head over and over and over.

If Suimei was here...

Yes. If Suimei was here, he would probably come up with a brilliant plan. The moment that thought crossed his mind, Reiji realized something.

Even after all this, I'm still depending on him...?

If Reiji always relied on Suimei, wouldn't he truly become worthless? Reiji quickly shook his head to ward off such thoughts.

"Reiji-sama!" Titania cried out. "Time is up! Let's retreat for now!"

Reiji suddenly raised his head. They'd reached their limit. The original plan was to inflict a certain amount of casualties on the demons, then gradually pull back to the city gates. To accomplish this retreat, Reiji's party shifted strategies to stalling the demons.

Lishbaum stood inside the Demon Lord's castle, within a cave without exit or entrance, alone. The magic circle glowing faintly at his feet illuminated the area with an ominous light. His eyes were fixed on the scene in front of him. On the black cavern wall, as if being projected on a screen, an army of demons and humans clashed.

"It has begun..."

After the initial collision, the two armies jostled for superiority, but before long the demon Lishbaum had created joined the fray. The humans were soon overwhelmed, becoming ants trying to confront an elephant. Their meager resistance didn't even scratch the demon. Lishbaum's grotesque creation crushed them unimpeded.

That was when Reiji charged in. He brandished the Ishar Cluster against the grotesque demon, but he couldn't get the upper hand. Even with the abnormal power of a Sacrament, it was impossible for him to rival the grotesque demon.

Did that mean the Sacrament's power didn't measure up to the grotesque demon? Or was Reiji still unable to draw out its true power? Lishbaum naturally believed it was the latter, but could that really be the case?

"Hmmm... A skilled enough fighter should be able to fend it off without even relying on the Sacrament..."

Reiji was but a trifle to the demon. He couldn't seize the initiative at all, and it was largely because he was an amateur. No matter how gifted he was, it was necessary to put in significant effort to overcome his lack of experience.

Though the grotesque demon possessed tremendous power, Lishbaum saw it as no more than poorly made and defective. No, not even that—it was just trash. He'd created it, but the "strength" he believed in wasn't reflected in this demon in any way whatsoever. That only stood to reason.

"Power. Power that can be understood at a glance. That's not your way."

Lishbaum had created this demon at Nakshatra's orders. She'd told him to follow her instructions to the letter: "Bestow humans with genuine fear through its sheer presence. However, one with simple and pure power has to be able to overcome it. It must be unleashed upon man like an ordeal from the gods."

"Well, I can see why."

Lishbaum had a clear picture of what Nakshatra—or rather, the Evil God behind her—was plotting. This was all part of laying the foundation, a roundabout way for the Evil God to get the upper hand in the long war against the Goddess.

However, it was also proof that the Evil God still underestimated humanity's potential. The future was unpredictable, and the same could be said of the Goddess. Lishbaum let out a bored sigh.

He then heard the sound of a small magic circle manifesting. This spell was unique to this world; a communication spell that only those faithful to the Evil God could use. Lishbaum pressed a finger against the small magic circle and was greeted by an irritated woman's voice.

"Lishbaum."

"Well, well... If it isn't Moolah. Calling me in the middle of a battle? Is something the matter?"

"No. I have a question for you."

"And what is that?"

"Why are you making us attack like this?"

"Like what, exactly?"

"Don't play dumb! I'm talking about this half-assed offensive!" Moolah yelled, her fury clear in her voice. "You claim we're taking down a nation, but fighting this way is in direct contradiction to that!"

It was just as she said. They'd mobilized an enormous army to topple a human nation. They'd even resorted to using mass teleportation to land at what was practically the front door of the enemy capital. And yet, the attack was being carried out haphazardly—the city hadn't even been besieged. The plan was full of holes.

A serious campaign would have involved an immediate opening strike, prioritizing speed in an all-out assault the moment the defenders started preparing. Moolah knew all this, and her knowledge had her enraged with Lishbaum. But he'd expected this reaction from her.

"Because it was Nakshatra-sama's command," he told her.

"What ...?"

"Did you not hear me? Nakshatra-sama commanded it."

Despite the magic circle's inability to convey such things, Lishbaum could sense her quiet rage and misgivings.

"You better not be lying while borrowing our liege's name..." she said menacingly.

"I would never. I have no reason to. In my opinion, this approach is far too roundabout and soft. If I were to bring about the same results, I would resort to other means."

Having regained her composure somewhat, Moolah fell silent. But she hadn't

fully dismissed her doubts; the faint sound of her holding her breath told Lishbaum as much. She was like a predator, watching her prey with bated breath.

"If you truly don't believe me, shall I connect you directly to our liege?" Lishbaum asked.

"Mrgh..."

Moolah had no choice but to believe him now. She stifled the words that crawled up her throat, leaving a bitter taste in her mouth. However, she still couldn't understand why the attack was being carried out this way.

"I understand," she said. "But why did Nakshatra-sama give such an order?"

"Our liege stated, 'It is to force preponderance of the Goddess's power.' I largely agree with this."

"Force preponderance...?"

"To forcibly concentrate the Goddess's power entirely within one hero," Lishbaum elaborated. "That is what we mean by preponderance in this case."

Moolah came to a realization. The Goddess's power was currently divided among four heroes. If that was to all be concentrated in one entity...

"Don't be stupid!" she yelled. "That'll just make that hero stronger!" "Exactly."

"Then why?! We're going out of our way to put ourselves at a disadvantage...? You must be scheming something idiotic—"

Moolah only grew more suspicious of Lishbaum. In her mind there was only one answer as to what would happen if this preponderance were successful.

"Please wait a moment," Lishbaum said, cutting her off.

"What the hell do you have to say now?"

"Just give it some thought. You went ahead and decided all on your own that that's the only explanation."

"That's because... you said yourself that's what it meant."

"No. Going with the simple answer is no different from not thinking at all. That is sloth. You must carefully consider things from different angles."

"Are you faulting me for being thoughtless?"

"I didn't go that far. I'm simply stating it is important to pay things due consideration."

"That's the same thing."

Moolah remained spiteful, so Lishbaum decided to give her a hint.

"In all likelihood, our god plans to settle things here and now. The cost doesn't matter. Everything is done based on this premise."

"Here and now? As in this battle?" Moolah asked.

"No. By here and now, I don't mean the battle you're currently participating in, but 'the present day's conflict."

"You mean to say that this battle is laying the groundwork for that purpose?"

"To the Evil God, everything done to this very date has been laying the groundwork. That includes both you and me—and Nakshatra-sama."

Moolah fell silent.

"I do understand that you don't like the thought of being used as a pawn, though," Lishbaum added.

"That's not true."

Lishbaum could immediately see that Moolah's thoughts and words were in direct conflict. She was quite different from the other demons; though tremendously loyal to her superiors, she was also extremely emotional, to the extent that it was not unreasonable to believe she could mix up her priorities when it came to the objective and the means to accomplish it.

Emotional demons as a whole did exist, but in this respect, Moolah was almost human. If so, was this also something the Evil God had set into place? Who was that spearhead going to be pointed at, then? Even now, Lishbaum couldn't get a read on it.

I suppose she is yet another who needs salvation.

And as Lishbaum continued to muse over Moolah's circumstances, a sudden thought came to mind.

"Lady Moolah, you're currently on the battlefield, correct?"

"Yes. Just as I said. I'm commanding the army and overseeing the attack."

"Perfect. There is something I'd like to ask you."

"What?"

"Do you see a human boy with black hair and black clothes there?"

"Black hair? No, I don't remember seeing anyone like that."

"Hmmm... He doesn't use the magic you're familiar with, so you wouldn't forget him if you saw him... Is Starfall not there...?"

Nobody could possibly forget that man after witnessing his magicka—he was simply that powerful. It was impossible to put a stop to his rampage without a significant show of strength.

He was like a fortress's gun battery. If he was present, a quarter—or even a full half—of the demon army would've been annihilated before the two forces even met. And that was accounting for the fact that he wasn't even at full power.

That's why I sent three of them... Hmm, we may have overdone it a little.

The objective of this battle was preponderance. They were trying to force the Goddess's power to funnel into one hero. The greater the danger, the greater the stimulation, the more they could intentionally force a hero to awaken, evolve, and lure the Goddess into making a miscalculation. The battle was of course meant to decrease the number of humans and break the balance of power overall, but that was a secondary goal.

But if they overdid it—if they were too powerful—the plan would backfire. If the hero was defeated, the power within him would be lost with him. Manipulating the preponderance of the Goddess's power would become impossible.

"So? What about this human boy?" Moolah asked.

"It's nothing. I was simply going to warn you to pay special attention if he was there."

"You bastard... Are you implying I'll lose to some measly human who's not even a hero?"

"I'm simply asking you to take such possibilities into consideration."

"Is this boy that strong?"

"Yes. However, with the amount of power you possess..."

Lishbaum trailed off there and sank into thought. Moolah was incredibly powerful. In terms of simple scale, she rivaled Demon Lord Nakshatra. So, maybe it was possible for her to defeat him.

"Are you belittling me?" Moolah asked angrily.

"Not at all. I'm warning you not to be careless, or you'll have the carpet pulled out from beneath you. That's his speciality."

"So all he's known for is petty tricks. There's nothing to worry about."

"Is that so ...?"

Just as expected, Moolah's wrath grew even stronger. She had some serious confidence, but it was true that she could defeat that man. If Yakagi Suimei could fully wield his powers, however, that would be a different situation. In any case, Moolah's trump card was not to be underestimated.

Lishbaum finished his call with Moolah and returned his attention to the footage on the wall. The "eyes" he'd sent to retrieve this footage didn't reflect the person he was looking for.

"Yakagi Suimei. Where are you?"

Lishbaum looked at the footage dispassionately. He didn't dare underestimate Yakagi Suimei. If anything, he'd considered the boy a threat from the very beginning. He was a "pure magician," the product of the greatest modern-day magician, Yakagi Kazamitsu. Suimei had enough power to annihilate any clear threats to civilization; of the six apocalyptic events revealed by divine revelation, he'd averted two calamities. Against nature and truth, he was one of humanity's greatest weapons. What was truly terrifying about this

was Yakagi Kazamitsu's ability to mold such power within the span of a mere fifteen years.

"It's kinda like if a hydrogen bomb grew a virtuous conscience, huh?"

These were the words of a certain magician—Suimei's self-proclaimed fan. His cynical words nonetheless revealed an admiration for the outrageous power Suimei possessed.

And so, Lishbaum continued staring at the projected footage, looking only for Yakagi Suimei's figure.

Two days after the outbreak of the war, Astel's capital of Metel was officially under siege. Following the opening engagement outside the walls, the stalling tactics, the evacuation of the civilians, and the reinforcement of all defensive emplacements, Astel's forces had retreated behind the tall city walls. Astel soldiers were now intercepting demons who were scaling the walls or trying to fly over them. But there were just too many of them.

Reiji's party was currently assessing the battle situation with the overall commander and the appointed officer for the command post they were presently sheltered in.

"The demon invasion is very sporadic so far, but the assault is quite fierce," the commander said. "We can't let our guard down."

"It's only a matter of time before they tear down the first wall," Graziella grumbled bitterly.

"What about the people left in the city?" Reiji asked, turning to Titania.

"They've already taken refuge behind the second wall," she answered. "We don't need to worry about them for now."

"It's good Metel's design is so ancient," Graziella commented. "If not, this would already be over."

"You can't laugh at our nation's long history now, can you?" Titania retorted.

"The outdated architecture just happened to be useful here," Graziella said. "It's like taking pride in coincidence and luck granting you a bull's-eye."

"Oh? Yet luck is just another facet of strength."

It seemed these two still had the composure to trade barbed cynicisms.

Much like Filas Philia, Metel also had walls constructed within the city. So, even if the first walls fell, the second, then third walls would still hold the enemy army back.

But Titania still seemed stiff. Was this because her home was being invaded? At the rate things were going, it was inevitable that the streets of her home would soon be dyed with blood. How much did this weigh on her?

"How many managed to evacuate?" Reiji asked.

"About half are still within the city walls," Titania said. "There wasn't much we could do about that. But the evacuation continues. We should be able to reduce the number of casualties."

"Huh? How is that still possible?" Reiji asked.

"Underground," Titania explained. "With magic, we've built several underground tunnels that will serve as evacuation routes."

"You can even do stuff like that...?"

Reiji was honestly taken aback. Digging underground tunnels would normally take a lot of time, but again, this was a magical world. If they could burrow to a safe distance, they could run away. But even this was only possible because the demons were being so lax in their siege.

"That female demon and that grotesque demon..." Graziella muttered. "We've got a mountain of problems."

"True..." Reiji agreed. "Graziella-san, do you also think that female demon is...?"

"She went as far as naming herself and challenging you," Graziella said. "Also, that concentrated power of the Evil God... She's a considerable foe."

"Reiji-sama, do you consider her dangerous too?" Titania asked.

"Moolah called it a warm-up," Reiji said. "She's probably still hiding her true strength."

"I bet she is. My head hurts," Graziella grumbled.

"What about that demon? Is it making a move?" Reiji asked the officer.

"It still hasn't shown up," the man answered. "None of our forces have reported spotting anything like it."

"If it does, the wall will fall in seconds..." Graziella said.

"True," Titania agreed. "I suppose all we are capable of is warning everyone to be ready to handle the inevitable..."

"It was, like, really gross," Mizuki joined in. "It's hard to believe that thing is even a demon..."

Reiji shared Mizuki's opinion. It was as if a sci-fi creature had been thrown into a fantasy world.

"Reiji, what are your thoughts on it?" Graziella asked.

"It was extremely strong," he answered. "Honestly, it took everything I had to keep it from killing me."

"So you think so too..." Graziella then turned to Titania. "Your Highness, how are the soldiers holding up?"

"You saw how strong it was, so, um..." Titania hesitated to continue. "They witnessed Reiji-sama being pushed back, so the ranks are rampant with unrest..."

"Figures," Graziella said.

Reiji gritted his teeth at his incompetence. He had done his best to take down as many demons as possible in the initial clash, but had been completely outmatched by the grotesque demon. And since it had happened right in front of the soldiers, many of them were left quite anxious.

What was he to do, then? To clear such anxieties, he needed power—enough to overwhelm that grotesque demon.

"I'll fight that demon," Reiji said.

"R-Reiji-kun...?"

"It's alright, Mizuki. I'll fight better next time."

"Really? You'll really be okay?"

"Yeah."

Reiji nodded reliably back to her. He had nothing to back his confidence, of course. But in order to keep Mizuki from worrying more—and honestly, to convince himself to face the demon again—he felt like he had no choice but to act like this.

"The one saving grace in this battle is the lack of blockades," Graziella pointed out. "Having a constant flow of people and supplies gives us considerable room to maneuver."

"Have the demons not realized that?" Titania mused. "Or do they think it unnecessary?"

"This invasion is relying entirely on brute force," Graziella said. "I assume the latter."

Both their expressions remained dubious, indicating just how strange they found this battle to be.

"Is that weird?" Reiji asked.

"Yes," Titania said. "Their offense is too half-hearted. In a siege, it is only right to immediately slam the full extent of your forces against the defenders."

"There must be some reason they aren't doing so..." Graziella muttered.

"They've withdrawn themselves to the point of holding that grotesque demon in reserve," Titania said. "Their strategy makes no sense."

The two continued to rack their brains for an answer, but they couldn't find any. Divining a demon's motivations was nearly impossible; they were just too different from any other race.

Reiji suddenly turned his attention away from the command post. Somehow or other, he had a bad premonition.

"I should get moving," he said. "We need to delay them at the first wall for as long as we can."

"Understood. We'll accompany you," Titania said.

Mizuki and Graziella nodded in agreement. With that, Reiji's party left the command post and returned to the fray.

Two swords danced atop the walls. Before his eyes, Reiji was witnessing Titania's techniques in all their glory. She leaped in the air and cut down winged demons who were trying to fly over the wall as if completely negating any advantage their flight might have given them. She struck like she was dancing, flitting about in the sky. Normal soldiers had no way of providing her any support. The weak were nothing but hindrances to her.

A shrill cry resounded in the air. Two demons shrieked as they charged in to challenge Titania.

"Do you think I'll lose to clumsy fools who can't even wield a sword?" Titania declared, her words chilly.

The two demons circled around as if they were trying to make sport of her, but just as Titania said, they were nothing. With calm and slow movements, she lured the demons into a false opening.

She turned cold eyes on them, dodging one and moving so that it got in the way of the other. The two demons collided and lost their balance. Titania thrust her sword at once, impaling both demons and killing them simultaneously. It was like she was a conductor at the symphony, with each and every player under her control. Trying to overwhelm her with numbers simply wouldn't work.

In short, she was terrifying.

If only I had Tia's skill with a sword, Reiji thought. If he did, perhaps he would've made more of an impact on that demon general, maybe rattled her a bit. With such thoughts clouding his mind, Reiji checked on the Ishar Cluster. He closed his eyes and hung his head. In the newfound darkness he found an azure glow.

He pictured pulling a bucket up from the bottom of a well. Immediately, he was overcome by a feeling of omnipotence and an overwhelming amount of mana. Once he was sure he'd drawn out its power without an issue, he called out to the girl behind him.

"Mizuki, I'm off."

"M-Mm... If it gets dangerous, come right back, okay?" she told him.

"It's alright. Don't worry."

Reiji looked down over the wall. Demons were everywhere. It was like looking at a swarm of bugs, or like watching a wave break against a concrete block on the beach.

"Hero...?"

One of the soldiers next to him raised his voice curiously, in the same tone someone would use to ask another if something was wrong. Reiji didn't answer. He jumped down from the wall. The soldiers yelled in shock as he dropped over ten meters to the ground.

Reiji felt time slow and stretch. As expected, there were demons right beneath him. Some were clinging to the wall, some were trying to climb it, and some were just trying to break it. Reiji unleashed a powerful attack against all of them.

He swung his sword without using any skill or technique, deploying the energy in the Ishar Cluster as if slamming down a hammer. The demons were sent flying away by the explosion of energy, while Reiji was left unscathed. Was this because he was strengthened by the Sacrament? Or was it because it automatically protected its wielder? Perhaps his power as a hero had reached new heights too.

A semicircle had been excised out of the demons at the bottom of the wall. Reiji adopted this open space as his foothold, using the adaptable crystal powers of the Ishar Cluster like he had the other day to overwhelm the demons. And as he did, he heard a soldier scream from above.

"They've broken through the wall!"

"Ugh... Already?"

Reiji searched from within his position in the swarm, seeing a group of demons heading to one point along the wall. They'd broken through. But this was to be expected; it was inevitable for the demons to break through the city's

first wall. One could say things were still going to plan.

Reiji immediately formed a crystal pillar beneath him, riding it back up to the top of the wall. He sensed the presence of a demon behind him, and just as he was about to turn around to intercept it...

"O Wind, run wild and become a great storm. Obey my will and wield your shapeless form. Lurk on above and crush down before me. Rampage to your heart's content. Everything before my eyes are my enemies—Rampage Air!"

He heard Mizuki's voice. Immediately following that, wind magic rushed toward the demon, a condensed storm strong and destructive enough to remind Reiji of the magicka Felmenia had once used against Graziella.

The concentrated gale ran past Reiji's side, striking the demon behind him like a giant hammer and mangling it to bits before sending it crashing to the ground. Using the opening, Reiji jumped onto the wall.

"Thanks, Mizuki. You saved me."

"It's fine," she said. "This is about all I can do."

"That was pretty amazing magic," Reiji reassured her. "You don't need to be humble. Still, when did you learn to use something so powerful?"

"Huh? Hmm, it's like I just suddenly could?" Mizuki said, somewhat bewildered. "Like, when I'm thinking of what magic would be best, it just pops into my head..."

Reiji didn't find this unusual. After all, Io Kazumi would've been able to use this magic with ease.

Gregory, one of the knights guarding Mizuki, then chimed in to explain the situation.

"Reiji-sama, the demons have already made their way past the walls."

"Understood," Reiji said. "I'll fight on the inside too. Where are Tia and Graziella-san?"

"Her Highness and Princess Graziella are doing their best to repel the demons from the top of the walls," Gregory answered.

"Reiji-kun, what should I do?" Mizuki asked.

Reiji took stock of the battle before answering.

"Mizuki, take Gregory and the others and fall back to the second wall."

"Huh...? But then..."

"I'm not really one to talk, but you're not used to this kind of fighting," Reiji elaborated. "If you stick around too long and get left behind, it's all over. I want you to withdraw before that happens."

"M-Mm. Okay..." Mizuki nodded, even though she was still worried. "What'll you do?"

"The walls and the area right around them will be full of demons soon," Reiji said. "I'll create an escape route for the soldiers."

With that, Reiji jumped down into the city. The top of the walls was sure to be overrun soon. Before that could happen, he had to get as many soldiers as he could back to the second wall. Reiji listened to Mizuki's cheering him on as he hit the floor. He looked up, and in complete contrast with the beautiful scenery he'd witnessed upon returning to Metel the other day, the cityscape was a cruel sight, ravaged by the ongoing battle and the demons' destructive powers.

"This is..."

He started to speak, but he couldn't even find the right words to describe it. He'd never dreamed he would find himself in a situation where he was at an utter loss for words. Could this atrocity truly be allowed?

With such emotions in his heart, Reiji slashed at the nearest demon. Perhaps due to the effects of the Sacrament, all the demons within his field of vision seemed to be moving so slowly. It almost felt like cheating.

Even in this state, Reiji could hear the cries of battle. With each demon he cut down, he heard Astel's soldiers cheering as they continued fighting back. Was the retreat actually going to work out? At that moment, Reiji sensed a bad omen, as if insects were crawling down his back.

Reiji turned around, and just as expected, the grotesque demon was there. It stood within the city walls at the head of many other demons. Where had it

come from? When he took a closer look, there was a massive hole in the wall; one far larger than the one that'd already been there.

"It got in..."

A bitter taste filled Reiji's mouth. An opponent he'd been so hard-pressed against the other day was once again before him. But the female demon wasn't here, so Reiji still had a means of handling this creature.

"Over here!"

Reiji raised his voice to draw the grotesque demon's attention. With its lack of intelligence, it was unclear whether it could even hear him, but it was better than doing nothing. And just as he'd hoped, the grotesque demon turned toward him.

A hot pursuit followed. Reiji felt a ghastly gale behind him and knew it was no tailwind. He kept running.

It was a three-dimensional chase; he jumped onto the rooftops to force his opponent to look up, and then he leaped around to cut off its line of sight. If he stayed in sight for too long, a fierce charge would come flying toward him. If he stopped for even a second, the houses he was using as footholds were sure to be destroyed, leaving him at an extreme disadvantage.

Jumping and sliding from roof to roof, he lured the grotesque demon away from the soldiers. After confirming that he'd put some distance between himself and the demon, Reiji returned to ground level and clenched the Ishar Cluster tight in his hand.

If the amount of power he could draw from the Lapis Judaix was influenced by time, then the longer he spent drawing from it, the stronger he would be. Certain of the power flowing through his entire body, Reiji circled around the grotesque demon in an instant and unleashed a downward slash at its defenseless back.

"Haaaaaah!"

He roared, putting every ounce of strength he had behind the blow. He used the full force of the Ishar Cluster. Nonetheless, all he'd managed was a scratch on the demon's back. "This still isn't enough?!" Reiji shouted as the demon turned around.

Wha?!

That was it. It just turned around. And with that simple gesture, Reiji felt an unexpected impact against his side. Unable to comprehend what had happened, Reiji was sent flying backward, as if hit by a truck.

"Ugh! Gah!"

Reiji bounced across the ground several times, like a loose rubber ball. He wheezed for air as he gradually got back to his feet, completely unable to catch his breath. If he stayed down, he would fall prey to this demon in an instant.

Reiji clenched the Ishar Cluster in irritation. Was he just completely hopeless before this opponent? No. He didn't have enough power. Not yet.

In that case...

What could he do to draw out more power? The answer was simple. He already knew it.

"Pray for it.

"Crave it.

"Reach out for it.

"Throw open the doors within you."

Reiji heard the voice resonating inside his head. He couldn't hesitate anymore.

"Give me... Give me more!"

An azure glow spread forth, pouring even more power into Reiji's body. It surprised him momentarily, but he was able to brandish his sword just as the grotesque demon closed in on him.

"Haaaaaah!"

Reiji slammed his sword against the grotesque demon's defending claws. However, this time, Reiji overpowered it. Its arm was knocked backward, and Reiji kept up the momentum to go on the offensive. The demon responded in kind and threw a desperate strike of its own, but Reiji blocked it. This was a huge difference from before.

"I can do it... I can do it! Hahahahaha!"

He could fight this demon without stopping to draw power before every strike. It was exhilarating. There was a sense of omnipotence in knowing he didn't have to gather himself for every blow, and in an uncharacteristic display, that thrilled Reiji. He'd never known having a strong opponent on the back foot would have his heart dancing like this. He'd never known it could be so *fun*.

"Fall before my power!"

Just then, it seemed reinforcements had arrived. Reiji could see a group of demons in the city changing their course and coming toward him.

"You pests...!"

In another uncharacteristic display, Reiji turned his anger toward them. He'd been just moments away from winning. Just a little more, and he would've overwhelmed his opponent. The interruption enraged him—it was unforgivable. How should these interlopers be punished?

Blinded by his fury, Reiji didn't see that the grotesque demon had closed in to cover his entire field of vision.

Crap...!

It was a fatal opening. He'd taken his eyes off the grotesque demon while in the clutches of his uncontrollable anger. He could do nothing but prepare himself for some serious pain.

Things started to unfurl as if in slow motion, like Reiji was watching events reveal themselves with the leisurely turn of a revolving lantern. However, even though everything was moving so slowly, only his eyes kept up with what was going on. Reiji couldn't even lift his little finger. An overwhelming regret consumed him. Why had he allowed his anger to dominate him so?

And just as he thought it was over, Reiji saw a light.

"Huh?"

A pillar of light pierced the heavens and let out a thunderous roar, and a lightning bolt quite literally "ran" toward the demon's back. It parted the wave

of demons closing in on Reiji and slammed into the grotesque demon that was about to crush him. Upon impact, the flash of lightning kept up its momentum and sent the demon flying away.

"What the ...?"

Reiji regained his composure, his mind still filled with doubt. He turned to look down the lightning bolt's path, seeing demons completely burned to a crisp while others had been sent flying from the force of the blast. Farther down the carpet of demon corpses were two figures.

"Looks like you're alright, Reiji."

One was a blond boy in armor, and the other was a black-haired priestess.

"Elliot?!"

"Sorry for being late."

"What're you doing here?!" Reiji shouted.

"Do you need to ask?" Elliot said, shrugging. "I'm pretty sure I already told you I'd be following you to Astel. Right, Christa?"

"Yes," his attendant confirmed.

The two of them immediately ran up to Reiji.

"Thanks. You saved me," Reiji said.

"I'm just glad you're fine... Are you?" Elliot said, unsure due to Reiji's appearance.

"I just look a little ragged," Reiji told him. "I didn't take that much damage."

"Hmm? Is that so? Then, can you still fight?" Elliot asked.

"Yeah." Reiji nodded.

The two of them turned to face the grotesque demon. It'd apparently blocked the lightning with its arm. Despite the arm now being charred black, the demon had no issue moving it. It wasn't clear whether it'd even taken any serious damage.

"Did I not put enough strength behind it?" Elliot commented. "I don't recall

holding back... So? What is that thing?"

"I don't know," Reiji said. "It came out right when the fighting started. It's stronger than any other demon I've seen before."

"I see... That means it's one of the newly created demons."

"Mm... Probably."

"Christa," Elliot said, "make sure none of the other soldiers come this way. Reiji and I will face it."

"But what about your support?" Christa protested.

"I don't need it. Go. That's an order," Elliot told her.

Christa tensed at his unusually strong tone, then soon enough agreed and left to aid the soldiers who were still fighting the growing swarm of demons.

"Let's work together to bring it down," Elliot said. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah! Of course!" Reiji shouted.

Elliot put on his bucket-shaped helmet and slashed at the incoming grotesque demon. It retaliated with frighteningly fast claws, but Elliot dodged them. His movements were those of someone who felt no fear when fighting a larger and stronger opponent—someone who'd been in this situation many times before. Reiji couldn't help but sigh in admiration.

However, despite Elliot's clear display of experience, the grotesque demon's brute strength was still too much for him, and it was far too fast. Before long, Elliot was forced onto the defensive with more and more frequency.

"Ugh! This is rough...!"

Elliot was sent flying, and even after landing, his heels skidded across the ground. Watching his movements carefully, Reiji chose the right time to support him.

"Elliot!"

"Guh! Thanks!"

Reiji charged in to make himself a target. He had just as much power as he'd had before. He could still deflect its attacks. When he stepped forward, it

stepped back. When he defended, he held his ground. If he kept up the offensive...

And just as that thought crossed his mind, Reiji was assaulted by nausea.

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"Ugh..."
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He was at a tremendous loss for breath. His shoulders heaved up and down as if the tables had been suddenly turned against him.

"Reiji, are you alright?" Elliot asked.

"S-Sorry. I'm just depleted of mana from using this power..."

"It's fine. There's no helping it."

"How are you holding up?"

"I can finally feel my arm again."

Elliot sounded calm, but his brow was damp with cold sweat. He had to be panicking too. He wasn't exhausted, but the grotesque demon's power was just that terrifying.

"I'd rather not fight that thing for too long," Elliot said, confirming Reiji's suspicions. "Let's finish it in the next blow."

"I'll hit it with everything that I have," Reiji agreed.

With that, Elliot lowered his sword and held out his gauntleted right hand. A portion of the gauntlet spread out like an angel's wings and fired another pillar of light into the heavens. Immediately following that, a lightning bolt shot out at the grotesque demon.

"Prepare yourself; the next one's even stronger," Elliot declared.

The gauntlet let out a thunderous roar, creating another pillar and another flash of lightning. Was this piece of equipment emitting the energy on its own? Or was this Elliot's power at work?

A great shock wave broke out, and the lightning slammed into the demon, spreading out like a cage and forming a barrier around it. Each time the demon tried to step forward, it was blown back by the lightning.

"Reiji, can you handle it?"

"Y-Yeah!"

Elliot had created the perfect opportunity for him. This could be their first—and last—chance. So, naturally, Reiji put all he had into his next strike. He squeezed out every last drop of mana he possessed, drew everything he could muster from the Lupis Judaix, and concentrated it all into the Ishar Cluster's blade. Azure lightning, quite different from what Elliot had created, rampaged all around Reiji. Every now and then, whatever the lightning touched transformed into crystals.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Give me power!

He pictured himself yanking on the chains that connected him to the source of this power. He pulled back the hilt of his sword as if drawing a bow. The further he pulled it back, the more mana concentrated within its blade and the more it affected his surroundings. Crystal pillars surrounded the grotesque demon and converged on it like a jail—this gathering portended the Ishar Cluster's Alpha Strike.

"Crystallized Las Shiara!"

Reiji unleashed the power, but just as the crystal pillars were about to fully envelop the demon, a deep miasma swelled from its body, smashing the crystals into tiny fragments. Still, it wasn't going to get away unscathed. Reiji immediately fired an enormous crystal, gouging it into the demon's torso.

"Gaagyaaaah!"

The grotesque demon let out a jarring shriek—the first sound it'd made this whole time. Its voice felt like it could pollute the mind and drive one to madness, just like a mandragora's death scream.

The two of them had managed to deal it a major blow. Expending all that power had been worth it. Elliot looked exhausted too, having mustered a significant amount of strength behind that lightning cage. He was still gasping for breath, much like Reiji was.

"Phew. Looks like we'll manage one way or another," Elliot said with a sigh.

"Yeah, if we keep this up—"

"If you keep this up, do you really think you'll win?"

And just as things were starting to look bright, a voice cut Reiji off out of nowhere and shattered their hopes.

"How shallow-minded..."

Reiji and Elliot turned toward the exasperated voice. Standing there was the female demon, her sword in her hand. Reiji froze in shock. This wasn't because she'd appeared out of nowhere without him noticing. It was because of what was standing at both her flanks. There were two other grotesque demons, identical in appearance to the first.

"No way..." Reiji muttered.

"This is bad..." Elliot grumbled. "There are two more of those things...?"

How many times had Reiji been rendered speechless since the beginning of this war? Even Elliot, who'd put up a pretty good fight against the grotesque demon, had a stiff expression. Fighting only one had pushed them to their limits, and now there were *three* of them. It was easy to imagine what would happen if Moolah set these demons upon them.

Reiji had been too careless. Why had he convinced himself that there was only one of those demons? He ground his teeth at his oversight.

"Another hero?" Moolah asked.

"Who...? What exactly are you?" Elliot said. "Oh, and don't give me the boring answer that you're just a demon."

"I'm a demon general and commander of this army, Moolah."

"I see. I suppose I could've guessed as much given your power..." Elliot said. "By the way, what are you here for?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Moolah stated.

As in, the demons were planning to annihilate them here.

"Reiji, can you still fight?" Elliot whispered.

"I have the Ishar Cluster, so I'll manage somehow. And you?" Reiji whispered

back.

"I still have some strength in reserve, but I'm pretty spent. I'm guessing this is going to be a pretty tough fight."

As was to be expected, the technique Elliot had used earlier had exhausted the majority of his strength.

Moolah raised her arm high as if to order her troops, and then...

"No, that would be boring."

Instead of swinging it down, she pulled it back. The grotesque demon Elliot and Reiji had worked so hard to maim returned to her side.

What was going on? If she ordered the demons to attack, it would be entirely possible to defeat two heroes at once. Why was she calling them off instead?

"What's the meaning of this?" Reiji asked.

"It's exactly as you see," Moolah said.

"What ...?"

Moolah sank into thought for a moment, then opened her mouth to speak once more.

"I simply came up with a splendid plan. You must so resent dancing to someone else's tune, no?"

"I don't-"

"From here on out, this is my fight," Moolah cut him off. "Look forward to it."

With that, she flung back her mantle, turned around, and left. The three grotesque demons followed in her wake.

What did any of that mean? What was her plan? How were they dancing to someone else's tune?

Reiji and Elliot remained in a confused daze, when suddenly, the situation in the city started changing too.

"Elliot-sama!" Christa yelled, running toward them and gasping for breath.

"Christa? What's wrong?" Elliot asked. "Why aren't you helping the soldiers

retreat?"

"Well, um..." Christa started, clearly bewildered. "The demons have started to withdraw."

"They're falling back?!" Reiji yelled.

He turned to look at the city. Just as Christa said, winged demons could be seen flying away from them.

"What's going on...?" Reiji muttered.

"I have no idea," Elliot said. "They finally broke through the walls. It makes no sense to throw away that victory."

Both heroes were left utterly perplexed by the inexplicable retreat.

Moolah looked over her shoulder at Metel. There were currently two heroes within the city. The appearance of a second hero had been unexpected, but she had more than enough forces to make up for it. It wouldn't be hard for her to overwhelm them.

It wouldn't be hard, but defeating the heroes would defy Demon Lord Nakshatra's will—and that of the Evil God. Above all else, she hated the idea of dancing atop Lishbaum's palm.

"With the slightest push, I could've defeated them right then and there..."

If her goal was simply to defeat them, all she had to do was unleash the three grotesque demons. That she couldn't was a nuisance. But this was her duty.

This was why Moolah preferred doing things with her own hands. She didn't want to borrow the power of some shady bastard who appeared out of nowhere. She wanted everything to be accomplished by the demons who'd been there from the beginning.

"I'll get things done my way..."

To fulfill Nakshatra's will, she had to exhaust a hero's spirit and power. Now that there were two heroes here and not just one, she had to change her approach.

To make adjustments to the plan, Moolah pulled out a certain item wreathed in miasma.

A huge horn. A fragment of a blade. A chunk of meat.

Anyone who knew what it was would recognize it at a glance. Moolah handed it to one of her subordinates.

"Go. Set the stage."

If this succeeded, the capital would fall with ease. Even with two heroes there, their struggle against the grotesque demon meant what she was about to set in motion would be overkill. Anyone else would probably see this as her defying orders. However, she had to take action, "just in case."

"Everything is as you will..." Moolah muttered to herself, as if offering up a prayer.

After confirming that the demons had retreated, Reiji and Elliot fell back to the second walls. Christa would contact Mizuki's group while the two of them caught their breath, and once their stamina and mana had recovered somewhat, they headed inside the walls to rendezvous with Mizuki.

The major question on everyone's minds was the demons' inexplicable retreat. The demons had broken through the first walls, had sowed chaos among Astel's ranks—their offense was only just beginning. And yet, they'd fallen back as if that had been their goal all along.

"What the heck is going on...?" Reiji muttered.

Was this part of their strategy? Reiji figured it might be a plan to lure the soldiers out of the castle, but Astel's forces were playing by the rulebook. They dedicated themselves to repairing the walls and adjusting their defensive formations. They weren't going to take the bait.

"I don't know what they're planning, but there's no point brooding over it," Elliot said, slapping Reiji on the shoulder. "In these kinds of situations, you're better off getting some rest. You can think about it once your mind is back in prime condition."

"Really...? Mm. I guess that makes sense."

Reiji did as Elliot suggested and just stopped thinking about it. Elliot was right. Reiji's mind was out of sorts, and in this state he wasn't going to be able to figure anything out. The battle with the grotesque demon had simply exhausted that much of Reiji's spirit.

"Oh, would that be the princess?" Elliot said, standing up on his tiptoes as he spotted someone.

"Yeah, it's Tia."

Reiji saw her too. She was currently surrounded by soldiers, ordering them on the distribution of rations. Despite putting up such a fight atop the walls, she was already right back to work. Reiji couldn't help but admire her.

Rations were apparently being allocated to those unable or unwilling to evacuate. At a glance, it was clear to see how drained everyone was, physically and mentally.

Setting those thoughts aside, Reiji walked up to her. "Tia, good work today."

"Oh, Reiji-sama," she said. "Christa-dono has informed me of the situation. I'm glad you're unharmed."

"Thanks. You sure you don't need to rest?" Reiji asked.

"I'm fine. Now is not the time for that," Titania said.

"Really? You were fighting just a few minutes ago," Reiji pointed out. "I think it's better not to push yourself."

"No, this is nothing," Titania insisted with earnest eyes. "There are those around us who are pushing themselves far harder."

"Tia..."

Reiji's worry for Titania only worsened. She had a strong sense of responsibility, but what if that ended up crushing her?

"It's alright," Titania told him.

At that moment a gruff voice suddenly piqued Reiji's senses. He turned out of curiosity and saw a fight break out over rations.

"That's..."

"Oh no. We must stop them immediately!" Titania shouted, raising her voice in a fluster.

She immediately ordered the soldiers to intervene in the fight. But the uproar had already influenced the crowd; chaos was spreading. The soldiers weren't able to keep it under control, and as result Titania stoutly set forth herself.

"Stop this at once!" she roared at those responsible.

Normally, everyone in the area would fall silent and listen to her, but now her voice had no effect on the aggravated civilians. They shouted back at her, with nobody seeming to recognize just who they were yelling at.

"Shut up!"

"We don't gotta listen to you!"

"There are more than enough rations!" Titania yelled. "There's no need to rush! Wait your turn!"

"Wait?! And what're we supposed to do if we lose our share?!"

One of the instigators of the fights tried to grab Titania.

"Hyah?!"

Caught off guard by the unexpected action and probably exhausted from the battle, Titania failed to get out of the way and lost her balance. She fell backward and put out her hand to catch herself, scraping it along a sharp edge. A line of blood ran down her slender white arm.

"Tia!" Reiji shouted, rushing over to her.

"You cur! Do you have any idea who this is?!" one of the soldiers roared.

"Like I give a damn!" one of the civilians shouted back.

"Give us our fucking rations!"

Reiji lent Titania a shoulder to help her get back on her feet. Things kept getting worse by the second.

"You're hurt...!" he shouted.

"I-I'm fine..." Titania muttered, smiling to put him at ease. "It's just a scratch."

Reiji's eyes were glued to the bright red blood trickling down her arm.

"How dare you!" he roared, glaring at the man who was responsible for this.

Titania had fought for her country's sake—was drenched in sweat doing everything she could for her people—and *this* was how they treated her?

"How dare I what?!" the man shouted back at him.

"You don't know...? Do you have any idea what you've done...?" Reiji asked him.

"Ah? Who the hell cares about that?! Just give me my—"

Just? Just what? As long as you're fine, it's okay for other people to get hurt?

And as those thoughts crossed Reiji's mind, he heard a voice calling to him out of nowhere.

"If you can't stand him, crush him.

"Wouldn't it be so easy for you?"

Yes. He could just crush this scum. It would be so simple. He had more than enough power to do so now. Compared to the grotesque demon he'd been fighting not long ago, it would be like taking candy from a baby.

Before he knew it, Reiji had the weaponized Ishar Cluster in his hand. Anger surged through every pore in his body. Those around him must've sensed something was wrong; after a single sobbing shriek, the area fell silent.

"R-Reiji-sama...! I'm fine! I'm alright! Stop!" Titania screamed.

"B-But..."

"Reiji-sama, please contain your temper! I'm begging you!"

Thanks to Titania's desperate pleas, Reiji slowly regained his composure.

"Fine..."

With that, he returned the Ishar Cluster to its original form and stowed it in his pocket. Still, thanks to this, the uproar had died down and everyone started to obey the soldiers' commands.

"Your Highness, what will we do about these men?" one of the soldiers asked.

"Forget about it," Titania told him. "We can't drive the people further into a corner. So long as they receive rations, they'll be sure to calm down."

"As you say..."

At Titania's command, nobody was to be punished over this matter.

"Why did they have to try and steal from each other like that...?" Reiji mumbled with a sigh. "In times like these they should be supporting each other..."

"This is what it means to be in a battle with your back to the wall," Elliot told him. "These men haven't even gone off the deep end yet. You've never seen friends plunder from each other?"

"Back home, whenever a disaster happened, people were more likely to help each other," Reiji explained.

"I see... What a blissful country," Elliot remarked. "Oh, don't misunderstand me. I don't mean that sarcastically."

It was then Reiji realized something. His shock must have partly come from how generally prosperous and peaceful his home was. But crucially, another reason he'd never seen such behavior was because his home was constantly exposed to natural disasters like earthquakes and typhoons. People helped each other because they couldn't survive without each other. Buying up all the goods on the market was a frequent event, but Reiji had never seen people fight over goods out of pure self-interest.

The sight of it now wedged into Reiji's heart like a splinter.

Chapter 3: To Right Back Where It Began

With their return to modern Japan complete, Suimei's group—with the addition of their new companion, Hydemary—stood in the magic circle in the Yakagi mansion's garden, ready to return to the other world. Mana ran across the geometry on the ground like an electric current, and after being enveloped in light, Suimei, Felmenia, Lefille, Liliana, Hatsumi, and Hydemary found themselves within pitch darkness.

The teleportation... was a success. It had definitely worked, but their surroundings seemed awfully dark. Curious, Suimei lit a small fire at his fingertip. The warm light soon illuminated stone walls. The room they had teleported into was like a dome made of stone bricks, with iron candlesticks nailed high above them. Suimei immediately lit the candles to get a better look at his surroundings.

"Ummm, where is this?" he muttered.

"Hmm, this isn't the teleportation circle in front of the house," Hatsumi commented, looking around restlessly with a hand on her katana.

Lefille was standing ready and on guard, seemingly more composed than everyone else.

"The kitties... aren't here to greet us..." Liliana said, lamenting for an entirely different reason, hugging her stuffed penguin.

"I don't know where this is, but it's definitely a different world," Hydemary said, twirling her magic wand.

"It is?" Hatsumi asked.

"Mm-hmm. The ether density in the air is quite different," Hydemary explained. "This is amazing. Because entropy is different here, the equilibrium of physical and mystical laws is different too. I'll have to make recalculations. Don't worry, it'll only take me thirty seconds."

"That's... quick," Liliana commented.

"I'm a genius, after all." Hydemary puffed out her chest with pride.

Her face wasn't particularly expressive, so even when she acted like this, it almost didn't register that she was actually boasting.

"Starting with a Heliomite coefficient of $\sqrt{2}$ – 2.02, and taking the current volume of ether and mana..."

"Go with a theoretical Heliomite value of -0.63," Suimei said. "It'll stabilize."

"Mrgh. Don't give me the answer before I get there." Hydemary pouted, puffing her cheeks out like a child. Still, she gave up on doing the calculations herself and simply asked for the answers instead. "What about entropy? Is the informational capacity the same?"

"That needs to be recalculated," Suimei explained. "The informational limit in a fixed space never changes, so we'll have to recalculate by making adjustments to the ether's base value and the aggregate mystical volume."

The flood of mystical terms sounded like complete gibberish to everyone else. Lefille and Hatsumi in particular looked utterly lost.

"Hmmm, the base value is rather large," Hydemary commented. "If this is the equilibrium point, civilization here will never develop, correct?"

"Hm? How so?" Suimei asked.

"Don't you get it? The evolution of civilization is the advancement of science," Hydemary elaborated. "If science never develops, civilization will stall. They're completely isolated."

"Aah, yeah. You have a point," Suimei conceded. "This world is overflowing with the mysteries, so scientific theory doesn't have a foothold..."

And as their conversation continued dragging on, Hatsumi turned a reproachful gaze toward Suimei. The fact they were in an unfamiliar place already had her on edge. How long was this tangent going to last?

"Hey, Suimei," she said.

"Sorry, sorry," he replied. "Magicka requires all kinds of calculations. We'll be done soon, so just wait a bit longer."

Suimei took a look around the room, then came to a sudden realization.

"Actually, I've got some crazy déjà vu here," he said.

"Yes, this is Camellia's summoning room," Felmenia confirmed. "This is definitely the summoning circle I once used."

"Hm? Wasn't that room totally destroyed by Blackbass or Seafish or whatever his name was?" Suimei asked.

"Sebastian," Felmenia corrected.

"Ooh, right. Suzuki," Suimei said. "My bad, my bad."

"They must have finished repairing it," Felmenia observed. "It's been half a year since then."

She had a point. They weren't going to leave an entire section of the castle in a total mess. Even upon Suimei's departure from the castle, they'd already started fixing it up. But he hadn't expected them to fully repair the summoning circle—something they had no intention of using—as well.

Maybe King Almadious left it here out of consideration for me... It was entirely possible the king had considered the possibility of Suimei returning to Astel and wanting to study it.

"So we were drawn in by this thing?" Hatsumi mused, squatting down and poking the circle.

"I bet. I might be linked to this place," Suimei agreed. "I'll have to keep this in mind and adjust the spell next time..."

"But why did I get dragged here too?" Hatsumi asked. "If that's the case, shouldn't I have ended up in the Saadias Alliance, where I was summoned?"

"No, I was the one to cast the spell," Suimei elaborated. "The teleportation used me as a base to transport everyone together. That's why we all ended up here."

In the middle of speaking, Suimei started massaging his rear.

"Hm? Why are you suddenly rubbing your butt?" Hatsumi remarked.

"I was just reminded of the last time I was summoned here..." Suimei

grumbled. "I got off lightly compared to you, but it was still hell for me."

"Meaning you went through more than just getting dragged into it?" Hatsumi asked.

"Yup."

Half a year ago, upon getting summoned here with Reiji and Mizuki, Suimei had landed right on his butt. It'd been quite painful. He'd thought the impact had permanently widened his crack.

"This is a grave situation!" Felmenia suddenly cried out.

"Hm? Something wrong?" Suimei asked. "I mean, I guess it'll be a pain to haul ourselves back to the Empire, but that's pretty much the only downside, yeah?"

"No, I mean the sweets and food we brought back for Her Highness," Felmenia explained.

"Oh. Right. That."

For an emergency, it was pretty anticlimactic. Felmenia had, in fact, been terribly eager to present those sweets to Titania. She'd been under the impression she could hand them over immediately upon arrival, but now, she had to consider the expiry dates.

"We've got no choice but to throw away the perishables or preserve them with magicka," Suimei stated.

"Disposing of them is out of the question!" Felmenia protested.

"That's... right!" Liliana joined in.

"Yes. We can't be wasting food," Lefille agreed.

"Y-Yeah..." Suimei muttered.

He had never seriously considered throwing them away. So, he and Hydemary took on the burden of using magicka to preserve the food.

"You got this?" Suimei asked.

"Magicka to delay putrefaction is an art magicians have tackled since days long past," Hydemary said. "Besides, I was taught personally by the professor."

"By the monster who set aside coffee for over thirty years and insists it's vintage?" Suimei pointed out. "Now I'm worried for other reasons."

"It'll be fine," Hydemary insisted. "I'll preserve the taste too, so leave it to me."

They continued chatting and finished the work quickly. Only after that did they consider leaving the room.

"Alright. Menia, lead the way," Suimei said.

"Leave it to me. Everyone, with me."

Felmenia took the lead and left the room used for the hero summoning ritual. They came out into a European-style corridor, completely contrasting the stone summoning room. Large windows lined the chicly decorated walls and, combined with the elegant furnishings throughout, drew quite the picture.

"How do I put it?" Hydemary said. "It's very much das castle."

"Well, that's exactly what it is," Suimei retorted.

"I mean, Alte Schloss is more... you know?" Hydemary said, bringing up the Society's headquarters. "That place is more striking... or more eccentric."

"Magicians remodeled that place half to death, remember?" Suimei said.

"Obviously it's gonna have different vibes. It's a total haunt among haunts. You can't lump that place with other castles."

"Something's strange..." Lefille commented grimly.

"Hm? What do you mean, Lefi?" Suimei asked.

"Something in the air," Lefille said. "Nobody is here, but I can tell something is going on."

"Hm...?" Suimei remained confused by her unclear answer.

"The air... is prickly," Liliana agreed.

"It's as if we're in the middle of a battle," Lefille elaborated. "The atmosphere outside is different from usual."

"Is it?"

Suimei turned his attention to the window. The sky was dark and cloudy. And since the town and its walls were largely made of stone, there was a lot of gray outside.

It was while looking outside that Suimei noticed that nobody was walking around on the streets. The city had been far livelier the last time he'd seen it.

This was definitely strange. What's more, parts of the walls appeared to be damaged.

"Suimei, there!" Hatsumi yelled, leaning out the window in a fluster. "Over there! On the closest wall! Look!"

"The wall...? Huh? What's that?" Suimei followed Hatsumi's finger and saw a flag flying over the wall.

A beat later, Felmenia raised her voice. "The winged flag is raised above the tower! A siege?!"

"Yes, the same happened when Saadias was attacked..." Hatsumi said. "I saw the same kind of flag back then too."

"So the capital is being attacked right now?!" Suimei asked in a fluster.

Suimei, Felmenia, and Hatsumi were clearly thrown off by the unexpected situation. In contrast, the other three appeared calm; Liliana simply didn't let her panic show, Hydemary wasn't capable of much expression to begin with, and Lefille had predicted this was the case from the beginning.

What could they possibly be fighting...? Well, there was no need to ask. It was practically impossible for a human army to be attacking right now, so the obvious answer was demons.

Felmenia urged the group on with a stiff expression and hurried down the corridor. Once they found someone, she called out to him in a voice demanding answers.

"You there! What's the situation?!"

"Wh-White Flame?!" the man yelped. "When did you return?!"

"Now's not the time for that!" Felmenia yelled. "Explain the situation! *Briefly!* Is King Almadious unharmed?!"

"Ma'am! Demons have invaded our territory and have reached the capital! We're currently defending the city! His Majesty is in the briefing room! Reijisama, Princess Titania, and the honored hero of El Meide are with him!"

"A demon invasion?!" Felmenia shouted.

"Yes! Demons suddenly appeared within our borders!"

"What were the northern nobles doing?" Felmenia asked.

"According to reports from those we've sent out the long way around, there is no evidence the demons passed through their territories."

"That's impossible..." Felmenia muttered.

"The demons manifested around eighty kilometers from the walls. They then proceeded to attack the capital directly..."

Demons had appeared out of nowhere. It was an outrageous story, but not impossible. *That* man was among the demons, after all.

Felmenia dismissed the man she was questioning, who gave her a quick bow before returning to his duties.

"Well, things have gotten pretty crazy here," Suimei remarked.

"Astel has had minor conflicts with its neighbors, but never anything of this scale..." Felmenia commented.

"To think I would have the opportunity to kill some demons immediately upon returning..." Lefille said, an air of delight in her voice.

"We only trained for a short period, but it's time to show the results," Hatsumi added cheerfully.

"Indeed," Lefille agreed.

"I'm worried... about Mizuki," Liliana mumbled anxiously.

"Yeah. This is a first for her..." Suimei agreed.

Mizuki had only just recovered from being in *that* condition. The mental strain this situation must have exerted on her worried him. But it wasn't all doom and gloom.

"Elliot being here is a relief," Suimei said. "Things should work out one way or another with him around."

"You're right," Felmenia agreed. "Elliot-dono is very reliable."

"How unexpected..." Liliana said, looking at Suimei suspiciously. "I didn't think... you assessed El Meide's hero... so highly. You always... curse at him."

"This and that are different matters," Suimei said. "He definitely knows his way around a fight. Anyway, where's this briefing room?"

"Follow me."

Felmenia led the group toward the briefing room where Reiji and the others were. Before long, they reached the doors, and Felmenia approached the royal guard who was standing on duty outside.

"White Flame!"

"Good work. Are His Majesty and Reiji-sama inside?" she asked.

"Y-Yes!"

"Then allow me through."

"No, um, you may enter... but the others..."

"Not a problem. I'll take responsibility. If anyone asks, I am entirely to blame."

Felmenia had an unusual air of authority about her. Where had her typical airheaded behavior gone? Hatsumi rubbed her eyes as if to rid her sight of a sudden illusion.

"That's... Felmenia-san, right?" she whispered.

"It is..." Liliana whispered in agreement.

"This is certainly unexpected..." Lefille joined in.

Almost everyone here was witnessing it for the first time. Well, she'd acted all haughty like this before too. Or maybe it was better to say she'd led a social life where this kind of attitude had been a necessity.

On the heels of Felmenia's no-nonsense approach, Suimei's group was ushered into the room. Inside were King Almadious, Reiji, Mizuki, Graziella,

Elliot, Christa, and what looked like several officers. They were surrounding a large table, looking at a map of the capital.

"Your Majesty! Felmenia Stingray has returned!" the guard announced.

"Ooh, Felmenia. You've come back," the king greeted her.

"Sire. I received a brief explanation on the way," Felmenia said. "It seems this is quite the emergency."

"Indeed it is," the king agreed. "We cannot afford to be careless."

And as that went on, spotting Reiji's completely bewildered look, Suimei called out to him.

"Yo. I'm back?"

"Wha?! Suimei?!"

"Suimei-kun?! Why are you in Astel?!" Mizuki shouted.

"Something unexpected happened. Here, your souvenir."

With that, Suimei held out a gift like he was a father returning from a drinking party.

"Oh, mm, thanks... Wait, now's not the time for that!" Mizuki yelled.

"Seems so. Sounds like you're under siege or something?" Suimei asked.

"Yeah. Demons suddenly popped up out of nowhere right next to the capital..." Mizuki confirmed.

"Well, you know. I'm glad you're both safe," Suimei told her and Reiji.

"You decided to show up awfully late," Graziella commented cynically.

"A bunch happened to us too," Suimei explained. "Besides, there was stuff we had to do there to help here, yeah? Though we did fit in some time to kick back and relax too."

"I see. Meaning you have plenty of energy," Graziella said. "Seems there's no need for restraint."

"At any rate, I never thought I would see you within Astel's briefing room, Princess Graziella," Felmenia remarked.

"Neither did I," Graziella agreed. "Those demons truly do not discriminate."

"Graziella-sama," Liliana said. "It has been... a long time."

"Indeed it has. I'm glad to see you in good health, Liliana Zandyke... But what is that stuffed doll?" Graziella asked.

"This is... Mr. Penguin," Liliana answered. "Very... very important."

"O-Oh. It's awfully cute. Is it some sort of magical tool?" Graziella said, coming to an odd conclusion. "I've heard of such spells."

"Huh? Oh, yes. That's right." Liliana averted her eyes.

"Like I thought," Graziella said, petting the penguin as Liliana held out it to her.

This was likely a misunderstanding based on Graziella's high assessment of Liliana's skills; the penguin wasn't for her magicka, but for emotional support.

Reiji then noticed the extra person in Suimei's party. He and Mizuki turned to the girl in the magician outfit.

"Hm? Aren't you Suimei's friend? Um..."

"Mary-chan, right?" Mizuki finished for him.

"Yup. Long time no see, you two," Hydemary said. "I guess the last time was at my magic show?"

"Ummm, the fact that you're here means..." Reiji started.

"Well, that's the gist of it," Suimei said. "I doubt I have to explain."

"Ugh... My world was actually full of the occult..." Mizuki grumbled. "So unfair! So unfair! So unfair!"

"Things seem to have gotten even livelier around you," Elliot said, joining in.

"Right now, that's a good thing," Suimei told him.

"True. We're in dire need of reinforcements," Elliot agreed.

"Yeah, also... you know. Thanks for watching Reiji and Mizuki," Suimei added bashfully, getting quite the reaction out of Elliot. "What?"

"I never thought I'd hear such laudable words from your mouth," Elliot told

him. "I wonder if it'll rain spears today."

"I'll thank you as many times as I have to if it'll cause such a mystical phenomenon to occur right on top of the demons currently invading," Suimei said. "No way something that convenient is gonna happen, though."

"Indeed," Elliot agreed. "We'll have to rain the spears down on the demons ourselves."

That was when one of the officers raised his voice. He appeared to have lost his temper—like all the other officers in the room.

"Your Majesty! Do you intend on having these people participate?!"

"I do." Almadious declared. "What of it?"

"Didn't that man run away because he didn't want to fight?!" the officer protested. "And isn't that mage from the Empire?"

"I also happen to be from the Empire," Graziella cut in. "In fact, I stand near its pinnacle."

"No, that isn't what I..." The officer faltered under Graziella's cold eyes.

Seeing the unexpected opposition to their presence, Hatsumi cocked her head.

"Suimei, what's going on?" she asked.

"Aaah..."

"Hm?"

"Well, when I got summoned, I threw a tantrum about refusing to put up with this crap," Suimei explained briefly.

"H-Hang on..." Hatsumi mumbled.

"Hmm? That doesn't sound like the softhearted soul that you are," Elliot commented.

"I'm pretty sure I'm not that softhearted," Suimei retorted.

"You're one to talk," Elliot insisted. "Remind me again. Who was it who picked a fight with the Goddess for someone else's sake? And who was it that raised

hell to look after Liliana-chan?"

"It pisses me off when I hear you say it like this," Suimei told him. "It sounds like you're making fun of me."

"Anyway, why did you refuse to help?" Elliot asked.

"Why? It was an abduction," Suimei said. "I was totally kidnapped. Back in my world, summoning someone without an agreed-upon contract already put in place would guarantee you get an ass-kicking."

"If anything, it would be a class-two mystical crime," Hydemary agreed. "Suimei-kun would be sent to pass judgment."

"Hm? Oh, you're right," Suimei said. "If you think about it like that, everyone involved should be rounded up and sealed."

"Huh?! You mean it's possible I could have all my magic sealed for it?!" Felmenia exclaimed.

"Well, yeah. That's why I was so harsh with you," Suimei said.

"Wa wa wa wa wa..." Felmenia turned pale; she was fully aware of Suimei's status in the modern world.

"Hm? What? Are you something like the police over there?" Elliot asked.

"More like a cleaner," Suimei explained. "I take part in cleaning up the messes in the large organization that governs the world of magicka."

"I find it rather unexpected that you engage in such serious work," Elliot commented.

"Shut your trap," Suimei complained. "Quit poking fun at me every chance you get."

"Hmm. So, Suimei, that's why they don't like you?" Hatsumi said.

"Yup."

Once they were done with their little conversation, the officers were once more yelling at Suimei to get out of the room. In Suimei's group were both the hero Hatsumi and Lefille, the Shrine Maiden of the Spirits. The two of them would be great assets in wartime, but it seemed the officers had no idea who

they were.

Hatsumi didn't explain and pouted at them, whereas Lefille kept her eyes closed in silence. Nobody was intent on giving the officers a full explanation. Titania and Graziella turned a "You spread these seeds yourself" look toward Suimei.

"No, I insist Suimei-dono's party remain," King Almadious said.

"But Your Majesty!" one of the officers protested.

"Now is not the time for this conversation," Almadious said. "The demon attack has finally eased up. We can't exhaust ourselves over such petty squabbles."

"That's true... but still!"

"You still refuse to be convinced...? Hmm, what shall we do about this?" Almadious trailed off suggestively, then glanced at Suimei.

"We'll simply have to prove our participation in this war won't cause any problems," Suimei answered.

"It will be time-consuming, but would you mind doing me this favor?" the king asked.

"Brute strength is a much easier and faster method of persuasion than standing here trying to convince them," Suimei agreed. "Let's go with that."

He then turned to Hydemary. "That's the gist of it. Mary, go play with them."

"Huh? What? Why me?" she asked.

"This works out just right, doesn't it?" Suimei said. "I wanna test whether your magicka works fine here. Just play with them however you want."

"Well, I don't mind," Hydemary conceded. "This is your mess I'm cleaning up, so you better make up for it later."

Suimei gave his disciple a "Yeah, yeah" and turned to the king once more.

"Will this do?" Suimei asked.

"Thank you," Almadious replied.

The officers glared at Suimei throughout this exchange.

"Hiding behind a woman...?"

"What a despicable bastard."

They disparaged Suimei, but it had no effect on him. On the contrary, he turned a devilish expression toward them.

"Hahahaha! If you wanna fight me, then you gotta beat her first!"

"Don't fuck with us!"

"We'll kick your ass out of here with ease!"

The war had put an irrefutable strain on them. Their tempers flared at the slightest provocation. And as that went on, a group whispered to each other in the corner of the room.

"Why is Suimei so good at playing the petty villain?" Hatsumi asked.

"I mean, Suimei's pretty good at acting," Reiji said. "He did trick us for the entire time we've known him."

"Aah... That's true. He did, didn't he?" Hatsumi agreed.

"Yeah! Yeah! Suimei-kun is such a jerk!" Mizuki joined in.

"Hey! You lot over there! Quit looking at me with those shady eyes, dammit!" Suimei yelled.

And so, the entire group, plus all those who disapproved of Suimei's presence, left the briefing room.

Suimei's group was guided to the training ground. The place had already been set up as a simple arena, and the castle's residents had gathered as spectators.

"Things have gotten rather amusing," Graziella said, smiling, as if she were about to witness a delightful show.

"I'm amazed you can say that right now," Suimei complained. "It's really not the time for this crap. Weren't you all in the middle of a war council? Ain't it weird for everyone to just get up and leave?" "Well, I largely agree with you there," Graziella conceded, then exchanged looks with Titania. "However, in a sense, you can say this is perfect timing."

"It does save us a lot of trouble," Titania agreed.

"Letting off steam like last time, you mean?" Suimei guessed. "When we did it, it was *before* the battle started. Can we really do this right in the middle of the siege?"

"I would say it's less about decompressing than it is maintaining discipline," Graziella corrected.

"The soldiers of the royal capital haven't faced real combat in a long time," Titania elaborated. "For many, this is their first battle—they don't know how to properly utilize their strengths, how to work as a unit, or how to move with the flow of battle. And since we are indeed under siege, that means the enemy has complete control over when the fighting starts."

"Well, they sure got energy to spare," Suimei said. "I've seen a few war zones 'cause of my job, and in those cases, everyone—from the rank and file to the top brass—are way too exhausted to even worry 'bout this stuff."

"Yes. That's the strange part," Titania pointed out.

"Strange how?" Suimei asked.

"A defensive battle *should* usually be more exhausting," she explained. "But that isn't the case with our army. If all the demons wanted to do was topple the castle, they should attack now, without pause; our army is so stretched thin with nerves it would be the perfect opportunity to do so. However, right from the outbreak of this war, the demons' attack has been sluggish."

"You think they're pulling their punches?" Suimei conjectured.

"Yes," Titania agreed. "Otherwise, nothing here makes sense."

"We have no idea what they're thinking," Graziella added.

"How's the evacuation going?" Suimei asked.

"It's well under way," Titania answered. "The refugees have been relocated to the nearby towns and villages." "That sounds way too convenient," Suimei mused. "Well, in a way, splitting up the citizens of the big city all over the place puts pressure on the locals and propagates fatigue across the land. The standard of living everywhere will take a nosedive."

"You come up with some vulgar ideas..." Graziella said, looking a little put off by this.

"I'll take that as a compliment," Suimei said. "But I don't think our enemy is so pressed right now to use such a tactic..."

"That's why none of this makes sense," Graziella agreed.

As they talked about such things, Hatsumi, who until this point had been observing the preparations for the mock battle, walked over to them.

"Hey, Suimei. Will Mary-chan be okay?" she asked.

"Hm? Yeah, she'll be fine," Suimei told her. "She knows her weaknesses. I actually doubt anyone here could even take advantage of her weaknesses to begin with."

"Still, making her do it on her own is a little..." Hatsumi trailed off. "Not that I think she'll lose either."

Suimei doubted she would have problems facing mages and swordsmen alike. Things might be different against Titania, Graziella, or Felmenia, though.

"There's something strange about that girl," Elliot said after following Hatsumi to the group. "It's like she's... not quite human?"

"She's a homunculus," Suimei explained. "An artificial life-form, so to speak."

"Artificial...? You mean someone artificially created life?" Elliot asked. "Your world does some outrageous things."

"You might be right," Suimei conceded. "But don't say so in front of her. Those like her find it offensive."

"I see. True, I suppose all life is equal," Elliot agreed.

"That's the gist of it," Suimei said.

The preparations were just about done. Hydemary and a select few soldiers

stood in the middle of the training ground. The soldiers ranged from eager for a fight to completely bewildered at having to fight a young girl. As for Hydemary, she had her magic wand in both hands above her head and was leaning left and right as she did some warm-up stretches. She was to face all of them at the same time—that would surely be enough to convince the naysayers.

"Let us begin the mock battle," the referee said, having confirmed everything was ready.

"Mary, show no mercy, 'kay?" Suimei shouted lazily.

"Mm. I just need to beat them soundly, right? Like, totally black and blue?" Hydemary confirmed.

"Yup, yup, that's the spirit."

They were on the same wavelength. Suimei didn't like the stink eyes his companions were turning his way, but he convinced himself that things were going to work out fine.

The referee shouted, "Begin!"

The swordsmen formed up at once, while the mages gathered mana to start their chants. Facing them all, Hydemary remained calm and collected. She didn't gather mana. She didn't chant. She simply twirled her magic wand around, as if playing with a folded umbrella.

Irritated by her behavior, the swordsmen brandished their blades and charged, their war cries resounding all over the training ground. They immediately closed the distance, but none could hit Hydemary. She dodged every blow with grace; not a single hair on her head was touched.

Before long, the mages finished their chanting and unleashed water magic at Hydemary. Yet Hydemary counterbalanced their magic before it could hit her. She twirled her wand, and as the aqua bullets came in contact with it, they popped and vanished on the spot.

"Hm? Is that it?" Hydemary complained. "If that's all you got, this'll be over pretty quick."

"What?!"

"You cheeky brat! Don't get full of yourself!"

"Wow, how scary," she said in response to the enraged soldiers. "Isn't it childish to shout at a girl like that?"

The interaction had Suimei curious.

"Man, they're really on edge," he said. "That's all it took to piss them off?"

"Given the situation, you can't really blame them," Graziella said.

"Suimei, it's your fault for provoking them in the first place," Titania added. "Reflect on your poor behavior."

As they spoke, one of the soldiers attacking Hydemary suddenly fell over on his own.

"Wh-Whoa?!"

He looked confused; he hadn't tripped on anything. The man looked around to find the cause, and spotted an adorable stuffed toy hugging his leg.

"Wh-What is this?! A doll?!"

"Oh, her? I made her myself," Hydemary told him. "Isn't she cute?"

"I can't get it off?! What's going on?!"

The soldier was frozen stiff, as if the little toy clinging to his leg restricted the full range of his movement. In the meantime, more and more stuffed toys popped out of the shadows, everything from normal dolls to stuffed animals, each rising to cling to the leg of a different swordsman like children stopping their fathers from leaving for work.

Even when the soldiers tried to shake them off, the dolls remained, completely glued to their bodies. The soldiers tried to just ignore the dolls and attack Hydemary, but again, their movements were being restricted. Not only were they moving sluggishly, they even toppled over like the first soldier had.

This was Hydemary's dollhouse magicka: the dolls were her familiars, and they acted in her stead to produce a multitude of results.

While the swordsmen were at their wits' end trying to handle the dolls, the mages made their move. They scattered to surround Hydemary before chanting

again, probably aiming to attack her with magic from every direction. Naturally, Hydemary inferred their intention immediately.

"Schrank, Versteck, Untergeschoss, Höhle, gestapelter Karton. Verstecken. Bleib Zuhause. Spaß, Spaß, Kinderparadies. Kein Eintritt für Erwachsene—Meine einzige geheime Basis."

[Closet, hiding place, cellar, cave, stacked cardboard boxes. Hide. Stay at home. Fun, fun, children's paradise. Adults not allowed—My Own Secret Base.]



Suddenly, sliding doors, cardboard boxes, and parts of a playground popped out of nowhere, forming a small base around Hydemary. This brought to mind the image of a certain blue robot cat digging for the right items out of a mysterious pocket.

"That's a rip-off of my magicka," Suimei explained.

Felmenia nodded. "Yes. I could tell right away."

Even with wind magic soaring in and earth magic slamming against it, the secret base's outer wall didn't budge.

"Okay, I guess it's my turn now," Hydemary declared.

A gale surged around her; she was unleashing her mana. After an intense shock wave, the dolls around her let go of the soldiers, joined hands to form a big circle, and started dancing, just like a Mayim Mayim folk dance.

"Suimei-dono, Suimei-dono," Felmenia said excitedly, "what kind of magicka is that?"

"It's hard to tell at a glance, but if you analyze the spell, you should be able to figure it out," he told her.

"Hmm... You mean the toys. A child's party... A festival of playthings... It requires a whole lot of toys to be present..."

"You got it," Suimei confirmed. "So, where do these toys come from?"

"She's not pulling out what's already hers, so..." Felmenia mused. "She procures them from her surroundings?"

"Exactly."

Before long, every weapon in the arena turned into toys. Like a roomful of cheerful party favors being set off at once, fancy-sounding *pop*, *pop*, *pop* noises could be heard throughout the training grounds. Everything from swords to staffs—anything the soldiers were wielding—turned into the kind of toys that children would play with. And all toys in the world were under Hydemary's control.

From this point, the bout was completely one-sided. It couldn't even be called

a fight. The swordsmen were using toy swords, and their once sturdy armor had turned into cotton-stuffed felt. No matter how hard they swung their weapons, they couldn't hurt their opponent. And the mages were wielding toy staffs. They made sounds and light but could do no more than delight children. No magic was coming out of them. There was no way any of them could accomplish anything.

"Fighting her like that is impossible..." Felmenia commented.

"Yeah. Her fighting style largely concentrates on neutralizing her opponent's capabilities," Suimei explained. "The same applies to her big teddy bear and the Vorpal Sword. A child's dream, a tiny toy box packed to the rim—that's her magicka."

"I see. Meaning she transforms everything into her own playground?" Suimei nodded to confirm Felmenia's conjecture.

"Hey... Isn't this settled, then?" Hatsumi asked.

"It sure is," Suimei agreed. "But I told her to be thorough, so I'm gonna let her keep going 'til the end."

"How merciless," Hatsumi said.

"Never do things half-assed," Suimei said. "That's coming from personal experience."

"Sounds convincing coming from you," Hatsumi added wryly.

And as the soldiers were being made complete fools of by her magicka, Hydemary started her next chant.

"Tanzen, tanzen mit allen. Es ist der Beginn eines lustigen Tanz."

[Dance, dance, dance with all. This is the start of a fun dance.]

"Erk." Suimei made a weird noise upon hearing the spell.

"Suimei-dono?" Felmenia prompted.

"Well... I *did* say no mercy..." Suimei grumbled. "But using *that*...? I mean, it'll make things real clear, but still..."

The circle of dolls scattered and ran about, playing with the soldiers and

grabbing them once more. The soldiers tried to ward them off, but the dolls took their hands and forced them to dance.

Some they held by the waist or shoulder to perform the Jenkka.

Some they faced, hand in hand, dancing the Korobushka.

Once touched by a doll, the soldiers all started dancing awkwardly, like marionettes. This was compulsion magicka. Bound by the dolls' curse, they were forced to move at Hydemary's whim. And, because the size difference between them and their dance partners was so large, the soldiers were forced to contort themselves into weird postures, putting an even larger strain on their muscles.

"Tanzen, tanzen bis du stirbst. Karens rote Schuhe. Bis du dein Bein mit einer Axt abschneidet, bis ich die eines Engels höre, hört nie auf."

[Dance, dance 'til you die. Karen's red shoes. Until your legs are chopped off with an ax, until you hear the angel's call, you cannot stop.]

It was a terrifying sight to behold. It reduced naysayers and critics of her flamboyant magicka to despairing fools. Once caught in this spell—based on the Danish fairy tale "The Red Shoes" by Hans Christian Anderson—no matter how powerful the magician, her target could do nothing but dance until they died.

"I-I can't do anything?! My body's moving on its own?!"

"E-Enough! I get it! I get it already!"

"S-Save me!"

The soldiers started screaming, but didn't stop dancing.

"Tanzen, tanzen wahnsinnig und fallen herunter. Egal ob sie hungrig oder schläfrig sind, die Füße ticken im Rhythmus."

[Dance, dance, dance madly 'til you fall. Even if hungry or sleepy, your feet tap to the rhythm.]

The soldiers continued their dance with the dolls. It was a charming sight from one perspective, but straight out of a horror flick from another. For those being forced to dance, however, it was an entirely different hell.

The one responsible could no longer keep watching, and she turned to Suimei.

"Suimei-kun, should I stop yet?" she asked.

"Not yet," he told her. "Keep going 'til they can't scream anymore. If you leave any of them in fighting condition, the big shots who chose them will probably kick up a fuss."

"Okey dokey," Hydemary acknowledged.

"Hey, Suimei?" Hatsumi prodded him with an elbow. "Won't they be unable to fight at all after this?"

"We can just make up for them ourselves," Suimei said. "Having a few more useless guys on our side won't make much of a difference. Just let them take a break for a while."

He was being rather harsh, but nobody would be able to tell them what to do after such an irrefutable display of power. If someone were to successfully hold command over Suimei's group, they'd be severely limited in their tactics and capabilities in their war. And the point of this whole show was to be granted the right to act independently.

Some time later, still holding hands with the dolls, the soldiers were completely limp on the ground.

"Hm? Over already? All bark and no bite, huh?" Hydemary commented.

The self-proclaimed genius provoked all those around her as if this were nature's course. Her extreme innocence was like a blow to the heart for her opponents.

"What's the right line at times like these?" she mused. "Oh right. Whatta buncha wimpy punks!"

"Where'd you learn that?! You can't say things like that!" After Suimei scolded the seven-year-old, he turned to the officers. "We good now?"

"Y-Yes..."

They looked completely dazed at being shown such a clear gulf in power—they never could've predicted this. Or maybe their minds were muddled by

witnessing such unknown mysteries. In contrast, Almadious addressed Hydemary directly.

"Splendidly done," he said.

"It was nothing," Hydemary boasted, twirling her magic wand. "I'd be happy if you could praise how cute my magicka is, though."

She was being awfully casual with the king, but she was seven, so there was no helping that.

"Anyway, your magicka isn't affected at all, huh?" Suimei observed.

"My magicka is different from yours, after all," Hydemary said, puffing out her chest. "The foundation for my magicka is none other than myself, so this is only natural."

If only she could've made a properly triumphant expression, this would've been adorable.

"I'm gonna have to find a way to fight properly too, and quick," Suimei said.

"Any ideas?" Hydemary asked.

"I was given a hint, but still..."

"You just have to make over there, over here." Those were the words of the Society's leader. What could they mean? If taken literally, it sounded like the perfect solution, but the pieces as they were simply didn't fit.

Having watched the mock battle from afar, Reiji now walked up to the group.

"Mary-chan, you're awfully strong, huh?" he said.

"Sure am," she replied. "I'm a genius, after all. Ehem!"

"Hahaha. I see. That's amazing..." Reiji said, his smile somewhat gloomy.

"Right? Feel free to keep praising me," Hydemary said. She was still the same as she always was.

With the mock battle over, Suimei's party returned to the briefing room to go over the current situation.

"So? The demons seriously popped up outta nowhere?" Suimei asked.

"Mm-hmm. Completely out of the blue," Reiji confirmed.

"It was total chaos getting ready for them," Mizuki added.

"Were you okay out there?" Suimei asked Mizuki.

"Me? I just kinda tagged along," she answered.

Mizuki was claiming she'd simply gone with the flow, but judging by how tired she looked, she must've fought properly too. It was clear to Suimei that she was just putting on a strong front.

"Appeared out of the blue, huh...?" Suimei muttered.

"I know it sounds impossible," Titania said.

"Not really," Suimei remarked. "It's entirely doable."

"Suimei, so you think it's...?" Reiji started to ask.

"Aah, I guess I told you about him before," Suimei confirmed. "There's a guy on their side who can do it."

"Umm, what was his name again?" Reiji said. "I'm pretty sure he called himself Lishbaum, but the guy you know has a different name, right?"

"Yeah, Kudrack," Suimei said.

"Hang on, Suimei-kun," Hydemary cut in, her voice suddenly grave. "Are you serious?"

"Yup. Dead serious," he told her.

"You're kidding me. That devil is still alive?" Hydemary said. "He was on the verge of death from the mayor's blood magicka and got blown away beyond dimensional space by your divine magicka, right?"

"Yeah, but for some reason, he's alive," Suimei said. "What could he have done to pull that off? Good luck alone couldn't make that happen..."

"Hmmm. Even *my* head's starting to hurt..." Hydemary started massaging her forehead with the tip of her wand.

"He's even grown some gaudy horns," Suimei added.

"Seriously? Isn't he definitely stronger than that shady-sounding Demon Lord?" Hydemary asked. "How many times are we gonna have to kill him this time?"

"Who knows...? He must have already put countermeasures in place. It's possible he's even linked to divinity..."

"Can you not bring up such apocalyptic possibilities?" Hydemary complained. "You'll make them true."

"Ugh... I guess my dad never dared to say stuff like that..." Suimei conceded.

"He really understood these kinda things," Hydemary agreed. "It had to be from experience."

"Maybe so," Suimei said, then got the conversation back on track. "Well, let's cut the chitchat there. What's the situation?"

"The demons have withdrawn for now," Elliot explained. "They might be reforming their ranks."

"It's awfully weird of them," Reiji remarked.

"They must be plotting something," Elliot agreed. "But so long as we have no idea what that is, we can't respond haphazardly."

"What do we do? Should we just launch an attack of our own?" Reiji suggested.

"I don't think meeting them in the field is a great idea," Elliot said. "We should do our best to preserve our strength until reinforcements arrive."

"And how long will that take?" Reiji asked.

"If the demons don't obstruct them, it'll take three days at most," Titania said.

"How likely is it that the demons attack before then?" Reiji asked.

"I would say it's pretty much guaranteed," Titania answered.

If the demons were intent on taking down the city, there was no doubting it.

"What's your opinion, Lefi?" Suimei said.

"I don't have any objections to the overall plan," Lefille said. "However, if they

retreated while maintaining the upper hand, we should assume they're scheming something. Luring the enemy into a false sense of security and rounding them up all at once is a common strategy."

"How can this be done, specifically?" Titania asked.

"One example would be to have several units disguise themselves to sneak into the city and launch an attack from within right as the battle begins," Lefille explained.

"I took a look around, but didn't see anything of the sort," Reiji said. "It's a different story if they're disguised, though."

If the demons were capable of disguising themselves as humans, it would be difficult to tell at a glance. Nobody could deny that was a possibility.

"I see. Then let's start by uncovering them and cleaning the place up," Suimei suggested. "Now's about the only time we can."

"How?" Reiji asked.

"With magicka, of course," Suimei answered.

"How convenient," Mizuki remarked, admiring. "It's like magicka can solve anything."

"That's what it's for," Suimei agreed. "But there's a lot that it can't do, so you've gotta spend a ton of time thinking of ways to get it to work sometimes..." Suimei paused there and sighed. "Okay, let's figure out what's going on inside the city. Time to get an eye in the sky."

With that, they left the castle, setting out to clean up any demons within the city walls.

Once outside the castle, Suimei drew a magic circle on the stone pavement. He used a dark red chalk that he'd firmly stowed away within a bundle of paper. Despite doing everything by eye, he drew a nearly perfect circle with clean lines, to the astonishment of those around him. When he finished, he started humming a chant.

"Blackened wings beat high above. Crows, O crows. Be born by my words.

Scatter and fall. Born of chaos, let your red eyes become mine. Cry. Assemble. Heed my curse. Above the twilight, sitting atop power lines, above all sight, the crows fall in line to look down upon you."

Suimei hunched over and rubbed his hands together as if trying to warm himself up in the winter winds. This was ancient magicka that directly manipulated a curse—a xenoglossia spell.

Shortly after, a black, tar-like liquid oozed from the gaps in his fingers. It dripped to the ground, stinking like oil, and formed a slick black puddle beneath him. A small red glimmer appeared within it before the cursed mud started swelling upward. Much like a ball of clay sitting on a potter's wheel, it started to take shape—creating a murder of crows. This was similar to the crow Liliana had once created, but done on a far larger scale.

"Ugh. Yup, that's magicka," Hatsumi said, reeling back as if she was watching something filthy.

"Wow! It's so creepy! This is great!" Mizuki exclaimed, her eyes sparkling in a completely opposite reaction.

"Um, Anou-san?" Hatsumi said, somewhat bewildered and put off by her reaction. "You do mean... that, right?"

"This kinda creepy and weird stuff is the true charm of the occult, right?" Mizuki said.

"Isn't it better when magicka is, like... cooler?" Hatsumi remarked. "Or even cuter, like what Mary-chan did?"

"There's that too! But that's not the point!"

Mizuki was trying to emphasize the greatness of occultic creepiness, but Hatsumi didn't get it at all. She may as well have had a bunch of question marks floating over her head. Meanwhile, Liliana looked at Suimei's magicka and puffed out her cheeks.

"Mrgh... Show-off," she said. "Is this out of spite?"

"You've been awfully pouty lately," Suimei told her. "Is it what I think it is? Are you in your rebellious phase?"

"I'm not!"

Liliana was pouting even more now. Despite this, she and Felmenia stared at the magicka and analyzed it, mumbling to each other about "So for this part of it..." "It's a matter of capacity..." and stuff like that. One way or another, those who aspired to learn magicka never quite stopped studying.

Before long, the murder of crows took to the skies as one. Lefille looked up at them, then asked the question that was on everyone's minds.

"Suimei-kun. What do those crows do?"

"They've got a spell built into them," he explained. "They move around automatically, and whenever they spot something weird, they report it directly to my eyes."

"That's amazing," Lefille remarked. "Not only do they search the area, you can even see what they do?"

"It's seriously impressive," Hydemary joined in. "You usually use a familiar for this, you know? Doing it purely with curses and mana is abnormal."

"It's eco-friendly," Suimei quipped.

"You can only pull off this stunt because of your ridiculous mana," Hydemary retorted.

That was when a sudden thought struck Felmenia.

"Suimei-dono's mana *is* amazing," she said. "Is this also true by the other world's standards?"

"It sure is," Hydemary acknowledged. "So long as he's motivated enough, he can do some pretty crazy things. His mana furnace is first-class, you know?"

"Well... Quite a few conditions need to be met first, but I suppose that's true," Suimei conceded.

"So you have that much power?" Hatsumi said. "Hmmm, you're sounding more and more outrageous as time goes on..."

"Well, yeah," Suimei said indifferently. "I was created to become a magician." "Huh?"

"What does that...?" Reiji started to ask.

"Exactly what it sounds like," Suimei said. "My dad was intent on molding me into a magician before I was born."

Everyone looked astonished by this fact.

"But, Suimei, how does that make you feel?" Reiji asked, apparently seeing this as a delicate matter.

"Nothing, really," Suimei said. "It was necessary. It's important to be able to pass down the secrets of your magicka, right? And I dislike the idea of the techniques I've built over the years vanishing too. It's not all—"

"Not all that bad?" Hydemary cut in. "Because of that, you get dragged into trouble at every corner."

Suimei's body suddenly stiffened, and after a short while, he covered his face with both hands.

"Someone save me..."

Hydemary had a point. However, there was nothing anyone else could do to save him from this fate. He was the only one who could do anything about his suffering, after all.

At any rate, as that conversation came to an end, he received an image from the crows of a strange group who were neither soldiers nor late refugees. Looking through the crow's eyes, Suimei noticed the Evil God's power coiling around them.

"Found them..." he muttered.

"Already?" Hydemary asked.

"It's not that wide a search area," Suimei said. "It's a lot simpler than finding one rat in a modern city."

"Sounds like you've actually done that," Hydemary remarked.

"Well..." Suimei trailed off awkwardly, not really wanting to remember it.

Still, nobody pestered him for details. Instead, they focused on the matter at hand.

"We have plenty of manpower, so let's split up," Titania suggested.

"Right. I'd prefer if we could have one magician in each group," Suimei said.

Felmenia started and stiffened, then awkwardly turned toward him.

"Th-That means I can't be with you...?" she said.

"Hm? What's wrong with that?" Suimei asked.

"...Nothing."

"No need to be so anxious," he told her. "You're plenty strong now."

"That's not what I mean..." Felmenia mumbled, drooping her shoulders.

For some reason, she was in low spirits. Suimei didn't understand at all, whereas Elliot let out an exasperated sigh, muttering, "That's exactly what's wrong with you."

"We've got four magicians among us: me, Mary, Felmenia, and Liliana," Suimei said, moving things along. "We'll put one in each team. We also have three heroes: Reiji, Elliot, and Hatsumi... Hmm, sounds like we can split into somewhat standardized groups."

"That might be for the best," Reiji said. "It'll be easier to coordinate that way."

Suimei then turned to Liliana. Or more specifically, to the stuffed toy in her arms.

"Also, shouldn't you leave that behind?" he asked.

"No. Mr. Penguin... comes with me," she said.

"I mean, this is war," Suimei said. "What if he gets hurt?"

"I'll use magicka... to protect him," Liliana insisted. "Not a problem. I'll make him... very sturdy."

She held up the toy penguin, brimming with confidence.

"Don't use up your mana for such weird things!" Suimei screamed.

"I also have... a harness... to carry him."

"That ain't the problem!"

"If necessary... I'm also ready... to fire the Mr. Penguin missile."

"Eek! What's with this scary girl?! Who did this?! Who raised her like this?!"

Felmenia, Lefille, and Mizuki quipped back at him in unison.

"Suimei-dono."

"Suimei-kun."

"Who else?"

He turned to look at them, and they all stared back in exasperation.

"Hey, can we get going already?" Hydemary asked.

"Yeah... Sorry..."

So, putting an end to that little charade, they got back to sorting their groups.

In the end, they'd settled on four groups.

Reiji's team consisted of Mizuki, Graziella, and Felmenia.

Elliot's team had Christa, Lefille, and Hydemary.

Hatsumi's team included Titania and Liliana.

Suimei was his own team of one, so he could better handle any surprises while continuing to search for more demons within the city.

At any rate, the first step was cleaning up any demons hiding within the city. Soldiers had been on patrol since the demons had retreated, but there were still quite a few present. They were in three groups: one at the edge of the urban area, one to the east, and one to the west. Though they had hidden themselves cleverly, they still couldn't escape Suimei's sight.

Elliot's team headed to the urban area, where the most demons were hiding. This area was beyond the two walls barricading Metel's heart, near a grove of trees planted at the outermost walls. The team of four hurried to make their way there.

The sky was still cloudy; not even the sun's outline could be seen. Rain could fall at any moment. These conditions made it dark enough that one might think

the sun was about to set. Lefille and Hydemary ran on, the damp air blowing against them, as Elliot described the characteristics of a certain enemy.

"A demon with a grotesque form?" Lefille asked.

"That's right," he confirmed. "It's hard to describe... It's revolting, like a giant insect. Does that make sense? Its figure is extremely mismatched, so you should be able to spot it instantly."

"That bad?" Lefille said. "Among the demon generals I've seen, many could be described as mismatched."

"Sure, but this is on another level," Elliot said.

"From how you describe it, it definitely sounds like trouble," Hydemary joined in. "You and a Sacrament wielder together could barely take on just one of these things?"

"Hahaha, harsh, but true," Elliot conceded.

"But if Elliot-sama had gone all out, the result might've been different," Christa said, apparently irritated by Hydemary's statement.

"I'm not so sure," Elliot said. "Besides, Reiji was the one who dealt it a major wound."

"That was simply because he happened to have the opportunity to do so..." Christa insisted, pouting like a child.

It embarrassed Elliot for Christa to idolize him so. He quickly changed the topic.

"Not to put myself down or anything, but Reiji's weapon is considerably powerful. It comes from your world too, yes?" he asked Hydemary.

Hydemary nodded. "I'm not very well-informed, but they're extremely hazardous."

"I've heard about them too," Lefille said. "They sound absurd."

"It can manifest a ridiculous amount of power," Elliot agreed. "I was shocked when Reiji drew out even more power than he was already using."

Elliot's group reached their destination. They hid in the shadow of a nearby

building; the presence of several things could be felt squirming around.

"Over there," Elliot noted.

"They've gathered in force," Lefille said.

"They're hiding well," Elliot observed. "I never thought demons could be so clever."

"You can't tell by sight, but they're polluting their surroundings with their miasma," Lefille explained. "I'm sure they're using it to conceal themselves."

"This is bad," Elliot said. "If they attack with the demons' next offensive wave, they can do some serious harm."

"Then let's discuss strategy," Lefille suggested.

"I'd like to preserve as much strength as I can," Elliot said, tapping the gauntlet on his left hand. "If that particular demon shows up again I'd like to be able to handle it somehow."

He'd used the gauntlet while supporting Reiji, but he was hoping to hold it in reserve here.

"Very well," Lefille agreed. "In that case, you'll take a supporting role and cover me. Is that alright?"

Elliot nodded "That's fine. What do you think, Hydemary-chan?"

"It works for me. I'll have my playing cards do the work for me."

"I'll use magic to support everyone," Christa added.

"Please do."

Now that they had a plan, Lefille ended the conversation by leaping from the shadows. The demons still showed no signs of moving, as if they were going to keep hiding and were intent on letting her run past them.

But Lefille wasn't going to permit such a thing.

She unleashed the power of the spirits. Ishaktney's Red Gale swept over the area, gusting forth like the premonition of a great storm. The glowing red tempest peeled away the Evil God's camouflage in an instant, revealing the demons hiding within.

Now that they were exposed, the demons changed plans and faced Lefille, but were glued in place by the red wind's great pressure.

"Wow, what're those? They're so gross," Hydemary said without any inflection.

Elliot and Christa couldn't tell whether she was being serious. If Suimei were here, he would be able to differentiate her tone from her usual voice.

"Right, this is your first time seeing demons, isn't it?" Elliot noted.

Hydemary nodded. "Mm-hmm. I had them described to me already, but they really are stereotypical demons, huh? They don't have goat heads, though."

"Hmm, so that's what they look like in your world."

"What about yours?" Hydemary asked.

"In my world? I guess they're more... slithery and slimy?"

"Mm... Sounds like you have it rough," Hydemary said, her expression unchanging but voice sympathetic. "Suimei-kun would probably scream in disgust."

At any rate, seeing that the demons were helpless against the red wind, Hydemary and the others got to work. Christa fired magic and Elliot used his sword, defeating demons one after the other. As for Hydemary, she unleashed her card soldiers. The large playing cards—each accented by a set of limbs and a head—attacked the demons with vicious swords, spears, and maces.

The battle was completely one-sided. The demons were unable to do anything because of the red wind, whereas everyone on Elliot's team had complete freedom of movement.

"I see..." Elliot muttered meekly. "I suppose it makes sense you don't consider me necessary."

"Hm? What's wrong, Elliot-dono?" Lefille asked.

"Aah, nothing really," he said. "I was just thinking how amazing your power is. I'm not needed here, am I?"

"E-Elliot-sama?! What're you saying?!" Christa protested.

"I mean, if you just take a look at the result..."

"You're the same as ever," Lefille said. Because of his playful behavior, she didn't take him seriously at all. "You never let your true feelings surface."

"Hm? Lefille-chan, do you want to see the *real* me? If so, I'll show you anytime you want."

"No, I'll pass."

"Elliot-sama!" Christa said.

"Yes, yes, I know. I'll concentrate on the task at hand."

Lefille was watching Elliot soothe Christa when a sudden thought came to mind. The way he masked his true self was somewhat similar to Suimei.

A short while later, after the demons were completely cleaned up, Elliot spoke.

"That was anticlimactic," he said, curious. "They didn't even put up a fight."

"It's as you say," Lefille agreed.

"The demon general apparently has some splendid plan in play, but it seems we drew the short straw in all this."

"Isn't it possible they underestimated us?" Hydemary remarked. "I mean, we do have extra reinforcements."

"No, that demon general was strong," Elliot said. "If she's come up with some elaborate plan, we should assume there's a reason for it."

"Hmm. Okay then."

Just as Hydemary accepted his reasoning, a thunderous roar shook the area with all the force of a cannon firing.

"Hm?!"

"Ew, it's all dusty," Hydemary complained.

"And here it is..." Elliot muttered.

Only he knew what was coming. What had crashed down among them was a figure far too mismatched to be normal. It was a muddled mix of insect and

beast—the grotesque demon.

"Is that the crazy demon you mentioned earlier?" Hydemary asked.

"Yes, it is," Elliot acknowledged. "Be careful."

"It's certainly as you said. Its figure *is* rather bizarre," Lefille said. "Not that any demons are normal."

"True... Oh, isn't this the one Reiji and I cornered?" Elliot remarked. "Good grief, it hasn't even treated its wound. Is it being discarded?"

The grotesque demon had a large cavity in its torso, causing its movement to be severely stilted.

"Ugh, it stinks," Hydemary said, pinching her nose. "Is it rotting?"

"Seems so. Still, for it to leave that wound as is..." Elliot muttered.

The cavity inside the demon was decomposing, blackening it even more than it already was. It was clear the grotesque demon hadn't received any treatment whatsoever. The demon general really did see it as nothing more than a pawn.

"Yuck... Everyone, keep it away from me," Hydemary said, deploying a total of thirty-five card soldiers.

They spread out and encircled the grotesque demon, then charged with swords, spears, and maces. However, they were all blown away with a single hit, returning them to simple playing cards.

"Not even enough to buy any time, I see," Hydemary observed.

"Half-hearted attacks aren't going to work on that thing," Elliot told her. "It'll be hard to keep it down unless you unleash significant power."

"Then how about this? I'll wash you properly later, so do forgive me," Hydemary said, addressing something the others couldn't quite see. "Jetz kommen, mein niedlicher Teddybär."

[Now come, my cute teddy bear.]

With an adorable *poof*, a giant teddy bear wearing a conical hat manifested in the air and engulfed the grotesque demon. A solid *thud* resounded through the ground as if an enormous rock had crashed down from the sky. Hydemary

expected the grotesque demon would be unable to move from beneath the teddy bear, just like the Monkey King had been squashed beneath Five Elements Mountain.

However, with a repulsive roar, the demon grabbed the teddy bear, swung it around violently, and flung it away with tremendous force.

"Seriously? Beat-tan is no good either? Seems like I might have to resort to grand-magicka-class spells..."

But Hydemary's attack had still helped to bring the grotesque demon to a halt. Taking advantage of this, Elliot charged in, slashing at its defenseless face. However, his sharp strike was stopped by the demon's tenacious flesh, and Elliot was blown back in the next instant. He'd managed to time a jump to his opponent's blow, and he landed on his feet without taking any damage.

"What's going on...?" he muttered in bewilderment, looking down at his blade.

"Elliot-sama! Is something the matter?!" Christa yelled.

"No... I'm fine. It's nothing."

"Did that gross thing do something to you?" Hydemary asked.

"It didn't. This is a personal problem."

Hydemary and Christa were puzzled by his answer.

"Lefille-chan...?"

Elliot, on the other hand, was confused by Lefille's actions. For some reason, she casually strode forward.

"...fro...low...bove...below..."

She muttered quietly to herself as she marched on. What was wrong with her? Elliot couldn't see her face, so it looked like she was completely out of her mind. And just as he figured out she was mumbling "From above to below" over and over, Lefille's eyes suddenly shot open and she faced the grotesque demon with firm resolve.

"I'll be using you to test my new strike."

With that declaration, Lefille held her greatsword up high, pointing it at the heavens and poised for the grotesque demon to come straight at her. Ishaktney's Red Gale whirled around her as if she was at the center of a tornado. Elliot could see that a circular field was forming around her.



Seeing her as its new target, the grotesque demon roared and charged at her. Lefille's howling greatsword was swung right at the demon's miasma-charged shoulder tackle. The chilling sound of a sharp blade cutting through air was accompanied by a ground-shaking *boom*. And just as the two forces were about to collide, the grotesque demon was bisected from above to below. Its two halves crumbled to the ground with a heavy *thud*. Before long, it turned into black ashes and vanished.

Elliot walked up to Lefille as she gathered herself.

"Oh man, you beat it so easily," he said. "I'm losing confidence."

"No, it wouldn't have gone this way had you and Reiji-kun not exhausted it," she told him. "It took a fair bit of time for my concentration to reach the right levels, after all."

Elliot recalled what Lefille had done. She'd readied her blade before concentrating. The entire preparation had left her open for a fatal strike. If not for those supporting her, she wouldn't have been able to bisect the demon like that.

But if that was all it took, Elliot and Reiji should've been able to beat it too. The demon had been killed so easily that Lefille didn't understand why those two had such apprehensions about it.

"I have a question," she said.

"What is it?" Elliot prompted.

"Was the demon you fought before really only this strong?"

Elliot froze for a moment before saying, "No, it was quite a bit more sluggish here, and it had the wound Reiji and I dealt to it left to rot. To be honest, we didn't even have the time to talk during the fight."

"I see. It appears I still need more training."

It had frankly taken Lefille everything she had to match the timing of her strike to the point of impact. If the demon had been any faster, its ramming attack would have hit her. Were there going to be armies of these demons in the future? This development seemed inevitable, and Lefille felt strongly how

necessary it was for her to keep training.

"Good grief, it seems I'll have to get serious soon too..."

Anxious over her lack of skill, Lefille heard Elliot murmur something, but couldn't make out what it was he said.

Moolah was alone inside a demon encampment some distance away from Metel. She was lost in thought, going over how to carry out the upcoming battle. She had to attack the city while meeting Demon Lord Nakshatra and the Evil God's expectations: forcing the Goddess's power to focus into one hero. Toppling the city was secondary. So long as the primary mission was accomplished, it would be nothing more than a nice bonus.

But if that's all they have, there's no guarantee it will go well, is there? Not only had she overpowered them and then withdrawn, she'd even told them what she was up to. Doing so was what caused the minor anxiety that was nagging her now.

"The preponderance of the Goddess's power... Can that really be done now that two heroes are present...?"

Things were already developing in an unexpected direction. So, it was at her discretion to correct the course of events. To that end, she'd put one grotesque demon and two schemes in place. The grotesque demon had suffered serious damage, so she didn't really expect it to accomplish much. At the very least, it could be a nuisance.

A demon then approached Moolah. It was probably here to give a report, so she lent it an ear.

"They've made a move...? What?"

However, the news the demon brought was shocking. Due to her original plans being thrown out of sorts, she was forced to change her approach. She recalled what Lishbaum had once told her.

"A human boy with black hair and black clothes..."

At the time, Lishbaum had told her, "I'm simply asking you to take such

possibilities into consideration" and "However, with the amount of power you possess..." All these statements clearly showed just how wary Lishbaum was of this man. So, what would happen if Moolah defeated him personally?

"Very well. How about I disgrace you with my own hands?"

Moolah's face tightened with anger.

Hatsumi's group was headed to the western part of the city, toward the church. It seemed the demons were plotting something nefarious at the Goddess's sacred shrine. Hatsumi's group was there to clean them up.

Proceeding at a half run, Hatsumi took a look at the city around her. Due to the invasion, the buildings and greenery were all tattered, as if they'd lost their shine. Regardless of the outcome of this war, whether they won or lost, the damage to the city was done. And that was a real tragedy.

With such thoughts in mind, she noticed that Titania had fallen silent. She, too, was looking at the crumbling houses.

"Titania-san?" Hatsumi said.

"Oh, forgive me. Seeing the city like this overwhelms me..."

"You don't have to..." Hatsumi trailed off. She knew exactly what Titania was thinking.

"I am a princess," Titania said, looking at the ruins of the town in grief. "I don't often go out into the city, but still, this is my home. To see it like this pains my heart... It vexes me. There was nothing I could do to stop this. All I can do is remind myself that abandoning the city is necessary."

"But there's no—"

"I don't want to say there's no helping that," Titania said, cutting Hatsumi off. "Once I do, I'll start to believe that it's alright to abandon everything in *any* given situation."

All this must have been building up in her as they traveled through the city's devastated remains. Titania's sorrow was palpable.

"We'll have to... drive the demons out quickly, then," Liliana said, tugging on

Titania's sleeve.

"You're right. Let's give it our all," Hatsumi added, trying to cheer her up with a show of spirit.

Titania stared at them in wonder, then smiled gently and said, "Thank you."

However, her expression swiftly tensed, showing the demeanor of a swordswoman. They'd found the hidden demons.

"There they are..." she muttered.

"Let's... defeat them."

"Yes, let's," Hatsumi agreed, putting a hand to the odachi on her back. "Come to think of it, I never thought I'd be using this katana so quickly."

What she had now wasn't the mithril katana the dwarves had made for her. This weapon was something she'd received during her stay in Japan. It was the same length and width as her previous one, but it was of the Kokushitsu Tachi style.

"It looks different from the one you used before," Titania said, observing the odachi curiously. "Is the blade even stronger than mithril?"

"I wonder about that," Hatsumi said. "At the very least, it's made of steel."

"So it really is steel. Wouldn't the one you had made in Saadias be better?"

"No, this is probably different from that one."

"...?"

"Want to try holding it?"

With that, Hatsumi handed the katana to Titania. Titania drew it and gave it one, then two swings. She slashed at a wall with practiced movements, but it didn't seem to strike a chord with her.

"Forgive me, I can't tell at all," she said. "I can only see it has a sharp edge."

"Birth pains."

"Huh?"

"No, it's nothing."

And as their conversation carried on, Liliana raised her voice in warning.

"Princess Titania, Hatsumi, the demons... are making a move."

It seemed the demons had noticed them and were maneuvering to eliminate them. The three girls quietly discussed what to do and settled on opening with magicka from Liliana to scatter the demons so Hatsumi and Titania could move in and crush them.

"Let's start... by getting rid of the trash," Liliana said with a lisp before she started chanting. "A cute, cute, grand parade. Everyone line up. Line up all together. Flightless birdies. Swimming birdies. Walking birdies. Form a tidy line."

"C-Cute?"

"B-Birdies?"

The other two were terribly thrown off by Liliana's strange chant. It didn't sound like it could harm a fly.

"To all who'll listen. Hearken my words. Contravene similarity, flow into an eddy, dissolve into goo, blend like oil. Free thyself from punishment. Free thyself from all shackles. Those who can't fly, take to the skies. Those who can swim, do not wade the waters. Those who can walk, do not march. Do naught but deny thy fate."

In complete contrast to the opening half, the chant finished on a rather eerie note. Liliana blew into her hands, causing a curse to spill to the ground like black tar. It was practically the same thing Suimei had done earlier.

The curse spread like mud on the ground before splitting into several shapes. As one, these shapes transformed to very closely resemble the stuffed toy Liliana was carrying—black penguins.

Liliana led them with a cane in one hand, and the penguins toddled after her. She looked like a teacher being followed by a bunch of kindergartners. The penguins being pitch-black with burning pallid eyes made it a whole lot creepier than that, though.

[&]quot;Mm, got it." Hatsumi nodded.

"U-Um, Liliana Zandyke? What is this?" Titania asked.

"This is that thing you mentioned earlier, huh..." Hatsumi said with a somewhat exasperated look.

The demons changed their approach at the sight of this abnormality. Now wasn't the time to be stealthily getting in position. They burst into action from every direction.

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"Here... I go. Take this."
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In response to Liliana's declaration, the penguins took to the air, lying flat like toboggans, then started flying in circles, spreading black curses in their wake.

Liliana then thrust forward her cane, and...

"Ultimate art! Mr. Penguin... Missile!"

Immediately following the strangest of keywords, the cursed penguins cried as one.

"KYyuUrururUrUrurRUruu!"

"PipYyppYPyYRRRRrrrr!"

"KyrRrruAUwaaWuwaaAAA!"



They flapped their flippers, apparently expecting to fly faster through the power of yelling louder and flapping harder. The strange cacophonous screams had all their enemies shuddering. As for the two who were watching the penguins soar off toward the demons, they couldn't help but question whether this would accomplish anything.

However, with each impact of penguin against demon, a demon was blown away, covered in curses, and rendered immobile. In an instant, a multitude of demons were left glued to the ground and unable to move.

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"Sooo... is it our turn now?" Hatsumi asked.

"No... not yet," Liliana said. "Please... wait a moment."

"Huh?"
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It seemed Liliana's magicka wasn't over yet. The demons were bound to the ground and unable to move inside what looked like a giant black puddle. What followed was none other than another chant.

"Black curtain of the depths. Thou art he who neither opens nor closes, covering many oceans. Fear lies beneath the waters, waiting only for the lid to open. Peer in, take a peep, and learn. Beneath the mired curtain lies a boundless and inexhaustible hunger for life, waiting and ready at all times. You and you and you, all of you hear my words. Here and now, you may look upon the source of all terror—Open the Big Jaws of the Sea."

The large black puddle undulated. It was as if an enormous fish was swimming right beneath its surface. Before long, a gigantic set of jaws burst out of the puddle, as if a vast whale came to unhinge its jaws before a school of fish. Yet the thing that emerged had the uneven and jagged teeth of a shark, and it proceeded to devour the demons in a single gulp.

The other demons kept their distance, making sure not to approach the cursed body of water. Just as planned, they were now scattered. All that was left was to crush them.

Hatsumi and Titania split up and overwhelmed the demons.

Reverse Mirror. Visions of Rust. Disembodied Blade. Wailing of the Restless

Dead. Hatsumi unleashed one technique after the other.

Lightning-fast slashes. Crossed blades. Rotating swords. Flipping decapitation. Titania, too, used a multitude of moves.

The demons fell one after the other at a speed far too fast for the eyes to follow. They were nothing to these two.

"They're not as strong as I thou— Huh?"

And just as Hatsumi started to voice this observation, she raised her voice in confusion. The demons she'd cut down were laughing. They were cackling. It was as if they were sneering at this display of humanity's utter foolishness. What made even less sense were the other demons. They weren't doing anything to try and defeat her. They stood where they were and pierced themselves in the chest with their own hands.

"What's going on? What're they doing?" Hatsumi asked in bewilderment.

"I don't know..." Titania muttered.

The demons laughed and committed suicide, each mumbling something as they died.

"To the Evil God's side..."

"All hail Nakshatra-sama..."

It was as if they were offering up their own bodies in service of something greater.

"Hatsumi, Princess Titania! Something... bad is coming!" Liliana shouted.

That was when Hatsumi came to a sudden realization.

"The blood is spreading!"

"Oh no! A magic circle," Liliana cried. She was the very first to figure out what was going on.

The blood spilling from the demons formed a circle. Immediately following that, the girls were blinded by an intense radiance. The blood-colored light left afterimages in their eyes, and before long, an enormous figure manifested.

It had a giant torso about the size of a house. It had a human shape, but it

looked nothing like a human. And on its head crested huge horns.

Both Titania and Hatsumi recognized it.

"That demon can't be..."

"No way, you're kidding me..."

It was none other than the demon Rajas. The sword in its hand and the clothes it wore were those of the demon Mauhario. The resulting sight in front of them was a mishmash of the best parts of those two demon generals.

"I see, so this is that female demon's splendid plan..." Titania said.

"What do you mean?" Hatsumi asked.

"Reiji-sama mentioned her saying something about a splendid plan before she retreated," Titania explained. "We were wondering what kind of scheme it could be. This must be it."

However, it seemed the fused demon didn't inherit the memories of its references. It was simply made to have their forms. Even after seeing Hatsumi and Titania, it didn't react.

"The others are likely encountering something similar," Titania conjectured.

"So both Reiji-san and Elliot-san's destinations have one of these too..."

"What... do we do? Call Suimei?" Liliana asked.

"We haven't even crossed blades yet. I don't want to call for help," Hatsumi said, hefting her odachi on her shoulder. "You two, step back."

"Very well."

"As you... say."

Hatsumi took a deep breath, mustered her spirit, and set her aim for the fused demon's neck.

"Kuchiba School of the Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani..."

She unleashed a horizontal slash. This was the same decapitating blow she'd used in the battle against Mauhario. Anything and everything in her blade's path was fated to be torn apart. However, in this one instance, she managed no

more than the smallest of scratches.

"No way..." Hatsumi said, voice trailing off in shock.

This was impossible. She'd never imagined her blow would deal so little damage. Her mind completely blanked out. And in that short opening before she could recover, the giant demon attacked.

"Ugh!"

Hatsumi immediately blocked the blow. There was no swordsmanship or anything to its strike. It relied entirely on brute strength and sent Hatsumi flying back.

"Hatsumi-sama!" Titania cried.

"Guh! I'm fine! Don't worry about me!"

Hatsumi landed. She'd managed to block successfully. Had the demon possessed any proper skill, however, things might've ended up differently for her.

Titania forced her way in to provide support. The fused demon was tied up by her two dancing blades and seemed incapable of catching her. However, even she found the brute force of its swings troublesome, and she avoided stepping too far in. What followed next was support from Liliana.

"Fasting earth. Thou art he who rots and melts and degenerates, allowing no recovery. Desire is severed, hope is lost, only cursing voices fill the nights, and winter turns the fields into a slimy desert. Voices of starvation from the depths of the soul. Voices of thirst from the depths of the soul. Life degrades. Beauty weeps. But even so, it never ends. The land that thou dost stand upon informs the living of death—Void Foothold."

Liliana tried to sink the fused demon into a cursed swamp, but perhaps because of its sheer size, she only managed to get it up to its knees. Before long, it shook off the curse and returned up to ground level.

"Right there!"

Immediately following Liliana's failed magicka, Titania danced through the air, striking the demon's face with a sweeping slash. She was aiming for its soft

eyes, but a thick miasma repelled her blow.

"Hyaaaaaah!"

Without giving it a moment to breathe, Hatsumi closed the distance with her odachi held high. She gave it a hearty slash across its shoulder. A strike that could split even steel dug into the fused demon's chest, letting loose a spray of black blood.

"Did that... do it?" Liliana asked.

"No! It was too shallow!" Hatsumi cried.

The feedback from her slash had been weaker than she'd expected. She had in fact been able to deal it a visible wound, but it was a superficial injury. She'd done no more than split open the surface of its bulky muscles.

The three girls scattered and backed away from the demon.

"This thing is way too tough. What's with its body...?" Hatsumi muttered.

"It's catching our attacks... with miasma," Liliana observed.

"It appears so. To get rid of it, we either need magic, or..." Titania trailed off.

"A hero's power," Hatsumi finished for her.

The fact that Titania's sword had done no damage was proof of that. Hatsumi had the power of a hero, and Liliana could use magic that made use of this world's Elements. They both had a means of fighting, but the problem was Titania.

"Your Highness... do you have any ideas?" Liliana asked.

"I resent it, but I have no choice but to imitate that man," she answered.

"Who?" Hatsumi muttered.

While the other two wondered what she meant, Titania started chanting. A chill enshrouded her sword. Hatsumi and Liliana could both feel a prickling sting caused by the cold breeze emanating from it. Judging only by appearance, her blade looked like it could freeze whatever it cut and cause frostbite from a single touch.

"Titania-san, what's that?" Hatsumi asked.

"This is Duke Hadorious's technique," she explained. "I can't do it as well as he can, but it should work."

"The duke? I thought... you didn't get along with him," Liliana commented.

"There was a time when he trained me..." Titania said, her expression as sour as possible. Being the sore loser she was, she really didn't want to recall that memory.

As that went on, the earth suddenly burst open. The fused demon had slammed its sword into the ground, sending a crack in the earth that ran forward in a wave of destruction and dust. Visibility deteriorated in an instant.

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"Crap...!"

"Now we can't—"

"I'll blow it... away."
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However, before Liliana could act, the fused demon closed in. Hatsumi sensed its presence earlier than the other two and read the path of its sword. Due to her enhanced spirit, she could make out that the faint shadow through the dust looked somewhat taller than before. It was likely holding up its sword in a reckless attack, as if swinging a club.

Hatsumi relied on the power of a hero and responded to its blows one, two, then three times. Even when she parried the strikes to the side, she felt her hands gradually going numb, pain running up her arms to her core. If her weapon were made of simple steel or mithril, things would likely have gone much worse. Her sword would've broken, and the battle would have ended far too soon. It was even possible her odachi would've been cleanly bisected.

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"Ugh..."
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Unable to withstand the fourth attack, Hatsumi was blown back. She took a shallow cut to her abdomen and tumbled across the ground. Right as that happened, Liliana cleared the dust with her magicka, and Titania immediately went on the offensive. She slashed at the fused demon's elbows and knees, opening cuts and freezing the lacerations to restrict its movements. Using the opening of Titania's attacks, Liliana ran over to Hatsumi.

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"Hatsumi, I'll heal you."
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"Sorry. Thanks."
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She started using healing magicka, sealing the wound in Hatsumi's abdomen and the scrapes she'd gotten from tumbling across the ground.

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"Aaaaaah!"
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The two suddenly heard an urgent scream. Turning to look, they saw Titania pressed down on her back by the demon's sword.

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"Hggggh...!"
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Its frozen wounds were still there, and Titania was using two blades to push back its one. Nonetheless, it was only a matter of time before it crushed her. The moment Hatsumi's wounds were healed, she set forth to help.

Hatsumi ran like the wind, aiming for the two arms that were trying to crush Titania into the ground. The demon switched its grip to a single hand to free up one that reached out toward her. A blast of miasma shot out of its palm. The moment before it slammed into her, Hatsumi exhaled.

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"Hatsumi!"
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"Hatsu...mi-sama...!"

And just as the two began to harbor fears regarding what was about to happen...

"Phantom Sword Mist Slash."

Hatsumi's body dispersed like scattering mist. As the miasma pierced her shadow, the demon took a sweeping slash to its sword-wielding arm. Behind it, Hatsumi stood with her blade poised as if she'd just struck.

With the pressure crushing down on her easing, Titania kicked the demon's arm and escaped, running over to Hatsumi's side. Liliana's dark magic kept it from pursuing them.

"Hatsumi-sama, I'm in your debt," Titania said.

"I'm just glad you're okay."

Upon a closer look, the wound Hatsumi had just dealt was already being

closed by miasma.

"Nothing truly hurts this beast..." Titania muttered.

"Meaning... we have to finish it with a single blow," Hatsumi said, holding her sword at the ready once more.

She'd never imagined she would be forced into such a hard battle against an opponent who relied entirely on brute force. It had a tenacious body, abnormal physical strength, and a physique that was two or three times larger than hers. Her techniques were supposed to surpass it greatly, but here she was at her wits' end just trying to simply handle it. Was her struggle due to her own lack of skill?

"So strong..."

This was a predicament. However, that was precisely why she had to steel herself.

Hatsumi recalled her trip back to Japan—more specifically, the moment her school's founder had casually appeared at the Kuchiba dojo.

It happened while everyone was idling in the living room of the Yakagi mansion, talking about things like what they would do when they returned, what to buy while they were still there, and what kind of souvenirs they would bring. The room felt like a gathering of students on the last day of a school trip.

In that moment, an old-fashioned rotary phone started to ring from somewhere in the house; someone was making a call. Hatsumi, being the most used to the quirks of her cousin's home, was the first to walk over and pick up. Luckily enough, it just happened to be from her mother.

"Hatsumi-san, the head of the family is here," her mother said.

"Huh? Granny Byakuya?"

She was genuinely surprised. The head of the family was the founder of the Phantom Sword, and she only ever came down from the mountains when something serious was happening in Japan.

"She's calling for you," Hatsumi's mother said. "Can you come back

immediately?"

"Mm. I don't mind, but..."

"It's alright. It doesn't appear to be anything urgent. Maybe she just wants to see your face."

"Got it. I'll be right there."

Hatsumi hung up and went back to the living room. The others had gathered in front of the veranda. The curtain was open, and they were all gazing at the night sky. An enormous red moon hung overhead, dyeing the night in its color.

"The moon... is bright red," Liliana said. "It's... creepy."

"It's also misty out," Felmenia observed. "Suimei-dono, isn't this rather abnormal?"

Suimei was still lounging on the sofa, not looking even a bit disturbed. He casually closed his book and turned to them.

"Hm? Aah, that," he said. "It's abnormal, but you don't have to worry about it."

"Are you sure?" Felmenia asked. "I believe this is a temporary transformation of the world. You described it to me once..."

"It's not supposed to happen... unless under the influence of something tremendous," Liliana agreed. "This abnormality... fits the description."

"It's the Night of the Crimson Moon," Suimei explained. "A grand monster has probably descended from the mountains."

"A-A grand monster?" Liliana repeated.

"Is it in any way related to the monster professor?" Lefille asked.

"No, not at all," Suimei said. "This one's a monster in an entirely different way. The professor can be pretty scary when he gets serious, but this one's scary on a whole other level."

Suimei's vague explanation wasn't convincing.

"Suimei, got a sec?" Hatsumi said, joining the conversation.

"Aah, Hatsumi? Look outside," he replied.

"Mm. That's what the phone call was about. Granny Byakuya came down from the mountains."

"Thought so. It wouldn't end up like this otherwise," Suimei said, sticking out his tongue.

"Lady Hatsumi, do you know what's going on outside?" Lefille asked.

"Nope. Looks like things are pretty crazy, though," she answered. "I don't know how it works."

"What do you mean?"

"Whenever Granny Byakuya—the founder of our school—comes down from the mountains, it's like... the air gets corrupted."

"The founder..." Lefille said, trailing off.

"...of your school?" Felmenia finished.

"Mm. The person who created the Phantom Sword," Hatsumi confirmed for them.

"Pretty sure you can't call her a person," Suimei quipped.

"Oh come on," Hatsumi said in exasperation.

"What's that?" Lefille spotted something outside and raised her voice. "I can faintly make out monsters."

"Hmm. Lefi, you can see the Hyakki Yagyo?" Suimei asked.

"I can see it... very clearly too," Liliana added.

"Aah, that's 'cause of the bonus option the Society's monster installed in your eye," Suimei told her.

A parade of skulls, monsters, and ghosts were outside. Granny Byakuya hadn't brought them down with her or anything, but because of the effect she had on the world, such things tended to manifest in her wake. Hatsumi couldn't see them, of course, so even as she squinted out the window, she had no idea what the others were talking about.

"What is it?" she asked. "I can't see anything."

"It's fine," Suimei told her. "They probably won't do anything naughty, so just leave them be. At most, they'll scare someone. If they go too far, their boss will cut them up."

"Hmm. Is it always like this?" Hatsumi asked.

"Yup. Whenever the monster comes down, it's *always* like this," Suimei confirmed.

"Is that so ...?"

"Well, they're different from the things the instructor had you cut down, so don't worry about it."

Hatsumi's expression turned to one of shock, and just then, a sudden thought came to mind.

"Suimei, will you come too?" she asked.

"No, I'll pass."

"Really? But you're part of our school too. Besides, granny isn't totally unrelated to the Yakagi family, isn't she?"

"She isn't, but I only studied there for a bit before quitting. It'd be awkward for me to show up now."

"I'm pretty sure you don't have to worry about that."

With that last remark, Hatsumi left the Yakagi mansion. The path outside was covered in a strange fog, and the air was humid and lukewarm, making for an all-around bizarre atmosphere. Still, this was the same as usual. Hatsumi paid it no mind and headed for the neighboring house, where her mother, Yukio, was waiting at the entrance.

"Hatsumi-san."

"Mom, is Granny Byakuya already in the dojo?"

"Yes, she is. Kiyoshiro-san, Haseto-san, and Gonda-san are with her."

Hatsumi immediately headed for the garden. The familiar sight of her home's yard was now overlaid with an incredibly eerie feeling. Anyone who saw it now

would assume it was haunted. Hatsumi could only hear faint cackling, but whoever was responsible for the noise wasn't showing themselves. It was only her instincts that could tell her that an unpleasant presence was in the area.

Stranger still than all this was the fact that her mother considered everything happening perfectly natural. Any normal person, Hatsumi thought, as she often did when things like this would occur, would find her mother terrifying.

The laughing hadn't stopped and was getting annoying, so with a concerted targeting of her inner bloodlust, Hatsumi silenced it at once.

Once inside the dojo, she saw her father, Kiyoshiro; her little brother, Haseto; and the head coach Gonda. Normally, she would at least give them a glance in greeting, but Hatsumi's eyes were drawn to someone else.

Both the shadiest and most radiant being in the world was right there—a woman with long white hair. Her flowing locks gave off an iridescent glow, as did her eyes, giving her a bewitching charm. Her face was that of a young and beautiful maiden in her twenties, and her skin was white as fresh snow, a single crack across her face like damage in a broken mask. She wore simple white clothes, much like what the dead were made to wear.

She was seated in the very back of the dark dojo, with a single knee propped up in a casual pose. A beautiful young man stood by her side, and he—Gikou—was also possessed of that unique mix of charm and suspicion.

"Granny, sorry to keep you waiting," Hatsumi said, bowing her head.

"I don't mind. I came down to the world without any notice. I understand if you couldn't be here immediately."

A clear voice echoed from deep within the dojo as if it had come straight from the heavens, so beautiful-sounding it was eerie. Hatsumi sat on her heels in the center of the dojo and bowed once more. This was the voice of Shamon Byakuya, one of Japan's Five Great Hidden Swords, the devilish priestess who'd created the Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani.

"It has been a long time, Founder," Hatsumi greeted her.

"Mm. Both you and Haseto have grown. Come."

Hatsumi did as she was told and approached. Byakuya then petted her head gently.

"M-Me too?" Haseto asked.

"Indeed," Byakuya confirmed.

"Oh man..."

Haseto also presented his head shyly to receive head pats. This happened every time they saw her, and it had become practically ritual.

"Kiyoshiro, you too," Byakuya said.

"No, no, no, gimme a break, Founder," he objected, "I'm past that age."

"Hm? Are you not only in your forties? It's hardly much different to me."

"Well, yeah, I might not be much more than a brat compared to you, but in front of my children I must maintain *some* pride."

"I see. Very well then," Byakuya relented, pulling back her hand.

"So? What brings you here today?" Kiyoshiro asked. "Is there some kind of trouble brewing?"

"I just felt like it," she answered. "Nothing more."

Kiyoshiro's eyes widened in astonishment. "How rare."

"I suppose it is," Byakuya agreed. "Whenever this mood strikes me, it means something is happening somewhere that has nothing to do with me."

Hatsumi stiffened. Maybe, just maybe, Byakuya had sensed the fight her group was going through.

"Hatsumi, what is your rank now?" Byakuya asked, turning to her next as if to confirm her suspicions.

"Mm. I reached thirty-two half a year ago."

"I see. It seems you'll soon be among the shadows."

"No, I believe things will only become harder from here."

"Of course it will. That level is haunted by monsters. There are many like me who've surpassed humanity, after all."

With that, Byakuya put on a self-deprecating smile. Her expression then changed completely to one of cold intensity.

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"Hatsumi, take up your sword," she said. "It's time for a lesson."
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"Hwuh?!"

"Oh?"

"Now this is interesting..."

Haseto, Kiyoshiro, and Gonda all raised their voices in shock. The same went for Hatsumi, of course.

"Granny, really?!" Hatsumi exclaimed.

"You must feel uneasy with only three of the secret arts, yes?" Byakuya commented.

Currently, Hatsumi only knew the misty decapitating blow known as Hazy Cross; the Esoteric Technique, Absolute Blade; Edge, a move that the Kuchiba school called the Longsword of the Absolute Edge; and the Kuchiba school's Enlightenment to Serenity.

"This has nothing to do with my duty as one of the Five Swords, but it's necessary," Byakuya said. "I shall give you a demonstration."

With that, she urged Hatsumi out into the garden. They were followed by Hatsumi's father, her brother, and the head coach.

Standing face-to-face with Byakuya, Hatsumi drew the odachi her father had given her, and in response Byakuya drew her own weapon. In contrast to Hatsumi's large sword, hers was a straight sword.

Unlike its corresponding branch in the Kuchiba school, Byakuya's style of the Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani specialized in the use of straight swords. The Kuchibas used an odachi because the head of the family at the time had taken the Phantom Sword and had adapted it to his personal weapon.

Hatsumi rested the back of her blade on her right shoulder in a combat stance. In turn, Byakuya held her sword so loosely it couldn't actually be considered a stance. The blade itself was around a hundred sixty centimeters long and about eight centimeters wide along its entire length, with a hilt

modeled after a three-pronged vajra coiled by an Eastern-style dragon. It was just like the blade carried by Acala.

Despite wielding such a rustic weapon, Byakuya was perfectly at ease. It was as if she'd stood this way for decades, or even centuries. Even though Byakuya's posture was so casual, Hatsumi couldn't attack her. Hatsumi had experienced many battles in the other world. She was supposed to have gotten stronger. And yet, she couldn't attack.

But that was only reasonable. Hatsumi's father, Kuchiba Kiyoshiro, was known as Japan's greatest swordsman, and the woman Hatsumi faced now was said to be beyond even him. She wasn't considered the strongest simply because she'd disconnected herself from all worldly ties and thus found the title unpalatable. Her power was the real deal.

Second among the Four Great Sages, the head of the Hyakki Yagyo, the sword master who'd been bestowed the secrets of the blade by the sword god Futsunushi's manifestation as the eleven-faced Goddess of Mercy—that was Shamon Byakuya. The only ones to have ever attacked her in a head-on confrontation were Hatsumi's father when he was younger and the man who'd been called a genius swordsman.

"Hatsumi, won't you attack?" Byakuya asked.

"...Please honor me with this bout," Hatsumi eventually replied.

Hatsumi knew from the very beginning that she could never win. Trying to search for an opening was ridiculous. All she could do was throw everything she had into a full-on assault. So, that was exactly what she did.

"Hah!"

She didn't shout, but exhaled, unleashing a straightforward strike that could easily tear even metal apart. However, Byakuya blocked it with a sweep of her sword. The shrill sound of metal grinding against metal resounded through the garden.

Up until Hatsumi had swung her sword, she'd been sure that Byakuya's blade had still been dangling along the ground. So how had she been able to so casually block Hatsumi's blow? It didn't make any sense. Well, comprehension

was beyond the scope of this battle. The gulf between their skills was simply too wide.

Hatsumi was overwhelmed by Byakuya's strength and was flicked back with ease, and she dug her heels into the garden soil to skid to a stop.

"Ugh..."

She groaned in pain. Her hands had gone numb, as if she'd stopped an enormous iron ball with only her palms. Byakuya then thrust her sword into the ground. In that instant, Hatsumi could no longer judge the distance between them. She backed away. Byakuya looked so defenseless without her sword in her hand, but if Hatsumi tried to take advantage of that, she had a premonition she would be cut in two with a strike from below. The chill running down her spine told her so.

"Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani, Esoteric Technique—"

The moment Byakuya began muttering, a wind assaulted Hatsumi, a devilish storm from the pits of hell that ran straight through her, from the ground up to the heavens.

Before she knew it, she found herself on her knees. She raised her head and saw Byakuya, her sword above Hatsumi's head, staring quietly at her.

"That was..." Hatsumi muttered.

"What I imparted to Kiyoshiro twenty years ago," Byakuya said. "It's too early for you to master, but it should help."

With that, the beautiful boy who was Byakuya's companion sang a verse. It was the martial poem for this technique.

"Hatsumi, remember this song well," Byakuya said. "The time will come when you'll depend on it and this technique, then make it your own."

"Yes. Thank you for your instruction."

Byakuya then put away her sword and petted Hatsumi's head again as the beautiful boy pulled a purple bundle out of nowhere. It was a long bundle, like a bag one would use for a bamboo sword.

"Hatsumi-san, take this," he said.

"What is it, Gikou-sama?"

"Open it and see for yourself."

Hatsumi did as he said and unfastened the rope, revealing an odachi. It had the same length and width as the blade she always used at the dojo. Its make was of the Kokushitsu Tachi style and had a certain haze along the boundary between metals.

"Take it," Byakuya said, holding a gentle hand to her jaw.

"What is it, granny?" Hatsumi asked.

"This is my parting gift to you for the battle to come. I figured you'd need it in the future and had one of the old swords reforged. We had plenty of Hihi'irokane."

"You made this just for me?"

"Indeed. Use this odachi to cut down what you must." Byakuya paused there before continuing in a serious tone. "Hatsumi."

"Yes?"

"When a swordsman draws their blade," Byakuya began.

"They accept where they stand as their final resting place," Hatsumi continued.

"Only death awaits once the sword is drawn," Byakuya said.

"Only death awaits once one is struck," Hatsumi replied.

"Precisely because there is only one chance at life..."

"...one path, the warrior's path, which is found in death."

After they finished that exchange, Kiyoshiro bowed to Byakuya.

"Founder. Thank you very much for granting my daughter your time."

"Mm. The fewer reasons to worry about the children's safety, the better," Byakuya said as if it was no big deal. "Especially when they're headed into battle."

Her eyes then wandered, stopping in the direction of the Yakagi mansion.

"And what is that youngster Yakagi up to right now?" she asked.

"Suimei is at home," Hatsumi answered. "He refrained from coming here. He says it's 'cause he quit."

"I see. Such a trifling matter shouldn't concern him."

"I couldn't agree more."

"But if he doesn't want to come, we can't exactly force him to," Byakuya said. "Hatsumi, tell him he'll do well to focus, now more than ever. Tell him that what awaits him goes beyond the danger before his eyes."

"Granny, what does that—"

"You don't need to give it any thought for now," Byakuya said, cutting her off. "It's in the future, beyond your current fight."

As Shamon Byakuya gazed at the bloodred moon with her glowing eyes, it really seemed like she was capable of seeing through anything and everything.

Recalling the sight of that sword and keeping it close at heart, Hatsumi returned to the present and steeled herself.

"I'll bring it down," she said. "You two cover me."

"Hatsumi-sama?"

"Hatsumi?"

"Please. Just give me an opening."

Hatsumi concentrated in order to deliver the finishing blow. She'd practically forced this request on the others, but they complied without question.

Titania danced around the demon, trifling with it, using the chill from her swords to threaten its joints. Meanwhile, Liliana used her xenoglossia spell to create a large wolf; then she straddled it and used its howls to blow away the Evil God's miasma.

"I cast my body upon the rocks and give my life to the immovable Kurikara."

Hatsumi chanted a verse from the dharani, picturing it in her mind. She imagined the moment before she unleashed her slash, the scene that would

follow afterward. Once she saw how one led to the other, she immediately took action.

The fused demon moved, a desperate attack to try to close the opening it'd left. Hatsumi evaded its reckless sword, then got herself in the best position to strike. She looked to the right, left, in front, and behind, like searching for the moon's reflection on the surface of a lake. She found the optimal spot.

This was where she could draw her opponent in a single step. This was where she could mess with the sense of distance between them and close the gap. To demonstrate that, she thrust her odachi into the ground.

"Hatsumi-sama?!"

"Hatsumi! What're you doing?!"

The others were shocked that Hatsumi had let go of her weapon.

The demon's massive frame closed in.

Hatsumi endured the gust of wind blowing against her and postured herself to meet the charge.

And then...

Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani, Esoteric Technique, Wisdom King's Judgment.

She would reproduce the secret art to create a wind slash capable of bisecting her enemy from bottom to top, right here and now.

Her sword flashed upward, defying gravity and creating a devilish wind from the depths of the earth. Right as the wind blew up into the heavens, the fused demon and the empty church behind it were bisected vertically.

Splitting to the left and right, the two halves of the demon collapsed. The debris blown up by the sharp slash slowly fluttered down to the earth. After following through with her blow, Kuchiba Hatsumi hummed the song Gikou had taught her.

"With its roots in the earth,

"the blade becomes an illusion,

"blowing up into the heavens,

"creating an unreasonable gale."

The song spoke of the core of this technique. The sword in the ground was meant to bewilder the opponent and mess with their sense of distance and timing. Taking advantage of the opponent's disorientation, the technique then unleashed a sharp wind that was far faster than any opponent's downward strike.

"Splendidly done, Hatsumi-sama," Titania said.

"No, I still have a long way to go," she replied. "My dad and Granny Byakuya could've defeated it more easily."

"Really ...?"

"Yes. They're that outrageous..."

There was no mistaking it. It was entirely possible for Byakuya to exterminate every demon in this world single-handedly. Hatsumi shuddered at the thought. She really did have a long way to go. Even after obtaining this much power, she was nowhere close to the heights of the Four Great Sages.

Meanwhile, Yakagi Suimei watched this scene through the eyes of his cursed crows.

"Holy crap! When did Hatsumi learn such a scary technique...?"

Suimei's entire face had spasmed into a yelp as he watched the end of Hatsumi's fight with the fused demon. Hatsumi had used an impossibly crazy skill. It was the secret esoteric wind slash of the Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani, the Wisdom King's Judgment. When wielded by a master, it could split a skyscraper vertically in two.

And Hatsumi had just reproduced it.

Suimei imagined that devilish wind blowing up from beneath his own feet and shuddered. Things had been going poorly for a little while there, so he'd considered stepping in to support them, but once he'd seen the tides start to turn, he refrained from intervening.

"Anyway, that's an awfully high-handed approach," Suimei commented.

As he thought back on Hatsumi's fight, Suimei took a moment to analyze the demons' methods. He remembered seeing that demon, the general Rajas, before. It looked like their enemy had manifested someone who'd already died once before and had fused it with something else. The stunt had required a significant amount of power. No, in this case, rather than power, it had required authority. In other words...

A significant amount of the Evil God's authority has been inherited...?

They'd created a general-level demon, a feat that normally required considerable authority to pull off. At this point it was best to assume the most powerful demon Suimei had seen had just taken the field. If he underestimated this enemy—if he didn't consider the idea that a foe on the level of Kudrack had just appeared—he'd be liable to receive quite an unpleasant surprise.

Suimei strained his eyes to refocus himself. He was searching for the demons' movements and what they might possibly mean.

What exactly are they up to...?

Their attacks were sporadic. They were fighting as if their plan was to intentionally drag things out, showing leniency in a way they never had previously. More often than not, this implied something was happening behind the scenes. Such a tactic was tailored to lower the enemy's guard in service of some other scheme.

An attack elsewhere... was unlikely. They were already at the capital's gates. There was no point attacking another city.

Suimei's original idea that they were letting refugees escape to put pressure on other settlements... would also be strange. It was hard to imagine the demons were so pressed for resources that they had to resort to such methods. If that were the case, they wouldn't have chosen a strategy where they'd charge in so recklessly.

The only thing he could think of that could plausibly fit with these sporadic attacks was if some large-scale trick—something that involved the entire city—was in the works.

"But there are no signs of that," Suimei said, thinking out loud. "What are they even trying to do here?"

They were secretly up to *something*, but it wasn't a grandiose plan on the level of constructing grand magicka to blow away the entire city. There were no signs of sacrificing humans and demons alike to create a path, or using the city's structure and blood to create a massive magic circle.

Suimei peered in as deeply as he could, but he couldn't find anything. In that case, the demons' goal wasn't to quickly take over the capital or to destroy it.

Sitting on the floor with his legs crossed, Suimei steepled his fingers beneath his nose.

"The groundwork to create new demons," he muttered, thinking. "No. Those demons already exist; they can just use the rest as resources in battle. Use this battle to drill fear into human hearts... That's also wrong. Doing so will only strengthen their faith in the Goddess. It'll give them more unity and make the heroes more powerful. Where...? Where is the answer...?"

As Suimei continued to rack his brain over this, he suddenly spotted something concerning through the crows' eyes.

"Oops, looks like Reiji's having a hard time. Guess I'll go lend a hand."

Suimei stood up and got moving. The Sacrament Reiji wielded was definitely powerful, but he was missing a few pieces to be able to defeat this kind of opponent on his own. That was exactly where Suimei had to step in.

Suimei flung back his jacket, then vanished without leaving so much as a shadow.

"This can't be..."

Looking at what stood before him, Reiji was at a loss for words. Having gone to the eastern part of the city, his group had been forced into a hard fight immediately. Or maybe it was better to say they had no idea what to do. They weren't being overwhelmed by the enemy or anything. They weren't even close to being injured. But they definitely had a hard time making any progress.

"How troublesome," Graziella said. "We crush it and crush it, but there's no end in sight..."

"Ugh," Mizuki grumbled. "Here comes another gross one."

"I believe this is the demon general who showed up during the battle in the Empire, but..." Felmenia trailed off.

Yes, it'd happened while Reiji's group had been cleaning up the demons in the eastern part of the city. In the middle of the fight, the demons had performed some kind of ritual, causing this *thing* to appear out of nowhere.

It was a mountain of pale pink flesh with countless limbs sticking out of it the exact same appearance of the demon previously named Grallajearus. But this creature seemed to be different. It didn't speak, and indeed, it didn't seem to possess any will of its own.

Its flesh just kept bubbling and swelling, multiplying in mass. But therein lay the current issue: this demon was expanding at a terrifying rate, and it threatened to bury the entire city under its meat.

In battle Reiji's group was only capable of delaying it. They crushed it with enormous boulders, burned it with fire, cut and crystallized it with the Ishar Cluster, but they weren't getting the results they hoped for.

"Tch. We managed against it somehow before, but now..." Reiji muttered.

"Last time you dealt the finishing blow," Graziella commented. "I suppose it really is different this time."

"Mm-hmm. It had a core," Reiji explained. "By cutting it, I stopped it from regenerating. But this one doesn't have a core."

"Felmenia-san! Can't you do something?!" Mizuki shouted.

"My flames aren't spreading very well," Felmenia said. "To defeat an enemy like this... Ummm, what was I supposed to do again?"

Felmenia dredged through her memories but couldn't find a clear answer. And even as they spoke, the parody of Grallajearus in front of them continued to swell in size. If left to itself, it really did seem like it would grow endlessly. All it did was expand, push against and engulf everything around it, flattening its

surroundings. Things were progressing badly enough that Reiji's group was starting to feel uneasy.

It was a mindless weapon. Grallajearus had possessed emotions and intellect. The simple act of removing those features had led to a ghastly outcome.

"I-I'll keep its expansion in check," Felmenia suggested. "We need to at least stop it from engulfing the entire city."

"Please do," Reiji agreed.

"White flames run across the fields. Surging over mountains, leaping across valleys, it sets fire to all in its path. My friend, answer my call. My friend, heed my request. Such is a baptism in white fire."

A magic circle emanated white light as it took shape on the ground. White fire burst out of it, spreading to the surrounding area and forming a field. Shortly after, a part of the fire swelled up and transformed into a white horse—more precisely, the white fire mimicked the shape of a horse. Its mane swayed like a raging blaze, and with each step, more flames burst into the air, moving like a real living creature.

The flaming horse lowered itself, and Felmenia casually straddled it before driving it forward using its reins. The horse left a wave of fire behind it, preventing the mass of meat from expanding any further. The fires burned what flesh it touched to ash and drew a clear line that couldn't be crossed. Yet this wasn't enough to defeat it.

That was when Reiji slammed his crystals into it. They buried themselves into the meat and shattered into more deadly fragments, but they were lost to the pressure of the swelling flesh.

"It's really no good..." Reiji mumbled.

"Gaaah! This is nonsense!" Mizuki cried.

Reiji had tried to crystallize his target. By doing so, he'd hoped to prevent it from regenerating, but the lump of meat was growing faster than Reiji could crystallize it.

Felmenia's flaming white horse was burning the demon's edges and keeping it

from growing larger by running in circles round it, but this wasn't ideal. It was no more than a temporary measure.

"Tch. I didn't think it'd go this poorly..." Reiji grumbled.

"I believe the only plan is to destroy it with overwhelming firepower... but the problem is how to arrange such a blow," Graziella said.

"Th-Then should we call for help?" Mizuki suggested. "We might be able to manage that way!"

"Seems that's our only choice," Graziella agreed.

However, Reiji shook his head. "No, please leave this to me."

"So you say, but isn't your weapon unsuited to mitigating the creature's regeneration?" Graziella countered.

"Yeah! Everyone else is in the city, so it'll be better to ask for help!" Mizuki joined in.

They had a point. However, while they called for help and waited for reinforcements to arrive, the creature would only continue to expand. Their only real chance to defeat it was at this moment while Felmenia was keeping it at bay. If they built a dome around the entire mass of meat to prevent its expansion, the white flames could do the rest.

However, that required a dome of massive scale. As things stood now, the meat was swelling faster than one could be constructed. Therefore, Reiji held the Ishar Cluster at the ready.

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"Reiji-kun...?"
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"Hey, what're you planning?"

Ignoring Mizuki and Graziella, Reiji stared into the Lapis Judaix and immersed himself in its glow. He repeated the words it wanted to hear in his mind, yielding himself to the voice in his head, and drew out its power.

Back then, he'd managed it. So, there was no reason he couldn't repeat the feat. And just as Reiji tried to access the deepest depths of the Lapis Judaix, a black shadow swooped down out of nowhere. It had a human figure. It wasn't a demon, but Suimei in his black suit.

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"Suimei-dono!"

"Suimei-kun!"

"Finally, you're late."
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The three girls cheered at his arrival as he swept back his long tailcoat and adjusted the fit of his clothes.

"S-Suimei..." Reiji said, completely bewildered by his friend's sudden appearance.

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"Yo, I'm here to help."

"Oh, right..."
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Reiji was partly in a daze at the suddenly anticlimactic turn of events. Interpreting this as shock due to his surprise arrival, Suimei knit his brows.

"Why so surprised?" he asked. "Isn't this what I'm supposed to do?"

"Aah. Yeah, it is," Reiji said.

"How are things going elsewhere?" Graziella asked.

"From what I can tell, things are just about cleaned up," Suimei answered. "This is the only one left in the area."

"Suimei-kun, are the others alright?" Mizuki asked.

"Yeah. Looks like they managed one way or another," Suimei said.

"As for us... Sorry," Graziella said. "It's as you see."

"I did see. And it's alright," Suimei told her.

"Our skills are poorly matched against it," Graziella said. "Do you have any good ideas?"

"Huh? You only want good ideas?" Suimei joked.

"Of course. Now's not the time to be an imbecile," Graziella told him frankly.

"Well, there're plenty of ways of handling this," Suimei responded with a fearless smile. "More than you can ever want."

With that, he pulled a small bottle from his jacket pocket, opened the lid, and

began chanting.

"Heed my words. Saddened by fear, grieving over sorrow, harboring lament for everything in existence. All anguish lies within you. Even in times of peace, the seeds of anxiety will never disappear from this world."

As Suimei chanted, he poured the content of the bottle into his palm. It was a small spherical object, larger than a bean but smaller than a bulb.

"A seed...?" Graziella muttered.

"Yup. This is best for stuff like this—a Seed of Anxiety."

Suimei flicked the seed, firing it at the swelling mass of flesh. The meat engulfed it with ease... and nothing happened.

"Hey, that didn't work at all," Graziella complained.

"Well, duh. It wasn't a direct attack or anything," Suimei told her. "Oh, you guys keep the offensive going. Just do whatever. Tear it, crush it, anything is fine."

"But Suimei, the regeneration will make our attacks meaningless," Reiji said.

"I don't care—just get to it," Suimei ordered.

"Let's do it!" Felmenia cried from atop her horse. "If Suimei-dono says it's for the best, then it'll work out fine!"

Felmenia trusted Suimei unconditionally. She did exactly as she was told and continued her attack using her white flames. Reiji and Graziella also joined her offensive and launched attacks of their own. Even Mizuki fired magic that mixed several of the Elements—something she'd suddenly been able to use out of the blue.

However, even when crushed by boulders, crystallized by the Ishar Cluster, and burned by white fire, the demon regenerated immediately and returned to its original size.

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"Suimei! This really isn't—"
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[&]quot;Take a closer look," Suimei said, cutting Reiji off. "It's fine."

[&]quot;Huh?"

Reiji did as he was told and strained his eyes. Upon closer inspection, the regenerated portions of the demon were blackened. What was more, these discolored portions weren't vanishing. In fact, they were multiplying as the demon continued to expand.

"What is that...?" Graziella mumbled.

"If destroying it is difficult, then conform and transform instead," Suimei explained. "You can just create an unfavorable condition for it without obstructing its regeneration."

"Huh. In other words, by altering *how* it regenerates, you cause it to self-destruct?" Graziella asked.

"Yup, exactly."

Listening to their conversation, Reiji came to a sudden realization. He knew about this phenomenon.

"Are those cancer cells...?" he guessed.

"Correct. This magicka is based on that concept," Suimei confirmed. "If the target's regeneration can't be stopped, then there's no point trying to stop it. You let it regenerate everything. By planting it with the Seed of Anxiety, it'll replicate it all on its own and drive it mad."

"I see, that makes sense," Reiji said, clapping his hands in understanding.

"Suimei-kun. This is, like... kinda nasty," Mizuki said, narrowing her eyes at him.

"Don't call it *nasty*," he complained. "There's a way to handle everything. Against opponents who regenerate or revive on their own like this, altering the regeneration process works best. Destroying an enemy isn't the only way of defeating them."

"I get it. That's pretty clever," Mizuki conceded.

"There are other ways of destroying an immortal enemy, but... I'd like to keep that card close at hand," Suimei said. "All that's left is to burn it up. Menia, you got this."

"Yes! Please leave it to me!" Felmenia replied.

She brought her mana furnace to its lower critical point, making full use of it to produce tremendous firepower. The demon that had been regenerating endlessly until moments ago was now only burning away thanks to the Seed of Anxiety Suimei had planted within it.



And just like that, the enemy Reiji's group had been so hard-pressed against was easily annihilated. Staring at the smoke from the white fire billowing into the sky, Reiji raised his voice in admiration.

"Amazing..."

"It's a difference in experience," Suimei told him. "I'd lose face if you pulled ahead of me."

"Really?"

"Really! I mean, aren't you even stronger than before?! Ain't that weird?! How fast are you growing?! There's a limit to puberty, dammit!"

Faced with Suimei's comical anger, Reiji could do nothing but give his friend a troubled smile.

Chapter 4: Death Comes for Everyone

After defeating the demons hiding in the capital, Suimei and the others returned to the castle and updated Almadious's war council on the situation, receiving thanks for their efforts. At the same time, scouts monitoring the demons' movements outside the city walls arrived with a report.

According to them, the demons' main force had fallen back to a forest around sixty kilometers away from the capital and had yet to make any conspicuous moves. After confirming everyone was ready to take the field if anything happened, the meeting came to an end.

And so, Suimei, Reiji, and Elliot found themselves in the castle's bathhouse. Astel largely used saunas when it came to bathing, but after the girls had noisily complained about wanting a proper bath, Suimei gave in and used magicka to construct a proper bathhouse.

Even though Suimei had constructed it for the girls' immediate use, they were still idling about, so the boys had gone in first. Currently, they were in the washing area, towels around their waists.

"I never thought I'd get to take a bath in Astel," Reiji commented.

"Thank the girls for throwing a tantrum," Suimei said. "Mary and I had to put it together in a hurry."

Elliot took a look around the newly renovated bath, then began humming in good humor.

"This is rather convenient," he said. "Maybe you're not all that bad."

"Don't use this as an excuse to treat me like a handyman," Suimei complained.

"Why shouldn't I? How about changing jobs?" Elliot quipped. "You'll be able to help people better this way."

"The more I do it, the more people will be unemployed. No thanks."

"You really can do anything, huh?" Reiji said.

"Being able to do anything is what it means to be a magician," Suimei explained. "We're trying to become omnipotent to grant all the dreams of the world. We'd be failures if we couldn't create a bath or two."

"Hmmm."

Reiji looked around the bath. There was a mirror on the wall and a painting of Mount Fuji in front of him. Surely Suimei knew what Reiji would think.

Suimei awkwardly lowered his eyes. "Well, just don't ask about the decor."

"This is that public bathhouse," Reiji said. "Matsuno's Bathhouse, the one in the neighborhood."

"Hmm, isn't copying an existing business like this illegal?" Elliot commented.

"Sure is. This is definitely copyright infringement," Reiji agreed.

"Like hell there's any copyright in another goddamn world," Suimei retorted.

"What a lousy excuse," Elliot said.

"I mean, what else could I do?" Suimei said. "Pretty much the only big baths I know of are this one and the resort spa in Germany."

"Then couldn't you have gone with the German spa?" Reiji asked.

"That place is way too big," Suimei answered. "It needs way more water than it looks like it would, so preparing it is a lot of trouble."

"So you're just being eco-friendly?" Reiji commented.

"Yup, eco-friendly," Suimei confirmed. "To my mana, that is."

"Even though you do some pretty absurd, not very eco-friendly things all the time?" Elliot quipped.

"Shut it," Suimei spat back at him.

Suimei scooped up some water from the bath and splashed it over his face like an old man. In contrast, Reiji grabbed a wooden bucket and emptied it over himself.

"Sorry, these are my world's rules," Suimei told Elliot. "You have to wash

yourself off before you go in."

"I don't mind," he replied. "Washing before entering the bath is how things are done in my world too."

"That so? Guess I didn't need to say anything."

After the three of them washed off, they got into the bath.

"This feels great," Elliot said.

"Yeah. This kinda thing isn't so bad every now and then."

With that, Suimei manifested a plastic pail with magicka, then slapped it against the floor, getting a nice *bonk* to echo through the bathhouse.

"What's that?" Elliot asked.

"For the ambience," Suimei answered.

"Hahahahaha. Yeah, you've gotta have that sound in a bathhouse," Reiji said, laughing.

And just like that, the three boys continued to enjoy a good soak in the bath. After a short while, though, Elliot's expression suddenly turned meek.

"I'm thinking I'll have to change the way I fight a little from here on out," he said.

"Hm? What's this all of a sudden?" Suimei asked.

"Well, you know... It's about this thing they call a hero's power. I feel like it's been getting weaker for a while now."

"Huh?" Both the other boys were bewildered.

"Have you been feeling the same, Reiji?" Elliot asked.

"No, it's been the same as always for me."

"I see..." Elliot seemed to be baffled by the change in his own power.

"But why does that lead to changing the way you fight?" Reiji asked.

"He can't rely entirely on the hero's power anymore," Suimei said, figuring it out quickly. "So, he can't slack off anymore."

"I'd rather you not talk like you know everything..." Elliot grumbled.

"Ain't it the truth?" Suimei said. "Anyway, now that it's come to this, you've gotta use your *own* power—the one you've been hiding this whole time."

"Well, that's one way to think about it," Elliot conceded.

"But why did this happen all of a sudden?" Reiji asked.

"I don't know," Elliot said. "I doubt faith in the Goddess has waned."

"If anything, *more* people should be clinging to her now," Suimei agreed. "The more people are driven into a corner, the more they feel compelled to cling to gods or whatnot."

The three racked their brains over this but couldn't come up with an answer.

"Well, I don't know what's going on, but it's possible something is happening," Suimei said. "Let's ask Hatsumi later too."

"Right," Elliot agreed. "We have to discuss this with her too."

"Oh, Reiji," Suimei said, deciding to ask about something that'd been bothering him. "They're saying you got even stronger again, yeah?"

"Hm? Yeah. I mean, I haven't gotten as strong as you or anything, though."

"Cut it with the weird humility," Suimei grumbled. "Is it the Sacrament's power?"

Reiji nodded meekly after a pause. "Mm-hmm."

"You seem awfully fixated on that," Elliot commented, shooting Suimei a quizzical look. "Is something wrong?"

"I don't really know if it's a good or bad thing," Suimei said. "Even when I ask other Sacrament wielders about it, they just dodge the question. I just can't help but think using what is essentially someone else's power and not your own comes with a significant price..."

"A power beyond your means will eventually come back to bite you," Elliot agreed, wiping his face with a towel. "Those are the basics."

"It's nothing that serious," Reiji said. "I draw out the power using my own mana. There's no other price or contract or anything."

"Do you know anything about this?" Elliot asked Suimei.

"I don't. Still, I did manage to draw out a bit of a verbal message from someone who uses a Sacrament in our world."

"A message?" Reiji asked.

"The voice within you is your dormant desire," Suimei said, recounting what he'd heard during his return to his own world. "If you pay too much heed to it, it'll corrupt you. What the voice tells you is in no way always the truth."

"That's a pretty ominous message," Elliot said. "Will using it contaminate the soul or something?"

"No, I don't think so," Suimei replied. "There aren't that many weird events around them."

"I see," Reiji said, thinking. "Wait, not that many?!"

"It's nothing that bad. Don't worry," Suimei told his panicking friend. "Slightly weird things just tend to happen."

"Is that really alright...?"

Suimei brushed him off. Sacraments were outside his field of expertise, so he had no read on how things could actually develop.

"Anyway, what does that message even mean?" Reiji asked.

"Don't lose yourself in the power you've obtained," Suimei summarized. "But I'm pretty sure you'll never do something like that."

"Yeah..." Reiji agreed after a pause.

"Well, if anything does happen, lean on those around you," Suimei told him. "If worse comes to worst, I'll do something about it."

"Sure. I'll be in your care if that time comes."

"Right on. Leave it to me."

Watching Suimei reassure his friend like that, Elliot chuckled to himself, saying, "You really are a softhearted soul."

Suimei smiled bitterly at showing a side of himself he didn't want others to

see. Naturally, Reiji burst into laughter at this, and Suimei awkwardly turned his back to them.

And just like that, after enjoying the warmth of the bath for a while longer, they heard faint... well, not that faint, but high-pitched voices. For some reason, the dressing room leading to the bath was suddenly noisy. The voices were very familiar too.

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"What the ...?"
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"Did something happen?"

"The only sudden event I can think of would be the demons making a move."

Guessing it was an emergency, the three boys exchanged looks and got ready to get out of the bath. They then heard even louder voices. It was Graziella and Titania.

"What's there to care about?"

"I care! We're... you know?!"

"It's not a big deal."

It seemed the two were arguing in the dressing room. However, they didn't sound particularly serious, so this wasn't about the demons. And just as the boys let out a sigh of relief, they heard Titania's voice once more.

"It's a huge deal! Besides... Suimei and Elliot-sama are present too!"

"Of course they are."

"Aaaaaah! I'm not getting through!"

"Stop! You can't! Graziella-san! Aaaah!"

That last voice was Mizuki's. She was panicking too. They then heard the sound of things being knocked about.

"What're they doing out there...?" Suimei muttered. "I'm pretty sure we all decided the guys were going in first."

"I have a bad feeling about this..." Reiji said.

"Depending on your perspective, it could be a good feeling too," Elliot said.

Suimei and Reiji were at their wits' end, whereas Elliot looked like he was enjoying himself. The sliding door then clattered open as Graziella strode in.

"Pardon the intrusion," Graziella said.

"Pffffft?!"

"Why?!"

Suimei and Reiji were dismayed by the impossible development. Graziella was wearing nothing but a towel as she boldly marched into the bathhouse. Her curves were perfectly visible.

Was this because she was never one to really care about this stuff? Or did she believe it was fine since she was wearing a towel? She looked awfully calm.

"What?" Graziella asked with a dubious gaze.

"What?! You hafta ask?!" Suimei yelled. "Why're you coming in?! We decided the guys were going in first, didn't we?!"

"It's no big deal," she said. "Also, don't look at me. I'll crush your eyes."

"How can you be so unreasonable?! And it's okay for Reiji to look?!"

"R-Reiji is fine..." Graziella said bashfully, averting her eyes.

Naturally, Suimei had to yell about this too. "It's been a while since I've seen this crap, dammit!"

"Aah, I get you," Elliot joined in. "I can see this happening all the time."

Reiji looked bewildered as Elliot nodded to himself. They then heard another voice from the dressing room.

"It can't be helped! Now that it's come to this, we must charge in!"

"Hey! Tia! You can't!"

"There are fights I refuse to lose!"

"Wait! Calm down already! Aaaaah!"

"I-If Her Highness is going in, then so am I!"

"Lady Felmenia?! Don't be so hasty!"

"Yeah! You'll just make things worse!"

Following Mizuki's and Titania's voices were Felmenia, Lefille, and Hatsumi.

"Ugh, whatever! Let's all go in!"

"Huh?! Why?!"

"I mean, there's no telling what'll happen if we don't! We're the only sane ones here! We might be able to avert the worst!"

"Ugh... Women need to have courage, you mean..."

"That's right! If we don't do it now, then when?!"

Why did women need courage? What did they have to do now or never? They'd long lost their sanity. Shortly after, the door to the bathhouse was thrown open, and the girls all came in, dressed only in towels.

"ΑΑΑΑΑΑΑΑΑΑΑΑΑΑΗΙ"

"Hey! Wait! What's going on?! The hell is going on?!"

"Hahahahahahahaha!"

Reiji and Suimei were utterly confused, their cries echoing around them. Elliot, on the other hand, leaned back against the edge of the bath and laughed while holding down his sides.

"We went with the flow and just came in, but what do we do now?!" Felmenia yelled.

"I don't know how to answer that..."

"I-I guess I'll go wash off..."

Lefille and Hatsumi both muttered as they went in and got started.

"L-Lefille? Hatsumi-dono?" Felmenia said, sensing something afoot. "You're both acting so calm! Why?!"

"Huh? No, I'm not really..." Hatsumi muttered.

"I'm not calm or anything," Lefille said. "I'm at my limit too, just so you know."

"You don't look that way!" Felmenia shouted. "I feel like you've stolen a

march on me!"

Well, both Lefille and Hatsumi had already experienced naked accidents with Suimei before.

"A-Anyway, let's wash off and get in the bath. Once we do, it'll get a little more—"

With that, Hatsumi approached the bath, when suddenly, she pitched forward and tumbled in front of Suimei.

"Hyaaaaaah?!"

"Whoa! Oomph!"

Something incredibly soft enveloped and pressed down against Suimei's face. Not only that, but in trying to avoid losing her balance, Hatsumi wrapped her arms around his head, increasing the pressure around Suimei even more.

"Ah! Suimei!" she yelled. "Don't move! It'll come off!"

"Mmgh! Mmmgh! Hgggh!"

"Ugh, dammit all. She stole the initiative," Lefille grumbled.

"Hahaha, how bold, Hatsumi-dono," Felmenia said, clenching her teeth. And then, with a sudden thought on her mind, she took a step forward. "Now that it's come to this, I'll also—"

"Lady Felmenia! What the heck are you thinking?!" Lefille shouted.

"What else can I do?!" Felmenia yelled back. "There's no point caring about appearances at this point! We must take drastic measures before Suimei-dono drowns! In all sorts of ways!"

"Stop! Stop right there!"

"Let me go, Lefille!"

"You can't!"

Felmenia and Lefille began squabbling without even trying to save Suimei. One was flailing about, while the other was desperately trying to hold her back.

There were two other girls who were completely exasperated with everything

that was going on. Having entered without anyone noticing, Hydemary and Liliana were getting along well and washing their bodies.

"What... are they all doing?" Liliana said.

"Isn't it that thing someone said earlier? It's a fight they can't afford to lose," Hydemary replied. "I don't really get it, though."

"They're so... uselessly noisy. Not that telling them... will do anything."

"Right? How unbecoming of young ladies."

Liliana and Hydemary continued chatting, astonished by the behavior of the girls who'd barged into the bath.

"Suimei-kun," Hydemary said, turning his way. "We went out of our way to build this bathhouse, so don't go spoiling it by turning it into some shady shop."

"I have no intention to!" Suimei yelled back. "Hey! Hatsumi! Quit flailing already! I'm begging you! Hak! Gah! Water is going up my nose!"

The bathhouse was now a cacophony of noise.

"Haha. I never thought I'd get to witness something so amusing," Elliot said.

"Still, they should be a little quieter," Christa commented. "It's only proper manners in the bath."

The two of them seemed to have no objections to bathing together and were getting along just fine.

"Princess Graziella! You're being shameless!"

"How so? Why don't you just come here too, Princess Titania?"

"Grrr... I can't let things go on like this. There's no choice but to charge into the bath..."

"Wait! Tia! You too?!" Reiji shouted. "Mizuki, do some— Mizuki?"

"Wa wa wa wa wa wa..."

Mizuki was also at her breaking point. She was stumbling about in a daze. Meanwhile, Titania slid in by Reiji's side.

"R-Reiji-sama! P-Pardon me!"

"T-Tia?!"

"Princess Titania! You're too close!" Graziella shouted. "Don't you have any shame as a princess?!"

"Who're you to talk?!" Titania retaliated. "None of this would've happened if not for you!"

"B-Both of you! Stop arguing over my head!" Reiji protested.

"And you! Reiji-sama! Grow some awareness already!"

Titania and Graziella continued arguing noisily around Reiji. As for Suimei...

"Lefille! Let's start by tearing Hatsumi-dono away!" Felmenia yelled.

"Right! Many things are at risk! Mainly Suimei-kun's life!"

The two jogged over and immediately started their rescue effort.

"Hatsumi-dono! You can swim, can't you?" Felmenia said.

"I can, but— Hrk?!"

"Come on, this way. Grab my arm!" Lefille said, pulling her away.

"Th-Thank you..."

Meanwhile, Felmenia helped Suimei.

"Gah! Hak! Dammit, why do I have to almost die when I'm not even fighting demons..." he grumbled as he reached out for support, unintentionally grabbing Felmenia's breast.



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"Hyah?! S-Suimei-dono! Y-You're so bold..."
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"Suimei-dono, if you're going to do this, then maybe not in public..." Felmenia muttered.

"And what the hell're you saying, dammit?!"

A while after all the commotion, now that everyone had soaked in the bath, things had calmed down a fair bit. Not wanting to get chills from getting out too early, everyone remained in the bath. Towels were hiding all their important bits, but they definitely weren't used to this situation. Aside from Elliot, Christa, Hydemary, and Liliana, they were all being very awkward.

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"Suimei-kun... sorry."
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"Well, this is one thing that can't be avoided."

Meanwhile, Suimei was casting magicka on Lefille to suppress her curse. With one hand on her back to support her, he had his other hand right below her belly against the curse seal. He'd given her this treatment on fixed intervals, so neither were embarrassed by it at this point.

"Anyway, I'm begging you here. Don't cut loose too much," Suimei said to Felmenia and Hatsumi. "Lefille still has this problem to deal with too. You've gotta be a little more considerate of others."

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"Forgive me..."
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"Sorry..."

The two of them apologized honestly. However, there were those there who were nowhere near as admirable.

"And why the hell do they have to be criticized by you?" Graziella spat out.

"That's right," Titania agreed. "It's your fault for being so unreliable."

"You two are so... C'mon, say something, Reiji," Suimei said. "It'll be best

[&]quot;Huh? N-No! Y-You've got it wrong! I didn't mean—"

[&]quot;Suimei! Why're you taking advantage of the situation?!" Hatsumi yelled.

[&]quot;I-It's not my fault!" Suimei protested. "I was about to drown!"

coming from you."

"Huh? You're pushing this on me?"

And while Reiji had no idea why Suimei was passing the baton, the two princesses threw up a fuss.

"You bastard! It's cowardly to bring Reiji into this!"

"That's right. Have some shame!"

"I don't wanna hear that crap from you two, dammit!"

Suimei's roar echoed through the bathhouse.

"I don't know why, but I'm exhausted..."

"Seriously. Why do I gotta be so worn out when I came here to relax...?"

"Oh? I'm actually pretty relaxed right now. Isn't it just a matter of perspective?"

Reiji slumped his shoulders, Suimei leaned his head over the back of a chair with a hand over his eyes, and Elliot cackled. Meanwhile, the girls were taking a break in the dining room as if nothing had happened. Felmenia and Hatsumi were spreading all the sweets they'd gotten back in modern Japan on top of the table.

"Ah! Chocolate! It's chocolate!"

Mizuki was smiling ear to ear. She was especially excited by this, having been deprived of such sweets for so long. Her hands fidgeted about nonstop, eager to dig in.

"It certainly smells sweet, but is it really something to get that worked up over?" Titania asked.

"It is!" Mizuki exclaimed. "Tia, Graziella-san, come on, eat up!"

"Then don't mind if I do..."

"Hmm. Let's try some."

And just like that, the three girls who'd been left behind in this world let out

sighs of admiration as they had one piece of chocolate after the other.

"We brought back some rice, miso, and dashi too," Suimei told Mizuki. "You can have a proper Japanese meal."

"Suimei-kun! Good job!"

"Will you forgive me now?"

"Obviously not. I'll hold this grudge for eternity."

Mizuki grinned and giggled, whereas Suimei furrowed his brow. He was sure she was going to continue making demands of him. He turned to Reiji for help, but his friend shut his eyes as if to tell him that here, he reaped what he sowed. It seemed Suimei had no allies on this front.

"By the way, where's Mary-chan?" Hatsumi asked.

"Hydemary is... taking a break," Liliana answered.

"She got sleepy after the bath," Suimei added. "That girl tends to nap a lot."

Just as they said, Hydemary had entered rest mode pretty much the moment she'd gotten out of the bath. After drying her hair with magicka, she'd locked herself in her personal room—something she was capable of manifesting anywhere.

"Alright, everyone, now for the main event!" Felmenia shouted, bringing over a large plate. Sitting atop it was a cake she'd also brought over from modern Japan.

"Wow! Look! A cake! A whole cake!"

"Amazing. You even managed to bring those over...?"

Both Mizuki and Reiji looked pleased by this. Chocolate was nice, but cake was on a whole different level. Now lined with several whole cakes, the table looked even more splendid than before.

Felmenia then presented a separate cake to Titania. This one she'd bought with her personal allowance, and it was a little fancier than the others.

"Your Highness, this one is for you."

"Wow." Titania's eyes sparkled. But the shine quickly faded. "Is it really alright

to enjoy such luxuries with the capital in this state...?"

"What are you saying?" Felmenia told her. "Have you not been working harder than anyone else?"

"But..."

"Your Highness, restoring your spirits is a part of war. Consider this a battle and eat up."

"White Flame... I'm in your debt," Titania muttered, voice choked with emotion.

She'd taken the field in battle, managed the distribution of provisions, and essentially helped out all over the place. Indulging in such a minor luxury wouldn't bring divine punishment down on her head. Titania took a bite of cake and broke into a huge smile, which made Felmenia smile too.

"I would expect nothing less of you, White Flame," Titania said. "I'm so proud to see you show such modest consideration."

"No, I still have a long way to go."

"That isn't true. It seems that conversation was a misunderstanding."

"A misunderstanding?"

"Yes." Titania paused, then turned a harsh gaze toward Suimei. "Suimei, I'm told you once described the White Flame as a klutz. Is that correct?"

"Hm? Yeah, I sure did," he acknowledged honestly.

"You sure did...? I'm surprised you can admit to it so shamelessly..."

Titania's mood was even worse now. She then started listing all of Felmenia's good points.

"She's a good-natured woman."

"Yup."

"And very tactful, just as you saw."

"Sure is."

"She is also very modest at her job while accomplishing her duty."

"Mm-hmm. No mistaking that."

Suimei agreed on every point. Felmenia paid attention to all the small details and flawlessly handled chores that Suimei was bad at. However, precisely because he was in agreement, Titania's expression darkened even more.

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"So how is she a klutz?!"
"I mean, you know..."
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"I know what?!"

"Tia, you don't get it?" Suimei said with a bold smile full of unsaid meaning. "Talent and klutziness are two sides of the same coin."

"Suimei..."

"S-Suimei-dono! That's so mean!" Felmenia protested.

"Huh? Aah, um, well..."

Coming back to his senses, Suimei searched the room for help. But Lefille, Liliana, and Hatsumi all plainly averted their eyes. Reiji noticed, giving them all a curious look.

"What's wrong, everyone?" he asked.

"Huh? Mm, I do believe Felmenia-san is talented, but..."

"Yes. I believe Lady Felmenia is very handy too."

"Felmenia... is amazing, you know?"

"Why are you all praising me instead of denying it?!" Felmenia screamed.

Everyone who spoke refused to look Felmenia in the eye, none of them refuting Suimei's claim that she was a klutz. They even provided their own reasons for why they thought so.

"I mean, despite being quite athletic, you trip on nothing all the time."

"When you get engrossed in something, you lose sight of everything else."

"You once... searched for Suimei... with tears and snot pouring down your face."

Reiji's group was speechless upon hearing of this unexpected side of

Felmenia. Meanwhile, Felmenia realized she had no allies here and became despondent. She turned a pleading look toward Suimei.

"S-Suimei-dono..."

"W-Well, you know," he muttered. "Everyone has a weakness or two. I also mess up every now and then too."

"R-Right?! It's okay then, right?!" Felmenia said, spluttering.

"Wh-White Flame!" Titania cut in, clearing her throat. "I believe you!"

"Y-Your Highness! Thank you!"

It seemed Titania still refused to accept that Felmenia was a klutz. She stubbornly mumbled "It's a misunderstanding" and "It must be some kind of mistake" as she continued eating her cake.

The group resumed eating their snacks, chatting cheerfully all the while. But soon enough, the sound of running footsteps from outside gradually drowned out their chatter. Someone was clearly panicking. Naturally, everyone inside the room had an inkling of what was going on.

"I would've liked to snack a little more," Reiji grumbled.

"Battle won't wait," Elliot said. "Christa, hold out a bit longer."

"Y-Yesh! Understood!" the priestess responded in a fluster, surprised at being suddenly addressed when her cheeks were stuffed with cake.

Meanwhile, the others were filled with anger.

"Demons really... can't be forgiven," Liliana muttered. "We can't even... sue them for it."

"To think I won't have the time to slowly savor the cake the White Flame bought for me..." Titania said.

And just as expected, the door opened shortly after.

"I bring news!" the newcomer announced.

"The demons have moved, yes?" Titania guessed.

"Huh? Yes! Exactly! What's more, they're inside the capital..."

"Inside?! We defeated all of them earlier!" Graziella shouted.

Everyone turned to Suimei for confirmation.

"That was definitely all of them," he said. "I searched every nook and cranny after that. None were left."

"Meaning more infiltrated afterward," Lefille concluded.

"Yes," the castle official responded in agreement. "In all likelihood, they infiltrated in a small group of select elite members. The one who called herself a demon general at the onset of the battle is among them!"

"What?" Titania muttered.

"Seriously? The supreme commander herself has taken the field?" Suimei said incredulously. "Are they messing with us?"

"What about the demon army?" Lefille asked.

"They've shown no signs of movement," the castle official answered.

"I see. Then we must keep them in mind too."

But that still meant the large demon army had yet to advance on the capital. This kind of infiltration strategy usually involved an all-out assault, so what were they thinking?

"His Majesty is already headed for the operation room," the castle official said.

Titania shook her head. "No, we'll head out immediately. The demons inside the capital need to be dealt with as soon as possible. How is the battle going?"

"Fighting has broken out in four locations," he answered. "The central street, the northern gate, and the northeast and western outskirts. The northeast houses the armory, and the west is near the food stores..."

"The food stores will need immediate help," Titania commented. "So? Where is the demon general?"

"She is on the central street and hasn't moved at all."

"Hmm, so she's waiting," Elliot said. "For me and Reiji, that is."

The heroes were the demons' sworn enemies. It only made sense for the demon general to await their arrival. If she'd come herself, it meant she intended to settle things one way or another.

Reiji, who'd kept quiet this entire time, suddenly spoke up.

"I want you to leave that demon general to me."

"Do you have a grudge or something?" Elliot asked.

"Not really. I was the first to cross blades with her. I was just thinking I should be the one to do it."

"Hmm... Well, not that I mind."

"Okay, guess I'll tag along for that too," Suimei said, but Reiji shook his head.

"No. Suimei, you take care of the other spots."

"Oh come on. She's a pretty powerful enemy, yeah? Won't it be better to have me around?"

"I'll be fine. I can fight a lot better than before. This time, I'll defeat her."

"But still..."

"I've gotten stronger too," Reiji insisted.

"So you say, but will you really be okay?" Suimei said. "You're pretty exhausted from today's fighting, yeah?"

"I've rested and recovered a fair bit. I'm in perfect condition."

Reiji obstinately refused to budge on this matter. He spoke with confidence, his complexion hearty and body practically overflowing with power.

"Suimei, how 'bout leaving it to Shana-san?"

"Hatsumi?"

"I understand wanting to be independent," she said. "It sucks to rely on someone else for everything, right?"

In the end, everyone had their pride, and it could be detrimental to fight while expecting someone else to come to the rescue.

"Got it," Suimei conceded with a sigh. "I'll take care of the other spots. Oh

yeah. Mary! Wake up! It's time for work!"

Using communication magicka, he urged Hydemary to put an end to her nap. After that, everyone split into groups and left the castle.

I have to be the one to settle things with the demon general.

Heading toward the central street, Reiji was spurred on by his sense of responsibility. He'd encountered Moolah twice now. The first time, she'd trifled with him before leaving. The second time, she hadn't even fought him before turning her back. He never thought he'd suffer such a disgrace not just once but two times.

She didn't even consider Reiji worthy of attention, seeing him as nothing more than a pebble on the roadside. If she didn't, she wouldn't be out there waiting for the "heroes" to show up. She could simply launch an all-out offensive whenever she wanted. The fact that she didn't see her enemies as a real threat meant that she didn't see Reiji for who he was, but simply as a hero.

He'd gotten stronger. Over the battles he'd experienced to date, he was supposed to have obtained more power. And yet, still, he wasn't even worth noticing? He wasn't considered a threat? And it wasn't just Moolah either. The others were worried about him too.

But the same doesn't go for him.

Everyone relies on him.

Why can't others look at me like they do at him?

I've been trying hard too. I've been fighting. So why won't they believe in me?

"...sama."

Why?

"Reiji-sama!"

"Huh? Ah... Tia, did something happen?" Reiji responded somewhat belatedly to Titania's call.

"No, nothing has happened yet," she said, turning an anxious look his way. "Is

something the matter? I called your name several times, but you didn't answer."

Reiji shook his head lightly. "It's nothing. Just thinking."

He'd been more absorbed in himself than he'd thought. This was happening a lot more lately, more than ever before. Was the Sacrament's influence simply that strong?

"If you pay too much heed to it, it'll corrupt you."

He suddenly recalled what Suimei had told him in the bath. Was he corrupted already? No, that couldn't be. Reiji was Reiji. He was maintaining his sense of self just fine. If not, he wouldn't even be thinking such things. He wouldn't be able to reflect on his behavior at all.

Reiji continued to convince himself with such thoughts as he and the others hurried toward the demon general. After passing through the second walls of the city and proceeding down the central street, they immediately found a group of demons.

The demons were set up in the middle of the road and weren't making the slightest move. It was as if this spot in the middle of their enemy's capital were their own stronghold. Reiji had the soldiers who'd been staring them down fall back, then weaponized the Ishar Cluster.

"Moolah!" he yelled. "You're there, aren't you?! Come out!"

However, his call received no answer. Was she refusing to show herself to the end? Reiji launched a crystal attack on the demons while preoccupied by his thoughts.

"She's not here ...?"

The barrage of crystals didn't unveil the demon general. According to the reports, she'd been standing here waiting for someone. And yet, she wasn't here. What was going on?

"Again, I'm being..."

She was ignoring him. Reiji clenched his sword in anger, the hilt creaking under his grip. And just as he considered turning his wrath upon the other

demons, the ground trembled. As if summoned by this, Reiji sensed a nauseating presence charging in behind him.

While Reiji's group was headed to the central street, Hatsumi and Hydemary quickly made their way to the north gate; Elliot, Christa, and Liliana rushed toward the armory to the northeast; and upon leaving the castle, Suimei hurried over to the storehouse to the west with Felmenia and Lefille.

Suimei's group was currently moving along the rooftops under the cover of night. He and Felmenia were using magicka to fly, while Lefille used the Red Gale to make great leaps and bounds. This was Suimei's first evening flight in a long time. He searched the area, and that was when he noticed the presence of the Evil God's power on the move.

"Suimei-kun, how is it?" Lefille asked.

"I've got a guess. What about you, Lefi?"

"I can sense an unpleasant presence ahead."

"I noticed it too," Felmenia added. "The aura of power there is very dense."

Everyone was in agreement. In all probability, their objective was ahead of them.

"The back of my neck is prickling like crazy," Suimei muttered as a terrible premonition struck him.

The three of them slid down an angular roof and landed on the ground. Lefille peeled away the demons' cover like a curtain. They seemed to have shaken off Astel's soldiers while on the move, and overall, they didn't look particularly exhausted.

As a smaller group, the majority of them had wings. They didn't seem like a gathering of elite troops, but among them was a grotesque figure that possessed far greater power than all the others. Suimei had seen this figure before through the crows' eyes. This was the grotesque demon Reiji had spoken of. However, the one here had a thoroughly intimidating air about it that couldn't be compared to the one Elliot's group had encountered.

"I see," Lefille muttered grimly, coming to the same conclusion. "So the one we fought earlier today was definitely weakened."

"How dreadful," Felmenia said. "If not for my mental defense magicka, my concentration would be a wreck."

"Haaah... That asshole really went out and made a huge nuisance."

Suimei cursed at the man responsible for creating this being. It was in such horrible taste to make something that spurred all who witnessed it. But this wasn't the reason for Suimei's bad premonition.

As his group stared at the grotesque demon, another demon stepped forth. It was a woman with horns and dark skin dressed like a knight. She was clearly different from all the other demons, and she matched the description of the general in charge of this attack.

"Like I thought," she said, deliberately and quietly. "If I made it seem like I was over there, the hero would head that way. If I made it seem like I was attacking the food stores, the strongest force would be sent over."

It was as if everything had gone exactly to plan. In other words...

"By the sound of it, you're intentionally avoiding a fight with the hero?" Suimei asked.

"Exactly, man in black," she answered.

"Hah?"

"I heard about you from Lishbaum," Moolah explained. She was referring to Kudrack.

"Hmm. I've got no idea what that asshole told you," Suimei said. "Anyway, that means you're after little ol' me? Why bother with someone who's not even a hero?"

"Because he seems awfully wary of you."

"Oh really? That why you came to get a look at my face?"

"Not at all. If I defeat you, I figure I'll get to see less of that disgusting face of his."

"I agree. His face is disgusting. If anything, I'd love to see him pushed to the end of his rope too."

Despite saying that, Suimei had no intention of cooperating.

"You demons consider the Evil God's will your number one priority, yeah?" he said, setting the matter of Kudrack aside. "You sure got a lotta spare time to be going after me instead."

"Of course. Our God's will is absolute. This is just a bonus."

"A bonus, huh...? Kinda hurts to be considered that easy a mark."

Suimei kept his responses frivolous while internally musing over the fact that this demon general had really human ideas. Her composure was eerie, though. Of the generals he'd fought before, Vuishta and Strega had been far cockier. She also didn't have the same overwhelming pressure that Rajas had. However, something about her was undeniably eerie. Suimei had gone along with her conversation, but he knew she wasn't someone he could be careless around.

"Well, that's the gist of it," he said. "I've been personally named for this one. Menia, Lefi, you two take care of that thing."

"Leave it to us!"

"Yes. I'll show I can kill this one too."

Suimei entrusted the grotesque demon to his companions, who looked highly motivated to do their part. Felmenia immediately put her hand to her solar plexus and twisted it slightly. It was as if she were rotating a safe's dial or turning an ignition key. She then spoke the keywords.

"Mana Furnace Core. White Fire. Immediate Critical Load!"

Mana overflowed from her body, the result of activating her mana furnace and of stimulating the power within her. Before long, her furnace reached critical state and the world trembled from a manafield vibration.

Felmenia exhaled vapor made of pure mana, the white haze sparkling as if studded with stars, and in that moment, the violent storm around her stabilized and she now had a colossal amount of mana at her disposal.

"My power is Ishaktney's Red Gale..."

And as Felmenia finished her preparations for battle, Lefille unleashed the power of the spirits, a red wind howling around her. The power she manifested was magnitudes greater than the bit she'd summoned to leap over the rooftops. A thunderous storm immediately coiled around her.

Their combined tremendous aura froze the demons. The only ones maintaining their composure in this vortex were the demon general Moolah and the grotesque demon Lishbaum had created.

"Rainblaze Clouds."

Felmenia chanted and spoke another keyword. Shortly after, white flames rained from above. This was her magicka. Flames blanketed the area as if to set fire to every blade of grass. The winged demons were immediately set alight, the fire jumping to those in their vicinity too. It was as impossible to dodge this attack as it was to weave through heavy rainfall. Naturally, the grotesque demon was also set on fire, but due to its resistance, it didn't seem affected by it.

Lefille leaped toward the sturdy foe, driving her greatsword down upon it. The grotesque demon just barely dodged the blow, and Lefille's strike shattered the earth instead. The ground caved in with a thunderous roar and cracks ran in all directions. As if to return the favor, the grotesque demon swung its massive arm. There was no technique to it, but it was fast. Lefille knew she wouldn't be able to evade the blow and raised her greatsword as a shield instead.

"Ugh!"

Feeling an intense impact against her blade, Lefille was sent flying backward. Still, she didn't slam into the ground or any of the surrounding structures, managing to safely land on her feet.

"Lefille!" Felmenia shouted.

"I'm fine. Keep up the support! Don't take your eyes off it!"

"Understood!"

Felmenia and Lefille linked up in front of the grotesque demon. Lefille couldn't use the technique she'd employed in the afternoon due to the amount of time it required. But it wasn't as if they had a huge arsenal of blows

guaranteed to damage this demon. It would be difficult to deal any damage without something on the level of Gala Valner or Lebeh Luvuast. Therefore, it was no exaggeration to say that everything depended on Felmenia's support.

Meanwhile, Suimei faced off against Moolah. Without any starting signal, they burst into action. Moolah moved like a master of the blade. Suimei ran, making sure not to stay in one place for too long. He pulled a vial from his pocket and transformed the mercury within into a katana.

"Permutato, coagulato, vis existito."

[Transform, coagulate, become power.]

Suimei didn't stop to take a stance, slashing at Moolah immediately. What unfolded was a genuine sword fight. Moolah seemed to rely on technique. There was strength behind her strikes, but the transition from one move to the next was entirely seamless, hinting at her tremendous skills. The sound of blades clashing resounded around them as they locked swords for a brief moment.

"Hmm? It seems you wield a blade better than that hero," Moolah commented.

"I have more experience than him with swords," Suimei told her.

"But you still have a long way to go."

"I've left that forte to my companions. But don't think you'll take me down that easily."

Suimei intentionally loosened his grip on his mercury katana, inviting Moolah to attack him. Just as her sword plunged for his face, he turned into smoke to evade it. The smoke was dispersed in two by her vertical strike, then gathered behind her where Suimei appeared once more. He slashed horizontally at her defenseless back, but without even looking, Moolah swung her sword behind her and stopped his blade.

"Tch! Not a bad trick!" Suimei complained.

"I can say the same to you!"

Moolah slashed at Suimei as she turned around. He blocked the blow, and for

a moment it seemed they were going to lock swords once more. But just then the demons' source of power ran through her blade. Faced with Moolah's daring smile, Suimei immediately tried to back away from the miasma. However, Moolah obstinately hounded him, refusing to allow him out of range.

She seemed capable of wielding significant power, evident in how the miasma encroaching upon Suimei was significantly more potent than usual. Because of that, he didn't want to defend against it. A poor block would have her sword going right through his defenses, and that miasma would assault his body directly. Unlike other demons, her miasma coiled around her like worms. It was repulsive.

"Tch! Being so persistent with a man will make people hate you!" Suimei shouted.

"Is that so? You want to get away from me that badly? Then feel free."

"Wha- Guh?!"

Suimei felt a tremendous impact against his mercury katana and was sent hurtling back like a cannonball, flying through the air for only a moment until colliding with the wall of the house behind him. He used magicka to soften the blow and remained unharmed. The house wasn't so lucky and collapsed entirely, causing rubble to tumble down on top of his head. Suimei defended against this too and sank into thought. What was his opponent's next move? Would she send miasma flying at him? Or was she going to lunge right at him?

He could see a swaying shadow through the cloud of rising dust. It had to be the latter.

"O flammae, legito. Pro venefici doloris clamoris. Parito colluctatione et aestuato. Deferto impedimentum fatum atrox."

[Oh flames, assemble. Like the resentful cry of the magician. Give form to death's agony and burst into flames. Bestow the one who obstructs me with a dreadful destiny.]

He chanted the spell to unleash Ashurbanipal's flames. Magic circles took shape around him and a gem manifested in his right hand. The gradient glow of the gem from red to orange was like a miniature sun forming. Time slowed as

the shadow gradually grew in size through the cloud of dust. Suimei patiently waited for it, and once it was in range, the shadow suddenly flew at him. With the gem clasped in his hand, he countered with a punch.

"Itaque conluceto. O Ashurbanipalis fulgidus lapillus."

[So shine. Oh Ashurbanipal's dazzling gem.]

He planted his fist into her chest and crushed the gem at the same time. Immediately following that, flames screamed and rushed toward the demon general. However...

Its power really is lacking...

It was drastically weaker than what he'd used in the modern world the other day. Precisely because he couldn't manifest its original power, he'd omitted the contagion curse during the construction phase. Normally, that would make this spell capable of neutralizing his opponent, but now he couldn't use that part of it at all.

The shadow moved within the flames. Had Moolah cut apart the fire with her sword? Or had she defended with miasma? The magician's flames were quickly blown away. Either way, the magicka he'd used to test the waters and keep her at bay hadn't left a single wound.

"You're a fool if you think you can beat me with such lowly magic," Moolah said.

"So you say, but you couldn't even dodge it," Suimei retorted.

"I simply had no need to."

"Acting tough now?"

It seemed Suimei's provocation had struck a nerve. A faint crack ran across Moolah's composed expression. She immediately unleashed the Evil God's power. It was several times stronger than what she'd been using through her sword.

She's pretty out-there...

Despite her drawing out miasma so crudely, her power seemed fathomless. It appeared she possessed more strength than Suimei had anticipated. Watching

her fight was like watching a battery hold out for far longer than it was supposed to. With slight misgivings about that inconsistency in mind, Suimei desperately wove his magicka. He couldn't let her get close. He would lose in close quarters, so his only choice was to overwhelm her with magicka from afar.

"Light gathers at my fingertips. This murderous flash penetrates all. It is neither blade nor bullet. It is impossible to repel. Fly, pierce, destroy. Shoot down all who obstruct my path—Precision Beamlight."

Suimei held out his right hand like a blade as light gathered at his fingertips. He immediately fired it like a laser at Moolah.

"Dissenters, hear me. You'll do well to join hands and work together. A storm crashes to the earth, creating a wave of surging soil. Watch your footholds. Stare upon the heavens. Such is the delusion of the fools who defy God—Grantornado."

The ground swelled up into a tornado of soil—a storm of genuine mass. It enveloped Moolah and blew up toward the heavens. Suimei then finished his sequence of attacks with a high-power explosive.

"Chain Explosion!"

Small magic circles formed a line and chased Moolah as she tried to escape the earth tornado. Immediately following that, they started exploding one after the other in a chain, each circle guiding the explosions toward their target. Continuous blasts resounded all over, and the last detonation enveloped Moolah entirely, sending her flying.

"Did that do it?!"

Had he gotten through? Or was she unharmed? Moolah fell to the ground. Miasma suddenly coiled around her, and she slowly swayed to her feet. Her expression was that of unfathomable rage.

"How dare you..."

The chain of attacks seemed to have struck a nerve. Moolah groaned in anger, then roared. Her power swelled exponentially. The earth shook with an explosive boom, and immediately following that, miasma radiated from Moolah like an expanding dome. Everything it touched was contaminated and rendered

the same color as the miasma. Suimei was assaulted by nausea, which quickly turned to dread. But there was one apprehension that was far more important to him.

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"Tch! Seriously?!"

"Suimei-kun! Be careful!"

"Suimei-dono!"
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He deployed his mana to protect his surroundings, but he couldn't stop the expanding miasma. It was spreading nonstop, as if the floodgates of an enormous dam had been thrown open. He couldn't hold it back, but he also couldn't build a barrier fast enough to defend against it.

"Oh come on! What's going on?!" Suimei screamed in confusion. "Where the hell is this power coming from?!"

"You want to know?! My power here and now is inexhaustible!" Moolah shouted back at him. "Wretched humans! Know how weak you truly are!"

She manifested even more power. Suimei had no idea what was going on. She really did seem to have an infinite source of power. She had to be manifesting more of it than her vessel could hold, either through an influx of power straight from the Evil God or by directly supplementing mana from the ley lines. There were several other ways too, but she wasn't doing any of them. It didn't make sense to be able to do this without any preparations to begin with.

However, Suimei had no time to be worrying about any of that. The spreading miasma was like a tsunami.

"Lefi! Menia! Get away! Tch!"

Suimei forcefully pushed them out of range. But he wasn't able to save himself. Why was she capable of manifesting such power? Why was it limitless? Even as the miasma engulfed Suimei's head, those questions kept repeating in his mind.

Before long, Moolah's miasma covered the entire area. Everything around her had been blown away by the pressure. All that was left was a vacant plot of land and a black miasma creeping across the soil. There was nothing there at all.

There was nobody there at all.

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"S-Suimei-dono...?"
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"Suimei-kun!"

Felmenia and Lefille looked around desperately, but couldn't spot Suimei anywhere. They extended their search range to account for him being blown away, but they couldn't sense his presence, nor were there any traces that he'd gotten away.

Yakagi Suimei had been completely obliterated by the attack.

Epilogue: The Man Who Laughs at Dreams

Around the time Suimei's group found themselves in great danger, Reiji was pressed into an unexpectedly difficult battle.

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"Why...?"
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After Reiji found out Moolah wasn't where he expected her to be, a tremendous power had suddenly appeared behind the group. He'd found himself in battle against a grotesque demon once again. This wasn't Reiji's first fight against this kind of demon, but he was having more trouble fighting it now than he ever had before.

Graziella and Titania had plenty of combat experience to rely on. Mizuki was focusing on hiding herself while providing support, so she could manage one way or another. Naturally, Reiji had succeeded in drawing power from the Sacrament and had a significant advantage. Even if it depleted his stamina rapidly, it was entirely possible for him to overwhelm his opponent in a short fight.

Well, that was *supposed* to be the case.

"Reiji-kun!"

Reiji could hear Mizuki's panicked voice. Was this because she had apprehensions regarding his incompetence in battle? Or was she genuinely shouting a warning at him?

This time, I thought I'd be able to maintain the upper hand.

This time, I was sure I could beat this grotesque demon.

And yet, now that he was in battle, he found himself at a disadvantage.

"Why...?"

He kept repeating that question. Why? How? What was going on? Why couldn't he manage?

"Reiji, what's wrong?!"

"Reiji-sama!"

He kept hearing apprehensive... or perhaps worried voices. However, they were going in one ear and out the other. He swung the Ishar Cluster. His strike shattered the earth, shaking his eardrums with a thunderous roar.

But this outcome defied his expectations. He destroyed something he had no intention of destroying. His attack affected something he didn't mean to affect. It was as if he had suddenly lost all control over his strength and had no idea how to recover it.

"Did I draw out too much power from the Sacrament...? No, that can't be."

Reiji muttered in confusion. When he took a step forward, the ground broke beneath him. When he dashed, he went too far and passed his intended target. He had *too* much strength now, and he couldn't fight the way he wanted. It was distracting him so greatly that he could no longer fight.

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"Why ...? Why ...?"
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Even as he tried to bring it under control, he couldn't. It was as if he were trying to move his body with a broken controller. What was going on? This question dominated his mind.

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"No, this is no good...!"
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Unable to properly control his strength, he overshot his target, leaving himself open for a hit he couldn't deflect or avoid.

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What am I even doing...?
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His mind was filled with misgivings and self-recriminations. Reiji charged toward the grotesque demon as if calling for a do-over. However, just as expected, he was too fast and overshot his target. Despite hitting the brakes immediately, he couldn't even turn around due to putting too much strength into stopping. This created an even bigger opening. Right as he finally managed to turn, Reiji saw the demon's massive foot in front of his eyes.

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"Reiji!"
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"Reiji-kun!"

By the time he noticed, he had already been fully kicked in the face and was

flying back from the force of the blow.

"Gah!"

However, he suffered less damage than expected. This attack would've killed him instantly before, but now it only hurt enough for him to complain about the pain. He hadn't even suffered any internal injuries.

"Reiji-sama!"

Titania and Graziella rushed over to support him, but Reiji screamed to stop them.

"Don't come near me! Everyone, get away!"

"But...!" Titania protested.

"Just do it! Don't worry about me!"

As he shouted, Reiji saw the dark glimmer of miasma in the corner of his eye. The grotesque demon's mouth was wide open and unleashing the Evil God's power from within. Reiji immediately stepped forth to use the Ishar Cluster, deploying crystal pillars all around him as a multilayered shield. The pillars were positioned exactly how he imagined them.

"Everything else isn't working, but this is...?"

Immediately following Reiji's confusion, a beam of the Evil God's power burst from the grotesque demon's mouth. It mowed everything down in its path, but Reiji managed to defend against it just as he'd planned. The beam was diffused by the pillars, splitting it into weaker shafts. Despite avoiding direct hits, everything touched by these weaker beams was still torn apart, blown away, and flattened. Its destructive force far surpassed what anyone could imagine.

"What power..."

"A direct hit would be fatal..."

Titania and Graziella gulped at the disastrous scene, and perhaps reacting to their voices, the grotesque demon turned toward them and gracelessly swung its arm. They were too far away for even its claws to reach, but the gale generated by the gesture was more than enough to threaten the girls.

A random assortment of shattered earth and stones flew toward them. Titania narrowly managed to dodge, but Graziella didn't.

"Gah...!"

The flying debris assaulted her like buckshot and threw her to the ground.

"Graziella-san!"

"Princess Graziella!"

Mizuki and Titania ran over to her, as did the grotesque demon, charging directly at them like a truck. The only thing Reiji could manage against it was a reckless shoulder tackle.

"STOOOOOOOOOOOP!"

Using his uncontrollable strength, Reiji slammed into the grotesque demon, sending them both tumbling across the ground. Shortly after, Reiji stood up and took a look around him. Graziella was wounded from the demon's attack, with Titania focused on casting healing magic. Despite having far more strength than before, Mizuki wasn't at a level to be able to fight the grotesque demon.

Reiji had messed up. Their forces weren't enough to fight against this enemy, and worst of all, Reiji was absolutely worthless. Should Suimei have joined them after all? Reiji was racked by regret, but if he continued with this mindset, he really would be forever useless.

No, that's wrong. That's not true...

Something began encroaching on Reiji's mind—his pride. His pride was slipping between his thoughts and interfering with his concentration.

What do I do? What should I do? What should I have done? What can I do to get everyone to acknowledge me?

Reiji could no longer make calm decisions.

And while he remained immersed in his thoughts, the grotesque demon opened its mouth again. A dark glow spilled out of it, manifesting intense power. It looked up, as if roaring at the heavens, then unleashed the beam straight at Reiji.

"Cra—"

He couldn't repeat the same defensive feat as before in so short a time. All he could do was shut his eyes.

However, the impact Reiji was expecting never came.

He opened his eyes once more and saw a shadow descend before him like a savior from the heavens. Had his best friend come for him?

No. He couldn't have been more wrong.

"Something smells awfully nice. It just reeks of my favorite scents—resistance and despair."

The person who had arrived was a man with dull blond hair and mainly white clothes. What immediately caught the eye was the enormous blindfold he wore, one of intertwined black leather belts as if trying to seal his sight forever. However, what made Reiji particularly uneasy was that these clothes and the leather belts had come from his world.

The blindfolded man held a wine glass in one hand, dangling it upside down as he turned to Reiji.



"Wh-Who are you?" Reiji asked, bewilderment clear in his voice.

"Hm? Me? A magician. I suppose that's the best way to answer? Well, that works. Not much of a point to classifying things."

"A magician? Then you're the same as Suimei...?"

"Oh? What's this? Do you know Suimei-kun? I see. Is that so? That's great."

It seemed this strange man knew Suimei; upon hearing his name, he nodded with glee. So was this blindfolded man an acquaintance? More importantly, what was he doing in this world to begin with? At the very least, Suimei hadn't brought him here.

"Ummm, who exactly are you...?" Reiji asked.

"Me? I'm Suimei-kun's fan."

"H-His fan...?"

"Yup. His fan. I'm like a degenerate chasing his favorite idol. I took it a bit too far and ended up in this weird place. Oh man, Suimei-kun really is endlessly fun. I'll never get tired of what he does."

"Uhhh..."

A simple question had led to a flood of words. The man's cheer was entirely out of place on the battlefield. What was more, the blindfolded man was spinning around on the spot and dancing with bombastic gestures. That only made things more confusing, but now wasn't the time to be thinking about that.

"U-Um, more importantly—" Reiji started, trying to cautiously urge the man to get to the point.

"Hm? More importantly? What's more important than this?" the man said, cutting him off. "Is there anything in the world worth interrupting me for?"

"Guh?!"

The blindfolded man's face was suddenly right in front of Reiji's eyes, blocking his entire field of vision as if to say Reiji only had to look at him. A terrifying pressure bound Reiji's limbs from moving, as if a titan were pinning him down

with its stare alone.

What's going on? What the heck is going on? The question repeated in Reiji's head, when suddenly, he saw the grotesque demon standing up behind the blindfolded man.

"Oh, it's already moving?"

The blindfolded man turned toward it. Reiji was released from the pressure binding his body, his heart hammering in his chest. He gasped for breath as the grotesque demon charged and swung its arm. There was no time to run away.

And just as Reiji expected to be bulldozed right alongside the blindfolded man, the man used one hand to stop the demon.

Yes. He simply held out his hand.

"Wha-?!"

The grotesque demon possessed terrifying physical strength. Reiji knew this intimately. But the blindfolded man stopped the demon with the ease of catching a feather. No shock wave spread to the surroundings. Not even the faintest tremor ran through the ground.

Still holding the demon at bay, the blindfolded man turned his neck with an eerie twist to look back at Reiji.

"Why so surprised?" he said. "This is simple with enough power. Need body weight? Height? Strength? Those are trivial matters to us magicians. Mana makes up for everything. Just like this!"

Unable to escape the blindfolded man's grip, the grotesque demon was blown away. It tumbled across the ground, carving a ditch as it went. It couldn't even put up a fight.

"Why are you helping us...?" Reiji asked.

"You need to ask? Do people need a reason to help others?"

"Huh?"

"Just kidding! I'm sure he'd say something like that, but I'm different. I just felt like it. I had a feeling that if I saved you guys, things would be more fun."

"More fun...?"

The blindfolded man stared long and hard at Reiji's bewildered face. What did he see? And just as Reiji pondered that thought, the man stopped and gave a creepy smile.

"I like you," he said. "You have a dream. You're trying desperately to achieve it, aren't you? You aren't satisfied with being useless. You're trying to surmount all the enormous walls around you. Good. Very good. No matter how disgraceful it is to struggle, it's so boring to stop. It's no fun to watch someone give up."

"Wha?!"

"No need to be so shocked. I can see that much with ease. You're gonna have to grow up to trick me. You'll manage a bit better that way. Well, both you and Suimei-kun seem like the type to die before growing old, though."

Reiji heard a wet crunch. The entire area around the grotesque demon had caved in, as if crushed by something heavy. Was this also the blindfolded man's power? Reiji had a feeling it was.

"How hideous," the man said, glancing at the demon. "That kind of being doesn't match my tastes at all. Having to look at it for even a second will ruin my wine and blood. So..."

With that preface, he began what sounded like a chant.

"Tell the living. About a purgatory of blood. About a festival of blood. About a requiem for the dead. Bring joy to the deceased. Scream, shriek, dye the world in red. It tastes of iron. It smells of iron. This cup is always filled with blood."

The blindfolded man walked forward. He did so casually and defenselessly, still holding a wine glass in one hand. A chair took shape in front of him, a hideous piece of furniture made of meat, bones, and entrails. He sat down in it calmly, crossed his legs, and held up his wine glass.

The grotesque demon closed in on him. There was no way he could do anything in time now. Despair bubbled in Reiji's mind, then popped as the blindfolded man uttered a short phrase.

"To your unhealth."

He lightly tapped his wine glass against the grotesque demon. It really was the lightest of taps, as if clinking it in a toast.

"Bloody Crisis."

The moment he spoke that keyword, a red magic circle took shape around his chair. It gave off a crimson light as what looked like a flood of blood surged out toward the grotesque demon. It coiled around the demon as if to bind it before invading its body.

The demon's skin bubbled like it was boiling from the inside. Its joints started bending in random directions like a marionette being jostled around. After letting out a jarring scream of agony, the grotesque demon collapsed on the spot as pitch-black blood burst from its every orifice. The black blood hardened on the ground like the blood extracted from a poisoned snakebite. The blindfolded man burst into laughter at the sight.

"Hahahahaha! Oh man! What a riot! Such a hideous scream. Nothing really beats a human's scream, after all. Don't you think so too?"

"I don't-"

"You don't think so? You really don't? Hahaha! I guess not! I get it! I get it! I figured you were that kind of person too!"

"O-Of course I am!"

Despite his bewilderment, Reiji glared at the man, whose expression turned to one of pure joy.

"So you are. That's the spirit. Such are the sensibilities of an upstanding person. You must stay that way if you wish to remain human. Don't get drunk on screams of agony. Don't feel ecstatic at the sight of conflict. If you do, you'll become a beast. Isn't that right?"

"...?!"

Reiji's breath caught in his throat. Why did those words resonate with his heart so strongly? It was as if a truth he didn't want to know had been gouged out of his mind and put straight into the mouth of this strange man.

As that went on, Titania started walking toward them.

"Allow me to offer my thanks for—"

Before she could finish, the blindfolded man twisted toward her.

"I'm speaking with him right now," he said, cutting her off. "Can you not get in the way?"

```
"Huh ... ? Ah ... "
```

Titania came to a sudden stop as if bound in place. She stiffened up and couldn't speak. She couldn't even lift a finger. At this, the blindfolded man smiled in delight once more.

"That's the spirit," he said. "It's a virtue, it is, to listen to your betters."

"What're you...? Wait, no, forget that. Tia!"

"Whoa there. You're talking to me, remember?" the man said to Reiji. "Isn't it rude to be so fickle? It's alright. I simply made it so that she can't move. There's absolutely nothing to worry about."

The blindfolded man had no intention of yielding this conversation to anyone. He maintained his grin as he lowered his gaze to the Ishar Cluster—which had returned to being an ornament.

"You've got something awfully interesting in your hand," he said.

```
"Huh? Oh-"
```

Reiji lowered his eyes too, then realized the Ishar Cluster he'd been grasping so firmly wasn't there anymore. He reflexively looked up. The blindfolded man was sticking out his tongue, waving the Ishar Cluster about in front of Reiji's eyes. When had he taken it?

```
"Wha?! H-How did you—?!"
```

"How? Do you even need to ask? This is a simple matter for a magician. It's our calling to steal from those who possess power, after all. Aah, don't worry. I'll give it back. Here."

```
"Huh? Ah..."
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The blindfolded man casually tossed the Ishar Cluster back to Reiji as if it were

a cheap trinket. This man just continued to toy with him, and Reiji couldn't hide his utter confusion.

An awful stench suddenly assaulted Reiji's nasal cavity, as if the stink of iron had been amplified several times over. It was the stench of blood. It was an unbearable mix of coagulated and rotten blood. Reiji resisted the urge to vomit, and seeing this, the blindfolded man gave him another eerie smile.

Compared to the man in front of him, the grotesque demon seemed like nothing more than a baby. This man was evil—the total embodiment of evil. While the grotesque demon had no will of its own, this man killed others purely by choice.

Reiji had heard of evil that could be so sick it was nauseating. And now, he had in front of him a prime example of such a thing.

"You're not really bothered if this gets stolen from you, right?" the man said. "If I'm going to steal anything, it's them."

"Wh-What-"

"You're not desperate enough, you see. 'Things will work out one way or another. Someone will do something about it.' You think you have to do something yourself, but somewhere in your heart that's what you really think. That's because you've never lost anything. Even now, you're being saved by 'someone' and 'something,' right? That's why you don't panic. That's why you're not scared. No matter how dangerous things get, you're never frightened."

"That's not..."

"Can you really say I'm lying? You can't. You just don't get it. People like you are dense when it comes to themselves. What's more, unless you correct this, all you do is misunderstand things. Even when overcome by emotions, you mistake them for your own. Isn't that right? Don't you think people who are more frank about everything are so much better?"

The blindfolded man paused there, then grinned as if he'd come up with a great idea.

"Very well. This is a present from me to you. Have a taste of real fear."





The moment Reiji started processing those ominous words, the blindfolded man's hand pierced through Titania's stomach.

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"Gah..."

"T-Tia...?"
```

Titania's eyes shot open. Was it from the inability to understand what was going on? Or was it from the shock of having her stomach pierced? Blood splattered through the air, then dripped to the floor in vast quantities. A red stain spread across Titania's clothes.

"This'll make you desperate. Isn't that right?" the blindfolded man asked. "The irreversible always twists one's heart with despair."

He yanked his hand out of Titania and threw her toward Reiji, who caught her in an embrace.

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"Reiji...sama..."
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Blood poured out of her mouth. Her body was rapidly losing its warmth. Her complexion was fading. That was when Reiji finally understood how dire the situation was.

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"A-Aaaah... AAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

"Tia!"

"Princess... Titania...!"
```

Mizuki's scream and Graziella's groan followed. Even as they all wailed, the blindfolded man continued his jarring laughter.

"Now! Show me how you struggle! Flounder! Curse! Curse! Curse! Curse your powerlessness! Humans can only get stronger by hating themselves!"

```
"Y-You bastaaaaard!" Reiji screamed.
```

"Whoa now. You don't have the time to be screaming at me, do you now? Isn't there something else you should be doing? If you don't, she's really gonna die."

```
"That's..."
```

Reiji lowered his eyes to Titania, but what could he do about this? Wasn't it already too late? As those thoughts crossed his mind, he caught a glimmer in the corner of his vision. It was the azure glow of the Lapis Judaix.

"That's right. Use it. Crave it. Lust for it. If you listen carefully, you should be able to hear it."

The blindfolded man was suddenly standing behind Reiji, whispering in his ear, like a devil tempting the virtuous. But that didn't change the fact that Reiji had something he absolutely had to do.

"Tch! Hand it over! Give it to me! Give me EVERYTHING!"

Reiji's scream resonated in the night sky. Shortly after, an azure glow enveloped him and Titania.

A moment after Reiji threw open the doors of his power, Titania's wounds were sealed. Her complexion was back to normal and she was no longer bleeding. She simply breathed quietly in her sleep. Reiji thrust a hand to the floor. There wasn't a drop of power left within him. He'd exhausted all of it.

"Haah... Haah..."

"Congratulations," the blindfolded man said. "You've learned of fear. You've learned of desperation. All you need now is to lose something dear to you."

"What... What are you...?" Reiji muttered, his vision growing hazy.

"But I can't help you with that," the man continued. "That kind of thing requires more drama. If you lose something from an act like this, you won't be able to carry your cross."

Reiji had no idea what he was talking about. He simply couldn't understand. All he felt was a tremendous fatigue seeping into his every extremity.

"Everyone has a cross to bear," the man said, explaining. "The same goes for Suimei-kun. Because he bears the cross called Kazamitsu, he's capable of chasing his dreams the way he does. So you should become the same one day. By doing so, you'll be able to run toward a never-ending dream too."

With that, the blindfolded man once more burst into laughter. It was like he ridiculed humanity's powerlessness—humanity's dreams.

He then turned to Reiji once more as if remembering one last thing.

"I don't think I know your name. What is it?"

"Shana... Reiji..."

"Reiji-kun, then. Best regards. You can call me... the man who laughs at dreams."

"The man... who laughs... at dreams..."

"Yup. That's right. In celebration of our new acquaintance, let us toast to blood and guts."

The blindfolded man's words blemished the night sky, and just like that, he vanished into the darkness.

After Moolah unleashed her miasma into her surroundings, after the violet-fringed blackness faded away, there was nothing left—nothing at all.

"Suimei...dono...?"

"No way..."

Felmenia and Lefille had barely escaped getting caught up in the wave of power thanks to Suimei. Their eyes were wide in shock. Suimei had definitely gotten caught in the blast. So, he had to be there. Yet they couldn't see him at all. Had he taken refuge somewhere at the last second? But if he had, he would've escaped with Felmenia and Lefille. In other words...

"Hmph... In the end, still just a human. To be wary of such a weakling... That man is also nothing special."

Listening to Moolah spit out those words, Felmenia spoke in a trembling voice.

"What are you saying...?"

"You need to ask? I'm speaking of the man in black, the one who protected you two from being annihilated."

"Suimei-kun couldn't have been annihilated!" Lefille protested.

"That's right! That's impossible!" Felmenia joined in. "Suimei-dono couldn't

have been defeated so easily..."

"Hmm? You dare to deny it?" Moolah said. "Can you say the same thing after looking at that?"

She pointed at something. It was a ruined fragment of black cloth. It was a scrap of Suimei's clothes.

```
"Wha...?!"
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"That can't be..."

The two girls raised their voices in bewilderment, then fell silent. But even as they searched the area, even as they denied Moolah's words, there was nothing to find.

As that went on, they suddenly heard the sound of running footsteps.

"Felmenia-san! Lefille-san!" a voice called out to them.

The two turned to see Hatsumi and Hydemary running toward them. Behind those two were Elliot, Christa, and Liliana.

"Hmm? Reinforcements?" Moolah said, taking a glance at them. "But you're just a little too late."

"What was that huge wave of power?" Hatsumi asked the two girls.

"I-It was the demon general's attack," Lefille answered.

"That's the demon general? She can wield that much power...?" Hatsumi trailed off, noticing there was something wrong with the two. "What's wrong?"

"Suimei-dono is," Felmenia muttered.

"What about Suimei? Oh yeah, where is he...?"

"There..." Felmenia pointed at the scrap of Suimei's suit.

Seeing it, Hatsumi figured it out.

"You're kidding..."

Shock was clear on her face. She'd never expected this. The same went for Liliana, whose single eye shot open.

```
"No... way..."
```

Hatsumi and Liliana were in denial, but even as they looked around, even as they called out to him, Suimei was nowhere to be found.

There was only one among them reacting differently. Hydemary looked around the area in silence.

"Mary-chan!" Hatsumi cried in hope.

But Hydemary didn't answer immediately. She remained in silent thought for a while longer before speaking.

"I also find it hard to believe... Even if he was hit by such a powerful attack, Suimei-kun isn't one to be defeated so easily."

"But it's the truth," Moolah said. "If he's alive, is there any reason to go as far as hiding his presence?"

"True. You have a point there," Hydemary conceded.

Suimei had no reason to hide. If anything, he could have rattled Moolah by coming out unscathed. It was just as Moolah said. Above all else, the tremendous mana Suimei kept within his body had been scattered over an immense area. As his disciple in magicka, Hydemary couldn't deny anything she said.

Suimei had been obliterated. That was the undeniable truth.

"The death of the living comes unexpectedly quickly," Moolah said. "None may choose how they go. Death comes equally to all."

"Yes, that's certainly true," Hydemary agreed.

"So you do understand," Moolah said. "In short, the same applied to that man."

"I see. You may believe that. However..."

Hydemary paused there and recalled a conversation from the past. Once, when he'd gone to face a certain battle, she'd asked, "What'll you do if you die?" He'd dodged the question at the time, but despite facing such a hopeless fight, Suimei had seemed strangely optimistic, like he wasn't afraid of death.

Could such a magician truly be defeated so easily? But even before any of

this, Suimei had come back from modern Japan with everything he'd wanted. There was no way his preparations had been lacking. Even if he'd only been ready for the bare minimum, he was supposed to possess more defensive power than a fortress. He had to have considered the worst-case scenario. Any magician had a plan for when they died.

"I don't think this is the end," Hydemary said.

"Is that so? Then cling to that delusion until the end of time," Moolah spat back. "Die with that despair in your heart."

Moolah was ready to make a move. She wasn't going to overlook the opening created by the shock everyone was experiencing, and she would defeat them all, right here and now. Despite recognizing this, Felmenia and the others were sluggish, failing to react. The loss of the one they believed in had a clear impact on them. Felmenia's eyes wandered all over. Lefille clenched her teeth and didn't move.

"Hmph. So that man was your pillar," Moolah said, lording over them.

"How dare you..."

Hatsumi trembled with rage, but her grief won out. She couldn't put any strength into her limbs. Liliana glared at Moolah, looking like she was about to burst into tears at any moment.

"What a state you're all in," Moolah said. "Cleanup will be a chore."

And just then, the situation took a drastic change.

"Aaaah. Aaah. Check. Check. This is a mic test. Not that this is a mic. It's a retro cassette recorder. Aaaah. Check. Check."

An idiotic voice came out of nowhere, and there was no mistaking it for anyone but Yakagi Suimei.

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"Huh?"
```

"Wuh?"

"Hah?"

Felmenia, Lefille, and Hatsumi all made weird noises. After all, this was

Suimei's voice. They obviously understood it was recorded, but they couldn't help but question the timing.

Why was his voice suddenly playing like this?

Where was it coming from?

They turned to the direction of the voice, then noticed a small cassette recorder under the scrap of Suimei's suit. His voice then continued playing from it.

"Uhhh, if this worn-out recorder is playing, then I must say, with the deepest of regrets, that I, Yakagi Suimei, have passed away. Man, how lame. Please tell me, 'Wow, you're such a dumbass.' Oh, did I even leave a corpse behind? Have I maybe been reduced to atoms? Jeez. That sucks."

Felmenia and Lefille were both bewildered by his sudden monologue.

"Wh-What is this...?"

"I have no idea..."

Nothing made sense. Even if they could suddenly hear his voice, there was no telling what it meant.

Hydemary then realized that the recorder was charged with mana, and at that moment she figured it all out: this recorder was a lifeline to Suimei's survival.

"Everyone! Protect it!" she shouted. "And don't touch it!"

"Huh?"

"What do you mean ...?"

"Among the magicians of my world," Hydemary explained, "there are some who are very hard to kill. They're called liches. They're said to have released themselves from death."

"Liches?"

"Now that you mention it, Suimei-dono mentioned something like that before..."

"By difficult to kill, I mean they have methods of escaping the cause of death," Hydemary elaborated. "As far as I know, this can generally be split into four

categories."

With that preface, Hydemary began enumerating these techniques one by one.

"First: A stock of lives. In short, they have multiple lives, just like in a video game. By preserving enough energy to substitute for life beforehand, you can create a fixed number of lives to escape death.

"Second: Quantifying the point of fatality. A technique that makes it possible to define the point of death by damage to mana or the soul instead of the flesh and internal organs. In short, creating an HP pool.

"Third: SMOS. Swampman Operating System. A pseudo-resurrection technique accomplished by creating a new body with the same memories.

"And the hardest to pull off, a Grand Resurrection Ritual. This is a genuine spell to revive the dead..."

"Revive the dead...?" Moolah repeated. "Such a thing is impossible."

"Are you so sure?" Hydemary said.

"I am," Moolah stated. "Life cannot be restored once lost. It's absolutely impossible to revive the dead. Not even a god's power can accomplish it."

"That's true. However, where is the boundary before it's absolutely impossible? Does someone die when their heart stops? Yet a cardiac massage can make a heart move again. And so, by changing the definition, the perspective changes too. Your definition of death is different from ours."

"You mean to say the conditions aren't equivalent?" Moolah asked.

"Exactly. The conditions," Hydemary confirmed. "For humans, both life and death have certain conditions to be met. But magicians aren't human anymore, so these conditions are different for us."

Before long, the cassette recorder cut to the main point.

"I wasted some time with that useless chatter, but let's begin Yakagi Suimei's Grand Resurrection Ritual. Hm? Grand ritual makes it sound overblown? Shut your trap. Not only am I stabilizing my lost astral body, I've gotta fully analyze the vast records of my ether body. Things end up on this scale whether you like

it or not."

The cassette recorder beeped, and Suimei's voice began chanting verse after verse. Sensing the danger behind this, Moolah took action.

"Tch! Ridiculous!"

She launched miasma at the cassette recorder, but it seemed to be protected in some way. It wasn't even scratched.

"Uhhh, just so you know, attacking this thing is useless. You *might* have had the *tiniest* chance while I was chatting away, but the defensive spell is already in place. You really thought I wouldn't protect the recorder? Hah! Well get a look at this! *Dumbass!* I bet you were all excited and giggling about killing me, but now you're going, 'Huh? What's going on?' like a total moron. Idiot! Dolt! Twit! 'He died, so there's no way a recorder popping out of nowhere can resurrect him on its own?' Has your brain melted? Is your head rotting? Hahahahahahahahahahahal. Dumbass!"

Suimei's voice was hurling abuse like a grade school student, sneering at the opponent in his imagination. As for the actual opponent this was being directed to... she trembled in rage, completely red in the face. Naturally, what followed was a peculiar kind of dialogue.

"How dare you mock me!" she cried.

"But you're a total idiot! You must've been so smug after beating me. Were you? Oh yes you were. Otherwise, you wouldn't be so pissed! Hahahahahahahaha! Ack! My sides!"

"I'll kill you! I'll kill you! I'll kill you! I'll kill you!"

"Not gonna happen now! You're just gonna have to give it another go after I resurrect!"

"Shut your filthy mouth!"

"Hey, what's it feel like? Come on. Tell me. Hahaha! It must be so frustrating! Hahahaha!"

"Graaaaaaaaah! You bastaaaaaaard!"

Even though this was supposed to be a prerecorded message, the

conversation flowed as if Suimei were actually present. It was so natural, in fact, that the question rose as to whether Suimei should be praised for intuiting the conversation so well or scorned for being so foulmouthed.



"You'll do well to mark my words. Magicians aren't ones to die from being killed once or twice."

With that last piece of advice, a massive magic circle took shape around the recorder. Glowing lines ran across the ground to draw its geometry. Warm light fluttered into the air like fireflies, while energy ran along the channels and concentrated in the center.

This magicka could not be stopped. Only grand magicka that matched it in scale could do anything. Lower magicka would lose out and be erased by rank disparity extinction.

Shortly after the light gathered, Yakagi Suimei's flesh was reshaped, and before long, he descended upon the center of the magic circle wearing his black suit. His tailcoat fluttered in the wind as his heel tapped against the ground. Perhaps due to the effects of resurrection, he had a hand to his head, as if he was nauseous and had an intense headache.

"Ugh... The hell happened?" a freshly resurrected Suimei muttered. "Ummm, I ended up eating that huge wave of power, and then... Ooh? The recorder, huh? Good thing I prepared it..."

Suimei's companions ran over to him. Felmenia's face was a mess of tears and snot.

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"Suimei-dono!"
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"Sorry 'bout that," Suimei apologized to everyone. "I never thought this would happen right as I got back."

"Good grief," Hydemary said in exasperation. "Tell us beforehand if you have something like that ready."

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"Sorry already. What's the situation, anyway?"
```

[&]quot;Suimei-kun!"

[&]quot;Seriously... you had us so worried..."

[&]quot;No kidding... That was bad for my heart."

[&]quot;Look."

"Hm?"

Suimei turned to look at what Hydemary was pointing at. Moolah was panting for breath and seemed to be enraged.

"You bastaaaaard...!"

"Huh? She looks super pissed?" Suimei said.

Naturally, Suimei had no idea why she was so angry. Had his revival injured her pride? Or was she infuriated for an altogether different reason?

"Suimei-kun. Suimei-kun," Hydemary said, "don't you remember what you recorded on that thing?"

"...Oh. Well, you know. I just guessed when I made that."

"You two had a completely normal conversation, though?"

"Completely normal...?" Suimei repeated. "What kinda simpleton manages to have a conversation with a recorder? That's gotta take a special kinda genius."

"One such genius is standing right there," Hydemary said, pointing out Moolah.

Suimei turned toward said genius. Her face was inconceivably red. It almost seemed like she could die from rage alone. Several of her veins even looked like they were on the verge of bursting.

"Uh... Sorry?"

"You cur..."

"Mm. Really. Sorry. I didn't mean it that way. I just said random crap for fun hoping maybe I could provoke whoever would be listening. I never thought anyone would be commendable enough to seriously get stirred up by it."

"Are you calling me a simpleton?!" Moolah screeched.

"Nope. I'm praising you for being so honest and pure at heart. Japanese people don't lie."

Those last words were in complete monotone. This wasn't helping ease her anger at all.

Suimei readied himself for battle. Was she going to charge at him?

Moolah let out a tremendous sigh. She probably figured she would be playing right into his hands if she fully gave in to her rage. She regained her composure and readied her sword.

"If you won't die from being killed once, I'll just keep killing you until you stay dead," she said.

"Ooh? That's a serious protag line. Man, you're so cool. I wanna try saying that some time."

Moolah didn't respond. Instead, she turned a sharp gaze toward him with enough intensity it felt like it could kill any living being on its own.

"Suimei-kun, do you really have to make sure that everything you say is poking fun at someone?" Hydemary commented.

"Not at all," he said. "I was being totally honest. Besides, no matter how you look at it, I'm not the protagonist, right? Magic wielders like me are totally the bad guy, or some henchman. A protagonist who revives over and over makes for a totally boring story, doesn't it?"

Suimei smiled and readied himself for Moolah's attack. Despite all the idle chatter, he knew Moolah wasn't an opponent he could be careless around. He still didn't have the slightest grasp of her abilities.

It was time to start over. The climax of this battle was still to come.

Afterword

Long time no see, everyone. Gamei Hitsuji here.

The Magic in this Other World is Too Far Behind! Volume 10 is now on sale! Thank you very much.

Unlike the last volume that largely focused on Suimei and his party, pretty much the entire first half of this volume is focused on Reiji. It depicts Reiji's worries and his growth as a summoned hero, and it sets things up for future developments. What kind of trials await Reiji now...? That's the kind of unprecedented pinch we've put him in this time. How will Reiji react to all this?

Yeah... He kinda feels like the real protagonist this way. I mean, I wrote this volume while keeping that orthodox train of thought in mind.

But the actual protagonist is properly active too! That's what makes it *The Magic in this Other World is Too Far Behind!* Your expectations are met! Suimei's party returns from modern Japan in the second half and... goes wild? Anyway, that's how it goes!

Liliana uses weird magicka.

Hatsumi is imparted with a new secret art.

And Suimei's magicka is exploding too!

We also get the arrival of a new character that Suimei has been mumbling about here and there...

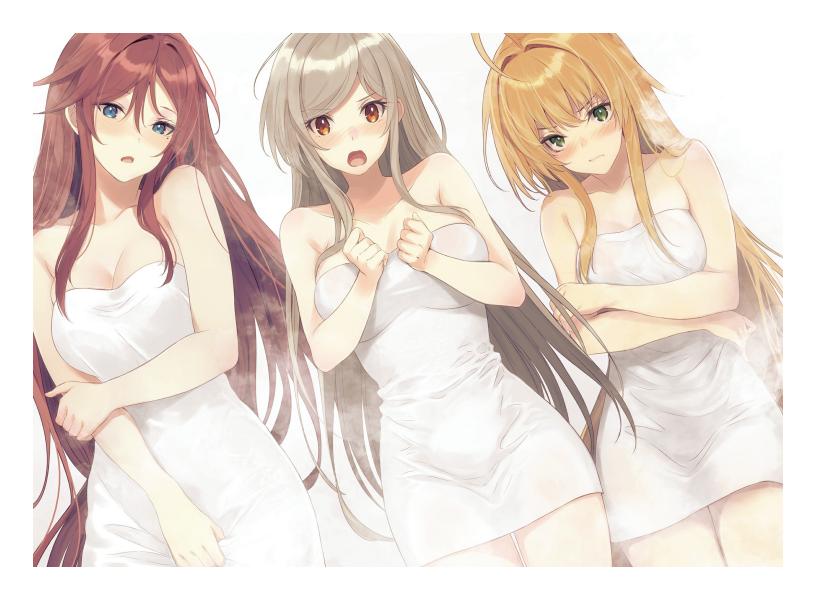
Formidable enemies are steadily popping out and are intensifying Suimei's battle. It's not just the demons. The Universal Apostles and suspicious aspects from the Goddess's side are gradually showing themselves. What'll happen next?

I think this volume came out pretty well! Then allow me to finish off by giving my thanks. To my editor N, the illustrator Yunagi, the designer coa, and the proofreading company Oraido. Thank you all very much.











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The Magic in this Other World is Too Far Behind! Volume 10

by Gamei Hitsuji

Translated by Hikoki Edited by Dan-Tran Cong-Huyen

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