



KAEDE KIKYOU
ILLUSTRATION BY
TOBARI

The
CHAMPIONS of
JUSTICE & the
SUPREME RULER
of EVIL

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Translation by Jekaterina Bält

Illustration by Tobar

Title Designer: KC Fabellon

Editing by A.M. Perrone, Charis Messier, and Robert Fox

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Chapter 1: The Supreme Ruler of Evil's First Foray

MEMORIES of days long past were what she held on to for emotional support. She clung, most of all, to the precious words of her beloved father like she would a treasure.

"Listen well, Mia. All of your powers exist for realizing our ambition."

"Yes, Father."

Every day the father would speak of their ambition, and the daughter would obediently listen.

"I know that someday, we will definitely realize our ambition. For it is our long-cherished desire; one we shall never compromise on!"

"Yes, Father."

She listened to this same story, every single day until her ears became sore from its constant repetition. But she never tired of it completely, because she too, believed it to be an ambition they would never compromise on.

"Mia, you must continue to hone your skills. Your grandfather failed to fulfill our greatest desire. I, myself, am endeavoring in every possible way to bring it about, but who knows what the future will bring. Therefore, this task might in turn fall to you."

"Yes, Father," she nodded dutifully.

Her father was a great man, yet their ambition was still far beyond their grasp. In order to someday realize it, she would continue honing her skills, so that one day she might put them to use.

"There will always be organizations that seek to thwart our ambition. So it was in your grandfather's generation, as it is in mine. Most assuredly, so it will be in your generation as well. However, we cannot afford to lose. No matter how bitter the battle, you must not give in. Our techniques are impeccable. Our skills unmatched! With our superior abilities, someday soon, we will crush our

adversaries and grab hold of our one true desire!”

“Yes, Father.”

*That’s right, we **have** enemies, Mia thought to herself. Enemies who would see our goals thwarted no matter the personal cost to them. There is no room for compromise! So long as we strive to realize our ambition, they will hunt for ways to bar our path. Such is the tradition of Good and Evil, continuing from time immemorial.*

“Now, Mia, say out loud what our dearest wish is, and feel the sound of it reverberate in your very soul! What is it that we call our greatest desire?”

Mia hastily straightened and proudly recited, “Our goal is world domination! Our ambition is to rule the world!”

She proclaimed to the world in a voice without the tiniest hint of doubt. The father, seeing his daughter’s eyes shining with strong resolve, nodded, clearly satisfied.

“That is correct! Well said, Mia. Now, let us be off, my dearest daughter! Next stop is but another step in the pursuit of our goal, world domination!”

Her father spectacularly flung his cape outwards and took a large step in the direction of world conquest...

PLEASANT rays of morning sunlight filtered into the bedroom doused with stillness. Mia stood in front of her dresser, fishing a black cape from out of its depths. It rustled as she wrapped its fabric around her shoulders and fastened it around her neck with a cord, which she tied in a cute bow. She took the sides of the cape in both hands, spreading it behind her back, and looked in the mirror.

“It’s a bit too big... However, I cannot very well just adjust the hem.”

She had never seen a hemmed-up cape, and besides, that would look lame. The length might be a little too long for her, but she couldn’t just go without her cape. So, with the bottom of it dragging behind her on the floor, Mia opened the sliding screen with a dull thud.

By the time she passed the living room and arrived at the kitchen counter, the

lengthy hem was white with dust. Mia grabbed it and started dusting it off.

“Gack!”

Coughing at the rising dust, she looked towards the counter. A single framed picture decorated its surface. Mia’s father stared at her from the frame. The man she looked up to and admired so much was no longer with her. She stood up straight, gazing at the picture.

“Dearest Father, I shall now be leaving to do battle. Please, watch over me.”

She bowed to the picture before taking hold of her wand, which she always left leaning against the kitchen counter. Zealously tossing her cape back, she took off for the entrance with a confident stride.

“Here I go, to achieve my goal! My ambition is world domination. I shall have everything within my grasp!”

She vigorously shoved the door open, the cape dragging in her wake. **Bam!** The door noisily slammed shut behind her as she exited her apartment.

The sparrows were chirping, exchanging their morning greetings. Just as she stepped out, Mia ran into one of her neighbors.

“Why if it isn’t Miss Oonari! Good morning! It’s still a school holiday, why are you up so early?”

“Good morning, Mrs. Ozawa! I need to run an important errand today. No time for sleep when there are goals to achieve!”

“Oh, is that so? What’s up with your cape? It’s too big for you! Today’s not Halloween, is it?”

“It’s, uh... Uh... U-Uniform, that’s right! It’s my uniform!”

“Uniform, you say? Oh, I see, it’s for a play, right? Of course, there must be a drama club at your high school!”

While there indeed *was* a drama club at her school, Mia, who by no means was a member, was becoming a bit flustered. However, Mrs. Ozawa, oblivious to her plight, went on to show Mia the basket she was holding, smiling from ear to ear.

“More importantly, look what I have here! Dried persimmons! Just got them from a neighbor! Here’s some for you too, Miss Oonari!”

Mrs. Ozawa handed her a bag containing some dried persimmons, which Mia meekly accepted.

“Thank you very much! I feel bad for always relying on you...”

“Don’t you worry about it! You’re living alone, that has to be difficult. If you ever need something, you tell me, all right, sweetie?” Mrs. Ozawa replied kindly, before returning to her apartment.

Mia lived in a rented apartment with two bedrooms, a living room, a dining room and a kitchen. It was an apartment complex, so she ran into her neighbors quite often.

Mia wiped the beads of sweat that had appeared on her forehead with her arm. “Phew, it seems I somehow managed to talk my way out of this. She who’s to become the Supreme Ruler of Evil must tread carefully!”

The fact that Mia was the Supreme Ruler of Evil and plotting world domination was her biggest secret—she had to keep it hidden no matter what. Should someone discover her true identity, she would have to make them disappear as soon as possible. That’s what Father had said. The problem was, Mia hadn’t learned the technique for doing that yet. That meant if anyone found out who she truly was, she would be in big trouble...because she wouldn’t know how to erase them.

“Well, anyway, today I managed to keep Mrs. Ozawa from catching on to who I am. I just have to pull myself together and push onwards!”

With bottom of her cape trailing after her, Mia descended the stairs of the apartment complex. After walking down a road in her residential district for a while, she suddenly stopped dead in her tracks.

“Hey, now that I think of it, what exactly do I have to do to take over the world?”

She crossed her arms as she pondered this crucial question. Father had told her to conquer the world, but she had never thought to ask him how she should go about achieving it.

While she was puzzling over this, a man walking his dog greeted her in passing. “Good morning!”

“Good morning!” Mia answered back automatically...then snapped out of her reverie. “For now, I’ll just get out of here. Can’t have my evil lair discovered after all!”

Mia, who was plotting world domination, had enemies who would get in her way. There was no telling when they might find her. So, after confirming there were no people nearby, she waved her wand.

“Fly in the skies!”

As soon as she pronounced those words with all her might, Mia’s legs lifted off the ground and her body softly floated skywards. Soaring up until she had reached an altitude where she would be unrecognizable to any passersby happening to look up, she stopped abruptly. Then she crossed her arms, her wand in one hand.

“Hmm. There is no ‘world domination’ without ‘world’, but to suddenly begin at that scale is crazy. Great undertakings like this are best started small!”

So she flew on, looking carefully with her magically enhanced vision for anything in the town that could act as a springboard towards world domination.

Mia was a sorceress. It would be meaningless to ask how she became one: she was simply born a sorceress. Just like her father and grandfather were born sorcerers before her, and their parents and grandparents before them—they had always been sorcerers. Throughout the generations, the sorcerers of her lineage strove to master magical techniques to realize their ambition of world domination, working tirelessly to fulfill their greatest desire. All of them, without exception, failed and laid down their lives in pursuit of it.

“Domination means controlling the country or its people... So, that means the world will eventually belong to me.”

She nodded in agreement with herself. Wow, she was good at this!

“And *that* means that this town, too, will be under my control and belong to me, which leaves me with just one thing to do!”

A sparkle lit up in Mia's eyes. Something had dawned on her; she triumphantly clenched her fist.

"I will be overseeing this town! As the first step towards world domination, I'll make it into my ideal town!"

First the town, then the country, and then the world! She could just slowly broaden the scope of the territory she oversaw. If she kept at it, someday she'd conquer the world! Happy with having finally set a concrete goal, Mia set about observing the town from above.

"Huh? What is that?"

There was a large river that flowed through the town. Once the fishing season started in early summer, its banks came alive with fishermen casting their hooks for sweetfish, and people convening to have barbecues. It was a famous gathering spot in town.

However, it was still just the very beginning of spring. The sweetfish wouldn't bite, and it was way too cold to be enjoying a barbecue. Despite that, perhaps because today was a holiday, there were several boys and girls making a racket, dancing and singing merrily to the music they had been loudly blasting from their speakers all morning. Not only that, they had littered the vicinity with leftovers and packaging from their food and drinks.

"How dare they?! This is a very grave matter. I will not allow them to further defile the beautiful sights under my protection!"

Rushing forward and cutting through the air with a whoosh, Mia landed on top of a sunshade. The boys and girls who had been living it up just until a moment ago were astonished at the sight of a girl suddenly descending from the sky.

"Hey, you lot! Explain yourselves right now!" Mia shouted at the gobsmacked group from atop the sunshade.

"Huh?" came the oh-so-intelligent reaction from one of the boys in the group.

"Putting on music so loud this early in the day; didn't you stop to think about how it would bother the people living around here? And throwing your garbage away wherever you please, aren't you ashamed of yourselves? I shall not

tolerate such travesty in a public area!”

“Whatever... So, did you, like, drop from the sky or something?”

“Why yes, for I am an evil sorceress, and that’s what we do!”

Tossing her cape back crisply, she struck the signature pose she had practiced for nights on end. Oh, it was a daunting pose fit for a Supreme Ruler of Evil all right, with her arms stretched out over her head for maximum intimidation.

“What’s up with this girl? She’s saying she’s an evil sorceress, so is she, like, saying she’s bad?” one of the girls asked, putting a painted fingernail to her chin.

“Maybe she’s not all bad—it’s just her brain that’s gone bad...”

“Ah, that kind of bad, yeah...”

“Wait, didn’t she come out of the sky?! Was she flying?”

“Argh, will you listen to me for a moment!” Mia pointed accusingly at the group merrily discussing her without reserve. They paused. “Good, and now you will clean up this mess you’ve made. Be sure to put all the garbage into garbage bags. And don’t forget to sort it either!”

The boys and girls seemed to grow irritated with Mia trying to boss them around.

“Kinda annoying, ain’t she?”

“Not only is she stupid, she’s grating on my nerves too!”

“We’re comin’ back from karaoke night and we’re feelin’ dope! We’ll go home after we sing it out, ‘kay, missy?”

“Listen up you lot,” Mia demanded, “if you won’t obey me, I’ll put you on my list of subjects to purge! You can’t hold me responsible for any harm that comes your way then!” When she menacingly tapped her wand on her palm, the group burst into laughter.

“What is she doing? Is this cosplay?”

“She’s wearing a cape or something; I think she’s just cuckoo.”

Mia was offended. “Wha-?! I’m the Supreme Ruler of Evil, I’ll have you know!

Which means I won't hesitate to cause you bodily harm if I must in order to fulfill my ambitions!" Mia exclaimed loudly, only to be guffawed at.

"Get this, she's the Supreme Ruler of *Eeeeeevil*! Bwahaha!"

"It's so cold outside, what could've possibly caused her brain to fry like that?"

"Why you! ...I'll sacrifice you plebeians upon the cornerstone of my glory! ...
Rage, o winter sea!"

She poured her will into the words and twirled her wand. Suddenly, something resembling thick white mist softly enveloped the group ridiculing her, accompanied by a loud rumbling. When the mist dissolved, the boys and girls were soaking wet—then an ice-cold wind blew vigorously, biting them and chilling them further.

"C-C-C-Cold! I'm s-s-so c-c-cold!"

"What the heck is this? F-F-Freezing!"

Mia crossed her arms, coolly regarding the shivering bunch from atop the sunshade. "I trust that you are now duly aware of the extent of my powers, muhahaha!"

By the way, 'muhahaha' was a traditional manner of laughing, passed down in the Oonari family since ancient times. Mia had learned it from her father as he learned it from his.

"You witch! You are so gonna regret this!"

"I'm c-cold! Go and turn on the heat in the car, quick!"

"I want a nice hot bath!"

Shaking and shivering, the boys and girls who'd partied too hard on the riverbank hightailed it out of there.

"Pft, this was too easy!" Mia smirked with profound satisfaction. Smirking was, again, something Supreme Rulers of Evil did. She'd made sure to practice her evil smirk as well.

After standing on the sunshade for a while, basking in her glory, Mia abruptly realized something—they hadn't taken their trash with them.

“Curses. Hey! If you are going to flee, why don’t you first clean up after yourselves and *then* run away, huh?!” she reflexively screamed aloud, but the group she was addressing had already fled the scene by car.

Mia sighed heavily. “...Well, I guess that leaves me to deal with this mess. Let this become yet another stone added to the foundation of my world domination scheme.”

She briskly jumped down from the sunshade and turned off the speakers first. Then she armed herself with the convenience store bags the group had left lying around and began collecting the scattered trash.

“Argh, I can’t sort the garbage here! I guess I’ll have to take it home with me to sort...” Mia was muttering under her breath while putting trash into the bags when she heard someone’s voice from behind.

“Huh, so you’re the new Supreme Ruler of Evil, eh?”

Mia, suddenly called by her alias, whipped around. “Who are you?!” she barked towards the source of the voice, which turned out to be a young man grinning down at her.



“Who, me? I’m a Champion of Justice. And you are the Supreme Ruler of Evil, right?”

“Indeed I am! ...Wait a minute, did you just say ‘a Champion of Justice’?!” Mia quickly hurled the bag of trash to the side and darted away, trying to put some distance between her and the man. Then she took a shaky breath. “Who on Earth are you?!” she pointed an accusing finger at him.

The man simply stood there calmly, with his hands stuffed in his trouser pockets. “I just told you that I’m a Champion of Justice, duh. Were you even listening?”

“Wrong! In a situation like this, you should be saying something like, ‘I cannot let such an evil deed go unpunished!’”

“Huh... But you were just picking up garbage, yeah? It just didn’t look all that evil to me, ya know.”

“Your timing is off! I was inflicting harm upon the ordinary citizens to achieve my ambition just mere minutes ago. If you had been here at that time, you would have seen a solid evil deed!”

“Whoops, sorry, my bad, had to drop by the convenience store real quick.”

Mia was thoroughly exasperated by his lackadaisical attitude.

This was all wrong. Her enemy, the ‘Champion of Justice’, was supposed to be different.

“Hey, scoundrel, do you have *any* passion for your job at all? You’re supposed to be a Champion of Justice here!”

“Uh, well, yeah, I guess... So, you really are the Supreme Ruler of Evil?”

“Mwahahaha, I’m glad you asked!” Mia pushed her cape behind her with a sharp flick of her wrist.

Try as she did with all her might, the hem of her too-long cape stayed glued to the ground. It looked a bit lame, but she refused to let that get to her.

“I am the Supreme Ruler of the evil organization known as Gealach, the Sorceress of Darkness, Oonari Mia!” Mia introduced herself loud and proud, not

forgetting to take her signature pose, naturally.

The man, seemingly impressed, rewarded her performance with light applause. “Whoa, I can see you’ve practiced a lot, very impressive! But hey, I’ve heard some things about Supreme Rulers of Evil, and apparently they usually go by some sort of codename or alias. Is Oonari Mia your real name by any chance?”

“Drat! Damnation!” She actually had thought up a codename for herself, but she had ended up blurting out her real name on the spur of the moment. “No, no, I made a mistake! I do have a codename! Err... Oh, right! It’s ‘Draiocht’!”

“Huh, I see. Well, nice meeting you, Mia!”

“Don’t you dare call me Mia! You have to properly address me as ‘Draiocht’!” She shouted at the top of her lungs, and promptly ran out of breath.

Ever since she had met the man, she’d been getting worked up, and it had finally worn her down. World domination was no piece of cake.

“Run out of steam, have ya? Well, no wonder you’re tired after yelling that much! I’ve got coffee if you want some?”

“As if I would accept charity from my enemy! How about you introduce yourself instead?”

“Well, while I’m dying to do just that, I kinda have to wait for the others before I do.”

At the man’s words, Mia was hit by a sudden terrible realization. That’s right, a ‘Champion of Justice’ was never alone. According to her father, Champions of Justice tended to flock together and form groups. Like turtles...or maybe worms—yes just like worms do when they gather together on the sidewalks after it rains. She didn’t know how many of them there were, but—

As she was remembering her father’s words, a group of people walked up from behind to join her enemy.

“So sorry, Ren! We stopped by this cell phone shop for a bit...”

“Ugh, I really wish they would cut it out with having us work on holidays.”

“Whoa, look, there really is a girl matching the description! Hey, why didn’t

you contact us sooner?”

“Sorry. I was off duty, so I was sleeping.”

Three men, one woman. If she counted the man she was talking to, that made for four men, one woman—five people in total.

Just as Mia braced her wand, ready for battle, one of the men who had appeared took a step in front, blocking her way.

“I haven’t personally seen your evil deeds to be honest, but let’s say that you were indeed up to no good here. Anyway, I can’t let you go unpunished. We are the Champions of Justice, Crow Rangers! Red Ranger, reporting for duty!”

Mia involuntarily let out a small “oh” of admiration towards the man introducing himself as the Red Ranger. This was it—*this* was the kind of passion she was looking for!

However, no one else appeared to even try to match Red’s zeal. The rest of the members went on with their introductions in a very mundane manner.

“Ugh, would you please stop saying ‘Crow Rangers’? Oh, I’m Pink, by the way. But being called Pink at this age is really embarrassing, so call me Aya, okay?”

“Nice to meet you! I’m Yellow. See this yellow plate I have on my jacket? If you’re ever confused, you can tell us apart by looking at the plates. I’d like it if you called me Shou.”

“What color was I again? ...Oh right, I’m Blue! You can call me Subaru.”

Mia was flustered by this influx of introductions. “W-Wait a minute! It’s too sudden! So it was, uh, Red, Aya, Shou, and Subaru?”

“Bingo. By the way, Red’s name is Misaki. And I’m Ren. My plate’s green, see?” The man who had called out to her first grinned broadly, walking up to her to show her the plate.

“I see, just like Shou said, I can identify which color you are just by looking at your plates.” Mia inadvertently moved closer to Ren, intently studying his plate. “Ah, so ‘Crow Rangers’ is actually written on your plates.”

“Yep. That’s something our Chief came up with. He says he likes the youthful enthusiasm it exudes. Sucks for us though,” Ren explained.

“His naming sense is just the worst,” Aya grimaced in agreement.

“Hey! That’s enough fooling around! We’ve got a job to do here. We’ll be receiving a bonus for working on a holiday, so get to it!” Misaki, the proud owner of the red plate, scolded his colleagues.

However, the four others remained thoroughly uninterested, which made Mia feel bad for Misaki. Ren leisurely stroked his chin, muttering, “And what do you want me to do anyway?” Then he looked up, “Oh, I almost forgot! She said her name’s Mia Oonari!”

“Quit calling me Mia! It’s ‘Draiocht’ for you! And don’t go introducing me without my permission!” Mia bristled instantly, but Ren was completely unaffected and casually shrugged his shoulders.

“Like it matters. So, what are we gonna do? Wanna fight?”

“Er, I’m fine with fighting, but can you wait a bit?”

Normally, as the Supreme Ruler of Evil, she should’ve been jumping at the chance to fight, but Mia still had unfinished business. Ren stared at her, clearly puzzled, so she pointed at the garbage bag she had thrown to the side earlier.

“Those insolent pests I had to deal with bolted before picking up their trash, so could we please wait until after I am done cleaning up?”

“I don’t mind. What happened here exactly?” Shou, the young man with the yellow plate, asked, so Mia decided to explain what had transpired thus far.

“There were some people making a racket here, blasting music from their speakers at full volume early in the morning. They were also scattering their litter about. This irritated me so much that I taught them a lesson, but they ran away without cleaning up after themselves.”

“Ah, that sounds troublesome. So you gave them an earful, huh,” Shou summarized.

“I don’t ‘give an earful’. I simply cannot let slide behavior that ruins the natural beauty of or endangers the peaceful life of the residents of this territory I am in charge of. That is why I sacrificed them upon the cornerstone of my glory!”

“Ah, I see! How noble of you, Mia!” Aya chimed in, smiling, and patted Mia on the head.

“Hey, stop touching me!” Mia furiously shook her head free from Aya’s hand, then turned and tried to lift the huge speakers, but they were so large that she couldn’t get them to budge.

Noticing her struggle, Ren approached her. “Want some help?”

“That will not be necessary! To me, this is supposed to be a springboard towards world domination. I cannot accept help from a Champion of Justice.”

“What are you gonna do then? No matter how you look at it, they’re way too big and heavy for you to lift.”

Indeed, the speakers were of considerable size, about Mia’s height. Yet, Mia proceeded to laugh evilly with her hands on her hips before climbing atop the speakers. “Hehehe! You’re naïve to think a trifle like this would hold me back, the Great Dark Sorceress, Mia Oonari!”

“You just keep adding to your title, huh? Also, you just used your real name again.”

“Gahh! I meant ‘Draiocht’!”

“I’m already used to calling you Mia. It’s easier to say, too. Mia-mia!”

“Don’t call me Mia-mia! Anyway, all of you can sit back, relax, and watch as I come closer to enforcing my dictatorship!” She waved her wand from her position atop the speakers, and chanted her spell, pouring intent into her words. **“Fly with me into the skies!”**

The moment the words left her lips, a gust of wind softly blew by. Mia, the speakers, and also Ren, who was standing right next to her, all floated into the air.

“Wh-Whoa!” he exclaimed.

“Wowie! Ren’s levitating!” Shou cheered, evidently amused by the sight of Ren struggling to keep his balance.

“This is the first time I’ve seen anything like this. So this is the ‘magic’ she was talking about,” Subaru whispered with awe.

“When I heard about it from our Chief, I thought it was just the ramblings of a crazy old man, but it was true, huh?” Aya stared on in wonder.

“Do you guys have any sense of urgency *at all*?! Let’s fight it out and get this over with already!” Misaki raged alone. No one on his team listened to him.

However, Mia flew up to him, looking embarrassed. “Do you think if I gathered their belongings and left them together around here somewhere, the police would treat it as lost property?”

“...Yeah, you do that. We’re police officers too. We’ll let the Traffic Division know about it on your behalf, so get moving already!”

A surprised “oh” escaped Mia’s lips at Misaki’s annoyed instructions. “So you are police officers! It certainly makes sense for Champions of Justice, now that I think about it. All right, understood!”

Mia lowered the speakers on a quiet spot by the riverbank and went back for the sunshade. She raised her wand, ready to cast the spell. “**Fly with me in—** wait, why are you following me?”

Ren, who Mia had just dropped off with the speaker, along with three other rangers, notably missing Misaki, were standing right behind Mia.

“Uh, well, you have to try everything at least once, you know!”

“Yeah, yeah!”

“I want to try flying too!”

“And I want an encore!”

“Hey, my magic is not your toy!” Mia wildly flailed her arms, fuming, at which Ren tried soothing her with a ‘there, there’.

“Hey, if you don’t hurry up, Misaki will get tired of waiting and leave. You okay with that?”

“Urgh.”

Letting an enemy escape would be a disgrace to her title as Supreme Ruler of Evil. Mia grudgingly twirled her wand.

“**Fly with me into the skies!**” she recited, and immediately the sunshade and

the four people along with it were lifted up and suspended in midair.

Each person had a different reaction: one made swimming motions, another dangled their feet in the air, but everyone seemed to be having a lot of fun.

“Say, Mia, how do you make this magic of yours work? You said ‘Fly with me something something’, so it’s, like, whenever you say this phrase, you can fly at will?” Shou inquired excitedly, his eyes sparkling with fascination. Mia shook her head no.

“There is no fixed phrase for it. I imagine the thing I wish to accomplish and hold this image in my head. Then, by pronouncing the words that come to me at that moment, I grant power to the magic.”

“I see, so concentrating while forming the words is necessary,” Subaru nodded sagely, hovering in midair with his arms and legs crossed.

“So you can basically do anything, Mia?” Aya joined in the questioning.

Mia answered in a detailed manner, “If I can give the intent a proper form in my mind, technically I should be able to do anything. In essence, however, I can only use the images I learned from my father... With some time, I could give form to ideas with my own power, though.”

Mia reached the place where she had left the speakers and safely landed the four people and the sunshade nearby. Then she waved her wand again.
“Disassemble!”

The moment she finished speaking, the sunshade’s frame began to unravel piece by piece, then stacked up in a neat pile by itself. The four looking on from behind clapped, amazed by the sight.

“Wow, that magic is really neat! Wish I could use it too,” Ren whispered enviously, stroking his chin.

“Hehehe, unfortunately for you, it’s impossible for commoners such as yourselves. This technique is something only us sorcerers can use. It has to run in your blood!” Mia sneered, firmly shoving her cape aside to flash a daunting pose.

“Ah, so it’s something akin to heredity, huh.” Aya nodded in understanding.

“Well now, playtime is hereby over!” Mia gave her wand a whirl, softly floated up, flew through the air, and landed a small distance away from the five rangers.

“My apologies for the wait! Now let me drop you straight into the cauldron of Hell!”

“Hey, do you actually have to wave your wand to do magic?” Ren interrupted.

Mia’s shoulders slumped at his out of place question. “Argh, enough about my magic already! Waving it is the way my father taught me how to do magic!”

“He was a person with old-fashioned, questionable tastes, eh?” Aya quietly mumbled.

That was when Misaki took a swift step forward. “Ugh, I’m ending this, *now*. Hey, Mia, I can’t leave someone defying common sense and plotting world domination to boot like you wandering around! I’m gonna arrest you and end this ridiculous charade!”

Misaki pulled something resembling a police baton out of his bag and charged at Mia without waiting for her response. Mia laughed indomitably and parried the baton with her wand. They clashed with a resounding clang.

Mia swiftly began to cast a spell, “**O earth, collapse!**”

Following her words, the ground supporting Misaki’s feet dully throbbed, and a hole opened up underneath him.

“Wh-Whoa?!” Misaki yelped as he lost his balance, falling on his backside. However, he immediately got back on his feet and thrust the baton in Mia’s gut.

“Oof!”

“I hate doing this to a girl, but...” As Misaki pushed a button on his baton, Mia felt a jolt of electricity rush through her body.

“Aiee!” She hastily whirled her wand, flying through the air to put some distance between herself and Misaki. Mia’s body still tingled unpleasantly, and her hair stood slightly on end from the static electricity.

“Humph, to think you would resort to such petty tricks!”

“Wow, so the stories really are true. A normal person would collapse after taking a hit from a stun gun!”

“Mwahaha! Battles are unavoidable for those who aim to conquer the world! With a defensive barrier, an attack like that is nothing to worry about.”

“That girl’s trouble... Hey, wait a sec! Come on you guys, help me out here!”

The other four rangers were dawdling behind him. None of them showed even a grain of inclination for joining the fray. Subaru was at least observing the fight, his arms crossed; Shou, on the other hand, was playing a game on his smart phone. Aya, for some reason, was cheering the enemy on with, “Go, Mia!”, while Ren was smoking a cigarette he’d procured from his convenience store bag.

“You people... You know what, I’m telling the boss on you!” Misaki exhaled exasperatedly.

Ren, apparently troubled by the prospect of that happening, took one step forward, the cigarette still hanging from his lips.

“Well, I guess I gotta do it then... Getting a pay cut would be a pain, so I’ll just get this sorted real quick.”

Fixing his eyes on Mia, who tightly gripped her wand in anticipation, Ren handed his cigarette to Misaki.

“Hey, put it out first, would you?”

“Meh, forgot my pocket ashtray. Hold on to it for me, ‘kay?”

Having said that, he started towards Mia at a leisurely pace. Mia was outraged by how blatantly he underestimated her.

“Let’s see how you like it when I drench you in ice-cold water, you craven! **With the ice**—huh?”

As Mia was casting her spell, Ren suddenly broke into a sprint at incredible speed. Startled by Ren appearing right before her in a blink of an eye, Mia lost her ability to speak. Meanwhile, Ren cupped her face with his hands, touching his lips to hers.

“...?!”

Mia's mind went completely blank with the sensation of having her lips sealed by a deep kiss. Hastily, she started hitting him on the back and pushing him away, but he wouldn't budge.

"Mm! Mmph!"

She was suffocating. Gradually, strength seeped away from her struggling limbs. At last, when her head started spinning, he let her go.

"There ya go, all done!"

"H-Huh?" Mia, whose lips had finally been released, dazedly looked up at Ren. She realized too late that she couldn't move her wrists. "Wha-?! H-Handcuffs?! When did you-?!"

"While you were enjoying my smooch. Was real easy too!"

"How vile!" With her hands handcuffed behind her back, Mia leaped backwards to get away from Ren.

"And you call yourself a Champion of Justice?! While committing such...such acts of barbarity, you dimwit!"

"But hey, if you don't concentrate while pronouncing the words of a spell, you can't cast your spells, right? So, I thought that if I sealed your lips you'd probably lose your focus, see?"

"T-To use such licentious methods is deplorable!" Mia's face grew red and her shoulders trembled. She was so mortified that tears welled up in her eyes.

Noticing the state she was in, Shou clapped his hands. "Wait a second, Mia, was that your first kiss?"

"Oh my." Aya's hand flew to her mouth.

"Of course it was, you fool! I have never done anything like this! When would I have had the chance to!"

"Oops, sorry for that!" Ren apologized, insincerely.

Rattling her handcuffs angrily, Mia fumed, "I don't care for your halfhearted apologies! Take responsibility for your actions, you bonehead!"

"What responsibility? Do I need to marry you now or something?"

“M-M-Marry?! Who said anything about that? ...**Dance, o blade of wind!**”

This time, Mia succeeded in imbuing the words with her will. As she spoke them, the handcuffs were cut through easily as if they had been made of paper, and they clattered to the ground in pieces.

“Huh, so you can do this, too. A miscalculation on my part.”

“Do not underestimate me. You cannot hope to restrain me with such flimsy aluminum handcuffs!”

“Apparently not. How ‘bout I put a sturdier collar on you next time, hm?” Ren smirked.

That smirk was completely unlike the smirk Mia had spent years to perfect; it was a wicked expression unfit to appear on a Champion of Justice.

“C-C-C-Consider this your lucky day; I’m letting you off the hook! But I’ll get you next time, you’ll see!” Mia threw as a parting remark, repeated by many villains over the ages that found themselves in a certain set of circumstances when they were confronted with Champions of Justice. She then picked up the garbage bag before soaring up into the sky with her magic.

“You gonna run away?” Ren grinned up at her.

“Call it a strategic retreat, will you?! I have to go and rethink my tactics!”

“That so? Well, I’m looking forward to the next time we meet! Also, not that I care, but you’re flashing your panties.”

“Aiee! Stop looking!” Mia hastily tried to hold her skirt down.

“White, huh... Frilly, too! And with a lace ribbon, how cute!” Shou observed.

“Wearing such underwear is one of the privileges of being a young girl, don’t you think?” Aya chimed in.

Their underwear discussion made Mia’s shoulders shake again.

“...Mia,” Subaru quietly called out to the girl. He had mostly stayed silent throughout the encounter and hadn’t taunted her, so she looked down at him tolerantly. He straightened his previously folded arms and met her eyes. “You look small and frail for your age. Don’t neglect eating nutritious foods during

lunch!”

“I-I don’t need your advice!” Mia shouted before she took off flying. The five heroes left behind watched her leave from the riverbank.

“Ahh, that was fun! At first, I hated this job, but if Mia’s gonna be our opponent it might turn out to be enjoyable after all!” Shou exclaimed with a smile.

“Yeah, I thought that in our day and age ‘Champions of Justice’ should be relegated to jokes or corny action TV shows, but I agree with Shou. Mia’s so cute!” Aya agreed.

“She’s all alone, isn’t she? I heard she has no family. I wonder if she’s eating properly...” Subaru was seriously worrying about her. He was very much the older brother figure.

“Seriously, you guys? I just want to get this job done and over with and return to my normal duties. The previous Supreme Ruler of Evil is finally dead and gone, and now there’s suddenly a successor appearing out of nowhere!” Misaki declared irritably. He was the only one wholeheartedly dedicated to ending the Champions of Justice’s job.

“But hey, Ren, wasn’t kissing her taking it a step too far?” Aya charged, “You could’ve covered her mouth with your hand or something, there had to be some other way to disrupt her words rather than kissing!”

“Yeah! Mia clearly looked completely inexperienced in that department,” Shou added, following her lead.

The person in question, meanwhile, relit his cigarette and gave a small shrug. “I just felt like doing it. Besides, I’ve sorta taken a liking to her, and if I take a liking to something, I go for it!”

“But you can’t. Don’t toy with her; you know she’s a minor,” chided Aya, but Ren just smirked, looking up into the sky.

“Pft. Then, rather than toying, I’ll just go for her—for real.”

“So, your intentions are honorable?” Subaru asked for further clarification. He

appeared to have taken the role of Mia's big brother upon himself.

"Ouch. I'm actually the type who'll take proper care of the one I've set my sights on, ya know?"

"...All right then."

"Yeah! Why don't you seduce Mia over to our side and make her give up on world domination? Then the world will be at peace, and we'll be able to return to our regular duties!" Aya proposed.

Shou clapped enthusiastically. "Yeah, it's a brilliant plan!"

"Well, if you could pull it off, I'd sure be happy," Misaki reluctantly approved, "I'd really like to return to my normal duties as soon as I can. So, you guys, from now on, pull it together and do your job, okay?"

His words only managed an unenthusiastic "yes sir" out of the others, except for Subaru, who silently nodded.

"Seduce her over to our side', huh? Ain't that gonna be fun!" Ren snickered to himself as he watched Misaki report the speakers and sunshade as lost property.

MEANWHILE, Mia was flying through the sky, grumbling to herself, "Damnation! I have no clue what happened, but I ended up having to fle—No, no, I mean, make a strategic retreat!"

It was decidedly *not* a withdrawal. She would just carefully rethink her tactics before returning to destroy the insolent rangers.

"Thinking about tactics... How about a clever ploy? Like a trap... Yes, a pitfall, perfect!" A light bulb went off in Mia's head. "They said they were with the police. Ha! Ha! Ha! So thoughtless of them to divulge their workplace to me like that! I'll keep watch on the nearby police station, and when I spot them, I will drop them straight into the pits of Hell!"

All that was left was to put her words into action. Mia dove through the air towards the police station at top speed until she saw a big road come into view beneath her. It had four lanes, with cars incessantly speeding along them. As

she was searching for a place to land without catching anyone's eye, she noticed a child on the sidewalk.

"So many cars around here... Is he alone?"

The child stopped before the pedestrian crossing, and when the traffic light turned green, he slowly started crossing the road.

"Hm, he follows the traffic light signals! What a good little future workforce member!"

As she was thus nodding to herself in midair, watching the child, the traffic light began to blink, then turned red. The child, who was still in the middle of the road, froze, distraught. When an impatient driver honked at him, he glanced around nervously, seeking help.

"Humph!"

The driver now angrily stuck his head out of the car window. As soon as Mia saw him do that, she swooped down, readying for a sharp drop.

"Start moving, you little brat!" The man yelled at the boy, slamming the car horn repeatedly.

"Y-Yes, sorry, mister." The boy hurried to continue along, but the cars in the other lanes had started moving already, zooming past him at high speed.

However, the driver was enraged; he continued slamming on his car horn, shouting at the top of his lungs. The child looked like he could burst into tears at any moment.

"Stop upsetting my future workforce member!"

Mia aimed a flying kick at the head of the man leaning out of the driver's seat. *Wham!* From there, she smoothly transitioned into a somersault, landing with a solid thump on the roof of his car. After a moment's delay, her cape fluttered down, following its owner, and draped over the car's windshield like a tablecloth, so that it covered it completely.

"Now you listen to me! All the people in this town are under my dominion. The children are the future drones of my workforce. Someday, they will become the limbs that will carry this town forth to greatness. I will not tolerate such

foolish and vicious behavior towards my precious human resources!”

“Ouch... Huh, wha-? Who the hell are you? Where the hell did you appear from?!”

“Where I appeared from matters not! See how the cars around you show no signs of stopping, even though a terrified child stands petrified in the middle of the road? This is precisely what people call ‘moral degeneration’! It’s a modern-day plague! My ideal town has no need for such immoral behavior! And now, I shall put things right!”

The man leaned farther out of the window with a threatening expression and looked up at Mia standing on the roof of the car. “Whatever, just get down from my ca—” In doing so, he had inadvertently peeped right up her skirt. “... Oh...! G-Get down already!” He had almost fallen to the innocent charms of the delicate white lace, but he quickly shook his head and continued harping at Mia.

“Pft, I don’t mind getting down, but only once I have finished what I’m here for. No one shall escape unscathed! ...**O verdant green, turn into shackles!**”

As Mia waved her wand, thin tendrils shot up from underneath the asphalt one after another and wrapped themselves tightly around the oncoming cars.

“Whoa, what in the...?”

“The car won’t move! I-It’s caught in a vine?”

Soon, the area was in an uproar, quickly becoming filled with stuck cars, stalled in the massive green vines slithering about all over the road.

Mia hopped down from the roof of the car and took the child’s hand.

“Come, little one.”

“Ah, er... Okay.” The child nodded. Mia grinned back at him then began confidently walking across the crosswalk.

When they finally reached the sidewalk on the opposite side of the road, the boy looked up at Mia with an awestruck expression on his face, the sparkle in his eyes growing brighter with each passing second.

“Miss, you were super cool! It’s like you can use magic!”

“Wha-?! How did you know?”

That a mere child could figure out her true identity! Mia’s face rapidly drained of color. Her father’s voice rang in her ears, *“If someone discovers your true identity, you have to make them disappear!”*

“Curses! I don’t know how to make people disappear! Do I remove them like pencil markings with an eraser?”

She had never imagined anything like this, and thus couldn’t conjure up a coherent image to use as a base for her magic. However, the words of her father were absolute. Deciding to improvise, Mia readied her wand for spellcasting.

“Muhahaha! I commend you for being able to figure out my true identity! However, I cannot let you walk away with this knowledge! V-Vanish!”

Weaving a spell based off a vague image, she decisively twirled her wand. The next moment, the hat the child was wearing disappeared into thin air. And then it fell right on top of Mia’s head with a plop.

“.....”

“.....”

After a few seconds of awkward silence, the child excitedly clenched his fists, gazing at her in sheer amazement. Mia, meanwhile, was clutching her head in her hands.

“Oh, wow! A real sorceress!”

“N-No, it’s different! The image was different!”

“Hey, you! What are you going to do about this mess?”

While Mia and the boy had been chattering, preoccupied, the drivers had crept up on them from behind, surrounding them. Mia, however, only deigned to grant them a perfunctory stare, and folded her arms, snorting derisively. “I am going to do exactly nothing. I did you all a favor by straightening you out. Surely, you do not mean to try and tell me you hadn’t seen the child, because I will have none of that.”

“Huh? He wasn’t in the lane I was driving in! But whatever, just do something

already!”

The man’s words rubbed Mia the wrong way. She forcefully threw back her cape and ascended into the air with her magic, stopping to stand atop one of the streetlights lining the road.

“This is precisely why I’m saying you lack morals! If a child comes into view, stop the car! Do you not feel bad for him, trapped in the center of the road like that? What were you planning to do if he had panicked and ran out in front of your car, huh?” she said all in one breath, then, realizing something, shook her head frantically. “N-No, that came out wrong, allow me to rephrase that. Not ‘feel bad for him’—‘fear my wrath, for he exists as a component of the workforce under my rule’.”

“Quit yer yappin’ and do something about these vines, ya hear me?”

“Pft. Those are just your regular old vines. If you pull on them hard enough, they will snap right off. You can do that yourselves. Consider this a part of your remedial training. Because it isn’t like I *don’t* know how to make them disappear!” she declared and glided into the air.

“Listen closely! This town is under my dominion. As I am in charge here, I shall not tolerate those who defy the principles I lay down! With this, ladies and gentlemen, I will be off, but all of you must keep up the good work! For the glory of Gealach, the evil organization!”

Having announced all of that, Mia finished her parting speech by flashing her signature pose in midair, then off she flew towards the local police station, laughing maniacally to herself all the while.

THIS left the crowd of people, the boy, and the cars wrapped in vines, to figure out what had just happened on their own. Someone tried giving a vine a tug. Unexpectedly, it snapped off rather easily.

“Oh hey, these are pretty flimsy. I think if you clear off the ones ‘round the tires, you’ll be good to go.”

“Really? ...Oh hey, it’s true!”

The drivers, chattering animatedly among themselves, set to work, ripping the vines off with vigor.

“But hey, don’t you guys think it’s weird? D’ya think she was one of *those*?” The man whom Mia had greeted with a flying kick flared up again, but no one else wanted to think too much about what had just happened. Rather than dwell on things they couldn’t understand even if they tried, they preferred to get their cars running again.

“Damn, guess I’d better get to pulling those off as well...” he conceded.

The rest of the drivers also slowly started returning to their cars. Only the boy, his hat clutched in his hands, was still staring up at the sky.

“A sorceress... So cool...”

He made up his mind to tell all about what had happened to him as soon as he got back home. But upon telling his story, he only received a curt, “There’s no such thing as sorcerers,” from his mother.

“**FOR** the sake of all that is evil, that was a huge detour I ended up making...”

Mia, having found a back alley near the police station, alighted there and stealthily ran to the corner to get a look at the building.

“Now, when will the blasted rangers arrive?”

Even considering the detour she made, the long distance between the riverbank and the police station meant that Mia was probably ahead of them. She was a quick flier and there were no traffic lights in the air anyway. As she was lying in wait, crouched, Mia’s stomach growled pitifully.

“Ugh, I’m starving.” She whipped out her cell phone and checked the time. It showed high noon. “Maybe I have something on me?”

Mia removed her cape and opened the small backpack she wore underneath. As she was feeling around inside it, her hand stumbled upon the dried persimmons she had received that morning from Mrs. Ozawa.

“Right, I had these! I shall have to thank Mrs. Ozawa later. When I succeed in taking over the world, I will reward her with a medal!”

She opened the small bag containing the persimmons and proceeded to eat them. The condensed sweetness of dried fruit was exquisite, while their chewy texture seemed to make her stomach fill quicker. Dried persimmons proved to be excellent rations!

Mia dug into the persimmons with zest. Just as she was sinking her teeth into the third one, she felt a sudden clap on her shoulder from behind.

“...?!”

The persimmon she’d swallowed whole in surprise got stuck in her throat, and she desperately pounded her chest to dislodge it.

“Mm-mmph!”

“What’s the matter? Something went down the wrong pipe?” The person behind her rubbed her back comfortingly.

“M-Mmph... Phew. I thought I was dead... Wait, who are you?” Mia tried to turn, but the mystery person trapped her by wrapping their arms around her from behind. Then a kiss landed on her ear, ripping an involuntary yelp from her.

“Man, asking me who I am, that’s cold! We’ve just met, did you forget already?”

Upon hearing the familiar voice and seeing the familiar jacket sleeves on the arms wrapped around her, Mia realized who it was with a start. “R-Ren, is that you?!”

“Yep! Short time no see, Mia!”

The man standing behind her was none other than Ren, the Green Crow Ranger she had met earlier at the riverbank.

Though wrapped snugly in his arms, Mia whipped out her wand, ready to fire off a speech worthy of a true evil sorceress.

“Ha-ha-ha! That you would approach me of your own volition so brazenly, how foolish of you! Mark my words, Crow Ranger Ren! This here will be your grave—ah!”

Ren blew a gentle breath into her ear; the hairs on the nape of her neck stood

on end. He kept on pressing a kiss to Mia's earlobe, until she began to wriggle in his arms, unable to stand the ticklish sensation anymore.

"Hyah! Stop! Eek!"

"Your ears are so sensitive... Oh, and quit calling me 'Crow Ranger', seriously. You sound like our Chief."

"I have no idea who that person is! And a Crow Ranger is a Crow Ranger! You Gree—ahhn!" Chills ran down Mia's spine at having a warm breath ghost over her ear again.

"If you don't do what I say, I just might do more!"

"Hya-ah! All right, all right, I won't call you that so sto—ah-hah!"

As soon as Mia indicated her compliance, he finally stopped kissing her ear. However, his arms stayed wrapped around her.

"Hey, let me go, will you?!"

"I ain't no fool to release you, knowing you'd attack me with magic if I did. If you try to use some weird magic tricks on me, I'll kiss your ear again!" He lightly nibbled on her ear, as if in warning. Mia's shoulders shuddered involuntarily.

"Stop..."

"Hehe... You're so sensitive, Mia. Some villain you are, going all helpless from just a little ear play. So, whatcha doing here?"

Exhausted from having her ears attacked, Mia felt her body grow heavy and limp, so that she blurted out her scheme before she could stop herself. "I was going to make a pitfall trap..."

"A pitfall trap?"

"Yes, to drop you straight into the pits of Hell..."

"Oh-ho, the pits of Hell!"

At his mocking tone, Mia returned to her senses with a jolt. "A-Anyway, release me at once!"

"If you want to break out from your restraints so badly, why don't you use magic?"

“Huh?” Without thinking, she whipped around inside his arms to face him.

“.....”

“.....”

The sharp sound of a car zooming past cut through the tense silence between them.

“I-I can’t very well do anything with you so close to me!”

“What are you talking about?”

“See, if I make it rain ice-cold water on you, some of it will fall on me too, and if I summon a gust of wind to blow you away, I’ll end up getting blown away right with you.”

“...Hm, I see.” Ren’s face broke out in a devilish grin.

Mia felt a chill of dread run down her spine. Had she made a terrible slip of the tongue just now?

“So if the target’s right next to you, you’ll also suffer damage from your magic? The effect is wide, not direct. Hm, this is a useful piece of information!”

“Damnation!”

“So your magic’s really not an invincible force. But the magic you cast upon yourself, like when you fly, is different.”

“You can tell?!”

The man before her, with a smirk so wide it threatened to split his face, could not possibly be a Champion of Justice. Between the two of them, he looked far more like a villain.

“You know, you’re kind of a...”

“Kind of a what?”

“Kind of a dummy really, or how do I put it, a bit slow.”

“...!”

This pushed Mia’s anger past the boiling point. Not caring that her target was right there beside her, she waved her wand and started chanting, pouring all

her emotions into it. **“With the ground—”**

“Oh hey, Mia! There you are!” A high-pitched voice broke Mia’s concentration.

When she turned around in search of the voice’s source, she discovered Shou and Aya standing next to the police station.

Mia looked up at Ren and emitted an indignant yelp, “Now they found me too! And it’s all your fault!”

“Well, yeah, but it was all over for you from the moment I spotted you.”

Ren, still hugging Mia from behind, adjusted his hold on her so that he was pinning her under his arm. He stood up and started walking towards the police station.

“L-Let me down!”

“Hey, you guys! I’ve just heard something really interesting!”

Mia’s hips stuck out from under his arm, moreover, her back was to Shou and Aya. She twisted her body, flipping around so that she could properly face them.

“You buffoon, you should treat the Supreme Ruler of Evil with more respect! I outrank you!”

“But I’m a Champion of Justice. Considering you’re a villain, I think I’m treating you exactly as I should.”

“Humph, do not look down on me! **O earth, collapse!**”

As Mia cast her spell, imbuing the words with her will, a large hole opened up right under Ren’s feet.

Ren almost lost his balance. “Tch! Whoa!” He clicked his tongue as he struggled to keep himself from falling.

Mia used this opportunity to slip away from him, putting a far greater distance between them than she normally would have, and readied her wand.

“Hah! **Dance, o wind!**”

This time, she uttered the words with a resounding voice. Suddenly, a soft

breeze started dancing around Ren, Shou, and Aya, growing stronger each second, until it was like they were caught in a raging typhoon anchored to where they stood. Then, it started blowing them away, shoving them towards a wall of the police station. However, Ren and Shou, in one fluid motion, angled their bodies so that they landed with their feet against the wall—Shou even managed to support Aya’s body with one of his arms. When the wind died down, they simply stepped back on the ground.

“Wha-?!” Mia, who had used her wind magic with the intention of sending her opponents crashing into the wall, looked utterly baffled at the ease with which her move had been thwarted.

“Wow, you certainly got some nerve to try and defy me like that!”

“What are you talking about? You are my enemy, so me attacking you is only natural!”

Ren glared at Mia with a smile so vicious Mia found herself faltering a bit.

Why was it that Ren, who was supposed to be a Champion of Justice, was the spitting image of a villain, right down to the menacing look in his eyes? On that note, in regards to impressions gathered from their outward appearance, Shou looked like the cute, softhearted type of guy, while Aya had an air of mature beauty about her. Shou, who looked so soft at first glance, smiled affably at Mia.

“Mia, you can’t do that! If you cause too much mischief, I’ll sic Ren on you!”

“Some shabby Champion of Justice you are.” Aya eyed Shou, scandalized.

Just as Mia was giving her wand a whirl to cast another spell, someone called her name from directly behind her out of the blue. “Mia.”

“Aiee!” Mia involuntarily jumped.

When she turned around, she saw Subaru, who had snuck up on her at some point, looking down on her. He was very tall, well over six feet. He was also pretty big. Taken together, he was like a wall. Indeed, it would be stranger to *not* be shocked by having such a wall-like man creep up on you from behind. Yet, contrary to his large physique, Subaru’s voice was rather small.

He quietly asked, “Mia, what have you eaten for lunch?”

“Huh?” Mia stared at him blankly, taken aback by this completely unexpected question.

At that moment, Ren, who had moved to stand next to Mia again before she had realized it, apparently remembered something and butted in, “Oh yeah, Mia, you were eating something when I spotted you, was that your lunch? What did you have?”

“N-None of your business. Aah—aiee! Hya!”

Ren pulled her against him once more, pressing another kiss to her ear. “I told you I’d kiss you again if you didn’t do what I asked, didn’t I?”

“Hya-ha-ha, stop it! I had d-dried persimmons! Dried persimmons!”

“Dried persimmons?” Ren uttered right next to her ear in disbelief.

Wriggling her way out of Ren’s arms, Mia tried to flee the scene. However, a large arm stretched out before her, blocking her means of escape. It was Subaru. Where did he appear from again? As he fixed a grip on Mia’s wrist, he scrutinized her.

And then he opened his mouth hesitantly, murmuring, “Eating only dried persimmons for lunch is bad for you. Growing children like you need to eat more.”

“M-Mind your own business! **O light, pour down with the rain!**” Twirling her wand energetically, Mia fired a spell that required a considerable amount of magical power. One of her ‘killer moves’, so to speak.

A blinding light flashed around Mia, forming a ring not unlike an angel’s halo, and gently floated up into the sky. From there, the ring spread wide before bursting into tiny droplets of light, which poured down like rain towards the ground.

“Ooh!”

“Wow!”

“How pretty!”

“A rain of light, huh?”

While the group of four was busy being mesmerized by the fairytale-like display before them, Mia escaped into the air. From up above, she struck a daunting pose with her arms folded, clearly proud of herself. “Did you see that? It was one of the great magical arts of darkness, ‘Solassi’!”

“Solar seed?”

“It’s ‘Solassi’! It means ‘light and fairies’! I properly looked it up in the dictionary when I was thinking up a name for it!”

“Your naming sense is weirdly off. Like with that drai-whatever thing?”

“It’s ‘Draiocht’!”

It appeared as if she and Ren were performing a fast-paced comedic skit, but Mia was actually seriously and profoundly irate. Abruptly, she tossed her cape behind her, still floating in midair. This time, she consciously kept a distance so that no one could see up her skirt or sneak up on her.

“Anyway! I will leave it at this today! The next time we meet will be the end of you Crow Rangers!”

“Oh, so that great magical art of darkness or whatever was just a means of escape? So much for being called ‘great’.”

“Shut up, shut UP! This is the first time I’ve used this much magic in one day! Which is why my magical powers are, er...”

“...Your magical powers are?” Ren used his teasing voice again, to which Mia responded by sulking and avoiding his gaze.

“Ah, maybe you ran out of magical powers, like cars run out of gasoline?”

The expression Mia made at Shou’s words made it apparent that he had hit the nail on the head.

“N-No, see, it’s like... Augh! I’ll get you for this!” Mia spat a line like sore loser would and took off flying, clearly on the verge of crying.

“**OH** dear, now you made her cry. Shou, you shouldn’t pick on her too much!”

Aya reprimanded.

“Yeah, but she’s so easy to mess with! The payoff is just too good, ehehehe.” Shou, whose evil smirk rivaled Ren’s, let out a chuckle.

“What a pity, I wanted to remind her to use an extra blanket when sleeping because the nights are still cold,” Subaru said in a concerned tone of voice.

“Subaru, you’re totally acting like her big brother!” Ren stuffed his hands in his trouser pockets, laughing at Subaru as he stared in the direction Mia had taken off in.

“Huh? Where’s Misaki, by the way?”

“He ran off to go on a date,” Aya answered, “I noticed he was in a particularly foul mood today, and it turns out he’s supposed to have a date with this girl he’s been in a long-distance relationship with for the past four years, so no wonder he’s been on edge...”

“Oh. I’m amazed he can do long-distance. Mad respect,” Ren folded his arms and nodded deeply, probably expressing heartfelt admiration. He knew he definitely wouldn’t be able to keep a long-distance relationship.

“Well everyone but Misaki’s here, so since it was our first outing as Champions of Justice and all, why don’t we go report to our chief?”

They nodded in unison to Shou’s proposal and headed into the police station.

Chapter 2: Secret Life is Supreme Ruler of Evil; Real Life is...?

IN Mia's dreams, she always saw her father going through his daily activities. In some, she saw her father donning his black cape and explaining proper décor for a Supreme Ruler of Evil. In others, he taught Mia many day-to-day lessons on how to use magic, how to properly create images and apply magic to them, how to think as the Supreme Ruler of Evil, how important world domination was. These dreams replayed endlessly each night, serving as both time together with her now deceased father, and tutoring on her purpose in the world.

"Mia, the world is so vast that it seems to remain unchanging, yet it is not so. Slowly but surely, it is heading towards destruction."

"Yes, Father."

Every day, Mia had given the same answer. She had no objections or rebuttals for her father's words. His words meant everything to her, because his values had truly passed on to her, not because she simply owed obedience to her parent. But you could also say their relationship had been one of codependency.

"Someone must put a stop to that destruction. World domination is a 'necessary evil'. We must purposely don the title of evil and conquer the world in order to protect this blue planet, even if that means being resented by humanity as a whole. This is the duty we bear as sorcerers."

"Yes, Father."

Truth be told, Mia hadn't understood the entirety of what he was always saying. All the same, as she'd been given the same speech every day throughout her lessons, she already knew the words by heart, even if she didn't comprehend their full meaning. She just hadn't been that sharp. Someday. Someday she should be able to truly understand. When she grew up, she would surely come to grasp the full extent of Father's words. Mia kept on believing

that, so she had listened to what her father had told her every day and committed it to memory.

“There is an organization that stands in our way. If we are evil, they, of course, are good. However, it is only due to their status as mankind’s champions that they are seen as ‘good’, just as we are ‘evil’ only because we are mankind’s enemies. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Father.”

The Champions of Justice. They will inevitably appear to thwart an evil organization’s ambitions. We are the blessed, the chosen ones of the world. This is why we always fight alone. Because the ‘Champions of Justice’ fear *our* powers, they band together and come in numbers. The reason they flock to each other is because they are weak. There is no other way for the powerless masses to resist in the face of great power.

We are the mightiest of all on this world. The strong have no need to join forces with anyone. That is why we are always alone. However, there’s no need for us to feel lonely. We *must not* feel loneliness. To harbor such sentiment would bring disgrace upon us as the mightiest of Earth. Therefore, this emotion is forbidden.

“That is why, Mia, you must not hesitate. You must not doubt. Even if the world domination we are plotting is bad for mankind, it is good for Gaea. Therefore, you must not give in, no matter how hard the Champions of Justice try to stop you. Until that fateful day, to protect the world, you shall have to use the great magical art of darkness, just like I taught you!”

“Yes, Father!”

The father had looked at his daughter earnestly, and the daughter had, in turn, looked up at the father with absolute trust shining in her eyes. Her father was her whole world... That is, until the day she had lost him. Now all she had were her dreams.

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! Mia’s eyes snapped open upon hearing the brisk chirps of the electronic clock. Slowly waking up, she turned off the alarm clock near her

mattress. With a stretch and a yawn, she got up, rolled up the bedding, put it in the closet, then changed into her uniform before opening the sliding screen into the next room.

When she opened the curtains in the living room and looked out the window, she noted that the weather was perfect without a cloud in sight and the sparrows were warbling happily.

“Hm, it seems like it’s going to be sunny. I’d better hang my laundry out to dry before leaving.”

Having decided upon a course of action, she set the washing machine on quick wash. While the washer was running, she made breakfast, which meant she smeared margarine on six pieces of nicely browned toast and poured some milk into a cup. Sitting at the table, she gobbled it all down. Then, in the time left before the laundry finished, she went through her morning routine.

The routine. That was Mia’s important duty as a sorceress.

She opened an antiquated small decorative wooden box, a coffret, and took out a piece of fabric resembling a wrapping cloth, like the ones usually used for wrapping up bento box lunches. She spread out the magic shroud on the living room floor and stood on it. The fabric the shroud was made of was black, with a symbol of sorts embroidered upon it in red thread. Standing atop it, she took a deep breath and visualized an image of her body cradled in light that softly illuminated everything around her. She had been doing this routine every day ever since she had been a child, so this particular image came to her as naturally as breathing.

When the image in her head took on a concrete shape, Mia chanted the spell. There were no fixed words. After all, words were nothing more than a medium through which spells manifested in this world.

“O shield of steel, cover my body!”

The moment those words left her lips, Mia’s form emitted a faint glow, which enveloped her from head to toe before disappearing, as if it’d been absorbed into her body. But Mia could sense there was now something invisible covering her. She gave a satisfied nod at its unmistakable feel. This was protective magic she had learned from her father. It was called a defensive barrier, and it offered

exceptional protection against all sorts of harm.

With its help, the powerful shock she had received from Misaki's stun gun yesterday would be reduced to a slight prickle of static electricity, and if someone were to stab her with a knife, or hit her with a car, not a single wound would appear. If she were to stumble and fall down on the pavement, her knees would remain without injury. According to her father, even if she were hit by a bomb, she would only have the wind knocked out of her.

All in all, it was a very important spell to Mia, who would be continually forced into battle. The effect dissipated overnight, so she had to cast it anew every morning. After all, there was no way of knowing when and where *they* would appear next to drag her into another fight. Though...

"A defensive barrier is all good and well, but can it not defend me against ear-kiss attacks and other sorts of...lip touching?!"

Mia's knees weakened as she hunched dejectedly on the shroud. She had complete trust in the protective barrier's defensive abilities. It could block any number of attacks meant to inflict physical pain, like Misaki's stun gun. Touch, though, was not an *attack*. Remembering the way Ren's kiss had felt, Mia quivered. She had to do something about that! If he did that to her again, she would really be helpless. Her mind would go blank, she wouldn't be able to concentrate, and, worst of all, it would send shivers down her spine!

"I should make it my foremost priority to devise a way of dealing with his tendency to touch me..." She sighed and lifted the magic shroud off the floor. There was a light layer of dust covering its backside now, so she gave the fabric a few firm shakes to remove it.

"Mm, I should probably clean up a bit during the next holiday. World domination is no child's play. Managing a household while simultaneously trying to achieve a long-standing ambition is hard work, that much is certain. However, I must not complain!" She nodded emphatically to herself. Not long after that, an electronic sound rang out, signaling that her laundry was done.

MIA Oonari was the Supreme Ruler of Evil and the Sorceress of Darkness, but that was her true face. The façade she hid behind was that of a *high school*

student. Mia was a junior, and while she was once actually quite plain looking, just like all girls, as soon as she hit seventeen, she had blossomed into an attractive young lady.

The school she attended was a fifteen-minute walk away from her apartment. On the way there, she spotted some students wearing the same uniform walking in small groups.

“Mia!” Someone called out to her from behind.

When Mia turned around, she saw a girl with shoulder-length hair, tied up into two neat buns, waving her hand as she scurried up to her.

“Morning!”

“Miss Kubo? Why, good morning to you too.”

As Mia bowed her head lightly in greeting, the girl whose surname was Kubo—beamed at her and started walking next to her.

“You’re always so polite and formal, Mia! The weather is so nice, isn’t it? I just love this time of the year! Not long from now, the rainy season will begin, and after that the heat will kick in... Don’t you just hate it?”

“Yeah, I’m not a big fan of hot weather either. Means chilled noodles for dinner every night.”

Kubo gave an amused laugh at Mia’s answer, and agreed that she’d get sick of that really quickly too.

It was no secret from her classmates that Mia’s father had died a few months ago. At first she’d received pitying looks but, partly due to her positive attitude, everyone now treated her as if nothing had changed.

It’s natural to feel sorrow when you lose your father. However, Mia had inherited her father’s will and possessed an ambition she had to fulfill no matter what. She had no time to grieve. It wouldn’t make Father happy if she did.

Mia was an ordinary high school student, but once she returned home, she had to work hard as the Supreme Ruler of Evil and the Sorceress of Darkness to take over the world.

“Hey, Mia, if you still have time after school, come to the kitchen! Our Home

Ec. Club will be making meat and potato stew, but we always make too much, so I'll let you have some!"

"Wha-? Really?! Thank you so much! I'll be sure to go!" Mia swerved her head toward Kubo with wide, sparkling eyes. Pleasantly surprised, Kubo giggled and nodded affirmatively.

When I achieve world domination, I will give you a medal for the meritorious deed of sharing stew with me, Kubo! Mia mentally commended her classmate's kindheartedness.

Now, Mia's brain was ordinary in just about every way: she neither excelled nor drastically failed at anything. Extremely unremarkable with average grades. That was the impression she was aiming for too—or so went her story. To the outside world, she was a high school student; therefore, she had to maintain an unspectacular lifestyle so that she could blend into the crowd without standing out.

Mia kept telling herself that it wasn't just an excuse for her persistent failure to obtain above-average grades, but, in the end, the answer to the question of whether she could get full marks if she tried was likely negative. Mia's athletic skills were mediocre as well. Not that they were particularly bad, but they were nothing to write home about. Mia was thus entirely convinced that she had succeeded in fitting in with the ordinary people. It was just that no one else shared that belief.

"MIA, come quick!"

"What's the matter?"

Lunch break. Mia had been munching on her onigiri set with side dishes, when a girl from her class had come running up to her. Panting to regain her breath, the girl spoke urgently, "Some freshmen are getting beaten up by seniors behind the school! I think they're about to get shaken down for their money!"

"What did you say?!" Mia surged from her chair.

With a salmon onigiri, the last one from the set she had ordered, still clutched in her hand, she ran after the classmate who led her to where the incident was

taking place.

Behind the school building. Why did this particular place attract the school delinquents like a magnet, serving as the background for all sorts of trouble? Was that a curse cast upon all the schools in Japan? Mia was going to build flowerbeds behind school buildings and turn it into a place where everyone could rest and relax once she had successfully conquered the world.

When Mia and the girl arrived, they saw five boys crowding three other male students against the wall, threatening them.

“...So, ya see? We got no dough! Ya know, school started, so we ain’t got no more time ta work. Ya got some cash though, yah? C’mon, gimme that pocket money!”

“B-But we don’t have a-any!”

“Cut the bull, ‘kay? We know yer family’s rich. If ya ain’t got any on ya, then go ‘ome and bring some!”

“Yeah, yeah, you just gotta take some outta yer parents’ fat wallets!”

The situation was getting out of hand. Mia’s face hardened. The three boys were quivering against the wall, scared out of their minds, about to burst into tears. One of them had probably already had his wallet taken away, since two of the five bullies were busy perusing the contents of a stylish billfold.

“Lookie ‘ere, a five-thousand-yen bill! Meh, where’s the good stuff at? This is, like, one visit to a karaoke bar!”

“I know, right? We wanna see some big bucks! Hey, nerd, bring some of ‘em tomorrow, ya hear?”

“Augh...” the boy moaned.

Mia couldn’t bear to watch anymore. She sprinted in their direction, and, utilizing the momentum, gave the delinquent terrorizing the three boys a swift kick in the back of the knees. His knees gave out and he stumbled. Using this opening, she tackled him from the back, toppling him forward. BAM! Then, planting a firm leg on his back, she cockily looked back at the four other bullies, folding her arms.

“Hmph,” she scoffed, glowering at them derisively. “What a rotten bunch! Do you even realize how trivial and petty this is? Grinning like idiots over a mere five-thousand-yen note, you mediocre gangster wannabe brats!”

“Oonari, you again?!”

Mia and the gang of delinquents had their fair share of run-ins, so they knew each other’s faces. She had warned them multiple times, but since they never listened, Mia had to come take them down every time. Probably no one at their school hated each other’s guts more than Mia and this group of punks did.

“And I was just eating lunch, too! Look! At! This!” Mia shoved the salmon onigiri she’d grabbed in a hurry in the faces of the seniors. Both the senior bullies and their freshman victims regarded the rice ball she held out for their observation with bewilderment.



“This is my absolute favorite! My top three onigiri are as follows: pickled plum is third, salted cod roe comes second. And the coveted first place belongs to salmon! However, just when I was about to enjoy my precious, I got called here! Can you imagine my indignation? Why is it that every time you try to steal money, it has to be during lunch break of all times? How many times do you have to get in the way of me enjoying my well-earned, delightful noon recess before you’re satisfied, huh?!”

At first overwhelmed by the outburst of her fiery tirade, the boys only scowled at Mia. But eventually they snapped back at her.

“HUUUH?! Why don’cha stop coming then? Every time we’re ‘bout to enjoy our well-earned, delightful noon extortion, ya gotta ruin it for us! Ya know what, this time, we’re gonna mess ya up! Yer gonna feel so sorry yer a girl!”

It looked like Mia wasn’t the only one with complaints against the other party. After their proclamation, one of the thugs decided to get down to business and aimed a fist at Mia. But he didn’t expect Mia would raise her hand to catch the blow. Just as the hit made no sound, Mia showed no sign of flinching. The bully’s fist touched Mia’s palm gently, like a palm of a baby reaching for its mother.

Normally, it should hurt—this was a big guy throwing a punch at full force. If an ordinary girl of Mia’s stature had borne its full brunt, she would have felt it reverberate all the way down to her bones, leaving her with a nasty bruise if not worse.

Mia, though, was wearing a defensive barrier. It was invisible to a normal human’s eye, but the magical protection it offered was absolute, and prevented her from suffering any damage without fail.

“Tch! What the heck *are* you?!”

“It’s not my fault you can’t throw a decent punch. Now, how about I teach you a lesson? YAH!” Mia pushed the flat of her palm into her opponent’s chest. And then she murmured under her breath, “**Softly float up!**”

There was a gentle whooshing sound, and then, seemingly by Mia’s push, the boy’s body was sent flying and crashed into the school building’s wall.

“OW! Damn, that hurt!”

The delinquent slid down the wall, landing on his rear end; the freshman students stared at Mia, slack-jawed. How could such a thin, frail, harmless-looking girl hurl a hulking senior male student through the air like that, with just one hand, no less...!

Of course, Mia didn't actually possess the physical prowess necessary to accomplish such a feat of strength. She was secretly using magic. As she needed her wand to channel spells properly, she could only use magic based on the simplest of images alone, but it was sufficient against such small fry. Just like Ren had conjectured, her spells had an area-wide effect, so they invariably affected her as well. However, thanks to the protective barrier, its effect had been nullified—and it helped that the spell she had used was so small-scale.

This meant that when Ren had pulled Mia into his arms, all she'd had to do was use a small spell like that to have gotten away from him. The fact that she wouldn't even dare to imagine using such a weak spell against a foe as powerful as a Champion of Justice characterized what kind of a person she was perfectly.

“Oonari! Why you lil’—”

The three other hooligans pounced on Mia all at once. The girl turned her back on them as if to run and sprinted towards the nearest corner, disappearing behind it. Without thinking, the bullies chased after her. However, as they turned the corner, they met a powerful jet of water hitting them with great velocity.

“WAAH!”

“Wh-Whoa! What the heck is this?! W-Water?!”

Mia had grabbed the head of a hose used for watering the school lawns, put it on jet setting, and was now spraying her pursuers down. She had the foresight to ask the classmate who led her there to go and extend the hose as close as possible to where Mia was having a showdown with the gang.

“Time to wash down the trash!” Mia declared with a cherubic grin. Faced with an unexpected water attack, the delinquents were thrown completely off balance and lost their nerve.

Then, suddenly, a voice called out, “What is going on here?!”

Several teachers came running towards them. The seniors panicked, “Oh, damn!” and burst into a sprint, but with their sopping wet clothes getting in the way, they didn’t make it very far before the teachers apprehended them and led them away.

“Um, thank you so much for helping us!” The students, who had been on the verge of having their money stolen, bowed their heads to Mia in gratitude.

Mia crossed her arms and nodded simply.

“You don’t seem to have any serious injuries, but did they do anything to you?”

“Not really, I mean, they gave my wallet back... It hurts a bit where they hit me on the shoulder, but I think we’re fine otherwise!”

“I’m glad to hear that!” Mia smiled sweetly at the relieved students.

Smirking was reserved for the times when she went into her ‘Supreme Ruler of Evil’ mode. The three boys regarded her kind smile with reverence.

“Could you tell us your name, please?”

“Oh, I’m Mia Oonari, a sophomore. If they ever bother you again, be sure to tell me or a teacher! I do not like it when something gets in the way of my lunch, but I hate lowlifes like that even more.”

“A-All right, Miss Oonari!”

She had proud eyes and soft black hair with a slight hint of chocolate brown, with just one side drawn back into a loose ponytail. Her small form somehow exuded an inexplicably dependable presence full of poise and dignity. As the boys admired her with starry eyes, Mia’s classmates rushed up to her from behind, crushing her in a flurry of bear hugs.

“Eek!”

“Yay! Mia, you were amazing!”

“So, so, SO cool! You are incredible! Mia, you’re our hero!”

Mia barely protected her precious onigiri from being squashed flat as her neck

and waist were clamped in a viselike grip by two girls. Mia Oonari might secretly be the ‘Supreme Ruler of Evil’, but by her peers, she was widely recognized as a ‘Champion of Justice’. She, however, remained blissfully ignorant of that fact.

Mia just disliked immoral types that engaged in unreasonable violence against weaker beings, so she beat them up. That was all there was to it. However, to those ‘weaker ones’, she was a true Champion of Justice. Mia Oonari was indeed an unexceptional student without remarkable achievements in either studies or sports, but in this one area she did stand out quite a bit. Those who she had saved and those who had seen her fight—all of them looked up to her, even idolized her. Mia strived to live an outwardly ordinary life, but unbeknown to her, she had failed miserably. She was so universally admired at her school that people referred to her as a ‘modern day superhero’.

A few days passed since the school incident, and the weekend finally rolled in. After tidying up her apartment, Mia went out. Today she would put her duties as the Supreme Ruler of Evil off for a bit, because there was something she needed to research first.

I have to look it up before they find me! Them as in the Champions of Justice, or the Crow Rangers, naturally.

Anticipating the worst, Mia had stashed her wand and cape in her trusty backpack. With those on hand, she would have no trouble fighting them should they indeed materialize before her.

Walking down the road to school, she reached a library situated in its vicinity and entered.

“The thing I want to know is fairly vague; I hope I can find something.”

Locating the library catalog terminal, Mia walked over and typed in the keywords on an LCD screen: tactics, strategy, rivalry.

Most of the books that came up in the results were about management, but there were several treatises on the art of war among them as well. She didn’t know which would contain the answers she was seeking, so she decided to start at the book closest to her and go from there.

Some time passed. After a while, Mia discovered how she could oppose the Crow Rangers. *This is it!* She didn't dare raise her voice inside a library, so she just pumped an imaginary fist to avoid drawing attention to herself.

The book she had stumbled upon was Sun Tzu's collection of aphorisms. The girl was wowed by how much useful advice it offered.

Mia, who lived by the motto 'no sooner thought than done', put the book away and dashed for the restroom, where she took out the items she had the foresight to bring from her backpack. She hastily donned the cape, took the wand in her hand, and, just like that, headed back out towards the library doors. The woman at the front desk raised her eyebrows at the emergence of a strange girl wearing cute, girly clothes that clashed with the long black cape trailing on the ground behind her from the restroom. Mia, however, paid it no mind and walked boldly across the floor, glided out of the doors, gracefully turned the corner, then jogged to the back of the building.

"Fly the skies!" As she wove together the words of the spell, her body softly lifted in the air.

Mia continued ascending until the library began to look small like a toy house. Then, after confirming which way to go, she took off flying at great speed.

She was headed for the police station located on the main street. Landing in a back alley, Mia made sure to check that there was no one behind her before formulating her plan.

If anyone in the station discovered she was the Supreme Ruler of the evil organization Gealach, she would surely be in for a world of trouble. She needed a disguise! Mia stuffed the cape she had just put on and her wand back into her backpack, and tied her hair up in a high ponytail. Then, procuring it from the backpack's side pocket, she put on black-rimmed fake glasses. To finish the look, she further added a black cap, tugging it as far down over her head as it would go.

She checked out her appearance in a hand mirror and nodded, satisfied with her efforts. "This is perfect! I look exactly like an ordinary citizen!"

After taking a moment to psych herself up, she entered the police station.

Once inside, she saw two female police officers at the reception desk looking through some paperwork.

Mia approached them and uttered a tentative, “Um...” to draw their attention.

“Yes, how can I help you?” One of the officers raised her head with a winning smile.

“I-I would like to inquire about an officer who works here.”

“I’m sorry, but may I ask your name first, please? Did you have trouble with one of our officers? Could you please tell me the reason you’re looking for them?”

Mia balked. Now that she thought about it, there was no way a police station receptionist would willingly give out information about their coworker just like that.

“U-Um, er, my name is Mia Oonari, and... NOOO! I said it again!”

Since her real name had slipped her tongue, there was no meaning to her disguise anymore. The female police officer observed Mia, who was clutching her head, with suspicion.

“U-Uh, R-Ren. There is an officer by the name of Ren working here! A-And, well, I, he...”

“Ren? What about him?” A voice questioned, coming from not behind the desk but right beside Mia.

When she turned her head to its source, she saw a middle-aged man studying her. He wasn’t wearing a uniform, just a white shirt, a crooked necktie, and slacks held up by suspenders, making for a sloppy overall appearance.

Mia felt panic rising in her chest, and started sputtering.

“R-Ren, he... Uh... K-Kissed me, and... H-hugged me, and... Ki-Kissed me o-on the ear, and... S-So, er—”

“Oh... A twenty-six-year-old man did all that to a young girl such as yourself? We cannot very well ignore that. That is indecent assault, not to mention that it is in direct violation of the Juvenile Protection Ordinance. If you decide to press

charges, it will cause quite the uproar. After all, we're talking about an officer of the law harassing a minor." He touched his hand to his chin, nodding, and then moved his hand to Mia's shoulder, pointing in the direction of a room in the back.

"E-Excuse me?!"

"Well, young lady, why don't we talk somewhere more private. All right?" He turned to the receptionist. "Oh, and you, bring us some tea, will you?"

"Y-Yes, sir." The receptionist stopped gaping and nodded respectfully to the man before rushing off to the office kitchenette.

The man steered Mia into the room he had pointed to. "By the way, Ren's on leave due to the public holiday. He'll come if I call him in though. Would you like me to do that?"

"N-No! His absence is actually beneficial to my sche—Ah, er, I mean, f-fine with me!" As Mia was waving both hands at the man, the officer she had talked to first walked in with steaming mugs of tea.

Mia took one and downed it quickly in a few small gulps, the gentle aroma of green tea helping her calm down.

"So," the man prompted Mia, having emptied his mug as well, "did you come here to file a sexual harassment complaint against Ren?"

"Eh?! N-No, I-I actually wanted to inquire about Ren's, or the others' personal details..."

"Oh?" The man, faintly amused, raised an eyebrow and folded his arms. "'The others', you say? I hope you don't mean to say that we're talking group molestation here! That would be a very grave matter indeed."

"M-Molestation?! No, that is not it at all! But I have to find out more about them, no matter what. I'll be happy with whatever you can offer me, so, please!" Mia bowed her head to the man.

Bowing her head to a police officer, her enemy, was very humiliating, but as things stood, he was the only one who would hear Mia out and the only one she could turn to for help with her inquiry.

As Sun Tzu had said, *“If you know your enemy and know yourself, you will never be defeated.”* Mia had taken inspiration from this saying that, in other words, meant ‘know thy enemy’. If you have a firm grasp of your own as well as your enemies’ strengths and weaknesses, you would naturally know how to counteract their every move. Provided your understanding was deep enough, you could battle them a hundred times and yet always come out on top. Such wise words to live by!

Knowing oneself wasn’t really a problem as she knew herself better than anyone else. What was crucial here was knowing the enemy, and that was precisely the reason why she had decided to infiltrate enemy territory—the police station, to be precise.

“Hmm... ‘No matter what’, huh? May I smoke?” When Mia nodded, indicating permission to go ahead, he apologized for the smell and lit up a cigarette. After enjoying its taste for a while, the man gingerly rested the cigarette on the ashtray and stared at Mia, scrutinizing her.

“U-Um?”

“Huh? Oh, er, right. Well, first of all, how about you tell me who those ‘others’ are?”

Mia honestly told him the names—Misaki, Ren, Subaru, Shou, and Aya. The man earnestly nodded along, an appreciative smile growing on his lips, and hummed, “I see. You meant those five. Haha, you are a very straightforward girl, no beating around the bush with you, huh, Mia?”

“M-Mia?! How do you—”

“Eh? Well, you did introduce yourself, remember? At the reception desk?”

“Eek! Did you overhear me?” Mia clutched her head in her hands again.

The man chortled, his shoulders shaking from laughter, and took another drag of his cigarette. Then he tapped on it lightly with his finger, and, changing his expression to a rather sinister one, uttered, “Okay.”

Mia, incredulous at this unexpected answer, raised her head and quizzically cocked it to the side.

“I will tell you about them, Mia. Nothing very detailed, though.”

“R-Really? My deepest gratitude, sir!”

The man snickered at Mia’s instantly brightened face. “I’d get into trouble if I gave you their files, so we’ll have to do this verbally. That’s not a problem, I hope?”

“Not at all! I have my notebook and pen with me!”

Mia zealously rummaged through her backpack to retrieve said items, and the man happily proceeded to regale her with basic information on the five people in question.

“Uh-huh, uh-huh... I see. Right! I did not expect you to divulge this much! Thank you from the bottom of my heart, sir!”

“If you’re okay with this much, no thanks needed at all! So, decided where you want to strike first?” The man asked Mia, having accompanied her to the exit to see her off. She had excused herself immediately after getting what she had been looking for, and had been bowing her head to him politely, about to part ways, when she heard the question. Without a second thought, Mia diligently flipped through her records.

“...I was thinking of starting with the most mysterious among them, Subaru.”

“Subaru, huh? A fine choice! Aya’s also a nice one. Shou and Ren are, well... They’re not bad people, but they do like to have fun at other people’s expense, so they’re quite tiring to be around when you’re not used to them. And then there’s Misaki...”

Mia solemnly nodded along to the man’s words and confirmed the section on Misaki in her notebook.

The man flashed her a conspiratorial smile. “He’s a little hardheaded, but he can be reasoned with. He’s a very decent guy. Anyway, good luck with everything!”

“Thank you!” Mia openly showed her appreciation, looking up at the man with stars in her eyes.

What a wonderful person! Even though she had come in disguise, he gave her

intelligence on her enemies without further prying. *Foe or not, he has my eternal gratitude*, thought Mia as she tightly clutched the notebook to her chest.

“Well then, I will be going.”

“Okay. ...Oh, just one more thing. Mia, are you feeling all right?”

“Huh?!” Perplexed by the sudden question, Mia turned around to quizzically gaze at the man.

With the same inscrutable smile he’d had on before, the man tapped the cigarette box he produced from his breast pocket with his finger and asked casually, as if they were talking about the weather, “Aren’t you tired after suddenly using so much magic? There’s a limit to how much you can spend in one day, right? Don’t be reckless!”

Mia froze, gaping at him, unable to process what he had just said. The man guffawed at her dumbstruck form, finished smoking a new cigarette, and retreated back into the station, throwing a “See you around” to the petrified girl.

FLOATING in midair, Mia tilted her head to the side in contemplation, her arms folded over her chest. She was in her normal outfit again, which meant the cape and the wand made their usual appearance.

“What was that person talking about? Is the amount of magic I can spend in one day really limited? Father never told me anything like that. When I used a lot of magic during the last holiday, I did feel drained though. Hmm...” Mia pondered this question for a while, but nothing came to mind.

Her father had been teaching her how to use magic every day, and while there were some dos and don’ts, he had never mentioned anything about a restriction on the amount of magical power per a day. To Mia, Father’s words were absolute. If he didn’t deem it worth touching upon, then it likely wasn’t applicable to Mia.

“He was probably just looking out for me. How nice of him to show me this much kindness, even though we are supposed to be adversaries!” Mia nodded

vigorously, feeling moved.

Maybe not everyone at the police station was her enemy.

“Well, enough about that, now is the time for action! I cannot let the precious holiday go to waste, for it is the perfect opportunity to come one step closer to world domination!”

She took the notebook out of her pocket and looked up Subaru’s address. Apparently, he lived alone in an apartment complex that, by some strange twist of fate, was situated right next to Mia’s.

“So we’ve been practically neighbors all along! We are apt to overlook important things that lie near at hand,” mused Mia sagely, happy to put the saying she had found while researching at the library to use.

When your foe was that close, it would be easy to spy on them. Thus she should keep tabs on Subaru’s daily activities and discover his weak points!

“It would be great if his weaknesses are easy to notice and take advantage of, like being afraid of dogs or hating brussels sprouts.”

If he were afraid of dogs, she could gather all the dogs in the neighborhood with her dog-calling magic and make them chase him; if he hated brussels sprouts, she could sneak a pot before his door, plant their seeds there, and use growth-enhancing magic on them to make him taste Brussels Sprouts Hell. As these colorful visions danced in her head, she felt a manic grin take over her face.

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Weakness! How sweet the sound of this word! Well now, let’s go and find yours, Subaru!” Mia headed towards the Crow Ranger’s apartment, laughing uncontrollably to herself.

The housing complex he lived in consisted of a series of one-room apartments meant for single people. Subaru’s was supposed to be located on the second floor, in the southern corner.

Still hovering in midair, she ventured a peek through his window, but the curtains were tightly drawn.

“Darn, I can’t even see whether he is still sleeping or out.”

According to the nice man from the police station, Subaru was supposed to be off-duty, resting from the previous day spent at work. Mia decided to alight at the rear of his building and walk up to his door on foot.

“...Well, let’s find out!”

Mia climbed up the stairs, her cape almost catching on the steps, and walked straight towards the room Subaru lived in. She barely pressed the bell to the side of the door before bolting back toward the stairs, peeking her head out cautiously to see what would happen—a ding-dong ditch in all but name. The intercom, stayed silent, and no one opened the door either.

“I take it he is out, then,” Mia sighed.

She checked her notes again, and it turned out that the rest of the group also lived relatively nearby. Mia entertained the thought of investigating other members for a brief moment, but she hated the idea of being discovered first while wandering around the neighborhood in search of them. Not like she minded fighting, but she really wanted to uncover the weak point of at least one Crow Ranger first.

“Well, I suppose I have no choice but to lie in wait for him here.”

She reasoned that he would return home once the sun began to set, so she moved to an alleyway running across from the apartment complex and started waiting for Subaru. Ten, thirty, then fifty minutes passed...

Ow, my legs, Mia stood up, rubbing her legs that were about to cramp.

She did get rid of the numbness that spread across her calves by standing up, but the overall leg strain remained. She had no idea that staying crouched for a prolonged period of time would hurt so much. Standing upright, she soon discovered, wasn’t much better—her legs started *literally* aching for a rest. She had seen police officers on a stakeout so many times before on TV, but now that she knew what it was really like, she felt a newfound respect for law-enforcement agents—this was really tough.

Mia heaved a weary sigh and plopped down on the asphalt. It was hard and cold, and she would end up with a sore backside eventually, but at least it helped alleviate her leg pain.

Why isn't he back yet? Where did he disappear to anyway? She had yet to see anyone come and go to or from the housing complex. It was a holiday, so it made sense for the residents to be out and about.

She briefly toyed with the idea of returning to her own apartment for a while, but she couldn't afford to be idle and waste the precious little free time the holiday afforded her. She had to find out as many weak points as she could, as fast as she could—because there was an ambition she needed to realize. *World domination*. She couldn't rest until she saw it through to completion.

Fighting alone sure is hard, Mia thought, feeling a tiny spark of *loneliness* prick in her chest. The moment she became aware of it, she shook her head vehemently. She ought not to feel lonely. She ought not to feel forlorn. She was not allowed to experience those emotions, for she was a 'mighty one'. It was a disgrace to her as the Supreme Ruler of Evil.

She rested her forehead on her knees and peered at the apartment building. ...There was no sign of movement. Eventually, her eyelids started to feel leaden, her eyes fluttering closed. She mustn't sleep, she had no time for this! However, Mia couldn't fight the drowsiness overtaking her anymore, and within minutes she was fast asleep, lightly snoring.

"MIA, Mia!"

Someone was tapping her cheeks lightly.

"M-Mm—"

"Mia, wake up. You'll catch a cold if you sleep here."

"A cold? Never had one in my li—Huh?" Mia slowly opened her eyes, roused from her slumber by the gentle touch of a large hand.

She stared vacantly at the man before her, who wore a concerned expression. Well-built, tall, with a homely, kind face—

"WAAAH!" Mia jumped to her feet with a start.

The well-built man, Subaru, stood up as well, and looked down at the panicking girl with worry still plain on his face. "What happened? A girl

shouldn't be sleeping in a place like this."

"It's not like I chose to do that, you know! Er, when did you come back? How did I not noti—"

Now that Subaru was here, she couldn't let him see her squirm; she was supposed to observe him and identify his weak points, after all.

Mia tried to put some distance between herself and Subaru, but, before she could, he reached out and touched her lips, swiping across them with a finger.

"E-Eep!"

"...There was some drool."

"Gyah! Don't wipe it with your finger!" Mia rubbed her mouth with her sleeve, and made to bolt.

However, Subaru wasn't about to let her go—he planted his foot firmly on the cape trailing after her. The cape stretched taut and Mia lost her balance, tripping and falling face-first on the pavement.

"Wha-! What do you think you are doing?!"

"I've heard the stories, but... I'm impressed, there really isn't a single scratch on you."

"Ha! With my defensive barrier, a tiny fall like that is nothing!"

Subaru was still standing with one foot on her cape. She desperately tried to pull it free, but it wouldn't give.

"Move your foot!"

"I'll move it if you answer my question. What were you doing here?"

"Er, well, I..." Mia unconsciously looked away from Subaru.

She couldn't very well say, *I was waiting for you to come back so that I could discover your weakness, you big oaf!* However, since Subaru showed no intention of lifting his foot before she would deign to respond, she decided she had no other choice, and whirled her wand.

"If *you* won't move, *I* will move you! **Dance, o wi—MMPH!**"

Before the girl could complete the incantation, Subaru's big hand covered her lips.

"M-M-Mmh! Mm-mmph! M-Mm!" She struggled with all her might, but he didn't budge from pinning her arms behind her back.

Eventually, he whispered in her ear, "If you promise not to try to hit me with your magic at the first opportunity, I will let go of you. I just want to talk to you. You promise not to use your magic on me?"

Mia nodded frantically, and, in turn, Subaru released his hold on her and moved away the hand covering her mouth.

While she tried to calm her ragged breathing by taking deep breaths, Subaru demanded again, "So, what were you doing here?"

"Uh... I was waiting for you."

For me? Asked Subaru wordlessly by raising his eyebrows, to which Mia grudgingly nodded. "Why?"

"Er, well, to secretly observe you in order to uncover your weak points."

"Huh, I see. Surveying your enemy is the basic of basics." Subaru stroked his chin, seemingly content with her explanation.

Mia looked up at him in frustration, then let out a heavy sigh and turned away from him. Subaru cocked his head in puzzlement.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Well, my observation plan failed, so I have to start from scratch again."

"So you're going to just give up and run?"

Mia felt anger bubbling up in her chest at Subaru's matter-of-fact tone and forcefully whipped around to snarl back. "It's not running! It's a strategic retreat! It is not like I could just ask you about your weakness and get a straight answer, so—"

"Why are you so sure of that? Maybe I *will* answer you."

Mia stared blankly in disbelief at the man before her who had uttered something simply preposterous. Would he really dare to reveal his weak points

to her, even though they were clearly on opposing sides here? With Subaru's poker face, it was difficult to tell what he was really thinking.

"You would truly tell me your weaknesses?"

"I don't mind, actually. I'd just have to tell you the things I'm afraid of or dislike, right?"

"Well, that is correct, but why in God's name would you do that?! I am your adversary, you know! Don't you have any pride as a Champion of Justice and member of the Crow Rangers?!"

At Mia's indignation, Subaru hummed and sank deep in thought, stroking his chin. "...Well, let's do it the traditional way then."

"Wh-What do you mean by 'the traditional way'?"

"Let's make a contest of it. If you win, I have to reveal my weak points to you. In return, if I win, you have to do what I say."

"Wh-What do you have in mind?" Mia cautiously inquired, to which Subaru wordlessly lifted a plastic bag from the supermarket he had left lying on the pavement. Apparently, he had gone shopping. Confirming the contents of the bag, Subaru looked pointedly at Mia.

"You will have to eat dinner with me."

"Eeeh? D-D-Dinner?!" Mia cried out hysterically, discombobulated by this sudden turn of events.

Subaru, though, only nodded with a straight face. "By the way, what did you have for lunch today, Mia?"

"Wha—Ah, er, I've forgotten to eat, actually. I had a cup of green tea, maybe?"

As soon as she confessed that, the air around him changed dramatically. Mia reflexively jumped back, trying to get away from him. Subaru took a heavy step in her direction and stared at her with inscrutable eyes.

"You've *forgotten* to eat? I must work on changing your eating habits, even if it means I have to go all out..."

“Eating habits?!”

“You have your ‘defensive barrier’ or whatever it is, so you’ll be fine even if I go a little overboard. Here I come!”

The moment he said that, Subaru kicked off from the asphalt, propelling himself forward in a run. He was terribly fast for his build and height.

Mia hurriedly waved her wand and chanted, “**O ice, become my projectiles!**”

As she uttered the words, ice spheres the size of Ping-Pong balls formed out of thin air around her and shot off towards Subaru. He swiftly shrugged off his jacket, and, waving it around like a flag, plucked the projectiles from the air. As the spheres hit his jacket, they fell and shattered on the pavement. Without breaking his pace, Subaru continued running straight for Mia. She twirled her wand again.

“**Fly the skies!**” Mia soared up.

With the skies on her side, she wouldn’t have to worry about Subaru’s speed and the quickly shrinking distance between them. She began ascending, planning to hit her opponent with wind magic from the safety of the sky. However—

“Gyah!”

Mia’s leg was tugged backwards with great force, and with all the momentum she had gained when trying to fly upwards, she slammed into the pavement. Subaru had grabbed her leg and sent her crashing.

She had her protective barrier on so it didn’t hurt at all, but she was lying prostrate on the ground. Before she could rally her strength and continue the fight, Subaru’s knee came digging into her back.

“OWWW!”

Mia flailed her limbs, but the knee stayed right where it was between her shoulder blades. She raised her wand, ready to fire off a spell, but a weird sensation erupted from her waist and prevented her by stealing her ability to think.

“Eep! Hee-hee! Ha-ha-ha! Hya-ha-ha!”

Subaru had sat on Mia's back and started to mercilessly tickle her waist. Unfortunately, tickling was among the things Mia's defensive barrier couldn't protect her from. She tried twisting her body every which way in hopes of breaking free, but Subaru's weight on her back was unshakeable, pressing her into the ground with no chance of escape.

"Sto—Ha-ha-ha! Hee-hee-hee, stop...!"

He, however, showed her no mercy. Expressionless and detached, with an unreadable face, he continued silently digging his fingers into her waist.

"...! Ahaha! Hee-hee-hee!"

"If you admit defeat, I will stop," he stated without even a hint of a smile, gazing at Mia fixedly from on top of her back.

Admit defeat? There is no way I would ever do that! Mia tried to rouse her fighting spirit, clenching her teeth in an attempt to endure the torturous assault. However, Subaru's tickling skill was truly extraordinary and promptly crushed her barely made resolve.

"Hee-hee! Sto—I admi—I admit it! So, please—"

"Are you being honest? Because if you are lying, I can tickle your sides, too!"

"N-No—I'm begging you, stop! Please, I lost, all right!"

In response to Mia's desperate pleas, Subaru finally let up his tickling attack and vacated where he had been sitting.

Mia shakily rose, taking heavy, ragged breaths, and slumped her shoulders dejectedly. She had laughed so much that her face was glistening with tears.

Subaru picked up the plastic bag he had put aside and proffered a hand to Mia.

"Wh-Wha-What...?" Mia questioned, still panting, and looked up at him.

Subaru slightly tilted his head to the side. "To eat, we must go home first. There's still dinner to make. Let's go."

"Y-You really meant it, then?"

"Of course I did. Or would you rather I tickled you again?"

Mia shook her head vehemently.

“Come on.” Subaru urged her to take his hand again, so, having no other option, she gripped the extended hand and pulled herself upright.

With her tiny palm clutched in his large one, he led her to his apartment. *Why is this happening?* Mia frowned, burning holes in Subaru’s back with her eyes.

FRIED mackerel, a heaping bowl of shredded cabbage, pork soup with root vegetables, and fluffy, steaming, pearly white rice—an assortment of freshly made dishes covered the surface of the low, round dining table. Subaru entered from the kitchen, bringing homemade tartar sauce with him, and located a free bit of space to set it down.

“Hmm, I have one more side dish, should I bring it out too?”

“N-No, I don’t really eat that much...”

Mia kneeled at the table and took in the sumptuous feast before her eyes. It had been a while since she had last gotten to eat like this. Actually, maybe tonight would be her first time having a meal this substantial.

Father and I used to eat this at a local diner, Mia reminisced, gazing wistfully at the fried mackerel, when Subaru reappeared with chopsticks.

“Let’s dig in.”

“Bon appétit!” Mia exclaimed enthusiastically, grabbing a pair of chopsticks, and going for the pork soup.

Mmm! So good! Way better than the fifty-yen miso soup I always order at the school cafeteria! There’s way more to it than just water, too!

Plenty of sliced pork back ribs, carrots, burdock root, taro, spring onions—the flavors melded together perfectly, lending the soup an exquisite richness. Unaware of the happy grin overtaking her face, Mia broke off a piece of fried mackerel, the main dish, with her chopsticks and put some tartar sauce Subaru passed her on it before eagerly stuffing it in her mouth.

First thing she noticed was the appetizing crunchy texture. Even the tiniest of bones had been pulled out with care, so it was very easy to eat. The tangy kick

from the homemade tartar sauce made the dish entirely irresistible, but above all, it was so lovely with the rice! Mia's chopsticks moved busily back and forth between the rice, the mackerel, the root vegetables in the pork soup, and her mouth, greedily devouring the piping hot, delicious food.

"I prefer mayo with my cabbage, but I have a different dressing too. Pick whichever you prefer," Subaru offered, as he put mayonnaise on his portion of the salad and proceeded to eat.

Mia sprinkled her cabbage with the dressing from the other bottle and began chewing. "Oh! Chinese-style vinaigrette! I like it!"

"Huh. You know, Ren likes to put sauce on his cabbage."

They went on with the dinner, exchanging bits of small talk here and there. For some reason, Mia felt restless. Not in the sense of being too excited to enjoy the meal properly—rather, she felt so uncomfortable she could hardly bear it. The thing was, Mia had actually never eaten meals in this manner before.

Father had always been so busy with plotting and executing his world conquest schemes that he hardly had time to spare to sit down for a meal with Mia. Their time together had been mostly spent with him teaching her magic, educating her on what a Supreme Ruler of Evil should be, or explaining the need for world conquest.

She would sometimes have a chat with her classmates while eating at the school cafeteria, but that was something entirely different from what was happening now. Somehow, she felt her heart grow warmer.

What in the world is this? Mia wrestled with the sudden gloom seeping out from within while making short work of the food in front of her.

Eventually, the dinner ended. While she was having a cup of tea to wash it all down, the doorbell suddenly rang.

Mia stared at Subaru in alarm. He reassuringly nodded to her, and, after confirming the identity of the mystery visitor through the peephole, he opened the front door.

"What is it?"

“Ah, uhm, sorry, but can you take some mandarins off my hands? My family sent me this huge crate of ‘em again, and... Huh?! You?!”

“Wait, this voice... It’s Red, is it not?!” Mia sprung up from her seat, gripping her wand tightly, ready to draw blood.

However, it only earned her a gentle reprimand from Subaru. “Sit down, Mia. You still have to do as I say.”

“But dinner is finished already!”

“You barely touched your tea, and you haven’t had dessert. Misaki just brought us some mandarins, so let’s have those.”

“Dessert?!”

Ignoring Mia gaping at him wide-eyed, Subaru put the box full of Misaki’s mandarins to the side of the door, in his hallway.

“W-Wait a minute. What the heck, Subaru? What’s Mia doing here?” the red Crow Ranger asked with a baffled expression, clearly unable to come to terms with the situation.

“I’ll explain everything in a minute, so come on in, Misaki. Also, you’ll have to help me finish the mandarins. I know you hate sour fruit, but even I can’t eat this much.”

“Uh, er, sure.” Misaki, still confused out of his mind, took off his shoes and joined Mia and Subaru at the table.

Noticing that she was still brandishing her wand as if trying to scare Misaki off, Subaru intoned, “Return to your seat, Mia.”

“Hmph!” With no other option but to obey, Mia plopped down right where she stood.

Subaru briefly disappeared into the kitchen to get a knife and a plate, then came back to his seat and started to nimbly peel the mandarins with his knife. Next, passing around the plates with the ready-to-eat fruit neatly arranged, he began his ‘explanation’.

“Around the time it was getting dark, I challenged Mia to a duel. I won, so I made her eat dinner.”

“...Sorry, but I still don’t really get it. Dueling is fine and all, but why dinner of all things?!”

“She’s still in her growing phase, but she forgot to eat lunch! She’s so frail. Look at her wrists and neck, thin as sticks! I’m worried about her,” Subaru answered plainly, to which Misaki shot an exasperated, “Seriously, dude?” in return. Then he sighed, peeled the last bits of rind from his mandarin, and put a piece in his mouth. Apparently Misaki really disliked sourness in all its forms, because his face promptly scrunched up at its taste.

Mia also sighed in resignation and reluctantly bit into her own piece of fruit. ... Surprisingly enough, it wasn’t as sour as she had expected. If anything, it was sweet, the slight citrusy tang lending the overall taste a refreshing quality. Misaki, though, was eating his mandarin with a grimace.

It seems he doesn’t like sour food. Heh! So that’s his weakness! That I should find out about it under such circumstances though, hehehe... Next time we fight, if I can just manage to get some lemon juice or a sour pickled plum in his mouth...!

Mia beamed widely, entertaining herself by thinking up evil schemes while she munched on the mandarins.

Subaru suddenly asked her, “Mia, what did you think of the food?”

“Hehe... Huh? Oh, it was wonderful. The fried mackerel was good, but that pork soup was something else entirely!”

“That so? By the way, what do you usually eat?” Subaru continued casually.

Mia reflected on her daily meals. “Well, we weren’t a particularly wealthy family after the last few wars, so, you know...”

Be it taking over the world or plain old paying the bills, money was necessary for both. Father did have a job at the time, but it had come second to his main occupation of Supreme Ruler of Evil, so he hadn’t progressed far in his career. That in turn meant that they’d only rarely had the opportunity to eat out.

Furthermore, neither her father nor Mia had been any good at cooking, so the meals they’d made at home were always simple: rice balls, toast, or something cheaper they had picked up from a store’s deli section. If they had time to

waste on cooking, they might as well have spent it learning a new spell.

As Mia was telling her story, a deep wrinkle formed between Subaru's brows.

"...I see, so both sides lost a great deal. And you're still living like this, even now?"

"Yes. Father took out life insurance, so I have enough money to cover my living expenses and school fees, but I can't indulge in any luxuries, and I still have to work towards taking over the world, too."

"Eh? Supreme Ruler of Evil with life insurance, are you kidding me?" whispered Misaki, cringing.

But Subaru only crossed his arms over his chest, his face darkening.

Mia, completely oblivious to Subaru's change in mood, decided it was now her turn to ask questions and addressed him, "You are an amazing cook, Subaru! Do you always make food by yourself? You are living alone though, right?"

"Yes, but until a year back I was living together with my younger sister. Our parents passed away, so..."

Just when Mia wondered how they'd both fit in this single room, it turned out that when they had lived together they rented a two-bedroom unit in an apartment building. *If so, where is your sister now?* Driven by curiosity, that was the next question Mia's brain supplied.

"So your sister is now living apart from you?"

"....."

For some reason, Subaru's only answer to the question was a troubled face and folded arms. Eventually, he cast his eyes down, his brows knit in a pained expression. Mia immediately felt a pang of dread shoot through her.

"Ah, er, have I asked something I shouldn't have?"

"Not at all. It's just that she...has gone, to a place far, far away..."

Mia felt as if she had been hit over the head with something heavy. So that was what was happening: he saw his dead sister in Mia, so he constantly fretted

over her. That was why he was worried about her health and dietary habits, and the reason he had fed her dinner.

“F-Forgive me! What a thoughtless question on my part! Please accept my apologies, even though I am your enemy!”

“It’s all right. But, when you were eating the meal I made, I remembered...my little sister, eating with the same relish. She used to love this pork soup, just like you...”

“W-Well, of course she did, because your pork soup is a true masterpiece! So, cheer up!” Mia desperately implored, trying to comfort him.

“Of course, you’re right,” he whispered, his eyes still harboring that faraway look.

After a while, his gaze refocused on Mia, now overflowing with kindness and affection. “If it’s okay with you, could you maybe come and eat with me from now on? Luckily, we happen to live close to each other too.”

“Oh, uh, er, b-but...”

How did Subaru know Mia lived in a neighboring apartment building? Even without realizing she should be worried about it, Mia was troubled. To her, the problem lay in the fact they were sworn enemies. They weren’t in any position to be having meals together; rather, their circumstances and the history of their factions suggested they shouldn’t. Yet, Subaru let out an uncharacteristic laugh and patted Mia’s head.

“Mia, we might indeed be adversaries, but we don’t have to be that twenty-four hours a day. What is ‘world conquest’ for you, if not a ‘job’? Similarly, all of the ranger work is just a ‘job’ to us, too. And, like all ‘jobs’, ours end after we spend a certain amount of time in a day doing it. After all, if you don’t rest regularly, you can’t go on to fight another day. Don’t you think so?”

Mia pondered Subaru’s words. He was completely right that working towards world domination around the clock was impossible. First of all, if she didn’t stop to at least eat, she’d die in no time, and if she skipped sleep even for one night, the next day turned into a living hell. She also preferred to shower at least once a day. But did this mean it was okay to eat together with Subaru?

“There’s an expression in classical Chinese literature: ‘bitter enemies placed by fate in the same boat’. It describes a situation where, when their interests align, even enemies will cooperate and help each other out. You’re so busy with trying to take over the world that you don’t have time to waste on cooking, and your diet suffers for it, but if you will come eat with me that will be solved.

“For my part, if I can share food with you, I’ll be able to remember the happy times I had with my sister, and it will ease the pain in my heart a little bit. Of course, on our ‘job’ time we will be enemies just like before. I have no intention of going easy on you then, so you should fight us with all you got. ...How does that sound?”

Mia remembered the taste of Subaru’s cooking. Delicious, steaming rice. Pork soup that filled her with warmth and satisfaction, crunchy fried mackerel. If she could eat such scrumptious meals every day, how wonderful would that be!

Besides, being able to help Subaru with the loneliness he had felt ever since losing his sister was also a good thing. When her father had passed away, Mia had to deal with the same pain of loss. She had experienced the sorrow of losing a family member firsthand.

“I’ll have to ask you to split the cost of groceries with me, but it will still be cheaper than buying a ready-made bento from a convenience store or a supermarket.”

“Really?! O-Okay... B-But it’s only for when we eat...!”

“It’s settled, then.” Subaru gave her a gentle smile.

They promised each other that when Mia acted as the Supreme Ruler of Evil and Subaru as a Crow Ranger, they would see each other as foes; but during mealtime, and mealtime only, they would agree to eat together in peace.

After Mia finished her mandarins, she left Subaru’s apartment.

“I know summer’s just around the corner now, but no kicking off your blankets during sleep, you need to stay warm, okay?”

With that final parting lecture from Subaru still ringing in her ears, Mia returned to her own unit in the nearby apartment complex.

MISAKI, who had silently watched the whole thing unfold from Subaru's side, inquired in a whisper, "...Say, didn't your sister get married one year ago?"

"Yeah. It was an international marriage. She's in Argentina now."

Misaki erupted in cackles. "...*gone, to a place far, far away...*" The meaning of those words weren't how Mia took it!

"Well, Argentina really is far away, I'll give you that, but Mia's definitely taken it the wrong way, y'know!"

"I didn't lie to her. However she decides to take my words is up to her."

"Y-Yeah, that's true, but... You so did that on purpose, didn't you?"

Subaru simply smirked in lieu of an answer as he looked straight at Misaki. Misaki took that to mean yes.

Subaru called out to Misaki from the kitchen where he was cleaning the dishes. "There are still too many mandarins left. Aya also lives close by, why don't you give some to her?"

"Uh, sure. Hey, Subaru? Don't tell me you're also thinking of making a move on Mia?"

Subaru turned around to stare at Misaki as he put some mandarins from the box into the plastic bag from the supermarket. "Me? No, I couldn't possibly desire a girl younger than my sister. I'm just worried about Mia's haphazard dietary habits. It's really bad for a girl her age to eat only ready-made bentos every day. Did you know that lifestyle-related diseases are on the rise among teenagers recently? ...Besides, that 'role' is filled already."

"You mean Ren? Well, yeah, I guess... But hey, Subaru, ya know..." Misaki scratched his head, accepting the bag now overflowing with fruit, and then finished in a murmur, "...You're way more underhanded than I thought."

At this, Subaru flashed an indomitable grin before shooing Misaki out the door. Flicking the door closed he headed back into the kitchen humming a tune, his mind awl with recipes and meals for his new long-term food guest.

Chapter 3: Perverts Don't Work on the Supreme Ruler!

MIA flew through the air taking in the sights of what would soon be her first conquest. On holidays, when she had no classes, she always went flying around town as the Supreme Ruler of Evil. Moments like this gave her the opportunity to observe the town from above, and with the assistance of her magically enhanced vision she kept an eye out for anything that could bring her closer to her goal of world domination.

“At first, I wanted to begin my conquest with this town, but now that I reflect upon it further, ‘taking over the world’ is a really complicated matter. I have to spend my days patrolling just to keep informed on the activities of this single town. Just how long will it take me if I have to patrol the entire world once it’s under my rule?”

World patrols would probably take more than a matter of mere days. The more she thought about it, the more she felt the sheer magnitude of what her family sought after all this time weigh heavily upon her shoulders. Would she really be able to accomplish the sorcerers’ longstanding dream in her generation? She didn’t even have any minions or the numerous monsters her ancestors could call upon for assistance. Mia was alone...

“No, I will have none of this weak attitude! For world domination is our most cherished ambition! Err, what did Father used to say again?”

Father was always who Mia looked to for guidance, which was why whenever she felt lost or confused, she remembered his words.

“Uh... Right! It is for the purpose of conquering the world that we have ‘magic’. As we use our powers, the Champions of Justice will inevitably appear. If you fight them and emerge victorious, and then use the ‘great magical art of darkness’, world domination will finally lie within your grasp.”

Mia wielded two great magical arts of darkness: the rain of light she gave the Crow Rangers a taste of a while ago, and another one. ‘Solassi’, the spell that

turns light into raindrops, was the spell she weaved into existence by giving form to the most beautiful image she could think of. The other art was the one her father taught her about every day. Most likely, this was what he referred to when mentioning the 'great magical art of darkness'.

"To put it simply, I just have to cast that spell after I lay the Crow Rangers to their eternal rest. Got it! Well then, I'll start with the things I can do right now. There are still people who would dare defy my principles, after all!"

Mia never stopped to think about complicated matters. Pushed forward by her impulse to accomplish her goals, she continued on, uncaring and unaware of how the world viewed her or her actions.

TRAVELING through the air at a leisurely pace, Mia eventually saw a verdant sea of greenery come into view. It was the town's biggest park that became flooded with people looking for shade and rest from the early summer heat.

"Huh? What is that?"

As she adjusted her vision some more, she saw four women dressed in sweats run away from a man in a trench coat. He was hot on their heels.

"I'm not completely sure what is going on here, but the women clearly look panicked. Is the man harassing them? I cannot let that go, for, as Father used to say, 'Be nice to the girls and strict with the boys'."

Not doubting Father's peculiarly gender-biased teachings for even a second, Mia began descending in the direction of the commotion.

"Kya! Stay away from me, you pervert!"

"Why is he out here in broad daylight?!"

The women in sweats were screaming to each other as they ran. The trench coat-clad middle-aged man chased after them, grinning like a maniac. For some reason, he was barefoot.

Mia landed between these two parties, her cape languidly fluttering to the ground behind her. Both the man and the group of women stared at her with bug-eyed astonishment.

“E-Eh, did that girl drop down from the skies just now?”

“I-I think I saw it too, but... No way, right?”

“But that cape... Like one weirdo following us wasn’t enough...”

Mia whipped around to face the confused women, forcefully tossing her cape back. The women quivered.

“What happened? I saw you running,” she said.

“What? W-We were being chased by that pervert over there. There have been sightings of him in this park for a while, pestering people.”

Pushed along by Mia’s vigor, the joggers began to explain the situation. Apparently, the man had started appearing in the park several months ago, and had terrorized women and children visiting it ever since. Of course, he had been reported to the police, but with his supernatural speed, he always managed to escape without being caught.

“He chases people, just like now, and then flashes them. And, after that, he bolts away at lightning speed. We always come to the park for tennis practice, but ever since he started showing up, we can never play in peace, it’s just terrible!”

“This simply will not do! I will not stand for such harassment in a town under my rule. The common folk are eagerly advancing their studies and engaging in labor, pushing their limits, all for my sake! I cannot sit idly while someone is out there pestering them!”

At Mia’s impassioned speech, not only the women, but the man chasing them as well, tilted their heads to the side in confusion.

It was the very beginning of summer, so the cicadas were already filling the air with their annoying cries, which now also served to fill in the awkward silence.

“...Uh, those things you said, like ‘for my sake’ and ‘town under my rule’, what was that all about?”

“Oh-ho, I am glad you asked!” Mia nodded happily in response and spread the cape widely behind her back with a flourish.

She had this gesture practiced to perfection—that is, her movements were adroit, but as for the overall image, the cape’s length left some room for improvement.

“My name is Oonari... No, Draiocht! I am the Supreme Ruler of the evil organization known as Gealach! Inevitably, this world and all in it, will belong to me. Therefore, this town too, is under my control. Even if it’s currently only under my control from the shadows.” Raising one arm high above her head, Mia finished off the tirade with her signature pose.

The wariness evident in the eyes of the small group watching Mia from the beginning of their interaction was now morphing into something else entirely, entering the dimension of stupefaction. The only ones voicing anything, though, were the insects, crying continuously without any regard to what was happening in the park.

“Oh, hear that? It’s the cicadas!”

“Ah, you just know summer’s finally here when you hear them.”

“I just love this time of year, don’t you?”

“Quit trying to pretend you didn’t hear what I just said!” Mia snapped at the women, who purposely stared off into the distance and started making small talk with forced liveliness.

One of them smiled sweetly at Mia and patted her on the head. “Right, right. This must be some kind of a game that’s been popular recently, yes? You don’t look like an elementary school student... Hm, you must be a middle schooler, right?”

“I go to high school!”

“Oh, so even the high schoolers are into it these days? ...Well, there are cosplayers among the university students too. They’re probably the ones spreading the appeal.”

She wasn’t buying Mia’s story at all, which was only to be expected. It was then that the man, whom everyone forgot about until that moment, suddenly raised his voice, as if only now remembering that he was there too. “Hey! Stop ignoring me! Look over here! I’ll show you! Oh, here it comes, ladies!”

“Kya-ah! I completely forgot he was still here!”

“Police! Aren’t they here yet?”

The women fussed in panic, aware of the man’s presence again, to which he reacted with evident pleasure, a nasty smile overtaking his face. His hand crawled towards the belt of his coat and began undoing it. Mia turned her head to look back at him, sensing his movements.

“He-he-he, I can’t wait to see your faces twist in shame! I bet you’ll run away once I show it to you. Come on now, my sweet!”

Letting out a high-pitched, perverted giggle, he grabbed the front of his trench coat and opened it. There was nothing underneath, besides his birthday suit. In other words, he was stark naked.

“Eek!” Rang out the disgusted women’s shrieks.

Judging from the blissed expression on the man’s face, those screams hit the spot. However, there was just one girl who showed a completely different reaction. Mia, without batting an eye, stared fixedly at the man’s naked body, her face completely blank. With the cicadas droning on in the background, the man felt inexplicably anxious under her scrutiny, and, with his coat still spread wide, he stuttered out cautiously, “U-Um, er, I’m f-flashing you?”

“Yeah, I can see that. So? How long do I have to wait to be harassed?”

“W-Wha—” The man quailed at Mia inclining her head in evident bemusement, the shocked women joining in with his exclamation.

“B-But Draí-what’s-your-name, this *is* the harassment!”

“Oh? So this is it? Being shown his naked body? Pfft.”

“Pfft’?! You mean, it doesn’t gross you out?! That—That thing!” The woman, averting her eyes, pointed in the general direction of the man’s *thing* with a shaky finger.

Thing being the wobbly lump attached to the exhibitionist’s lower torso. Mia obediently took in the *thing* the woman pointed out.

“Hm,” she put a finger to her lips, as if deliberating, and then deadpanned, “... It’s so tiny.”

The man opened and closed his mouth several times, like a fish suffocating on the ground, flabbergasted by the girl's words. Mia, with no regard to the man's reaction, went on to regale him with her honest, unadorned impressions.

"It is, how should I say it, so pitiful. Also, it is sort of malformed. Looks withered. Short, too."

Every adjective Mia uttered blew a hole right through the man's chest, causing him to stumble and twitch. Having an attractive young girl deprecate your genitals will do that to any man.

The flasher rushed to his own defense, "I-It's about to grow bigger now!"

"Really now? Will it grow to at least four inches?"

This turned out to be the final blow, bringing the man down to his knees. Her voice barely rising above the ever-continuing din of the insects' cries, one of the women mused aloud, "Who knew that harsh words spoken without malice sting that much worse?"

As the would-be victims and Mia watched the man sob hysterically, unsure what to do, they heard the siren of a patrol car in the distance. Mia raised her head with a start.

"Curses! Did you call the police?"

"Y-Yes, from our cell phones, while we were being chased."

"This is bad! I need to go. I don't think you will need to worry about harassment anymore though?" Mia agitatedly fumbled with her cape and took out her wand.

The joggers, startled by the wand's cutesy design, had their conviction that Mia was a cosplayer reinforced, and simpered, "Yes! We're confused to no end about what just happened, but thank you! You really saved us, Dra-something!"

"It's Draiocht! Right. You common folk can go on living your life in peace. Apply yourselves to your jobs with zeal, so that one day you may contribute to the greatness of Gealach, the evil organization! Now, if you will excuse me... Bwa-ha-ha-ha-a-a-ah!"

Cackling loudly, Mia twirled her wand, her feet left the ground, and she was about to fly off, when someone grabbed the hem of her cape and yanked it back, which set her on a collision course with the cold, hard ground.

For some reason, this had been happening to her a lot lately. It didn't really hurt, but she'd prefer it if people stopped grabbing her cape—it was really bad for her heart.

When Mia tried to get to her feet, she felt someone tugging on her cape, trying to pull her in by it. Like a fish being reeled in, Mia was being dragged backwards by the mystery person drawing her in with steady force. She desperately twisted her body in an attempt to get a look at who was doing this to her, but as soon as she did, she was grabbed by the hands and hugged close to someone's chest.

"...?!" For a moment, her head went blank, but then she realized that a number of things felt very familiar: this sensation, the design on the jacket sleeves encircling her, and the smell.

"Curses, it's you! Crow Ranger, Gre-ea-ah!"

"Didn't I tell you to quit calling me that?"

The one who pulled Mia in by her cape was none other than Ren. He proceeded to softly exhale a wisp of breath into her ear. Mia felt something akin to electricity run up her spine, making her shoulders quiver. Ren, seeing her reaction, broke into that infuriating grin of his.

"Your ears are as sensitive as ever, I see. So, what do we have here? I came because someone reported harassment."

"Why, of all the officers in town, did they send you? Hmph, but you came too late, in any case. I have already finished casting someone into the depths of despair to come one step closer to world domination! Not that I really understand what he is so upset about, though."

As Ren inclined his head in puzzlement, the harassed joggers rushed to fill him in. Having grasped the situation after their explanation, he nodded in understanding, and patted Mia on the head, mussing up her hair.

"So you managed to catch the flasher terrorizing this area recently, huh?"

Great job, Mia!”

“Don’t touch my head! And it was certainly no ‘great job’, I did it as a part of my plan to take over the world!”

“Yeah, sure, whatever. Kudos for your world conquest effort! Now, I’d better go arrest the guy since he was so nice as to get caught red-handed.”

With those words, Ren finally let go of Mia, and put handcuffs on the pervert. Then he took out his smartphone, and reported, “One man, arrested for indecent exposure. Uh, the time is 2:32 p.m. I’ll bring him in now.”

Then, as he was putting away his phone into his chest pocket, he suddenly turned to stare at Mia.

“...Hey, according to what the nice ladies were saying, you showed no reaction to the *thing* this guy was dangling in front of you, and even insulted it so bad the guy broke down. That true?”

“I was not trying to put him down. I just honestly told him what I was seeing—that it was tiny, short, and terribly pitiful.”

Mia’s answer seemed to induce some kind of weird coughing fit in Ren, while the flasher started weeping again with two fat streams of tears running down his face.

“Oh, man... There, there, cheer up, ‘kay? I know this hurts,” Ren comforted the flasher in handcuffs, then inadvertently scolded Mia, “And you, don’t say things like that to a man! That’ll crush any male’s pride.”

Mia let out an indignant huff and crossed her arms. “He put his *dick* on display, so I just gave him my impressions. What is wrong with calling small *things* small?”

“Stop saying ‘small’! Whose are you comparing it to anyway?”

“...To Father’s, why are you asking?”

At Mia’s words, everything went still, Ren and the harassed joggers’ jaws dropping in incredulity. After a pause, Ren prodded suspiciously, “F-Father, huh...? You mean, you remember his *thing* that vividly?”

“Well, we always bathed together until the day he passed away. If you see

something every day, it's only natural you would remember its length and size, no?"

Ren's expression changed from shock to disbelief. "H-Hang on a second, whaddya mean until the day he passed away?! You're in high school, right?!"

"That is correct. Do you mean to say there is a problem with that?"

"Of course there's a problem, a huge one at that! Please don't tell me that *you* were actually the one to ask him to take baths together!"

"No, it is just that whenever I went in, Father would join me. We would then relax together in the bathtub, scrub each other's backs, and..."

He really let her wash his back! Ren took a step back with a profoundly disturbed expression on his face. *What a terrifying father-daughter relationship. The daddy's girl here obviously has a bit of a father complex, but that creepy old man bathed with his high school daughter! There's no way that can be morally justified!* Ren argued in his thoughts.

The women also seemed to be creeped out by the exchange about Mia's dubious family bathing habits. Mia, though, quizzically cocked her head to the side.

"Now that I think about it, these ladies said that the man showing his naked body was harassment. Was it because he was doing it outside? At home, Father used to wear only a robe over his naked body, so I fail to see what was so wrong with the man's actions."

"A robe with nothing under it? That guy!"

"He would wear only a cape over his naked body on occasion, too."

"That does it, he was definitely a perv!" Ren buried his face in his hands.

He had seen a picture of Mia's father before. His face suggested a severe, straitlaced type of handsome guy, and to think that this very same man was such a deviant at home! That would explain why Mia was so thoroughly unimpressed at being confronted with a man's groin. If she had to see it every day, that would have taken away any sense of shame she may have harbored.

Letting out a small sigh, Ren pulled on the man's handcuffs telling him to

follow, and shuffled towards the patrol car with heavy steps. Puzzled by Ren's strange behavior, Mia called out to his back with a face full of confusion, "Huh? You're leaving already? I was counting on at least one bout of battle between Good and Evil..."

"We can't fight with all these people around, now, can we? Besides, I, uh, lost the will for today. Let's go at it another time."

"O-Oh, all right."

Ren heaved a long, heavy sigh at Mia's baffled gaze that followed him until he left. Even if he succeeded in taking her as his lover down the line, and had the chance to show off his dick to her... *If she started examining it closely, and then announced it was too short or too small, I know I'd cry too.*

In that moment, he really felt like saying a few choice words to the old deceased flasher—that is, to Mia's dad.

A few days passed without incident, and today was shaping up to be just another day of peace and quiet. Despite that, the police were as busy as ever.

"Phew... It's like there's no end to them, no matter how many you arrest!"

That day, Aya was driving around the streets in a small police car with her partner of the day, making her rounds. Aya, who was assigned to the Traffic Division, had a broad scope of duties, mainly dealing with violations: speed violations, parking violations, stop sign violations, and the list went on.

They were patrolling while lamenting how the infractions always increased during the holidays, when Aya's coworker, who sat in the front passenger seat, tilted her head to closely listen to the police radio, frowned, and then put the receiver back into place with a clang.

"What's up?"

"There's been a report of a car left parked out in the street since yesterday. Supposedly a local resident identified the abandoned vehicle."

"I see, an infringement of the Parking Regulations then. Do we still have some chalk left?"

“Yeah, we do! We should be able to get there in about five minutes,” confirmed Aya’s partner, who entered the address into the GPS and brought the location up on the map. Aya sped towards the street in question, following the computer’s instructions.

With the GPS they were able to quickly find the abandoned vehicle and got to work marking it down to be towed. Aya nodded as she sent back the request for impound to come pick up the vehicle.

“I’m done calling it in,” Aya said.

Aya’s partner finished attaching the boot to the car. “Same! Ready to head back? I could go for an early lunch.”

“Sounds love—” Aya’s cheery response was cut off.

Vroom! Suddenly, they heard a loud rumbling noise approaching them at high speed from behind, shattering the tranquil residential area’s calm. Aya whipped around to see a very flashy car running through a tiny one-lane alleyway at tremendous speed. It roared past them in a flash, disappearing from sight at the end of the street.

“Wha—In the car now! Let’s follow it!”

“Roger Wilco!” Her partner rejoined in a way that made Aya want to roll her eyes and remind her they’re not in some kind of war drama, and hopped back into their patrol car.

Aya already had her seatbelt fastened, and the moment her coworker slammed the door shut, she hit the gas pedal. With the siren blaring, they chased after the runaway vehicle.

“Dammit, I think we got a souped-up hotrod on our hands. They obviously removed the muffler, but that speed ain’t normal either!”

“No hope of catching up to them on our rattletrap then. Guess we’ll have to rely on the motor officers.”

Aya’s partner quickly reached for the transceiver, relaying the information on the vehicle. In the meantime, the car they so desperately tried to follow was getting farther and farther away. Aya watched it go, her brow furrowed in

vexation, but then, out of the blue—

“...!” Aya brought the car to a complete halt, the tires screeching on the asphalt.

The other policewoman gave a startled yelp, her body violently slammed forward, but Aya’s eyes were trained on the sky. Without a word or taking her eyes off the sight overhead she began undoing her belt. She then sucked in as much air as she could hold in her lungs, and hollered at the top of her voice, “Mi-i-i-i-i-a-a-a!”

Instantly, a girl who had been hovering somewhere up above, dropped from the skies in a straight line, like a bird that had been shot, hurriedly slowing down halfway to alight safely on the ground. Aya broke into a run towards her.

A trailing black cape, a magic wand fitting every little girl’s fantasies; this was, without a doubt, the self-proclaimed Supreme Ruler of Evil, Mia Oonari. The teary-eyed girl complained, gingerly covering her ears, “Keep it quiet, please! Today I enhanced my hearing, so my ears are still ringing.”

“Mia, there’s a black car I was pursuing, heading that way! Please, you have to stop it!” Aya pleaded, pointing out the direction with her chin.

“Huh?” Mia gawked, unable to make sense of what was going on, but Aya grabbed her by the shoulders and gave her a firm shake.

“I’m begging you! Letting a car that big run rampant on a street this small is way too dangerous! There are a lot of kids and elderly people living in this area!”

“Hmph, indeed, I cannot very well ignore such danger to my peons. Especially in the town under my rule, the common folk are—”

“Yes, yes, but you have to go, *now!*”

“Eek!”

As Aya urged her with a terrifying steel glint in her eyes, Mia’s spine went rigid. She quickly chanted the spell, soared up and vanished in the direction Aya had pointed out.

Mia’s flying speed far exceeded anything a car or a bike’s engine could crank

out. There was no doubt she would be able to stop the car with her 'magic'.

"Well, let's go after 'em!"

"Y-Yeah. Hey, Aya, did that girl take off flying?"

"Yup. The world is actually full of things you wouldn't believe existed, tucked away in the nooks and crannies of the mundane," Aya snickered at her partner, and stepped into the car with a cheerful, "Let's go!"

AFTER driving for a while, they stumbled upon the car, which was stalled, caught in a tangle of long, thick vine-like tendrils hanging from between a series of telephone poles. The driver, who had fallen out of the car and was holding his left arm, raged at Mia, who proudly towered on the roof of the car and seemed to be answering the man in kind.

"One must not endanger the common folk, especially my future minions!"

"HAAH? What the heck are you talking about you little nutjob! Just look at what you have done to my baby! And get the hell off of her! You're going to scratch the paint!"

She's at it again, huh? Aya chuckled to herself, approaching the two people making a scene.

"You are under arrest for violating vehicle code..." Aya's partner shouted as she plowed into the driver, slamming him into the ground and slapping a pair of cuffs on him. "You have the right to remain silent, anything you say..."

Quickly apprehending the reckless driver, Aya's partner returned to the patrol car to make her report over the radio, but not before viciously throwing the whiny driver into the back.

Aya looked up at Mia and smiled pleasantly at the overpowered munchkin. "Thanks a lot! I owe you."

"Not at all. I'm just glad no harm came to the commoners. The children are the future workforce, and the elderly must be protected as the keepers of knowledge."

Aya beamed at Mia, who was nodding sagely. "Say, Mia, why don't you come

down from there and go to the station with me? I'd like to thank you properly!"

"Th-Thank me?! There is no need for that. Besides, we are mortal foes, what reason could I possibly have to willingly venture into the enemy's lair?"

A beatific smile spread across Aya's face at the sight of Mia nervously recoiling on top of the swaying car.

"Yes, we are foes, but you really helped me out today, Mia! I'd like to thank you as a person, unrelated to my position. Isn't that only natural after what you did for me?"

"I had no intention of lending you a hand. I just couldn't let that driver do as he pleased—that is all there is to it."

"C'mon, pretty please? Letting you go without expressing the full extent of my gratitude would hurt my pride. Surely, you understand how terrible that would feel, my noble Mia?" Aya cooed, sending the strongest puppy dog eyes she had at the nervous future overlord of the world.

Mia pouted, looking extremely distressed, but the word 'pride' seemed to tug at her heartstrings. Her face was firmly creased into a deep frown, but she gave a tiny nod of assent nonetheless. "...If it won't take long, I might as well..."

"Really?! I'm so happy! Well then, let's get into the patrol car!"

After asking Mia to lower the vine-wrapped car back to the ground, Aya requested over the radio for a second tow truck to be sent out. With Mia and the car now firmly on the ground, they set off for the police station with Aya's colleague and the apprehended man in the back. Mia sat in the front passenger seat between Aya and her partner, happily wiggling in between the two of them. Aya briefly stole a sidelong glance at Mia, and then trained her eyes back on the road ahead somewhat awkwardly, her lips pursed.

WHEN they entered the Main Street Police Station, Mia was led to the room at the far back. It was a plain meeting room, with three long tables arranged in the middle, and aluminum chairs placed along their outer sides.

"Take a seat wherever you like! I'll make us some tea."

“Uh-huh.”

Mia timidly perched on the edge of one of the chairs. Aya locked the door and walked off somewhere. Left to herself, Mia warily surveyed her surroundings.

What am I doing in a place like this? I was only doing my rounds today, and look where it got me. However, if I could use this opportunity to find out Aya's weakness, that would make all of this more than worthwhile! As she was hatching evil schemes, the door suddenly flew open.

“Oh, it's really Mia! Long time no see!”

“It's been a week in my case, I think? Sup!”

“...!”

Shou and Ren entered the room. Mia bristled right away like a cat whose tail had been stepped on, and hastened to get away from them, kicking over a chair while somersaulting back.

“Yellow and Green!”

“Aw, I told you to just call me Shou, didn't I? There's no need for this show of force. You're here today on Aya's invitation, right?”

“Aya's the one who called us over, too. We're just here to have some tea.”

They seemed carefree as ever, although they were supposed to still be on duty at this hour. Apparently, even officers of the law had time to spare every once in a while. As Mia was shuddering in horror at this development, the door opened anew with a thump. This time, Subaru and Misaki appeared in the doorway.

“Wha-wha—”

“Ah, it really is Mia... What did you get up to this time?”

“This is where you normally say ‘hello’, you know.”

Oh no, what mess did I drag myself into this time! Now, if Aya joins them, which she will in due time, the Crow Rangers will be at full-combat strength. Mia clasped her wand tightly in her hand, so that she could use it in battle at a moment's notice, and glowered at the males. It was then that Aya reentered

the room, bearing a freshly brewed pot of coffee and tea. She froze in her tracks, befuddled as she took in the room.

“Huh? Why’s everyone standing up? Go on, sit down!”

“We would, but Mia...” Subaru sighed, pointing at Mia with his thumb.

“Ah.” Aya deduced what had transpired and smiled softly. “I was just thinking, why not use this opportunity to have a tea party together? It’s been a while since we all gathered in one place like this!”

“A t-tea party?!”

“Come on, sit down. There’ll be no fighting today. You said you’d let me thank you properly, now, didn’t you, Mia?”

“Meh,” sulked Mia, but she could tell that the Crow Rangers were in no mood for battle.

Well, she would’ve been at a disadvantage anyway, since she’d basically be grappling with the enemy on their home turf. She obediently went back to her previous sitting place.

Misaki, Subaru, and Shou sat across from Mia. Ren chose to take a seat right beside her. Aya, after having poured everyone a cup of coffee or tea, set down a strawberry shortcake before Mia.

“What is this?”

“It’s my thanks, of course! There’s a cake shop right next door, so I popped in there super-extra-quick to buy this! It’s real good!” Aya chirped, and dropped into the chair next to Mia on the opposite side of Ren.

Mia sat still, her eyes glued to the cake in front of her.

“Aren’t you going to eat it? Wait, don’t tell me you don’t like sweet things?”

The question seemed to throw Mia off guard; she raised her face, startled, and fervently shook her head. “No, I love sweets. ...I suppose I’ll...have some, then...”

“Hehe, go on!”

Urged along by Aya, Mia picked up her fork and reluctantly cut off a small

piece of cake with it, revealing two layers of moist, bouncy sponge cake, separated by a layer of fluffy cream mixed with sliced strawberries, with more whipped cream spread out on top. After a moment of hesitation, Mia stabbed her fork into the piece, and put it in her mouth, then slowly chewed it.

For some reason, everyone was watching her with bated breath. Mia was completely unaware of the several sets of eyes directed her way, and, having swallowed the first piece down with her eyes closed in rapture, let a dopey smile bloom on her face.

“So sweet... So good...” Mia said reverently under her breath, and went on to polish off the cake.

She left the big, juicy strawberry on top for last. As she finished the cake, with a heavy heart, she impaled the plump berry on the fork, admired it for a while, and then, making up her mind, closed her lips around it. Her face radiated pure bliss at its refreshing, mild sweetness.

Finally, Mia set the fork down on her plate, and turned to her coffee, adding milk and sugar and stirring them in. When she raised her head from her drink, she noticed everyone staring at her for the first time.

“Wh-What are you all looking at me like that for?”

“Um... Could it be that you’ve never had cake before?”

“How did you know?!” Mia flinched away as if stung by Ren’s question.

So it was just as everybody had suspected; her innocent reactions to the cake gave it away.

“Never had cake, in this day and age?! What about Christmas or your birthday? Didn’t you celebrate those with your old man?”

Mia shook her head at Misaki’s question. “Of course we did! For special occasions, we always ate potato cake!”

...Ate what now? The Crow Rangers’ eyes bulged out of their heads.

Mia began dreamily telling them about the ‘potato cake’, like it was one of her happiest memories.

“It was something Father, who would ordinarily never touch cooking utensils

with a ten-foot pole, made only for Christmas or birthdays. Ah, the saltiness, the copious amounts of mayonnaise, I will never forget this taste!”

“I-I’m sorry, but would you care to elaborate on this ‘potato cake’?” Subaru weakly groaned through clenched teeth, and Mia complied, summarizing it for him.

Essentially, it was just mashed potatoes. You put it in a baking pan to shape it like a cake, put it together by combining two separate layers, and then decorate it with a sprig of parsley.

The five Champions of Justice exchanged incredulous looks. Mia’s family was... even less well-off than they had thought. They had no organizational backing, neither did they come from old money—they were just descendants of an ancient lineage of sorcerers who had been slowly wiped out.

Besides, since her father was always preoccupied with taking over the world, his housekeeping skills were practically nonexistent, and he didn’t earn money very well. One thing he did have in abundance, so much so it creeped Ren out, was the love he held for his own flesh and blood, but to think that he couldn’t afford to treat his daughter to a cake even once!

“So, this was your first time eating this kind of cake? Never had one with lots of cream?”

“That’s correct. I knew of their existence, naturally, and that they are supposed to be sweet, but I never had the chance to taste one. Now that I have eaten shortcake for the first time, I must say it was delicious! Exquisite, even!” Mia bubbled with a grin, and took a sip of her coffee.

Subaru felt so bad for her, he was discreetly shedding tears on her behalf, shielding his face from view with his hand. And, in his mind, he swore—he would bake a cake for her birthday with his own two hands.

“Hmm,” interjected Shou, and, gulping down a mouthful of coffee, he asked Mia, “how about I take you to an all-you-can-eat cake buffet next weekend, then? My treat.”

At the unexpected invitation, Mia choked on her coffee so hard it sprayed from her nose.

“Hey! Quit trying to casually hit on her! She’s *my mistress*, okay?”

“Hmm, you pecked her on the lips once, and now she’s suddenly *yours*? That’s cute, but when did you turn into such a sap? Go all the way with her first, and then we’ll talk.”

“Jeez, do something about that foot in your mouth, will ya? You can’t say things like that in front of kids!” Misaki cut Shou’s tirade, which was getting a tad too explicit, off with a chop to his head.

Mia was vacantly observing the exchange, when she got that wide-eyed look as if she suddenly remembered something.

“Right! Say, Misaki, you aren’t particularly fond of sour things, if I recall correctly?”

“Eh? Er, yeah, don’t really like ‘em... Why’re you asking?” Misaki narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha!” Mia burst into peals of booming laughter, and shook the backpack she normally concealed under her cape off her shoulders. Rummaging noisily around inside with her hand, she finally pulled something out of it.

“A lemon?”

“Correct. And now, I shall offer you a taste of living hell!”

Living hell? Misaki furrowed his brows, at which Mia only cackled and intently stared at the yellow fruit. Then, she grabbed the wand she had left lying on the table, and lightly flicked it.

“Let this taste be transposed!”

It seemed as though she had just cast a spell, but nothing much appeared to happen: there was no sound or any visible effect. However, a triumphant grin spread across her face.

“Now, taste your coffee!”

“...I have a *really* bad feeling about this...” However, possessed by morbid curiosity, Misaki gingerly took a sip from the cup before him. The very instant it hit his tongue, he spit it back out with disgust.

“What’s wrong?” Shou asked Misaki, who was violently coughing, trying to get rid of the taste.

As Shou rubbed soothing circles on Misaki’s back, the latter barked at Mia, “The heck did you do to my drink?! It’s so sour it burns! It doesn’t even taste like coffee anymore—AT ALL!”

“He-he-he, I left the color and the drink’s other properties untouched, except for the taste, which is now turned to lemon! It took me quite some effort!” Mia puffed out her chest with a self-satisfied smirk, ignoring Misaki’s indignant squawks.

Meanwhile, Shou also took a swig from Misaki’s cup, conveniently placed next to him, and raised his eyebrows in amazement. “...Wow, it really does taste like lemon!”

“Seriously? Mmh, whoa. Yep, that’s lemon all right,” Ren was also surprised when he took a sip of the coffee passed to him by Shou.

With not even a hint of coffee left, the liquid in the cup was unmistakably pure lemon juice to taste.

“So you can do clever tricks like that too?”

“It isn’t exactly my area of expertise, but I had to try it, since I was so lucky as to discover Misaki’s weakness the other day. Night after night, I did image training. Hours of biting into lemons, etching their taste in my memory, and then creating an image of transferring that sourness into my enemy’s drink... It caused me so much trouble! I ended up needing two whole weeks to perfect it!”

“Don’t waste two weeks of your time to come up with such stupid pranks!” Misaki yelled at her, the sour taste having apparently faded from his mouth.

Mia was undaunted, crossing her arms and grinning with a devil-may-care attitude.

“I can’t afford to spare effort on anything that will hurt my enemies! Hee-hee, now, every time you put a drink to your lips, you shall cower in fear! For it is up to me whether or not it will turn into lemon juice inside your mouth! Bwa-ha-ha-ha!”

“Wa-a-ah! It’s a stupid prank, but it’s damn scary!” Misaki clutched his head in horror.

It was a far more terrifying prospect than a physical fight with all the kicking and the punching that came with it.

Aya, sipping on her coffee, turned to ask Mia, who displayed such surprising aptitude for pranking, “Wow, that was amazing! Can you shift any taste you want with this trick?”

“I wonder if I can... It’s my first attempt at such a spell. I need to concentrate on the image in my head in order for my magic to work. It took me days of chewing on lemons to just be able to maintain an exact image of sour taste, so I probably can’t turn drinks into anything other than lemon juice at the moment.”

Satisfied by the explanation, Aya folded her arms and hummed, deep in thought.

Ren also had his arms folded, similarly pondering something. He was the first one to speak out. “So, you can basically do anything as long as you’ve got the right image for it?”

“Father said so, and I have no reason to doubt his words. However, I need to expend magical power in order to create a spell out of an image. And the bigger the image, or the more large-scale it is, the more power it requires. Also, he told me materializing things that are commonly believed to be valuable requires spending a tremendous amount of power, so I should refrain from even trying it.”

With the right image, she could do anything. It was something any grown-up could easily come up with; if she could only produce an image of a gold nugget or a precious gem, she’d be able to live like a queen. However, making things that were universally regarded as valuable used up a lot of energy. In other words, if she tried creating an ingot of a precious metal—it would probably require spending a monumental amount of magical power. And using that depleted Mia’s physical energy reserves.

Mia had used her ‘great magical art of darkness’ on them before, making a beautiful rain of light fall down with the spell. And it had caused her to run out

of magical power, so she had fled. She felt physically drained at the time too.

Everyone wondered how much it would take out of her to materialize something commonly recognized as valuable. They didn't want to find out by trying, though.

I have no need for such things, and I'd hate to see Mia used as a tool to satisfy someone's greed. That was the thought running through the minds of everyone present, which they communicated with each other through their eyes.

Mia was unsafe, and not in the sense that she herself was dangerous. What if some shady sort found out about her sorceress powers? They would kidnap the girl, gag her so that she couldn't harm them with her spells, force images serving their selfish desires on her and make her fulfill them with her magic. It wasn't that farfetched of an idea to suppose there were lowlifes out there capable of doing that. Not to mention, why would the values of the world make an item more difficult to create or summon? Either way, Mia's powers were quite mysterious and powerful.

"Mia, you can't tell this to anyone, okay?"

"To anyone? Hah! You lot are the first ones... Huh? Why in the world did I divulge this top-secret information to the likes of you?! Despite Father having told me it was something only sorcerers must be privy to... Damnation!" Mia clutched her head, apparently having remembered all of that too late.

The question came so easily during small talk, the answer ended up slipping her tongue just as casually.

Suddenly, a glimmer of a smile played out across Ren's lips, and he lightly stroked Mia's head. At the sight of her confused face rising to meet his gaze, the glimmer widened into a full-blown grin.

"Don't sweat it. Yeah, why don't you do image training to play some more pranks on us instead? Seems like the one you played on Misaki was effective, if not stupid."

"More like, stupidly effective! Ugh, after hearing a story like that it seems like I ain't got much choice but to grin an' bear it. Dammit! You guys, tell her some of your weaknesses too!" As Misaki argued that it wasn't fair he was in this

alone, Shou touched a finger to his chin, mulling it over.

“O-kay, soo, I hate the taste of mango juice! Orange juice, too.”

“Ah, I’ll go with cocoa, then! Whatever I drink will turn to cocoa, right? Oh, that would be the *end* of the world for me!” Aya exaggerated, hiding her grin behind her hand.

“I can’t stand green tea... No, wait, make that black tea,” Subaru tossed out.

“Those’re your favorite drinks, you backstabbing...” Misaki started fuming that everyone was betraying him.

Mia, who was conscientiously taking notes, let out a surprised, “So you actually like those?!”

Ren seemed content to just watch the exchange, hiding his amused smile behind the coffee cup, when Aya inquired, “Ren, don’t you have anything you dislike?”

“Yeah, come on, spit it out!” Misaki joined in, pressing him for an answer.

He must really be pissed to be the only one whose weakness was uncovered. Ren snickered and murmured, looking up at the ceiling, “Hmm, what should I go for? Ah, I think I’ll pass on the drinks.”

“Huh? Food, then?”

“Food... Well, it’s sort of close,” Ren drawled, casting a suggestive glance at Mia.

She sulkily stared back at him, a grim foreboding filling her at his gaze.

Ah, those defiant eyes of hers are just irresistible! Ren thought, smirking, and purred, “I hate kisses. So, if you really wanna tick me off, just put your lips on mine and you’re golden! You don’t even have to do image training for this one! Super easy, right?”

Mia looked gobsmacked. It seemed like she needed some time to process what had just been said to her. When she finally comprehended it, all the blood in her body rushed to her cheeks, her face growing as red as a ripe tomato.

“Th-That can’t be true! Did you really think I would believe you, after you

repeatedly kissed me and nipped me on the ears?!”

“Well, I like kissing people, but being kissed, yuck!”

“You liar!” Mia went ballistic at Ren’s blatant lie.

Exasperated, Aya muttered, “Oh my, even a kindergartner could come up with a better pickup line...”

Chapter 4: Evil Worthy of a Villain

MIA was sitting in the living room alone, glued to the television screen. She was watching a superhero live-action series that was broadcast every Sunday morning. She had yet to miss recording an episode.

On the screen, there were five Champions of Justice and one villain. As the villain briskly waved his hand, his henchmen appeared and engaged the Champions of Justice in battle.

“Ah, henchmen! I wish I had them too.”

Unfortunately, Supreme Ruler of Evil Mia Oonari was on her own in her conquest. Those who swore loyalty to her family and Gealach over the ages had slowly died off in wars against the Champions of Justice.

She wished she could conjure up some henchmen with her magic, but she didn't even know where to begin thinking up an image for that... The knowledge provided by her ancestors on how to conjure up minions, along with the numerous contracts made with ancient dragons sleeping on Gaea, and eldritch beasts from beyond the void, were all supposedly lost in one of Gealach's many secret lairs when they all burnt down one after another.

Without guidance, Mia couldn't even imagine what shape she should give her minions, how they would move, or what kind of attacks they would use. Deciding on each of these things, and then creating her underlings based on that—the thought of all that work alone filled her with fatigue.

“Oh well, unlike that villain, I have my magical powers. Now I just have to put them to good use and get rid of those pests!”

Of the things she could've done, the other day she ended up visiting her enemies' base and was treated to coffee and shortcake that tasted like happiness, but she only went as a favor to Aya, nothing more.

Next time, I'm definitely going to get them! Mia swore to herself, clenching a fist, and returned her undivided attention to the screen.

There, the battle between the forces of evil and the Champions of Justice had reached its end. Of course, it had been the latter that emerged victorious. However, Mia was only watching the show to study up on what being a ‘villain’ was all about, so she didn’t care much about who won and who lost. In other words, she was only preoccupied with the concept of ‘evil’.

Her father used to say that they were ‘evil’. The position of the Supreme Ruler of the evil organization known as Gealach had been passed down from one generation to the next, and Mia was the one occupying it now.

“We must purposely don the title of evil and conquer the world in order to protect this blue planet, even if that means being resented by humanity as a whole.” Father’s words rang clear in her mind.

They were evil, therefore they were resented. That much she could understand. But Mia never wanted to upset or trouble people, or make them cry. She didn’t want anyone to hate her. She had a nagging suspicion that, maybe, she hadn’t been able to fully embrace being ‘evil’ yet.

That did not bode well. Her Father had entrusted her with the fate of their evil organization. To carry on the legacy of the one whom she respected and loved so much, she had to work hard and be the ‘evil’ he would’ve wanted her to be.

The episode was still playing in the background, with the villains now back in their hideout. What an eerie place! Should she try to redecorate so that her room looked the part?

The woman who was the villains’ leader broke into an insane grin.

“We have to perpetrate even more evil deeds! And then, we shall harvest Deviling Stones from human souls!”

Deviling Stones were an item often mentioned in this series. Apparently, you could take over the world if you gathered enough of them. Unfortunately, in real life, there were no Deviling Stones. Mia couldn’t help but wish there were some easily distinguishable items that she could collect to complete her world conquest.

If only her great-great-great-great-grandpappy, Supreme Ruler of Evil Omni-

Dark had succeeded in raising his army of fish warriors. With the world's fish supply on her side, she would have a nearly unbeatable army of minions and could definitely take over the world with their help. Bemoaning the fact that there were no items or minions wasn't going to solve anything.

"‘Perpetrate evil deeds’, huh..."

Evil deeds. On the show, the typical examples of those would be villains hijacking a school bus and abducting the kindergarteners inside, alighting in a park and attacking innocent people, brainwashing girls and boys to do their bidding, or cornering someone and tormenting them with no real purpose other than to spread misery.

Mia, though, had no wish to do such things. Something deep inside her heart wouldn't allow her to.

"Hm, maybe I should start from, uh, more mundane evil deeds. If I ease myself into it, in time I should be able to graduate to performing grander evil deeds. I don't really want to, but if I avoid hardening my heart, I will only ever amount to a half-fledged Supreme Ruler of Evil unworthy of my family name," she breathed a great sigh. But then, exclaimed, "I must not fall into negative thinking!" She hurriedly shook her head, and bolstered her resolve.

"All right! I shall begin by performing the smallest of evil deeds. I don't have anything specific in mind, but I could just ask other people to weigh in. Yes, that sounds excellent!"

Having thus rallied her thoughts on the matter, Mia nodded to herself and skipped off to take a bath.

WASTING no time in pursuing her newest idea, Mia started questioning her classmates the following day.

"Evil deeds? Why are you asking about that?"

"Err, no reason. I was just thinking: is there anything that could be considered an evil deed that we come in contact with in our daily lives?"

Mia was trying hard to pretend that it was just some idle small talk to her. Her

unsuspecting classmate hummed and tilted her head to the side, considering the question for a moment. She raised her index finger, indicating she figured it out.

“It’s a bit of an exaggeration, but the boys that you’re regularly getting into fights with... Well the things they get up to come to mind. At least I think what they do would count as an evil deed.”

Mia remembered the school delinquents and had to agree with her classmate. Extortion, bullying, pushing weaker students around, aggressively hitting on girls who aren’t interested... Mia scrunched up her face in distaste. She couldn’t possibly bring herself to do any of those debased things. She was definitely a loftier kind of ‘evil’ than that. Besides, there was no way she could achieve the glorious ambition of world conquest by engaging in such petty acts of villainy.

“Umm, isn’t there anything else you can think of? Like an evil deed that anyone would be capable of doing?”

“Hmm, let me think... Hey, what exactly counts as a bad deed anyone can do?” her classmate called out to a boy who passed them in the classroom.

He widened his eyes, taken aback by the sudden question, and inclined his neck. “A bad thing anyone can do...? Smoking or drinking, that sorta thing? It’s illegal. Oh, and shoplifting!”

“Shoplifting?! S-Stealing will not do! Smoking and drinking, on the other hand... That would indeed constitute as a mundane evil deed.”

The boy looked at Mia, who folded her arms approvingly, and shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, if you think about it, in the end anything that disturbs other people is bad, isn’t it? Be it something that will get you into trouble with the police or something your parents might scold you for.”

“Indeed, it’s as you said. Yes, that was a very interesting point of view. My thanks!”

Mia bowed her head to her fellow students in gratitude. They raised their eyebrows in surprise at first, and then burst into laughter.

“You’re such a weirdo, Mia! What got you so interested in this topic?”

“Um. Ah, er, it’s just something I was thinking about lately... Plain curiosity, nothing more!”

“Well, considering your almost daily run-ins with the school bullies, no wonder you’re getting concerned about ‘evil deeds’ and the like.”

Uproarious laughter filled the classroom. Listening to that merry sound, Mia was secretly glad that she found a new way to tackle her problem, and happily pumped her fist.

ON her way home, all the hopes Mia had built up were mercilessly crushed. She hadn’t changed from her school uniform yet, which made it glaringly apparent that she was still a minor. So anywhere she tried going to buy some alcohol or cigarettes, be it a supermarket, a liquor store, or even a convenience store notorious for its lax age control, she was refused. As her last resort, she turned to vending machines, but even those required an ID card proving she was over 21.

At school, Mia had seen delinquents smoking cigarettes so many times she was completely convinced getting them was as easy as flying in the air, which made her own inability of getting a pack of cigarettes that much harder to swallow. How in the world did *they* buy them?

Mia had no choice but to drag her feet home in defeat. Well, not home, exactly, because after school she went to Subaru’s apartment instead of her own. Their arrangement was still in place. ...For some reason, the number of people involved in it went up though.

Arriving at Subaru’s place, she held down the bell button, letting the chime ring. After a moment, the door was thrown open.

“Welcome back, Mia!”

“Th-Thank you,” Mia replied to Subaru’s greeting with unease plainly written on her face, and took off her shoes at the entrance.

No matter how many times she heard those words, conveying that her

presence here was appreciated, something looked forward to even, she just couldn't get used to them; each time she came, she felt strangely unsettled.

"I was just making dinner. It'll be ready in another twenty minutes or so. Watch TV or something in the meantime, okay?"

"All right," answered Mia, and Subaru promptly returned to the kitchen.

Mia padded to the living room and leaned over to prop her schoolbag against the side of the low dining table.

"Hey, good to see you again, Mia!"

"Blegh... Thank you...?"

There was someone already sitting at the table, namely, Crow Ranger Green—Ren. He was smoking a cigarette, another finished one laid smothered in the ashtray.

Lately, Ren started showing up at Mia and Subaru's shared meals. He had probably heard from Subaru that he was having Mia over for dinner. But it didn't stop at Ren just showing up, no not at all. Before Ren butted in, Mia went back to eating prepacked meals she bought at a supermarket or a convenience store on the days when Subaru was stuck on nightshift, but ever since Ren began joining them, he made food when Subaru couldn't. That meant that Mia went to Subaru's place for dinner every night. She would just have different cooks based on who was working.

What surprised Mia the most was that Ren could actually cook. When he prepared dinner for the first time, Mia stared at it with eyes wide as saucers, as if it were some kind of alien artifact, and shut her eyes tightly in anticipation when she took the first bite, but it turned out to be surprisingly tasty. Ren had then playfully told her, "Duh, who did you take *meow* for, huh?!" and rubbed her head so vigorously he almost gave Mia an afro.

By the way, unlike Subaru, Ren mostly made stir-fries, like fried rice, or noodle dishes, like udon or ramen. Also, while Subaru's cooking was undoubtedly more refined, Mia found that she didn't mind Ren's erratic seasoning habits at all—not that she would tell him that, of course.

Without even realizing it, Mia was eating out of their hands.

After the initial greeting, Ren and Mia both settled comfortably atop cushions lying around the table and their eyes flickered to the TV screen. There, a news program was on, showing some special feature on fine dining. The presenter was recommending what to eat at the local restaurants and later went on to introduce the highlights of the morning market.

Mia was watching it halfheartedly, until her drifting gaze suddenly stopped at the cigarette Ren was smoking. Noticing her, he curiously tilted his head to the side. “What, you want a welcome home kiss?”

“Wha—I made no such requests! I was just looking at your cigarette!”

Ren made it a habit to try to initiate physical contact with Mia at every opportunity. Not used to such attentions, she reacted with suspicion to all his attempts.

Ren pinched the cigarette between his fingers and waggled it around a bit. “You mean this?”

Mia lightly nodded, and then tentatively asked, “Um, would you mind giving me one of these?”

“Aren’t you forgetting the tiny little fact that I’m a cop? Like hell I’d give a young girl a cigarette!”

“That’s true.” Mia flinched at his indignant tone of voice and hunched her shoulders.

She knew that Ren wouldn’t share his cigarettes with her. She just figured asking was worth a try.

Ren pressed the stub of his cigarette into the ashtray, completely putting it out, and turned to fully face Mia, eyeing her suspiciously.

“Why do you want a smoke all of a sudden?”

“Eh? A-Ah, err... C-Curiosity, that’s all. I was just wondering what smoking is like.” Mia waved her hands around frantically.

There was no way she would admit to him that she was trying to get into perpetrating evil deeds, like a proper villain should. Ren seemed to have caught on to her trying to cover something up, but thought better of pursuing the

topic, returning his eyes to the TV set.

Mia rested her eyes on Ren's profile, observing it minutely. The corners of his eyes were sharp and upturned, a line of white always visible between his lower lash line and his irises. Because of those eyes, his face looked rather evil, even under normal circumstances. Right now, he was leisurely watching TV with a neutral expression on his face, but, when he smiled, his face contorted into a smirk, and, unlike the one she had spent so much time practicing, his looked positively villainous.

And with a face like that, not only is he an officer of the law, but a Champion of Justice to boot! The world is full of mysteries indeed, Mia thought to herself.

Ren, feeling Mia's gaze boring holes in him, once again turned to face her, warily looking at her. "What is it? Spit it out. Or else I'll really kiss you."

"No! Argh. With that face, he surely... Eh, but... Though maybe..."

"Huh? What's that about my face? If you've got something to tell me, speak up!"

When scowling, he looked downright vicious. If he tried to mug someone wearing that look, anyone would willingly throw their wallet at him. Resolutely balling her hand into a fist under the table, Mia shot Ren a question. "Um, what do you think are some evil deeds anyone can do? If your answer is drinking and smoking, I don't need it, because I've already heard about those."

"...Hey, you aren't possibly thinking something like, 'oh, I'm the Supreme Ruler of Evil, so I should try my hand at evil deeds', are you?"

Eep! Mia's spine went rigid.

Hearing her innermost thoughts leaving Ren's lips just like that sent Mia into a full-blown panic. "Er, ah, it, it is not that, it, er, it's j-just curiosity, or, eh..."

"Yeah right, I think I've heard this somewhere before. Jeez. D'ya really think petty crimes like that will lead you to world domination? With your smarts, or lack thereof, you shouldn't try to think too hard and just concentrate on playing stupid pranks on us, ya know."

"Lack *thereof*?!"

Was it just her, or had she been ridiculed just now?! Ren stretched his lips in his trademark smirk at Mia's indignation. She turned away from him in a huff, choosing to grumpily stare at the TV screen instead.

"...So," Ren broke the tense silence between them, "why ask me something like that? Do I look like someone who can effortlessly crank out ideas for 'evil deeds' to you, or what?"

"So you do possess some modicum of self-awareness. It's exactly as you say."

"...And what makes you think I have evil thoughts?" he asked somewhat darkly.

Mia continued running her mouth unapologetically. "Well, you have that malicious look in your eyes, and your face is menacing. I expected with a countenance that villainous, evil deeds would be your forte."

"Oh-ho." Ren narrowed his eyes.

Realizing with a start that she was in trouble, Mia tried to get away from the table, but she was too late. Ren nimbly caught Mia's hand and pulled her into his arms, squeezing her mercilessly against his chest.

"A-Agh—It hurts! Ow-ow-ow-ow!"

"Heh heh, can't move, now can ya? Pointing out stuff I'm self-conscious about like that... You're just itching to be punished, ain'cha? How about I seal that nasty little mouth of yours, hm?"

"A-Ah! Stop! You asked what made me think you were evil, so I was only answering your ques—mmph!" Mia's frantic babbling was cut off by a deep, unforgiving kiss. "...!"

Mia tightly screwed her eyes shut. A shudder ran through her body, her blood rushed to her cheeks while her head grew dazed. The kiss felt violent in the beginning, but when she moved her mouth to meet his, he gently soothed the place where he nipped her lips with his tongue, and then broke it off slowly.

"Jeez, and *now* you show me your flustered, girly side."

"...H-Huh?" As Mia was staring at Ren with unfocused, glazed-over eyes, he smirked down at her, triumphantly licking his lips. Humiliation and fury flashed

across her face in quick succession. “Y-You shameless buffoon, how could you —”

“...I’m sorry to intrude upon you two lovebirds getting along so well, but dinner is ready,” rang out Subaru’s monotone voice from behind Mia, who was working herself into a frenzy.

When she whirled around to look behind her, there he stood, holding plates loaded with side dishes in both hands. Belatedly, Mia realized that he must’ve witnessed everything, and her flush climbed up to her ears.

Why? Ren had hugged and kissed her on numerous occasions now, it was nothing new. How come she felt this mortified now? Was it because it was past her official Supreme Ruler of Evil ‘office hours’? She didn’t really know, but she was apprehensive about her own unexpected change of heart.

With a carefully neutral expression on his face, Subaru put the side dishes on the table and then strode back to the kitchen, returning to serve rice. However, his façade cracked when he was setting the final small bowl on the table, containing Kyoto-style pickled eggplant and cucumber salad.

He whispered ruefully, “...I wonder, is this how a father feels when his daughter brings home her boyfriend for the first time?”

“A-A father?!” Mia lurched.

Apparently, Subaru’s feelings towards Mia evolved from seeing her as a little sister to seeing her as his daughter at some point. Ren cracked up at that, grabbing the chopsticks from the table.

Dinner consisted of the same steaming white rice, but also miso soup with mushrooms and okra, cold cuts salad made with plenty of vegetables, and garlicky octopus and potato stir-fry.

People sitting together at the table, enjoying the invariably delicious food while filling the air with trivial chitchat, was the very picture of a family mealtime. When Mia and her father shared meals, they had talked of nothing else but spells and taking over the world.

When done eating, they continued with magic lessons until it was time to sleep. Mia had never experienced this kind of dinner table before—carefree,

relaxed, with people getting excited and talking over each other about something silly, but she found that part of her enjoyed this kind of gathering. Every time she caught herself thinking she was having fun, she lowered her eyes to stare at her plate and go on eating in silence, occupying her mouth with chewing food.

When it had only been her and Subaru, it was still bearable, because he wasn't very talkative by nature. However, ever since Ren joined them, the dinner table had become much livelier. Subaru making quips about something Ren had said, Ren getting exasperated at Subaru's attempts at humor, and when Mia would join their dialogue, they would team up against her, coming up with the most ridiculous rejoinders. Every time, they brought Mia to the verge of laughing out loud.

However, for some reason that only served to frustrate Mia; she couldn't bear the thought of them noticing she was having fun, and each time it came close to that, she ducked her head, hiding her face from their eyes.

Lately, no, ever since becoming the Supreme Ruler of Evil, she had been feeling nothing but distraught. The food was good, and the conversation pleasant. So why was it that she could barely hold back her tears?

MIA usually ended up leaving Subaru's place after dark. But since she lived in an apartment complex right next to the Crow Ranger's, it wasn't really a problem.

This time, Ren accompanied Mia on the walk back to her unit.

"Oh yeah, you also live close by, don't you, Ren?"

"Yep. How did you know?"

"...I-I just do. For there's nothing that I do not know, mwa-ha-ha!"

She couldn't very well tell him she had been to his workplace and asked for his personal details, so she chose to dodge the question by engaging in some loud cackling.

Ren calmly took out a pack of cigarettes from his breast pocket, and put one

stick in his mouth. Apparently, he was going to smoke on his way back; he was hardly an upstanding citizen, even though he worked for the police.

Stopping in front of Mia's apartment, they faced each other. Mia, sensing that this was Ren seeing her off, decided to ask him something that had been weighing on her mind for a while now. "Say, is going around hugging and kissing girls some kind of hobby of yours? Do you do that to every female?"

"Whaddya think, that I'm some kind of a pervert, or what? If I did that to random girls, that'd make me a molester."

Well, that was true, but then why was he doing all of those things to *her*? If she thought back, from the very first time they had met he had already kissed her, embraced her, and even nibbled on her ears. He usually refrained from doing that at least while at Subaru's place, but there were times, like today, when even that didn't hold him back.

Mia, after staring at her feet briefly, idly laced her fingers together and continued, "Sooo, why are you doing those things to me?"

"And what exactly are 'those things'?"

"W-Well, like I told you, kisses and hugs..."

Mia felt as if she were asking something terribly embarrassing. Just as she was starting to freak out about what the heck she was actually saying here, Ren hummed, stroking his chin pensively.

"So you're aware enough of my affections to worry about this stuff..."

"Hm? What did you just say?"

"Nah, never mind. ...All right, I'll tell ya. The reason I'm doing all of that to you is, hehe, to get a rise out of you!"

Huh?! Mia threw her head up with a start, her words failing her.

Ren's eyes sparkled with mischief, the familiar wicked smirk tugging at the corners of his lips. "You're giving your all to beat us, right? You even got so far as to drive poor Misaki up the wall with your prank. So, I decided to repay you in kind! Also, you can't use your magic on me with your mouth sealed, so that's basically two birds with one stone."

“S-Such knavery! Stealing the lips of an innocent maiden and embracing her with such vile motives!”

“And you only noticed that now? Silly girl! Bwa-ha-ha!” Ren chortled in clear imitation of Mia, reaching out with his hand to tousle Mia’s hair.

Mia whipped her head around, shaking his hand off, and looked up at him with burning eyes.

“Argh, Ren! I hereby solemnly swear that I will find your weakness, and when I do, I shall make your life a living hell!”

“Eh? But I’ve already told you the one thing I hate most. Remember, that day at the police station?”

“At the police station... Surely you don’t mean that k-kissing thing? That is *such* an obvious lie! Besides, all the others tried to trick me, too, what with that ‘orange juice’ and ‘cocoa’ nonsense, hah!”

Ren laughed with genuine amusement, watching Mia rant, and then raised his eyebrows lightly, with that infuriating smirk still in place. “Meh, dunno about the others, but I was telling the truth. ‘Cause, ya see, me kissing you is just a way to get under your skin. I like annoying people, but when someone’s trying to annoy me? Can’t stand that. It’s the same with you, right?”

That got Mia thinking. It was true that succeeding in pushing someone’s buttons and watching them squirm felt incredible, but having someone do the same to her didn’t feel good at all. Could that be what Ren was getting at?

“Y-You truly don’t like it?”

“Uh-huh. Hate it with a vengeance. It drives me absolutely crazy.”

“...And what about that smirk you get when you are talking about kissing?”

“That’s just my face. Like someone told me recently, I’ve got a villain’s face, after all.”

It seemed that what Mia had told him before dinner today had struck a nerve. She disregarded his original words, instead deciding that what he had said seemed plausible, and nodded thoughtfully.

“So, you thinking of kissing me yet?”

“Well, now that it seems believable that it would really upset you, I feel like I would like to give it a try!”

“Aagh! You’re the worst! I should’ve expected as much from the Supreme Ruler of Evil, though, how stupid of me! Of course you’d try to take advantage of my weakness as soon as it slips my tongue, woe is me! Well then, I’d better run away!” Ren sniggered, taking his cigarette out of his mouth, and making to dash away.

That did it for Mia—like a shark that smelled blood, she couldn’t let her prey escape, so she hurriedly shot out a hand to grab Ren’s sleeve. ...Ren, as if he had expected that, leaned into her pull.



Mia didn't seem to catch on to that, screwing her eyes shut and planting her mouth firmly on the Ren's lips. She had no idea what to do, so she just relied on her memory and imitated Ren's kisses. Ren, on his part, seemed to savor the feel of Mia's lips on his, but Mia, not knowing when she should stop, cut the kiss short far too soon. She was panting now; that was probably due to her forgetting to breathe during the kiss.

"D-Did you hate it?"

Although Ren was the one who was supposed to be upset, it was Mia who was easily the more affected of the two. Ren returned his cigarette to his mouth, the corners of his eyes crinkling.

"Did I ever! Worst few seconds of my life! How could you do this to me? Next time, I'll give *you* a kiss to get back at you, so be ready!"

"As if I could ever be ready for that! Ugh, I don't understand what's happening, but I feel like I have made a terrible mistake! Y-You really did hate it though, right, *right*?!"

"Course I did! Heh heh. Well, see ya!"

Ren lit the cigarette dangling from his lips with his trusty Zippo, nonchalantly waved his hand to Mia, and off he went. Mia, with a vivid blush staining her cheeks, stood rooted to the spot, watching Ren's retreating back with a conflicted look on her face.

Chapter 5: Supreme Ruler Plots a Kidnapping

I should kidnap someone!

Mia shot up from her chair, toast hanging from her teeth, struck by a sudden flash of inspiration. She turned the words Ren had said to her before, *“With your smarts, or lack thereof, you shouldn’t try to think too hard”*, over and over in her mind, and came to the disheartening conclusion that he, in fact, had ridiculed her with that statement. This discovery prompted her to accomplish at least one evil deed, even if it killed her, and thus finally start acting in a way befitting of the Supreme Ruler of Evil.

Kidnapping, abduction, confinement, squatting—each of them evil deeds in their own right. According to the news, whoever perpetrated those always got sent behind bars, not to mention that a villain abducting children was a staple of the superhero shows she loved so much.

“But abducting a child will not do. Their parents would be beside themselves with worry, and it would cause undue distress to the public at large.”

Isn’t there someone well-suited to be her target, someone whose disappearance wouldn’t cause anyone grief?

“Or, maybe, someone who *wants* to get abducted...or something. No, that’s impossible, of course...” Mia sighed disappointedly and munched on her toast.

Summer break was finally here, so today, Mia, who now had more spare time than she normally did, was trying to finish her breakfast as soon as possible so she could go patrol the town as usual.

“UGH... Will someone abduct me and take me somewhere faraway, please?”

“THEY DO EXIST?!”

It happened on an early summer afternoon, in a park where a chorus of cicadas filled the air with their ear-grating cries. Mia, feeling thirsty, had

purchased a bottle of iced tea, and was in the process of drinking it on the nearby bench, when a woman who was sitting next to her suddenly mumbled that she wanted to get abducted.

Mia, still tightly gripping the plastic bottle in one hand, surged from her seat sputtering incredulously, “Y-You really want to get abducted?!”

“Huh? Yeah. Oh, if only that would actually happen to me, I’d be over the moon...”

“Incredible! And I doubted I would find someone. Well, I had better get to abducting you then! Come!” Mia grabbed the hand of the woman, who tilted her head in puzzlement, twirled her wand, and sonorously chanted the spell, **“Fly with me into the skies!”**

Their bodies immediately felt lighter than air, causing them to float upward, going higher and higher.

“Waaah?!” The woman screamed, holding onto Mia’s waist for dear life, her hands digging into her sides in a death grip.

“Ah! Hey, that tickles! Stop it! Hee-hee-hee!”

“Nooo, stop wriggling! Kya-ah! A-Aagh!” The bewildered woman shrieked, desperately clinging to Mia.

The ticklish clawing of her captive bothered Mia, but the kidnapping, and now screams of terror—everything else was just like in the superhero TV shows. Mia nodded to herself with profound satisfaction; this was it, *now* she was finally acting like a true villain should.

FINALLY, their ascent stopped. Panting heavily over the insanity of the past few moments, the woman ventured a reluctant glance down. The park looked pretty small from where they hovered, as if she were looking at it from the apex point of a Ferris wheel. She shook her head with a vengeance—no more looking down for her.

What is this? What happened to me? Were people created with the ability to fly, and I just forgot? She was desperately trying to stop her racing thoughts and

be rational, but how could she stay sane when she was floating in the sky!

While the kidnapped woman sought to stay calm or risk shattering the magic keeping her afloat, she glanced at her kidnapper who had crossed her arms and sat cross-legged as she slowly spun 360 degrees head over feet with a look of intense concentration on her face.

“All right, step one, abduction, is hereby complete. But what do I do next? Hm, shall I return home for now?”

“Huh?! Did you kidnap me with no forethought whatsoever?!” the panicked woman cried out in consternation despite herself.

The strange girl scratched her head somewhat awkwardly as she continued to spin like some kind of demented genie. “Mm, I just wanted to try to abduct someone and see how it goes. What do you normally do after you kidnap someone?”

“Eh?! Err, usually you demand a ransom, and if you’re not after the money, then you lock your victim up and rape them or something, I think?”

“Lock up? Rape?! Ransom?!” Her spinning came to a stop as Mia regarded the woman with eyes wide with terror, horrified at what terrible things she had come up with off the top of her head.

The woman, forgetting all about being suspended in midair, high in the sky, looked back at Mia with exasperation in her eyes. Her kidnapper was no longer spinning, but was still upside down in a cross-legged position gaping at her.

The two weightlessly bobbed around in the air in silence for a few charged moments. Mia, still staring her captive down, growled in frustration.

Ransom. She had no desire to demand money using threats. It wasn’t like that was the purpose she had abducted the woman for in the first place. She just thought that by kidnapping someone, she’d get one step closer to being a *good*—if this word could actually apply to her—Supreme Ruler of Evil, which was why failing to think ahead and make a plan about what to do next was very imprudent of her indeed.

Noticing Mia’s lapse into silence, the victim timidly inquired, “Hey, so, you can fly?”

“Hm? Yes, I can. Under normal circumstances, I would have to make you disappear as soon as you found out about me being a sorceress, but I can’t abduct you without using magic, so I shall let it slide this one time as an exception.”

“Wow, most of the things you’re saying go straight over my head. Don’t worry, even if tried to talk about this to someone, no one would believe me. Heck, I can barely believe what’s happening to me right now. Okay, so you whisked me away without thinking it through, right?”

Mia gave a breezy nod, to which the woman breathed out a tired sigh. “I just want to go far away from here...”

“...I see.”

“I want to get away from this town, go somewhere, anywhere. So, take me away, please.”

“I don’t mind doing that, but I’m somewhat short on money.”

When Mia told her captive about her financial situation, the woman exploded, her voice rising, “UGH, seriously?! You’ll bear the responsibility for taking me away, right?! As my kidnapper, you should at least do this much for me, your victim! It’s not like I’m asking you to take me overseas! Somewhere not that far away from here is fine, just take me somewhere!”

“I-I can’t!”

The woman grabbed Mia’s hands, bringing her spinning to a stop. Letting out a long sigh laced with anguish, she consented, “I guess it’s fine, even my kidnapper doesn’t care about me... Just drop me from the sky to my death. It’s not like a single person cares about me after all.”

Mia’s drifting attention snapped back to the woman. “D-Drop you here?”

“Yes, since even my kidnapper doesn’t care, I might as well die. Maybe someone will sympathize with me when they hear about my body splattering on the concrete over the news.”

“W-Wait I-I am not going to just drop you!”

Moaning with utter despair and tears in her eyes, the woman cried out, “How

could I be so worthless that even my kidnapper hates me?!”

“Ah...” Mia searched the area for some kind of distraction, for someone to help, to no avail. Was this really what kidnappers had to deal with? Were kidnapped people really this depressed and suicidal? “Oh! I’ll be right back!” Mia said as she zipped off toward a vending machine.

Watching her go, the woman sat floating in the air with tears in her eyes. “Are you going to leave me too?”

Zippering back over a minute later, Mia held out the can of hot tea. “Here.”

“Huh? Tea?”

“Whenever I feel depressed hot tea always helps me calm down. Feel better?”

The woman sniffled, “Maybe if you got some food...”

Mia nodded. “I think I saw a convenience store.”

“No, no, no, I am much too depressed for convenience store food. There is a nice restaurant that does amazing takeout right over there.” The woman pointed to the east. “They’re quite expensive, but I am sure as my kidnapper you wouldn’t mind paying...right?”

Mia froze as the woman gazed pitifully at her. “I don’t really have the money —”

She sniffled again as tears filled her eyes. “I see, then maybe I should just die. Just let me fall to my death, if even my kidnapper is unwilling to get me some simple food...”

“All right, all right.” Mia rushed to pull her wallet out, quickly checking how much money she had. “I’ll take you.”

The woman smiled, her previous tears vanishing in an instant. “Wonderful, it’s right over there. Oh, and there is this lovely clothing store nearby that I have always wanted to shop at. You wouldn’t mind buying me something there too, right?”

“But—” Mia tried to object and was instantly cut off.

“*Right?* You wouldn’t be such a mean kidnapper and deny me this would you? Now let’s go, it’s right over there.”

Groaning, Mia began drifting in the direction the supposed *victim* pointed in.

IS this really how a kidnapping is supposed to work? Mia wondered as she took the woman who had still not given her name, from place to place. First they went to a high-end takeout restaurant, then a clothing boutique, and now her victim was buying an ice cream with Mia’s money. At least the woman paid for her own clothes.

“Okay, I’m ready for the next place!” Mia’s victim happily declared as she marched over and forced Mia to take her back into the air.

“Isn’t this enough?” Mia groaned.

Staring into Mia’s eyes as if trying to bend her will, she declared with a waspish whine, “Not in the slightest! Now on to the next location. Or are you going to abandon me, and take responsibility for your utter failure as a kidnapper?”

Sighing and unable to resist, Mia ended up nodding in agreement. She had already argued several times with her, and each time it ended in tears with Mia feeling guilty.

The woman planted one hand on her hip as they floated into the sky, lowered her eyes, and began thinking aloud, “My husband was in the park you took me away from, he’s probably looking for me as we speak. There’s a chance that he might find us if we go to the nearest train station or continue shopping close by, so fly us to the station that’s two stops ahead, we’ll board a Special Express from there.”

“Err, uhh, b-but...” Mia helplessly sputtered, obviously reluctant.

Her would-be victim glowered at her, a threatening gleam in her eyes. “Please? I just know that I won’t be able to recover from this poor attempt at kidnapping unless you take responsibility for the mental trauma you have placed me under. If not, I guess I should just die here and now. Maybe I’ll end up in an insane asylum, stuck with a shrink, outcast and alone. And everything

would be your fault.” The woman sniffled, tears once more forming at the edge of her eyes.

Mia didn’t understand what the woman was talking about, between the two of them, she felt far more traumatized, but the woman strung together enough really scary words for Mia to give in.

Reorienting her position in the air, Mia stretched her legs out and focused on the supposed victim glaring at her. “All right, I shall do as you say!”

Wasn’t it just her luck that she ended up kidnapping a woman who said such horrifying things without batting an eye? Mia was close to tears, but braved them to press her own, small demand. “...Sorry, but can you please let me go use an ATM? I only have 237 yen left on me.”

“Ugh, you know, even elementary school kids have at least a 1000 yen on them at all times nowadays! You’re so hopeless. Go on then. But make it quick!”

Mia nodded vigorously and took off in a hurry with the woman in tow. Pointedly not mentioning that she had more money before the woman had pressured her into paying for a shopping spree.

“...**MIA’s** on the move.”

“Huh? You mean, on a different route than her usual patrol?”

Ren held his phone in one hand, his other hand occupied with an insect catcher. He was wearing a police uniform instead of his Crow Ranger jacket. Shou, also in his uniform and with an insect catcher in his hand, stood next to him.

“Yeah, seems so. She’s about to cross into another prefecture. Hm, is she going on a trip?”

“Doubt it. I can’t really imagine Mia going on a trip for fun. She’s more likely to go, ‘Ah, now that I have more time due to summer break, I must devote even more effort to achieving world domination!’ and fly around the town all pumped up.”

Ren nodded in agreement. He had a map open on his smartphone, and right

now, a small red dot was moving swiftly towards the prefectural border. The red dot represented Mia's movements.

Mia Oonari was under surveillance, with Ren in charge of the operation. He didn't know how the system worked or the principle it was based on, but whenever the girl used magic, the tracking system on his phone reacted to it. The system had been adopted in her father's generation. Apparently, it was one of the few tools to survive the wars between the Champions of Justice and the Forces of Evil.

Ren really didn't understand the science behind it. Whether it was her blood or the magical energy that reacted with it, since the very beginning, there was a small chip buried inside Mia's body. He didn't even know who implanted it in her body, whether it was her father or someone else, but it was definitely there. What that implied, at the very least, was that there was some kind of connection between Mia's father and the police...or the organization that was known as the Champions of Justice.

This generation of *Champions of Justice* had never crossed weapons with Mia's father. Apparently, their chief along with a team of his fellow officers had fought him, but Ren didn't care for the story, so he had never asked for the details. In fact, he still didn't care, but he did think there had to be more than what he had been told. Anyway, that was the reason why he appeared before Mia as if by magic that very first day they met.

While Shou was trying to sneak a peek at Ren's smartphone screen, "Over there!" a voice called out in the distance.

The two policemen immediately raised their nets, ready to strike, and Ren slid his phone into his breast pocket. After a few moments, a nearby patch of grass started shaking, making a rustling noise, and out peeked the face of a small monkey.

"Aha, bingo! Come to daddy—"

"Don't screw up now, Shou."

"Course I won't! I'm a pro at cornering my prey—"

Just like they had agreed in advance, Ren swiftly snuck behind the monkey.

Then, Shou, brandishing his insect catcher, charged ahead, running straight for the animal. Screeching, the monkey tried to escape him by running in the opposite direction, where Ren was already in position, his net at the ready. A swing, and the monkey was captured.

“Phew, finally we captured it!”

“Hehe, what’s more difficult: capturing this monkey or capturing Mia’s heart?”

“Hmm, the latter? But it’s also way more fun!” Ren snickered, and then contacted the zoo official who requested the police’s assistance over his radio.

Soon after, a zookeeper with a cage and the other police officers came running, heavily panting.

“Oh, thank you so much! You have really helped us out here.”

“Ah, it was nothing. Please make sure the little guy won’t escape again!” Ren said, a fake polite smile he had never once shown Mia playing on his lips, and gave the monkey, still tangled up in the net, to its caretaker.

The monkey had escaped from the zoo and had been causing trouble for the people living in the neighborhood ever since. The caretaker moved the monkey to the cage, locked it, politely bowed to Ren, and took his leave.

Subaru, who had also been participating in the hunt for the monkey, joined the group, and Ren, taking his phone out again, gave him an update on Mia’s status, specifically her odd detour from her usual patrol routes. Subaru, an insect catcher still in one hand, seemed worried after hearing the news.

“...She’s traveling to another prefecture? She didn’t mention anything yesterday. And I told her to contact me if she’s going somewhere or if she won’t need dinner!”

“Well, Mia’s on summer break, maybe she’s trying to pull off some crazy scheme?” Shou suggested, chuckling.

Ren seemed exasperated by his ability to be amused by everything and anything, but said nothing, instead swishing around the insect catcher he got back from the monkey caretaker. “We can get traveling expenses reimbursed,

right?”

“Well, if they’re work related, sure. I’ve got nightshift today, so I can’t tag along. Oh, take Aya with you! She seemed free and bored last I saw her.”

“I’ll be on standby until you contact me. Does that work for you? Not sure about Misaki, but we should at least let him know what’s happening,” Subaru said, taking out his phone.

Ren reached for his chest pocket, but then he remembered he was in his police uniform. “Ack, got no cigarettes. Dammit. I’ll return to the station first, let them know about the monkey, report Mia’s movements to the chief, finish up my administrative tasks, and *then* go on a hunt.”

“He-he-he, are you gonna punish her once you get your hands on her?” Shou asked with a wicked grin.

“Duh!” Ren smiled at his grinning friend.

KUH-KLACK, kuh-klack, kuh-klack. The Special Express Train zipped forward with tremendous speed. Mia was staring vacantly through the window at the ever-changing landscape racing past her.

After boarding the train, Mia and her ‘victim’ had finally made their introductions. The woman’s name turned out to be Kana Shirakawa; she was twenty-seven years old. Kana looked like she took good care of herself, but she didn’t wear any makeup. Her shoulder-length thick brown hair was gathered in a bunch, her clothes unremarkable—a plain combination of a tunic dress and leggings, plus flat sandals on her feet. The woman was fiddling with her phone, a disgruntled look darkening her features.

Mia, for her part, cast a furtive glance at her hands, in which two tickets to Nasu-Shiobara Station were clutched. She had wondered aloud why they had selected Nasu as their destination, but that had only earned her a glower from the woman. Somehow, she had this terrifying quality about her that made it impossible for Mia to disobey.

For a while, they rode in silence, rocked back and forth by the train’s movement, and then Kana opened her mouth, “We’ll take a shuttle bus once

we arrive at the station.”

“Wha-?”

“It’ll take us to the *ryokan* I’ve already reserved for us. It’ll be about 16,000 yen for the both of us.”

“Wha-ha-ha—”

Mia was completely taken aback. Did kidnapping someone imply spending this much money?! She already regretted choosing this particular option as her “evil deed” from the bottom of her heart.

On that note, Mia’s cape and wand lay in her backpack now. She was forced to put them away with tears in her eyes after having Kana scold her about how, “a kidnapper can’t possibly wear such a flashy getup!” But she was the Supreme Ruler of Evil! She couldn’t help but feel depressed about this entire situation.

“Nasu was the last place I went on a trip with my husband.”

“I-Is that so? Uh, but your husband is still alive, right?”

“Of course he is. I meant that was the last place we went to together, just the two of us. Then came our daughter, and we had no time or energy for traveling anymore.”

Mia hummed noncommittally in response. She sensed that if she dared to point out the absurdity of all this, it would not be pretty, so she decided to play it safe.

Kana continued talking in a quiet, subdued tone, her gaze trained on the shifting landscape on the other side of the window, “We haven’t been on a single trip ever since our baby girl was born. If we go somewhere, it’s only ever to visit my husband’s parents. There, I have to attend to my mother-in-law’s whims, take care of our kid... Sucks all the joy out of the trip. And then my baby’s sitting in my lap all the way there too, and if she’s being fussy, I have to get up from my seat...” she complained under her breath, on and on.

Mia just listened in silence to her grumbling. Kana opened a can of beer she bought at some point in time at a station kiosk and began greedily gulping it down.

Refreshed, she deeply exhaled, and carped on, the alcohol loosening her lips further. “My hubby, he’s not that bad actually, you know! He’s trying to help me with childcare and household chores and stuff, in his own way... But, you see, I don’t really want him to! But he’s sooo eager to do it, as if he’s trying to make up for everything by doing that. Well, I’m telling you, he’s got it all wrong! So, so wrong. It’s like, when have I ever told him I want him to help me out with the kid and chores? ...That’s not it at all. I don’t want him to just see me as the mother of his children, I only want him to look at me as his wife...” She heaved a long-suffering sigh and took one more swig of her beer.

Then, she called out to a passing attendant with a trolley selling snacks and beverages, “Excuse me, miss. I’ll have some dried scallops and a peanut and rice cracker mix. And some smoked squid. And two beers, please!”

“All of that?!” Mia whined through her tears, but promptly handed over her wallet, sniffing, after being glared at by Kana for her insolence.

“Um, and a bar of chocolate with almonds as well, please...” Mia felt that unless she at least allowed herself to indulge in some of the sweets she loved so dearly, her spirits would be dealt irreparable damage for the day.

Meanwhile, Kana continued her sob story. Her daughter was in her “no” stage and wouldn’t listen to her, her husband treated her like a mother and not at all like a woman, even though they had been so lovey-dovey with each other when they were dating—and other tales about her family woes and day-to-day life. When they went to visit her husband’s family, she’d have to tend to her mother-in-law, which was a huge bother, and when she mustered up the enthusiasm to help the woman around the house, that didn’t go very well.

Kana expected to finally be able to laze around at least at her own parents’ house, but her mother would pester her to lend a hand with the chores, and when she’d vent about her family life, Kana’s mother would shut her down with, “It’s a miracle you found someone who was willing to take you as a wife, so don’t let me hear your privileged whining again,” which made her even angrier. It was one big pity party, and alcohol was probably helping in keeping it going.

Mia sipped on green tea from her plastic bottle, thinking that starting

tomorrow, she would have to stop going to Subaru's for dinner and subsist on a diet of onigiri and water for a while. Out of all her meager living expenses, the food costs were probably the only item she could cut down on to stay afloat.

Subaru will probably pop a vein when he hears about this, thought Mia as she halfheartedly listened to Kana's endless monologue.

"...so, you get what I'm saying, right? My hubby, he's, like, only thinking of me as his baby girl's mama. You know what he's calling me these days? 'Mommy', can you imagine that?! *Mommy!* And I'm all like, 'I ain't your mommy, dude'! Seriously, we haven't had sex in *ages*. Well, I mean, we definitely don't wanna wake our baby up at night, so that can't be helped, but not being desired just —"

As Mia was lending the woman a sympathetic ear without interrupting, her soliloquy took a saucy turn, so she rushed to hush her. "H-Hold on just a minute! B-before you go any further, I would like to remind you that we are in a public place!"

"Lame. Ah, but you sure look like you've never had a boyfriend. They say that the high schoolers nowadays are precocious, but you aren't experienced at all, are you?"

"Experienced? In what way do you mean? L-Let's change the subject for now... Uh... Oh, right! I was wondering what your baby girl's current age is!" Mia blurted out the first question that popped into her head, trying to distract Kana from the sex topic.

"Baby girl?" Kana cocked her head to the side in puzzlement for a brief moment, and then with her cheeks turning red, she bit out, "...She's two."

"Ah, two years old! ...Is it common at this age to have the 'no' stage? The one you were talking to me about earlier?"

"Uh-huh! No to this, no to that! If I try to change her clothes, she runs away, if I scold her, she turns on the waterworks. And when she does, she wails 'Papaaaa' and clings to him like a leech! I'm the one who wants to cry here, you know! But my husband goes all, 'Don't be mad at her'!"

Wow, she has a lot pent up inside her, Mia sympathized with Kana. *When I get*

married and have children, will there come a day when I'll want to complain about life, just like Kana?

And so it went, Kana grumbling profusely with her beer and snacks in hand, and Mia listening to her in the next seat. Eventually, they reached Nasu-Shiobara Station, thus drawing a close to their train ride, most of which consisted of Kana's monologues. The opportunity to vent did the woman a world of good, apparently, because she now seemed happy as she merrily checked the time on her smartphone with a smile.

"The bus will be here any minute now!"

Mia nodded, flooded with relief. A few moments later, the shuttle bus indeed arrived, letting the two women board and driving off down the road.

"You ever been to Nasu?"

"Mm, there was this one time we came here on a school trip. I don't remember it that well." Mia had a vague recollection of going to a ranch in this area; she faintly recalled frolicking with goats and cows.

"I see. So, this will be your first time at the local hot springs. Let's enjoy it to the fullest then!"

That sounded rich, coming from someone who reserved a room at an inn with someone else's money without telling them a word about it. Mia laughed, admitting defeat. This woman had a commanding presence about her that she just couldn't disobey, and Mia did come all the way here—enjoying it as much as she could was indeed the better choice than grieving over all the money she had lost.

Forgetting their roles as the kidnapper and her victim, Mia and Kana relaxed into a lively conversation about Nasu's attractions, while the bus took them to their ultimate destination. Eventually, it dropped them off at the *ryokan* of their—Kana's—choice. It appeared to be a popular place, if a bit on the shabbier side; the price was very reasonable, but it reflected back in the overall look.

"...By the way, I didn't bring anything with me."

"Ah, right. I think I saw a convenience store close by. Let's buy everything we need there. I'll pay for that much myself."

Just like Kana had said, there was a lone store standing a short way down the hill. The two girls purchased some underwear and a couple of toiletry sets, and once again set foot in the *ryokan*'s entrance hall.

The space the hostess led them to and showed them was, just like Mia imagined it would be, a modest Japanese-style room. It did look quite old, but it didn't seem unsanitary; it was obviously well-maintained and meticulously cleaned. Mia plopped down at the table and immediately stretched her hand out to grab the complimentary candy. Kana, meanwhile, was staring out at the scenery stretching behind the inn's window. Somehow, her back seemed very lonely.

However, when she turned around, it was with a grin that she proposed, "If we go soak in the hot springs right now, we won't make it in time for dinner. Let's eat first and bathe later!"

"Huh? ...Ah, sure." She thought the woman was crying, but that proved to be a false impression. Mia let out a breath of relief at that.

Together they enjoyed some tea and sweets until their dinner was brought, which they ate with relish. Mia wondered briefly just how many future dinners at home the money she paid would've covered.

"AHH! The food was out of this world! And the liquor's amazing too, keep it coming!"

"Kana, you're drinking too much. You've already emptied two bottles of hot sake. Are you all right?"

Kana grinned as if to show she was just peachy. She had three cans of beer on the train, and two bottles of hot sake over the course of the evening meal. A pink flush settled firmly over her face. Mia, who had never had a drink in her life, was beginning to worry about her.

When they went for a soak in the hot springs, Kana only dipped up to her hips, so that the air would hit the upper half of her body, cooling it. To Mia, this was her first time at a hot spring.

Ah, so this is the pleasure that is an open-air bath, the realization seeped deep

into Mia's bones with the hot water surrounding her. Kana kicked up one of her legs, making a small splash, and exhaled in relaxation. And then, she abruptly mused aloud in a small voice, "I wonder if he's worried about me..."

"Your husband?"

"Y-Yeah. Well, my phone *was* ringing nonstop. I put it on silent, though,ahaha."

"Of course he's worried—calling you so much proves it."

Having said that, Mia was hit by a sudden realization; she remembered that she was the one who abducted the woman in the first place. Mia awkwardly stared at her feet. She was an evil sorceress, so doing bad things was a must. Why was it then that her chest felt so tight?

"I wonder if he's calling because he's worried about *me*. Maybe Sakura is crying and he just doesn't know what to do." She let out a mirthless chuckle.

'Sakura' must've been the name of her daughter.

"I do not claim to understand your situation, but your husband is not thinking of you solely as your daughter's caretaker, is he?"

"I wanna think he's not, but I just don't know! Ever since we had our baby... I'm not sure of anything anymore. 'Cause ever since Sakura was born, all you ever hear from him is Sakura this, Sakura that. I care for Sakura too, y'know? She's so cute, and I love her to death. But...I wanna be loved, too."

"Hmm... Kana, I was thinking...have you told your husband any of this? Like, 'don't call me mommy' or 'love me, please'?" Mia, sensing that she had just asked something very embarrassing, blushed scarlet.

Kana silently shook her head with a somewhat resigned smile. "No, never. How can I say that I want him to love me now, after all this time? He'll go, 'what are you saying?' and laugh me off, no doubt. As for the pet name, after he started calling me 'mommy', I started calling him 'daddy' in return too. It's too late to change it now..." Kana trailed off, sighing deeply.

Mia couldn't possibly understand Kana's feelings. Not only did Mia have zero experience with married life, she didn't even have a boyfriend. It was next to

impossible for her to empathize with all the subtleties of her emotions. Despite that, Mia didn't hold back and candidly shared her thoughts with the woman. "The way I see it, you're putting up a brave front, but it puts a strain on you. Do you not have anyone you can vent to?"

"Nope. I got friends who are also young mothers, but I don't think they'll like it if I complain too much."

"But doesn't that mean your husband is actually the one you could share your frustrations with the most? Also, don't you think he feels shut out because you won't spill a word of your problems to him?"

"Huh?" Kana inadvertently raised her face at those words.

Mia sunk in the water up to her shoulders and looked straight at Kana, who was sitting on a stone step. "I mean, you are a couple, right? It shouldn't matter whether you have a daughter or not. You are treading on eggshells around everyone, including your husband. Just let it all out. Whine, grumble, moan, just don't keep it pent up to the point where everything may fall apart."

"B-But... What if he hates me for it, or tells me I'm annoying... I don't think I can take that..."

"Is he the kind of husband that would say that just because you vented to him?"

Kana suddenly fell silent, as if lost for words. Mia didn't beat around the bush, and with her straightforward attitude she breached the walls around Kana's heart. It wasn't a bad feeling.

Was the husband Kana loved so dearly the kind of man who would turn away from her if she dared to voice her grievances? Didn't she, somewhere along the way, start thinking that she was the one who had it tough, who struggled, and fell into the trap of victimizing herself?

"Saying something won't change a thing" and "no one would understand me anyway"—she was just shutting herself off with those thoughts and steeping in her feelings of discontent, letting them grow. Was it because she could finally whine all she wanted and thus expel the heavy weight from her chest, that she

realized with a start that she never tried approaching her husband with any of this?

“Do you think it’s really okay to tell him?”

“Sure. Why would it not be? You are a couple, after all.”

Hearing Mia’s confident answer cracked Kana up, and she burst out laughing beside herself. Mia was right. They *were* a couple, a married one at that. How could she forget something so simple? Nothing would ever change that, not even the birth of their daughter. Why did she even think something had changed in the first place? It suddenly seemed so funny she couldn’t stop giggling.

Mia cautiously watched Kana giggle hysterically to herself. She was getting worried that Kana was far drunker than she would admit.

“H-Hey, umm... About Sakura, your daughter... Uh, do you love her? Do you... treasure her?”

“Huh? Of course I do! How could I not adore her? She drives me up the wall a lot, and she can most certainly make me go insane. There are times when I think that I can’t take it anymore, but...that doesn’t really matter.”

Kana segued into boasting about her baby girl, which she did with so much gusto one could wonder what all of her previous complaints were for. Sakura could count all the way to ten; she could make scissors with her hand; she would compliment Kana on her cooking when she ate and snugly cuddled up against her when she slept; the way she acted so cute and dependent on her mommy was utterly adorable... Somehow, it seemed that there was a lot more to brag about than to grumble over. Mia giggled softly at that, and looked up into the night sky.

There was no moon, but the stars were beautiful. Today had been a blur, and she had no idea how she ended up where she was now, but Kana was gushing about her daughter happily beside her, and so Mia found herself not minding everything that had led up to this at all.

Mia’s mother had breathed her last when she was just two years old.

Naturally, she had no clear memories of her; she could only remember her face from a photograph. That was why her father had been the only parent to her and her everything. Father used to tell her that her mother had adored her, but when she heard Kana complaining about her family life, it made her uneasy.

What if her mother had just hidden her troubles from her father, and there were actually days when she had thought of Mia as a bother? But then she noticed how radiant Kana looked when she was speaking about her daughter, and her heart felt light as a feather again. If her mother had felt tired and at her wits' end at times, but still loved her on a deeper level...Mia would be happy with that. She hoped that it was true, as she let her thoughts wander to her deceased mother.

PLEASANTLY warm from their long soak, the two girls put on crisp, rustling yukatas and left the springs behind, engrossed in lighthearted chatter. The moment they were out the door, Mia was greeted by the sight of two incredibly familiar people, along with a man she didn't know, and a small girl.

"R-Ren and Aya?!"

Ren's gaze locked on Mia, "HA! HA! HA! Mia... So, all this time we've been searching desperately all over for you in our rental car, you were here, enjoying delicious food and relaxing in a hot spring? You are so gonna get it!"

"Oh, Mia! We were so worried! What are you doing in a place like this?" Aya lightly knocked her on the head.

As Mia was gingerly rubbing the sore spot on her head, she heard Kana's voice. "...Masayuki."

The way Kana spoke his name left no doubt in Mia's heart that this was the woman's husband. *Why would her husband be with those two?* Mia looked thoroughly mystified, so Aya offered an explanation.

"Some time ago, a woman was reported missing. She disappeared from the town park at around noon, and although her family looked everywhere for her, they couldn't find her."

While they had been combing the park and its vicinity, there had been a call

from a station attendant who had seen Kana and a teenage girl head towards a platform together. When Ren and Aya had caught on that the teenage girl must have been Mia, they felt their blood freeze in their veins. They had been absolutely convinced that Mia had gone on a trip on her own, but now they had learned she had been spotted with a woman who had been reported missing!

Had Mia gotten herself involved in some kind of trouble? The two police officers, convinced that that must be the case, had taken Kana's husband and daughter with them and had come all the way here. Thanks to the tracking device, they had been able to approximate their location quite easily, but there were so many hotels and inns in this area; they had had no idea which place it was exactly that Mia and Kana had chosen to stay, so they had to resort to asking around randomly and hoping for the best. The search had taken them quite some time, but eventually they had reached here.

"Ugh, here we were, thinking you've gotten yourself into some kind of crazy mess, worried out of our minds, looking for you everywhere, and here you are, stuffing yourself full of food and lazing around in a hot spring without a care in the world! You are so in trouble for this. I'm not letting this go until I dish out some extra special punishment!" Ren gritted out, closing in on her with malicious determination.

Mia backed away, snapping defensively at him, "Wh-Why in the world did you have to worry about me?! Whatever I choose to do is none of your concern! I am the Supreme Ruler of Evil! It is my job to perpetrate evil deeds. You get no say in what I do to perform my duties!" Mia yelled at him with mounting desperation.

That didn't seem to faze Ren, who took a final big step towards her, and pulled her into his chest by the arm, tightly closing his arms around her. Holding her in his arms, he whispered in her ear, "...I'm begging you, please, if you're gonna stir up trouble, do it somewhere close to us. Don't stray too far away from me," he bit out, almost pleadingly.

Mia's eyes flew open in surprise, her mind racing a mile a minute. She felt so confused her head started spinning. Why was there so much sadness dripping from his voice? How could she deny him after hearing it?

“Why? ...Why do you care about me so much? We are enemies. You are the Champions of Justice, and I...I am the Supreme R-Ruler of the evil orga—”

“Mia. To me and to Ren, to all of us, you are just Mia before you are the Supreme Ruler of Evil, and we worry about you. Caring about people has nothing to do with their position,” Aya softly asserted, brushing through Mia’s hair with a gentle hand.

When Mia looked up at Ren, she noticed that his brows were furrowed, his face drawn painfully. His clothes under her cheek were damp. A tentative sniff revealed a slight tang of sweat. He had probably worked it up while looking for her. As she glanced over at Aya, she saw that her shirt was sticking to her chest too, a dark circle of perspiration discoloring it. Mia felt terrible at her discoveries.

“...S-Sorry,” a word of remorse spontaneously tumbled from her lips.

Her own mouth was betraying her, apologizing to her mortal foes, the Champions of Justice, against her will—something she would never be caught doing under normal circumstances. Ren smiled softly in response and tenderly stroked her back. Mia felt warmth spread through her heart at that one small gesture.

Kana and Mia quickly changed from yukatas into their regular clothes, and exited the *ryokan*. Kana and her family said they would take a cab to the train station. Ren, Aya, and, by extension, Mia, would go back after returning the car they had rented, which meant that this was where Mia and Kana would part ways.

“Glad that we could find the missing person within the day, before something happened to her!”

“Yes. I am so sorry to have caused you so much trouble.” Kana bowed her head politely, and her husband, who was standing by her side, did the same.

Mia eyed Kana pensively, thinking whether she should say something to her. The woman, however, beat her to it, flashing her a big smile. “Mia, thanks for listening to me and my petty whining. I feel so much better now. Thanks to you, I feel like I might’ve gained a new perspective.”

“I-I see. Um, well, what can I say... Be good to your husband and daughter!” Mia said, awkwardly scratching her head.

Kana nodded, lovingly looking at her family. Her husband tentatively called out to Mia. “Um, I still don’t understand how you’re connected to all of this, but thank you very much for being there for Kana.”

“N-Not at all! I did nothing worthy of your gratitude! Rather, I was the one who abdu—A-Ah, err, never mind! Um...” Mia stammered, flailing her arm out in front of her as if trying to wipe away what she had just said.

She couldn’t very well say, “Hey, I was the one who kidnapped your wife,” so to distract the man from her slip of the tongue, she blurted out the first thing that came to her mind. “C-Could you...could you talk more to Kana? A-And give her lots of love!”

“Wha—Mia?!” Kana gaped, startled, her face rapidly reddening, but Mia had already lost control of her mouth, babbling further.

“I-I completely understand that you care for your daughter very much, but Kana was feeling lonely. She was struggling, but kept it all to herself, so as not to cause you unnecessary worry. S-So, wh-when you manage to get some alone time, don’t call her ‘mommy’, call her by her name, a-and, k-kiss her, and, well, you know, things like that. Um...”

“M-Mia! What are you saying?! N-No, Masayuki, it’s not like that, it’s, uh—”

Kana’s husband watched the two girls working themselves into a frenzy with slightly widened eyes for a while, eventually breaking down and laughing out loud, “Ahaha, so that’s what this was about! I’ve noticed that you’ve been a bit off lately. So this is why! ...You should’ve told me earlier, so silly. But, I’m sorry. I was the reason that you pushed it all under the rug and sucked it up.”

“M-Masayuki... Um, uh...”

“Shh, I know. Let’s take our time speaking about it afterwards. I’m really sorry. Let’s talk things through nice and slow, okay?” Masayuki offered, gently stroking Kana’s head.

Kana nodded, sniffing.

“Well, Mia, you don’t mince words, do you? Don’t worry, I’ll do as you said. Thanks for lending Kana an ear.”

“N-No thanks needed. Take care of your daughter too!”

Mia had no idea what kind of facial expression was appropriate for this kind of situation, so she ended up looking distraught. The couple, carrying their sleeping daughter, stepped into the taxi and rode off. Ren, Aya, and Mia watched them go until the car disappeared from sight.

“So, how in the world did you end up here? Did that woman, Kana, kidnap you or something?”

“N-No! It was the opposite, actually. It was me who abducted her, er—”

Mia realized that she had said something she shouldn’t have too late. Ren scowled, his face darkening beyond his default ‘villain-face’ into something utterly ferocious, and Aya raised her eyebrows, flabbergasted. Mia gave up on trying to salvage the situation and ended up spilling everything.

“Bwahaha, ahahahaha! Hoo! Boy, you’re such a dummy! Oh my, you really do lack in the mental fortitude department! Pffffff!”

“R-Ren, stop laughing so much at the poor thing! But, hehe... Ahaha! It’s classic Mia, isn’t it?”

Ren and Aya were in stitches over Mia’s story. This raised her hackles so much she exploded, a blush high on her cheeks. “This is no laughing matter! Yes, I was a bit intimidated by Kana...but I really thought that this is what a kidnapping is supposed to be like!”

“That’s why I’m telling you that you aren’t the sharpest tool in the shed! Ahaha! You abducted her, and yet ended up paying for everything: the food, train tickets, her drinks, the snacks, even the lodgings! She totally mooched off of you! Hope you enjoyed your trip!”

“Shut your insolent mouth! Th-This was a slight miscalculation on my part. Next time, I will pull off a perfect kidnapping, you shall see!”

“And end up getting sponged off of by someone new? I think you should give it a rest. You aren’t suited for these sorts of evil deeds, I’m telling you. Haha!”

Mia made a face and sulkily looked away. Then she seemed to remember something important, so she turned her face back to glance at Ren, and mumbled awkwardly, “Um, so, by the way... I don’t think I will be able to come to Subaru’s for a while. Could you please tell him that for me?”

“Eh? Why’s that?” Ren, tired from all the laughing he had done, let out an exhale to catch his breath, and inclined his head to the side.

Mia winced uncomfortably and explained, “Uh, this whole incident drained my funds, and I don’t have much money left to use until the end of the month. I will have to subsist on onigiri for a while.”

“Uh-huh, and you think that Subaru and I will just nod and say, ‘okay, gotcha’? Subaru’s gonna throw a fit. Don’t sweat it, you’re still welcome at his place.”

“B-But, I cannot very well freeload off of you both knowing I have nothing to pay you back with!”

Mia’s face radiated unease; she was very particular about financial matters. Seeing her expression shift like that, Ren narrowed his eyes slightly, and flashed that infamous evil grin of his.

“In that case, let’s settle it with punishment. If you take the extra-special version of it quietly, including the bonus for making me almost lose my mind with worry, not only will I let this whole thing slide, I’ll throw in paying for your share of grocery expenses, too!”

“Huuh?! I require nothing of the sort! As if I’d take anything quietly!”

“Oh? So the ‘sorry’ you said earlier was just hot air? Is the feeling behind your apology that shallow?”

Mia’s face showed extreme discomfort at Ren’s stinging words. She cast a quick glance to Aya, begging her for help, but the young woman just observed the pair over the edge of her smartphone with a small smile, seemingly content to assume the role of a bystander. Mia slumped her shoulders in defeat and looked up at Ren through her lashes.

“It looks like I have no choice. Very well...”

“Heh. ...Atta girl, glad to see you showing some remorse.”

A slow smile unfurling over his features, Ren gently but firmly gripped Mia's shoulders; her body tensed with apprehension. Then, he leisurely let his lips trail up the length of her neck.

"Mmh?!"

A shiver ran down Mia's spine. His smile deepening, Ren sucked on her neck gently, making small sucking noises. When he pulled away, a crimson mark was left blooming on the milky-white expanse of her skin where his lips had sealed over it. He regarded his handiwork with apparent satisfaction.

"Ah, a-are you...done yet...?"

"As if. Not even remotely," Ren replied in a husky voice.

"Not even remotely?!" Mia almost squealed in panic, as she tightly shut her eyes, scared of what was to come.

She looked almost painfully adorable, still not used to these things after all this time. Raising her chin slightly with his hand, Ren pressed their lips together. It felt the same as usual, yet different; a long, insistent kiss. Eventually, deciding it was enough, Ren gently broke the kiss. Mia blinked owlishly, her face stained scarlet.

"Th-there was... t-tongue..."

"Yep. I didn't call it 'extra special' for nothing. Hope you'll think twice before misbehaving next time!" Ren smiled complacently.

"Bleh." She dejectedly stared down.

"You guys done? I think we'd better go soon!"

"Yep, all done! Let's get outta here."

Mia was manhandled into sitting in the backseat of the rental car, Aya settling down next to her. Ren hit the gas pedal, and off they went. The girls in the backseat started a conversation, apparently about Kana. Ren eyed Mia through the rear-view mirror; she was still red in the face, her tone somewhat subdued.

Well, ain't she the cutest, Ren thought, driving while listening to Mia talk, his eyes crinkled at the corners.

THREE weeks had passed since the tumultuous abduction incident, and Mia's summer break was nearing its end. She had battled with the monstrous amounts of homework she had been given, had patrolled the town as the Supreme Ruler of Evil, and now, she was hugging a watermelon to her chest with a sullen face.

Why is this happening to me? Inside the moving car, Mia let a small sigh escape her.

The car was a spacious minivan with seating for eight people, divided into three rows of seats. At the wheel sat Misaki with Subaru right next to him in the front passenger seat. Then in the second row were Shou and Aya, with Ren and Mia behind them in the third row.

But seriously, why is this happening to me? Mia knit her brows helplessly.

Yes, Mia had been *kidnapped* by the Crow Rangers. It had been just another day of her summer break, when she'd put on her cape, the wand already in her hand, and had stormed out of her apartment ready to seize the day.

However, it had been exactly at that moment that her neighbor Mrs. Ozawa had chosen to make her appearance, and Mia ended up receiving a watermelon from her. She had decided she'd better go make her rounds after putting the watermelon in the fridge, and when she had been just about to return to her apartment, a black minivan had abruptly stopped, brakes screeching.

Mia had paid it no mind, making to go up the stairs, but then the van's door opened with a bang, and she felt a sharp tug backwards. Frozen in shock, she had been quickly stuffed into the van. The one who had pulled her in by the arm turned out to be Ren.

Mia had been protectively clutching the watermelon as she was dragged inside, and it was not seconds later that the van had taken off. The car, Mia had discovered to her abject horror, contained the full lineup of Crow Rangers.

"Well, now that everyone's on board, let's hit it!" Aya had enthused.

What is going on? I don't understand a thing. And just like that, Mia had been taken captive by the Crow Rangers.

“Um, I would really appreciate it if someone gave me an explanation about what is going on right now.”

“Hm? Well, I’ll give you a hint!”

“A hint?!” Mia echoed incredulously, earning herself a grin from Ren, who had been smoking out of the open window, but turned to look at her after her outburst.

He patted the air in a placating manner toward Mia. She just continued fuming about annoying Rangers kidnapping other people and then daring to talk about “hints”. Ren jerked his chin to point at the trunk of the car.

“Your hint is the stuff lying in the trunk.”

“The ‘stuff’?!”

With a grand total of three seat rows, there wasn’t much in the way of storage. When she peeked into the cramped space, Mia discovered a cooler with a bunch of paper bags crammed on top of it. Lying haphazardly next to it were three fully loaded supermarket plastic bags. Her inspection thus finished, Mia readjusted her seating position and tilted her head to the side in confusion.

“You don’t get it?”

“No. Are you all going somewhere together?”

“Bingo!” Shou responded gleefully from the second row. “Coordinating our days off was so hard! See how Subaru’s conked out in the front? He just got off duty.”

Indeed, Subaru was sound asleep in the front seat, his arms crossed over his chest and his eyes shut tight. Mia remembered that during yesterday’s dinner it had been just her and Ren too.

“Misaki and I are off duty, and only Ren and Aya could take the day off. You see, ideally we wanted to go to the seaside, but we gotta go somewhere we can return from quickly in case the station calls us in. Sorry, but we’ll have to stay close to town!”

“I don’t really mind tha—Wait! Why are you taking me with you? I was about to do my rounds!” Mia fumed, hugging the watermelon.

Aya turned around, holding a Pocky box in her hand, and drawled exasperatedly, “What are you talking about, girl? You can take a break during *Obon*, at the very least! You should be honoring the spirits of your ancestors during this time, not running around plotting world domination. Have you even visited your family grave yet? Want a Pocky?”

“Oh! I will h-have one. Ugh, what am I saying...?” Mia vehemently shook her head, but still snatched two chocolate-covered sticks and proceeded to chew on them huffily. “I paid respects at m-my family grave yesterday. That was supposed to be the end of my summer vacation. ...Why is this happening?”

“Want a *Toppo*, Mia?”

“Yes, thank you. Where are you planning to go anyway? You said ‘close to town’, but...”

As Mia was munching eagerly on the hollowed breadstick filled with chocolate paste, Misaki answered in an apathetic voice all the way from the driver’s seat, “We’re going to Okutama. ...Ugh, I’m with Mia on this one. Why is this happening?” he complained, shoulders sagging, his hands on the wheel.

“Yeah, but what can you do?” Ren said without a trace of remorse in his voice, grinding his cigarette into his pocket ashtray. “You’re the only one with a minivan. You don’t even have a family, but you own a minivan. ...I don’t even have to ask if you’ve *done it* in this car—it’s obvious that’s why you own one. I just hope you cleaned it afterwards?”

“Oooh, it’s for going for looong rides with your girlfriend, the one you have a long-distance relationship with... I see. If you fold down the second and third row seats, you can make them flat. Ooh! Kinky!”

“Argh! Quit talking about this kinda stuff in the presence of a minor! Also, stop saying such vulgar things!” Misaki squawked at Ren and Aya who were milking it for all it was worth.

Mia was listening to the conversation unfold with a blank look on her face, not really following what they were talking about.

“Heh? For all you say about us being ‘vulgar’, you did take the time to tint your windows.”

“It’s only because I hate it when the sun shines right in my face!” Retorted Misaki, shaking his head in annoyance at his friends’ antics.

“Come on, you must’ve done it here at least once!” Shou prodded with a cheeky grin.

“NOT! EVEN! ONCE! I only bought a minivan ‘cause I like big cars, okay?”

Shou made a face as if to say “how boring” and started fishing around in a box of snacks, when Mia, cocking her head to the side curiously, asked him, “Hey, what were you talking about? Misaki is ‘kinky’?”

“Don’t call me that!”

“Well, there are a lot of guys who are kinky, in general, but it seems like this one isn’t. Don’t worry, you’ll find out what that was all about soon enough. Ren’s gonna explain it all to you, *nice and slow*, trust me. His car’s small, but it’s still a station wagon, after all.”

“Huh?! What’s fun about doing it in a cramped car? Besides, unlike Misaki, I’m not an exhibitionist.”

“Well, I ain’t one either!” Misaki shouted, but his voice got drowned out by everyone’s cackles.

“It’s not funny!” The poor man whined pitifully.

Mia, who utterly failed to comprehend what was going on, sulkily stared down at the watermelon she relegated to her lap. All of a sudden, she felt someone tap her on the head. Raising her head, she realized it was Ren, who sent a smile her way, “Don’t let this bother you,” he said.



IT was a long way from the town where Mia and the Rangers lived to Okutama. Lulled by the car's movements, Mia found herself gradually nodding off. When her head started lolling forward, someone gently shook her.

"Mia, Mia."

"Mmh—"

"Wake up, Mia. We're here. If you won't wake up in three seconds, I'm gonna kiss you."

"Mm... Kiss...?"

"Three... Two..." a male voice was counting down.

"One...ze—"

"Aagh!"

Mia's head shot up with a start. Ren's face was right in front of her, barely a hair's distance between their noses.

"Tsk, we're here, like I said."

"Did you just click your tongue at me?!"

"Nah, you're just hearing things!" Ren said nonchalantly and climbed out of the car.

Apparently, she ended up falling completely asleep at some point during the car ride. Mia seemed to vaguely remember leaning against something warm and solid, someone gently holding her shoulders. She could have easily figured it out if she tried, but with her sleep-addled brain refusing to kick into gear, she just stepped out of the car, cuddling her watermelon close to her body.

"Ooh..."

A quick look around showed that she was in some forest. Although she could see a road and a camping site nearby, if she cast her gaze a bit further, countless trees filled her line of vision. A fence stretched over the back of the parking lot; when Mia examined it, she discovered there was a river flowing at the foot of the cliff. Its waters calm and tranquil, it seemed like a great place to

enjoy a barbecue or do some fishing.

“Mia, over here!”

When she turned around at the sound of her name, she saw Aya beckoning her to join her with one hand, while the other hand was occupied with a bag. When Mia approached Aya, she took Mia’s free hand in hers and, after walking some distance, they reached a two-story log house, the door to which Aya promptly opened with a key.

“Come on in! This is our home for the day.”

Mia cautiously stepped in. She saw a spacious living room, a kitchen, and a staircase leading up to the second floor.

“There’s two bedrooms upstairs, one for the boys and one for the girls. And over here, we can make our barbecue!” Aya bubbled, calling Mia over to where she was standing.

Mia stepped through the balcony door and found herself on a large roofed terrace; there were a number of wooden chairs lined up on the deck, and a grill too.

“Wow...”

Mia curiously stared at the big grill for a few moments before she went over to the railing, leaning on it with her elbows and examining her surroundings. There was a river flowing under the balcony, the same one she saw earlier at the parking lot, and a number of families and groups of people milling about, enjoying their vacation on riverbanks, fishing and barbecuing.

Taking in the pleasant view and wonderful weather, Mia returned indoors. Aya was just taking food out of the cooler and moving it into the fridge.

“Uh, um...”

“What is it? Ah, the tea’s right there. Lemme give you a cup.”

“Er, no, that’s not what I wanted to ask. Um, why did you take me here?” Mia asked, hugging the watermelon to her chest with both hands.

The question seemed to surprise the older woman, her mouth opening slightly.

“Uhhh, because Shou came up with the idea of doing a barbecue with the whole gang during *Obon*? If we’re all going, that naturally means that we’re bringing you with us too.”

“B-But why would you bring me with you?”

“Well, if you decide to get up to no good while we’re out of town, we’ll get called back to deal with any mischief, right? If that’s the case, all we need to do is just take you with us in the first place, see?”

“So that’s the reason!”

Mia almost dropped to her knees, her shoulders slouching. She felt deflated. So that was how it was. They had wanted to have some fun together. However, if Mia were to cause trouble in town while they were away, they’d have to intervene as Crow Rangers, which would bring an end to their time off. They had no regard in the slightest for her plans or convenience.

For Champions of Justice, they are terribly inconsiderate, grumbled Mia inside her head.

Aya chuckled at the displeasure written plainly on Mia’s features. She stepped closer to her and gently lifted the watermelon from her hands.

“Come on, you don’t have to carry it around anymore. Let’s eat it for dessert! You came all the way here, so just let it all go and enjoy it! Now, let’s get something ready for when the guys come back. Give me a hand, okay?”

As soon as Aya put the watermelon in the fridge, she went to the kitchen and started setting up for the barbecue.

Truth be told...this ‘kidnapping’ was meaningless—if Mia wanted to, she could just fly back home. Or, fighting the Crow Rangers was certainly an option, too. There were ordinary people here as well, and that would cause trouble for them, but why did she have to care about that? She had her cape and her wand with her, so she was free to fight as she pleased. ...And yet—

Mia took some of the ingredients from the fridge to the kitchen, and began peeling the leaves off the cabbage and trimming the stems of the shiitake mushrooms. Why? This was a question she had asked herself countless times already when dealing with humanity in general. It was as if there was something

inside her heart that burned with yearning, tingled with excitement, leaped in anticipation.

Barbecue for dinner. Ren and the other guys had gone to the nearby supermarket to buy some drinks and snacks, according to Aya. Mia hadn't had barbecue since the school camp some years ago.

It had always been Mia and her father, just the two of them. She never really went out to play with her friends, because she had always been told that there was work to be done. Day in, day out, she had trained by meditating on the same image and manifesting it, until the magic that her father had taught her about started coming to her naturally. That, though, had been it. Father had given her love and attention, of course, but they had never done anything for fun. Mia hadn't known the delight of having fun with someone; she only had memories of being with her father.

Aya kindly showed Mia, who was really clumsy with a knife, how to use it properly. Mia was cutting onions, her movements still awkward, when the door to the log house crashed open, heavily thudding against the wall.

"Honeys, I'm home!"

"Oh, welcome back!" Aya responded to Shou's greeting.

The latter lumbered into the kitchen, both of his hands weighed down by enormous supermarket bags. "I bought the beer you wanted! It's E...Bi...Su—Ta-da!" He put the sparkly gold tin can on the table with a flourish.

"Whoa!" Aya exclaimed appreciatively.

"I'm back! I just grabbed a random bottle of juice off the racks, I hope you're o—Hey, Mia, why are you crying?"

"...Huh?"

Ren entered the house soon after Shou, and immediately upon reaching the kitchen, he let a startled question fall from his lips at the sight that greeted him. Tears were dripping down Mia's face in two fat streams.

"Ah, it's the onions."

"The onions?! I almost had a heart attack!"

“Wh-What are you getting mad for? I can’t help this; the tears just keep on flowing!”

Mia couldn’t fathom why Ren had looked so shaken at the sight of her crying. Now, the tears weren’t the only thing running down her face anymore, there was copious amounts of snot involved, too. As Mia sniffled repeatedly, snot bouncing up and down from her nose each time, Ren couldn’t take it anymore. He fished a cloth out of his pocket and began wiping her face down with it.

“Mmh! Mmph! R-Ren...too...rough!”

“Zip it. ...Hm, there ya go. All clean.”

When the rough bout of wiping was over, the liquids covering Mia’s face were gone without a trace. Ren put the hand towel back in his pocket and headed out to the terrace. ...He probably needed a smoke.

“What was that even supposed to be, ugh,” Mia muttered under her breath as she transferred the onions she managed to finish cutting to a plate, grimacing slightly at her tingling nose and undereye area that took the brunt of the towel assault.

Shou and Aya snickered behind her back at that.

“Is he trying to be her boyfriend or her big brother?”

“That’s ‘cause Ren’s absolutely no good at expressing his feelings. He’s only got two modes: trying to shove his tongue down her throat from the get-go, or behaving like a mother hen. That’s what makes it so amusing to watch though!” Shou shrugged with a devilish grin.

Just then, Misaki and Subaru appeared, having finished parking in the garage, and joined in the preparations for the barbecue.

THE wooden table on the terrace was loaded with an assortment of cuts of meat and vegetables, canned and nonalcoholic beers, bottled tea and juice, while the grill fire crackled merrily. Subaru was in charge of cooking, grilling meat and bringing vegetables to sizzling perfection one piece after another with practiced ease. Mia followed his every move with rapt attention.

“...Is this really so interesting?” he asked her.

“Yes. It’s not what I imagined it would be. For the barbecue I remember, we used wood and charcoal to start a fire, and then put a grill rack or a camping pot over it to cook food.”

“This one also uses charcoal, but here you can regulate the heat level by turning the knob.”

Wow, what a handy contraption! Mia regarded the grill with a newfound respect. Subaru watched her calmly, checking the temperatures of the meat.

“Beef tongue’s ready, everyone!”

“Okay! Well, let’s dig in then!”

At Misaki’s words, everyone reached for their drink of choice. Mia poured herself a glass of apple juice, and everyone toasted. As soon as the meal began, the air became filled with noise and boisterous chatter.

Misaki, who drove all the way there, was in a sour mood at first, questioning why he had to participate in the festivities too, but a generous portion of grilled meat restored his good spirits in no time, putting a smile on his face.

Subaru was heaping meat and veggies upon plates thrust towards him from people asking for seconds. He kept the best cuts for himself, though, and continued cooking, a beer in his hand. Shou and Aya were exchanging complaints about their workplace, and seemed to enjoy the party just fine. A few steps away from the rest, Ren was lighting up a cigarette and nibbling on grilled meat instead of the normal snacks.

Mia took a seat at the table and was inhaling the meat. It was so good! Not to mention that grilled meat was a rare treat for her. She was thus minding her own business, when suddenly, an avalanche of vegetables dropped onto her plate. ...It was Subaru’s doing.

“Eat your veggies.”

“Ugh, but can’t I just enjoy meat, at least on this occasion?”

“Grilled vegetables taste amazing, just so you know. Grilled shiitake mushrooms, in particular, are a delicacy. I’m making some baked potatoes in

the coals now too.”

Mia thought that baked potatoes weren’t a special enough dish to make for the party, but kept it to herself, chomping down on a shiitake instead. “Mm... Oh! It’s delicious!”

Just by getting grilled over hot coals, the abundant juices from the shiitake, a mushroom she had eaten so many times before, gained a special, deep flavor and aroma. Subaru sprinkled some lemon juice on top of the mushroom she was eating, and she found that the slight hint of sour complemented it perfectly. Subaru, nodding in satisfaction to her reaction, returned to his duties at the grill.

After that, Mia tried eating other veggies, and all of them tasted heavenly: the slightly crunchy pumpkin, onions and cabbage turned sweet by the heat, fragrant bell peppers.

“Whoa, I just made a new discovery! Who would have thought that grilling turns vegetables this tasty?”

She couldn’t help but wonder if she could replicate this at home. If all you had to do was cut and roast the veggies to make them this good, she could save money on the condiments, which would also make it very practical. Mia continued munching on her food, entertaining such domestic thoughts, until it was time to try the baked potato. She had Subaru put some butter on it for her, and bit into it very carefully, huffing around the small mouthful to cool it down somewhat. She was surprised to discover that it too, was scrumptious.

“Mm! Mmm! I never would have thought a lowly potato could be this delicious!”

“You really get surprised over the most mundane things, don’t you?”

She didn’t know when he had managed to sneak up on her, but Ren was standing right beside her, eating a baked potato as well. His topping of choice was mayonnaise.

“Is it good with the mayo too?”

“Yep, real good! Want some?”

Seeing Mia nod, he held his half-eaten potato out to the girl's mouth. She took a small bite. She found that the hint of sourness in the mayonnaise enhanced the potato's flavor.

"Mm, it tastes great!"

"I know, right?" Ren smiled at Mia upon hearing her state her honest opinion with the utmost seriousness.

The two of them nibbled on their respective potatoes for a while in companionable silence, until, out of the blue, Ren ventured a question, "Hey, Mia, I was thinking... You say you're the Supreme Ruler of Evil, but what is it that you do, exactly?"

"...Huh?" Mia blinked at Ren in surprise.

He finished his potato and took a swig of his beer. "Well, we're doubling as Champions of Justice, but I can't say we've got a good understanding of the situation. The rest of the gang's the same—one day, a scrap of paper came out of nowhere, signed by our chief, and that was how we got the job."

"Seriously, I couldn't believe my eyes! All of a sudden, he's all like, 'stop the Supreme Ruler of Evil!' or coming up with stuff like 'Crow Rangers' and 'Pink'... I thought the poor old guy went completely bonkers," Aya inserted herself in the conversation.

Mia looked around the terrace and noticed that Misaki, Subaru, and Shou were all listening in. Apparently, they really didn't know much about what they had gotten involved in.

However, Mia couldn't offer much in the way of explanation either. Most of the battles and knowledge of the wars from before faded with her grandfather and all but disappeared with her father. What she was striving to do was extremely simple, but she was still struggling to find a concrete way to make it work, plagued by contradictions and inconsistencies in the teachings her father passed down to her.

"What is it that I do exactly, huh? Maybe it's worth telling you who are my mortal foes! We are working tirelessly towards our long-cherished dream of achieving world domination!"

“Uh, we kinda know that already. But what are you doing to make that happen?”

“W-Well, that is... F-For now, I decided to take over the town I am living in before I advance on the world, so whenever I have free time, I am patrolling my domain, and beating up whatever reprehensible miscreant who does something that contradicts my ideal or causes trouble for the ordinary working class, or, at least, that is my intention.”

As she ended the explanation of what she was currently up to, Subaru crossed his arms and said, “I see.”

Shou also nodded in understanding, and flashed her a grin, stretching his lips around the mouthful of potato. “So that’s why you were flying around the town whenever you were on a break!”

Then, Aya raised her hand, like a diligent student in class. “I want to ask something, too. What are you going to do if you pull off taking over the world?”

“Eh?! I haven’t thought that far ahead. But you had better be ready for what comes after I defeat you—I shall activate the great magical art of darkness, thus completing the world conquest!”

“The great magical art of darkness?” Everyone raised their eyebrows.

“Ah!” Subaru exclaimed, seemingly having remembered something. “Are you talking about that beautiful rain of light that you showed us the day we first met? I seem to remember you calling that the great magical art of darkness.”

“Ah, the one Mia used to run away from us with her tail between her legs?”

“NO! That was the magic I used as a part of my distraction strategy! The spell I shall use after I lay you lot low is a different one!”

Everyone hummed as if they understood what she was talking about, but she could tell they didn’t. No wonder, for Mia didn’t understand it all that well either. What she did know was that there was a spell that she was supposed to execute in the wake of triumphing over the Crow Rangers.

Mia had been taught the great magical art of darkness by her father ever since she had been but a small child, training to manifest the correct image over

and over again. Mia hadn't been allowed time to play with her friends or to devote to her hobbies—all she had ever done was learn the great magical art of darkness and other spells that came with it from her father.

If Mia had to use one word to describe that great magical art of darkness, it would be 'history'. Her father had carefully explained to her things not unlike those one would learn about in an elementary school's social studies class, and then she had to recreate the scenes in her imagination in great detail and make images out of them. This kind of training had continued day after day.

This was why, if Mia was being completely honest, she couldn't venture a guess as to what would happen when she used that spell after defeating the Crow Rangers. A gun salute...or something?

As Mia sunk into a reverie, Misaki noisily poured himself a cup of tea, breaking the silence hovering over the terrace, and addressed Mia. "Have you got any aspirations, something you wanna achieve with the whole world conquest thing? 'Cause usually, when someone's talking world domination, they have a picture of what kinda society they wanna create."

"Of course I have that! I want to create a world where the workforce toiling for my benefit can spend their days safely, pleasantly, and in good health! People will most probably resent and reject my dominion, but that cannot be helped, for I am 'evil'! However, the ordinary folk bear no sin, so I would at least want to provide a happy and merry everyday life for them."

Ren's eyes widened at Mia's speech.

What was she saying? It almost sounded like...

"Hey, hey, Mia, what about the people who are not in the workforce, like the seniors and the children?"

"Hmph! The children are the future workforce that must be protected and kept safe! And seniors and those with disabilities must be treated with kindness and respect!"

...a child's "perfect world".

There's a phrase that children would often use when describing the ideals of a 'Champion of Justice'. That phrase is, "a world where everybody is happy". What Mia was talking about was essentially that very same thing.

When children become adults and learn how society works, they mostly come to realize the futility of that dream. There is no way for all the people in the world to attain happiness; it's difficult enough for the people in one's immediate vicinity to do that. Eventually, they will learn that making even themselves happy is easier said than done, and will spend the rest of their lives in a desperate pursuit of bliss.

That was why Misaki, and everyone else, thought the same thing—that Mia's thinking, although she was saying she was evil, was fundamentally that of a 'Champion of Justice'. Why was it, then, that she insisted so stubbornly that she was 'evil'? It looked horribly forced on her part.

"...I'll try bringing it up with the chief," Ren muttered.

There were a number of things that Mia had mentioned that he was curious about, and a lot of mystery surrounding the previous Supreme Rulers of Evil, such as the tracking device surgically implanted in Mia's body. Clearing up those questions would be his first priority now.

"Is something wrong?" Mia inquired, her head tilted in puzzlement.

"Nah, I'm fine," Ren smiled and patted the girl on the head.

"But that must be tough on you. No matter how much you patrol the town, there will always be something. Even we, the police, apprehend and arrest so many people every day, but there's no end to the troublemakers," Subaru, who kept silent per usual, spoke up, a beer in his hand.

Mia nodded solemnly, crossing her arms over her chest. "Yes, that's true, the small conflicts will not cease. However, I must not let that stop me! Oh, right! This is not related to the previous topic, but there is magic I have been training to cast in order to enforce my ideals. I was thinking of activating it behind the school building someday."

When Ren asked her why it had to be behind the school building specifically, she explained that there were delinquents who liked to frequent that particular

place at her school, whom she beat up on an almost daily basis, but who just wouldn't learn their lesson and continued to engage in shakedowns, pushing weaker people around, and smoking.

"This is why I want to create a flower garden behind my school building. Those scoundrels will not be able to rob others of their money anymore when they will be surrounded by beautiful flowers, right? I intend to secretly cast this spell in all schools around the country! He-he-he... Let me treat you to a sneak peek! It's still a work in progress, though!" Mia exclaimed, pride oozing from her, and stood up from her seat.

She grabbed the wand she left propped against her chair, and twirled it. Then, she fixed the image in her head, and let the words ring out, pouring intent into them. **"Break open and bloom, o flowers of the heart!"**

As soon as the last sound escaped her lips, the ground beneath the Crow Rangers' feet became shrouded in a faint glow. Then, right out of the terrace floor, a multitude of flowers emerged, their buds instantly breaking open to reveal the colorful petals within. Gerberas, carnations, daisies, violets, lotuses, sweet peas, dandelions. The air was filled with the sweet, slightly grassy smell so characteristic to flowers. This was indeed a true "flower garden".

"How pretty..."

"Yeah," Subaru gave a faint nod in response to Aya's words of marvel.

They followed the stems with their gazes, and were surprised to see that the flowers seemed to be rooted in the grains of wood on the planks lining the terrace floor. Even Misaki and Shou seemed to have lost their ability to speak in awe of this sight.

Ren was...he was looking at Mia. She was slightly out of breath. Was she tired?

"...Is this taxing on you?"

"Yes, I feel a bit drained. I always do when I use magic that conjures things up on a broad area. This flower spell is my original creation, but it's close in scope to a great magical art of darkness. It's less exhausting than Solassi, though."

Solassi, the clumsily named great magical art of darkness. That, too, was

something that Mia had come up with on her own; the most beautiful thing she could imagine made real.

“Actually, I don’t have a name for this spell yet. Besides, I would like to add more types of flowers, I’m trying to remember them by looking at a botanical field guide. When I put the finishing touches on this, the flower garden the spell will produce will be even more splendid. Bwa-ha-ha!”

As Mia struck a daunting pose, laughing loudly, Misaki walked through the flower field with a shell-shocked expression.

“These will look good at home!” Aya muttered, stalking around and picking a bouquet.

Subaru and Shou seemed to have fun picking flowers as well. Ren was the only one who didn’t take his eyes off Mia.

Mia was no “villain”. No, she was, rather, more of a good person than the Crow Rangers, who grudgingly wore the title of the ‘Champions of Justice’ just because it was a part of their job. She was also a bit lacking in intelligence, her ways of thinking often more befitting of a child rather than the high school student that she was. Most of all, deep down inside, she was very lonely.

Ren had realized that; Subaru, probably, had too. When the three of them would sit around the dinner table, every time she enjoyed herself or was about to crack a smile, she would cast her eyes down. She didn’t want to let them see that she was having fun, so she would stare down at her plate and hide it.

Every time she did that, Ren wanted to make her laugh, wanted her to show him a smile shining with happiness. He had noticed that she sometimes let her guard down and smiled at Aya or Subaru, but he had yet to see her lips quirk up for him. That upset him far more than he wanted to admit.

She wormed her way into his heart from the first time they had met. The way she wore her heart on her sleeve, her unyielding spirit, and her pluck. The way she reacted to his teasing. The more she tried to run, the more he wanted to give chase and catch her. The more she tried to defy him, the more he wanted to corner her and make her give in to him.

When he kissed her to spite her, she blushed, her dark eyes glistening with

emotion. He inevitably got an earful from her for that, but he was obviously attracting her attention. When he realized that, it endeared him to her even more. Before he knew what was happening, his infatuation had already grown into affection, and dare he say it, something more.

Both of the spells Mia claimed had been her original creations, were beautiful—the fairy-tale-like rain of light and the vibrant field of flowers. The two sights were so much like something glimpsed from a little girl’s dream; it could hardly be something a villain would come up with.

If you’re talking magic befitting a villain, you should make it a bit more aggressive, don’cha think? Ren wanted to laugh sometimes.

But, such was Mia. This was the reflection of the very heart of Mia Oonari, kind and unable to harm people without a good reason. Indeed, it was because of the goodness of her heart that she could only produce such images. The magic she gave birth to could only be something beautiful. And yet, the girl called herself *evil*, despite anyone with eyes seeing that she was anything but evil. Did this eat at her as much as it did at him?

Silently, Ren clenched his fist as he watched Mia shoo Shou away when he started trying to make flower angels in the densely packed flower growths. Ren decided here and now that he would learn more about Mia Oonari.

Chapter 6: Versus Crow Ranger Yellow!

“**SO** this is where you’ve been slacking off, you good-for-nothing chief.”

At the back of the police station, hidden in the middle of a mountain-like pile of cardboard boxes, was an old staircase in a corridor leading to the rear entrance. Buried between two large water dispensers and several candy machines was the police chief leaning against the wall smoking a cigarette. By using the nearby window he skillfully directed the smoke out of the building and kept his presence hidden.

“Hmph, I’ve been busted, huh? Looks like I’ll have to find myself another place to relax.”

“Why you... You *do* know that our station is supposed to be completely smoke-free now, right?”

“Oh yeah, right. Terrible, that, don’t you think? I, for one, find it objectionable that whenever the esteemed general public happens to come up with some bright idea, we have to rush to implement it. Look at me, having to hide in my own station to have a smoke because of some bleedin’ lungs.”

Ren only sighed at the chief blowing a cloud of smoke in his face. He was a smoker too, so it wasn’t as if he couldn’t empathize with the sentiment, but not to the extent of actually sneaking about to smoke. Besides, the moment he took his eyes off the man, he’d no doubt disappear somewhere to skip work. Were all officers counting the days till their retirement like that?

“There’s something I wanted to talk to you about.”

“We can talk here, right? Go on. Oh, here’s the ashtray.”

“I’m not smoking! Getting chewed out if they find me or getting a pay cut’s not really a part of my plan for today.”

The man tutted and deliberately closed his lips around his cigarette, which looked a bit childish. He was dressed in a wrinkled shirt, with a somewhat

lopsided necktie looped around its collar, his slacks held up by suspenders. His entire outfit seemed picked out only to exemplify his slovenly appearance.

The man was none other than the boss of the ‘Champions of Justice’, the one Ren and the gang called ‘chief’. One day, he announced the formation of a new squad, to be called the Crow Rangers, designated Ren as Green, and gave him the smartphone with the built-in tracking device. No matter how far removed from reasonable that was, as a member of the force, he could do nothing but nod his assent to his new assignment. Such was the tragic reality of having a job where respecting the chain of command was of the essence.

Ren’s first thought had been, *The chief must’ve lost his marbles*. What was all this talk of Supreme Ruler of Evil, magic, and Champions of Justice all about? No one who has reached the ripe age of twenty-six expects words like that thrown at them with utmost seriousness at their place of work. But when he tried going to the place marked on his tracking device, he had indeed encountered a ‘Supreme Ruler of Evil’ there, who had been using ‘magic’ to boot.

She was just a girl. Even as she got innocently flustered by the grown-ups’ teasing, she still did her best to pursue her goals and achieve them. If he just closed his eyes, he could vividly picture her many expressions—here she was, eyes lit up from within by defiance and determination, and there she was with her cheeks stained pink in embarrassment and surprise.

It was in order to learn more about this girl that he came to ask his slacker of a boss a few questions. So, Ren leaned against the opposite wall before the man, leveling him with a glare, and growled threateningly, “Mia. Tell me about her.”

“Mia... You must mean Mia Oonari. What do you want to know?” Chief willingly indulged him.

Ren was bemused at the unexpected ease with which the man yielded, but pressed on. “First, the tracking device. Why is there a chip buried in Mia’s body?”

“That’s her father’s doing. He planted one in his own body too, and he was the one who handed me the tracking system.”

“I thought as much. Why would he do such a thing? Weren’t you and her dad

enemies, you being a Champion of Justice and him the Supreme Ruler of Evil and all?”

The man opened his mouth, only to expel some smoke from it in a quiet exhale. He had a peculiar expression on his face—it was as if he had been anticipating this very question coming someday, and felt at peace with having Ren finally ask it.

“Mia’s father gave me the system before he became the ‘Supreme Ruler of Evil’. We were friends since high school, him and I. It was when I got dispatched here, to this town, to work as a police officer, that he appeared all of a sudden and offered the tracker to me.”

This meant that the connection Ren had inferred was not between the police at large and Mia’s father, but between the chief and Mia’s father, on a personal level. So, the girl’s father had given the tracking device away before becoming the Supreme Ruler of Evil. Mia must’ve been a baby at the time.

“Say, since when did the whole ‘Champions of Justice’ things start? ...Here, in the police force, I mean.”

“I don’t know, but, according to rumors, we’ve had them for a long, long time. Only in this town’s police corps, for some reason. It’s probably due to Mia’s family living here for generations, but anyway, somehow, the Champions of Justice seem to have always been here, their member lineup changing every time a new Supreme Ruler of Evil emerges. That seems to be the tradition. Don’t ask me who decided all this, I really have no idea,” Chief said somewhat apologetically, ducking his head. “If you want exact dates, just find some old news articles. Prior to Mia’s father, both groups were in the news quite often.”

Leaning against the wall before Ren, Chief took another hefty drag of his cigarette, before releasing another puff. It was hard to believe that the man in front of him was actually one of the people appointed to be a Champion of Justice during Mia’s father’s time as Supreme Ruler of Evil. And, using the tracking system, every time a surge of magic was detected, he headed to the crime scene, nipping the evil deed in the bud.

“Evil deeds? Did he really do any, Mia’s old man?”

“That he did! All awfully petty though, now that I think about it. We once

fought at a big dog park, when I found him there releasing the massive pack of dogs he formed by luring pets away from their owners with his magic. All the dogs were enhanced to insane levels—could likely have taken out a Kodiak bear and won on their own. They were a nightmare to deal with.

“Then there was that time he appeared at the trip paid for by the force for my outstanding service, when I was itching to go have a soak at the hot springs, and he put a literal damper on the mood by making it rain pumpkins. And I am not talking tiny little baseball-sized ones, but car sized. Imagine hundreds of pumpkins the size of a car falling out of the sky... Gah, just thinking about it brings back old pains. Or, when I’d go to a cabaret club, he’d make all the hostesses fall in love with him, so they’d ignore me completely. ...Ah, that was just because he had a pretty face, dammit.”

Ren had seen the pictures of the man, and he had indeed been good-looking. But, however nice his facial features, he could never look at him the same way ever since he found out that he had been taking baths together with his high schooler daughter.

Be that as it may, the evil deeds he had perpetrated were even more small-time than Ren had imagined, to the extent that no one in their right mind would think to call them that. Not that giant pumpkins and overpowered dogs weren’t dangerous, but they just didn’t really scream ‘Evil’. The level on which he had operated was almost the same as Mia’s—just more competent.

“Don’t tell me that the Supreme Rulers of Evil haven’t done anything but lame pranks, generation after generation?”

“Nah, like I said, just look up the news articles. Prior Supreme Rulers of Evil have had a hand in some pretty awful crimes up to Mia’s grandfather’s generation. Gas accidents due to unknown causes, mass abductions, monsters from the deep, eldritch abominations from space, some of the battles have even rearranged the landscape in a few places. It all changed since Mia’s father became the new head of the family.

“Ever since then, the Supreme Rulers of Evil would only cause weird mischief unfit to be called evil deeds. It wouldn’t even get picked up by the media. Not that most people even pay much attention anymore—from what I remember,

one of the spells they cast makes everyone view the Supreme Rulers of Evil and anything related to them as normal. Or some such nonsense.”

Ren narrowed his eyes, touching a finger to his chin. That actually explained a lot about the lack of reactions he had seen. The behavior of Supreme Rulers of Evil had changed, starting from Mia’s father’s generation. What could have been the reason for it? The tracking system he gave to the chief before becoming the family head... Why did he hand over such a thing to his enemy? It was as if...

“I can’t help but think...he gave a tracker to you so that you could always find him.”

“That’s right. I think he wanted me to stop him. He never said that, of course.”

“...Stop him from doing what?”

The evil deeds? No, that couldn’t have been it. The evil deeds themselves were so out of place, after all. Mia’s father must’ve wanted something else prevented.

The chief, having smoked his cigarette up to the filter, was rubbing what was left of it out in his pocket ashtray. A thin wisp of smoke rose from his pocket before being snuffed out.

“I still don’t know what he was really thinking. We just fought whenever we stumbled upon him. He kept saying something about how completing the world conquest after defeating us was ‘their’ long-cherished desire or something.”

“Mia was saying the same thing. When she defeats us, she’s gonna activate the great magical art of darkness and stuff. What is this great magical art of darkness? Is it a spell that can’t be used without beating us first?”

“Most likely so. You know, every time he ran away from us due to running out of magical power, he had this strange expression on his face, looking suspiciously close to relief. After seeing it, I became convinced that magic can’t be anything good. That was probably why he wanted us to prevent him from using it.”

Mia’s father, the man who made the chief come running at the slightest hint

of trouble and battled until he ran out of magic. It was as if he was using those fights over nothing as an excuse to avoid using the great magical art of darkness. It was strange. Ren felt the same kind of contradiction in Mia's father's thinking as he did in Mia's—the man had ostensibly wanted to activate the great magical art of darkness, while, in reality, he hadn't tried to do so, not even once.

Out of habit, Ren's hand crawled towards his breast pocket, almost taking his box of cigarettes out, but then he remembered that this was a nonsmoking area and clicked his tongue in frustration.

"Come on, you can have a smoke. You've got your pocket ashtray. The window and fan will take care of the smoke, who's gonna notice?"

"I'm not smoking! But seriously, you're useless. I can't rest until I understand the crucial parts of the story, which I still don't get."

"Hahaha, sorry about that. If it'll improve your opinion of me, I'll investigate this matter a bit further. But why are you so hell bent on uncovering the truth? Could it be that you're feeling something for our little Mia?"

Ren's expression clouded over in an instant—a wrinkle formed between his brows, his face radiating annoyance. *Do I really have to explain myself to you?* was written plain on his features. Chief chuckled at Ren's reaction.

"You have a crush on her, huh? You, at twenty-six, crushing on a seventeen-year-old girl? I didn't know you had a thing for young girls! You know there's a word for that?"

"Wha—Shut up! When Mia turns twenty, I'll only be twenty-nine! This much of an age difference is normal in our day and age!" Ren barked back reflexively, and bit his tongue in frustration, realizing what he had just said.

It was as good as admitting his feelings. Just as he thought, the corners of the chief's mouth jumped up in a grin. *How about a fist in your smug face, you incompetent bastard of a boss,* ran through Ren's mind. However, before he could act on that impulse, the chief's face changed, the grin making way for a relieved, serene smile.

"What? What are you smiling like an old geezer for?"

“Like an old geezer? How so?”

“You know, a creepy smile, like you’re about to say something only obtained through age and experience, some profound nonsense like, ‘what a fine young man, don’t you think, dove?’”

Chief laughed, as if to say, “that’s harsh”. Then he muttered, “I’m fine with it, if you’re the one by her side. But be careful with that girl. She, or rather, all sorcerers of her bloodline, only have a certain amount of magical energy they can spend in a day. If they spend too much, it puts a great toll on them, physically, from which they can only recover in a deep sleep.

“But you mustn’t let her use more magic than the limit allows. If she looks tired, make up a random excuse and let her get away. The top brass are fine with anything as long as Mia is stopped, but if you don’t want to lose her, do as I said. And no matter what, don’t let anyone threaten her life. You do not want to see what happens if a sorcerer’s magic feels its host is threatened.”

Ren’s eyes flew open at the chief’s words. He remembered how Mia looked when she used a lot of magic; she looked exhausted afterwards. The day they had met for the first time, Mia had escaped in a hurry, probably because she felt her magical power reserves depleting. But what would’ve happened if he hadn’t let her go, but had given chase instead, fighting her further or just pulling a gun out and shooting her? What if he had driven her to use even more magic? ...What would have been the consequence of that? Cold sweat started dripping down Ren’s spine.

“...And what will happen if she continues to cast magic despite being tired, and used all of her magical powers up or we threatened her life?”

“When her magical power reserves are drained till the last drop, she will die. If she tries to use more magic than she can, it will wear away her very soul, and she will be erased from existence... At least, that’s what her father said would happen to me once when we were kids. As for a threat to her life, well there’s a reason why the government hasn’t just sent a black ops team to assassinate the entire family line and it goes by the name of Ozone Layer. Let’s just say when an attempt was made, scientists around the world feared Earth might no longer have an ozone layer anymore and so we ended it there.”

Ren was at a loss for words. Chief continued to speak in a subdued tone of voice, his eyes cast down, his words steeped in deep regret and a bit of fear, “As for using up all their magic, we actually think that’s how Mia’s father died. He was fighting us, and I could see he felt the strain of it getting to him. He would usually run away when it became too much, but that day, he didn’t. And then... he activated a great magical art of darkness of his own creation, pushing through the exhaustion, and died because of it.”

Ren reeled, feeling as though he had taken a blow on the head. *If she continues to use magic, Mia will... Mia will die.*

AFTER speaking to the chief and digging further into the Supreme Rulers of Evil, Ren listlessly went about his daily tasks. As had become the norm somewhere along the way, he went over to Subaru’s and ate dinner with his friend and Mia, with the three of them huddled around the table. Sitting there, talking merrily over one another about nothing in particular was an integral part of their everyday life now.

Today, however, Ren didn’t let his gaze stray from Mia, trudging through the meal with less chatter than usual. Mia noticed that something was off about Ren, and inquired about it, but he brushed her concerns off with a smile and a curt, “It’s nothing”.

If he wanted to stay by her side, he would need to tread carefully. He had to convince Mia to give up on world domination, no matter what. After a great deal of debate, he found himself drawn to Mia. And for her to survive she would need to find another goal to devote herself to. The decision that he secretly made in his heart was to pursue her from this point on, no matter what happened down the line.

SUNDAY came rolling in without any real changes occurring in the town or world at large. It was a rare, precious day off for Ren. He chose to spend it with a cigarette in his mouth and a controller in his hand. He was taking it slow today, playing a video game since the moment he had woken up. It was a soccer simulator where he got to control a famous player with their real stats

converted into the game.

On the floor, the essentials were lined up: beer, some dried squid, and an ashtray. He was only dressed in a T-shirt and boxers, not the most dignified outfit, objectively speaking. He shrugged the concern of his clothing off, deciding it was fine because no one would see him anyway. At least on his days off, he wanted to wear whatever he pleased. ...That is unless he got called in for something that had to do with Mia.

She should learn to take it easy from time to time, too!

His smartphone was lying on his bed. The tracking device was activated, responding to the girl using her powers. It was probably just her doing her rounds around the town, as usual. Ren could tell by now what she was doing just by watching her movements on the map. However—

Ping! An electronic sound rang out. When he took a look at his phone's screen, he saw a red dot unmoving, positioned on a road that ran along the riverbank. Mia was using her magic. She was casting so many spells in a single spot, it was most certainly out of the ordinary. Suddenly, he remembered the chief's words, *"There's a limit to how much magic she can use in a day, so..."*

Ren heaved a sigh. Ugh, he would really appreciate it if she stopped worrying him so much. Did she even know about her own potentially fatal weaknesses? He couldn't very well ignore this, so he rose to his feet and hurriedly put on his clothes. Quickly tapping away on his phone to let the others know about what was happening with Mia, he heard a bleep indicating he just got a new message. ...It was from Shou.

"I've got my hands on Mia♪ But it's her fault! She was the one who approached me, k? So, anyway, I'll be playing with her until you come get her. Bye~"

Ren felt the blood draining from his face. His hair was a wild mess, but he didn't care. He tumbled down his hallway and out the door, sprinting in the direction of Shou's house.

SHOU was enjoying his day off duty, queuing up at the doors of an

entertainment venue first thing in the morning. As he was standing there, a very familiar cute voice called out to him from up in the sky, “Found you!”

Shou looked up in confusion, there he saw Mia Oonari in all her long black cape-wearing, sickeningly cute wand-wielding splendor, perched atop a fence separating the venue building from the road.

Having confirmed that it was indeed none other than Shou whom she had spotted, Mia whooped and jumped down, making a perfect 360-degree flip in the air before landing on her feet in front of her quarry.

The gazes of all the men who were standing in line together with Shou were probably concentrated on the same spot—the one that got exposed when the girl was doing the spin, her skirt fluttering down around her legs. If one managed to sneak a peek at it, they would catch a glimpse of a sliver of cool blue fabric.

“Morning, Mia! Blue panties today, I see! And pink ribbons on both sides too, very cute! Great choice!”

“You swine, how were you able to glean that much detail when you have only seen them for a brief moment?!”

“I think it’s a part of the standard skill set of any man.”

We haven’t looked that closely! Thought the men standing around Shou, but Mia seemed to buy Shou’s excuse, equal parts impressed and shocked. Then she shook her head, as if to clear it and get her mind back on the right track, and thrust out her wand towards Shou, pointing it at him.

“Yellow, I hereby challenge you to a duel!”

“Eh? Don’t wanna.”

Mia staggered at such a blunt refusal. She scrunched up her face, close to tears, and whined pitifully, “But whyyy! I was so in the mood for this!”

“Yeah, but they’re installing the new machine today! I really want to try it out. And it’s the Redemption Event Day, too!”

At Shou’s answer, Mia took a closer look at the venue’s front, only to raise her voice in exasperation, “Lining up for *pachinko*, and this early too? ...I feel like

you have hit a new low!”

“But I wanted to get the best seat! I woke up at the crack of dawn for this, so let me off the hook for today, please? Okay?” Shou implored, but that only served to fan the flames of Mia’s anger.

A wrinkle etching itself between her brows, she finally snapped, seething, “Absolutely out of the question! I have grown soft lately, associating with you lot as if I lost my fighting spirit! But no more of that! What is more important here, me, who has renewed her resolve and decided to defeat you one by one, or *pachinko*?!”

“I don’t really care about *pachinko*. I’m here for the slot machines. ...And since you’re asking, right now it’s probably the slot machines...” Shou answered flatly.

That made Mia completely lose her temper, with steam coming out of her ears. She violently grabbed Shou by the wrist. Then, she loudly chanted the spell, “**Fly with me into the sky!**”

A gust of wind drifted around their feet, and then their bodies soared up, getting propelled through the air with a whoosh. The men queuing to get into the casino stared blankly at their backs.

“Ah, well, just one of those days I guess...” someone mumbled and took the place that opened up in the line after Shou’s disappearance, the entire incident between Shou and Mia fading to the back of their minds the moment Mia and her passenger were out of sight.

MIA took Shou to the riverbank, away from the town center. She landed, planting her feet firmly on the ground, let go of Shou’s hand, and jumped a few steps back to put some distance between them.

Shou, only scratched his head awkwardly, mumbling, “Oh man... And I was really looking forward to that new machine...”

“Stop saying it in such a mournful voice! You are a member of the Crow Rangers, are you not?! I suggest you take this more seriously!”

“Yeah, I know, but see, I’m a pacifist. Unless you do something really terrible

right before my eyes, I won't feel like doing anything. ...But you won't do anything bad, right? You're a good girl!"

Shou was only honestly telling Mia what he thought, but to her it sounded like he was making fun of her. Clearly offended, she forcefully waved her wand and cast a spell, "**O wind, tear and rend!**"

Swishing through the air, razor-sharp blades of wind flew straight for Shou. He jerked his arms up to cover his face, the fabric on his jacket sleeves ending up torn and full of shallow cuts. He stared at his arms, his face expressionless. ... Eventually, one corner of his lips curled up, and he turned his face to look Mia dead in the eyes.

Shou's smile, for some reason, made a chill run down her spine. Mia shuffled backwards, her legs suddenly feeling unsteady.

"Hmm, so you really wanna fight me, even though I've just told you I'm a pacifist. You little monster."

"Monster?! No! This is how it was supposed to be from the beginning! I was just too soft on you lot until now!"

"Too soft, huh...? No. You just don't know what the world is like, and all the dirty and wicked things that exist in it. Well, I guess I'll have to humor you, but remember, you were the one who picked a fight with me, 'kay? I'll just give you a spanking for being such a bad girl."

A crooked smile still plastered on his face, Shou slowly slid his feet into a fighting stance. Apparently, damaging his jacket proved sufficient to get him in the mood for a battle. Mia could do without that chilling smile of his, but all in all, the situation was finally progressing in the way she wanted it to. She clenched her stomach muscles and whipped her wand forward.

She let an image fill her head, poured the feelings it evoked into words, and finalized her spell by shouting out, "**O Earth, rise up!**"

A rumbling noise came from somewhere deep in the ground, and then the earth under Shou's feet bulged, surging up high.

"Whoa!"

He jumped back down to the safety of the flat ground, but the soil swelled under him again. All around Shou, piles of earth shot up in a circular pattern, and then spread and fused with each other to form a single thin, long conical shape, attempting to block his field of vision. Shou evaded the wall of soil sealing him inside by performing a running jump off the enclosing walls and over the top and dashed towards Mia.

“Tsk. O wind, tear and rend!”

“Pff, that won’t work on me twice!”

The blades of wind were thin and straight, which meant that their area of effect was highly limited. Shou seemed to have realized that, so he quickly kicked off the ground with his right foot to gain momentum, and leapt to the side.

“You can run in a straight line and jump to the side on a moment’s notice?! I didn’t know you rangers had reflexes like that!”

Astonishment flooded Mia’s face, but she refused to be beaten, and, drawing strength from her ever-blazing will to fight, she braced her wand.

“O sh-shield of ice, protect me!”

As soon as she pronounced those words, a wall made of ice appeared in front of her, its expanding edges twisting themselves to form a circle which was closing around Shou. It seemed that Mia was out to buy herself some time, but all she had done was change her attack from wind, earth, wind again, and now to ice. While the elements changed, the attacks were relatively the same.

“And now I shall make hail rain down on your head!” Mia exclaimed, raising her wand high overhead.

A ghost of a smile crossed Shou’s face at that declaration. He exhaled in a short burst to even out his breathing, and then, raising a battle cry, he slammed his fist into the ice. With a sharp sound, a crack opened in its surface, widening and branching out with tremendous speed. Before long, the wall of ice shattered into pieces, emitting a high-pitched noise.

Mia’s eyes swam with fear—she hadn’t anticipated Shou breaking through her wall with such ease. Shou deftly hopped over the broken shards of ice and

bolted towards Mia, taking off his jacket while running. Coming to a skidding halt before her, he spread his jacket out in front of Mia's face, put it over her mouth and then tightly wrapped it around her head while sliding behind her. In a single motion Shou had Mia gagged and was in a position to debilitate or even strangle her if he wished.

"Mmph!"

"There, there. Now, zip those lips."

With Mia's mouth thus covered, she couldn't do a thing. She squirmed and struggled, trying to free herself, but Shou had already restrained her arms. The only places left uncovered by the jacket on Mia's face were her eyes; her nose too, but just enough to be able to breathe.

Shou bent down and whispered sweetly at her ear, "Hee-hee... Looks like you've lost, Mia. Now, like I promised, I'll give you a spanking."

"Mpamkimph?!"

"I need to make sure you won't dare come bugging me ever again, so I'm gonna instill some respect in you—through your body," Shou chuckled softly against her ear.

Shou was basking in sadistic glee, his voice coming out in a lazy lecherous drawl. There was a bewitching quality to its lilt; if someone with masochistic proclivities heard it, they'd melt into a puddle on the spot.

"You're powerless at close quarters, right? I heard from Ren. Your magic has an area of effect, so if you attempt to use it in close proximity to your target, you're gonna suffer damage as well. ...I'm gonna call a cab now, and for the ride I'm gonna remove the jacket, freeing your mouth, but don't even think of crossing me! If you try anything funny, the poor taxi driver will suffer for it. You don't want that to happen, my sweet little Mia, so you'll do as I say, won't you?" Shou uttered, his words much more befitting a villain than a Champion of Justice, and giggled, blowing a gentle puff of breath over Mia's earlobe.

Immediately, something cold crawled up Mia's spine, her eyes filling with terror. She felt so different from Shou's touch than she had at Ren's; it baffled her.

Ren made her heart beat wildly in her chest, while Shou evoked a mysterious sense of fear in her, making her tremble. Shou eyed her with satisfaction, evidently savoring the way her face twisted in dread.

Shou took out his phone and called for a cab to pick them up, just like he had said he would. The car appeared quickly enough, and Mia, her face completely jacket-free, was hauled into the taxi by Shou, his hand draped over her shoulders as if they were a couple of young lovebirds. They rode for some time before arriving at Shou's apartment complex.

As soon as he got out of the car, he put his hand over Mia's mouth and ushered her to his unit, almost dragging her there. The apartment he called his home was pretty big for one person, and looked quite expensive. Evidently well-cleaned, it was neat and tidy.

Shou, pulling Mia along, opened the front door. ...Mia took a peek inside and her eyes grew wide as saucers. *Wha-What is this? What in the world is this place?*

The first thing that stood out to her was probably the bed. It seemed extremely uncomfortable to sleep on—being X-shaped and all. Moreover, something resembling belts dangled from it here and there. Above the bed was what looked like the oddest seat she had ever seen made up of black leather straps and a way to move, raise, or lower the entire thing anywhere around the bed.

Next to the bed was a triangular piece of wood lying horizontally with its sharp edge directed upwards—another chair, probably? Visual evidence suggested it would be a pain to sit on. It had black belts attached to it, too. A set of handcuffs hung down from a nearby wall, and on the ceiling, a number of sturdy-looking iron bars were mounted. Mia had no idea as to what the use of all of this equipment could be. On another wall was an assortment of masks, some that covered the entire head, and some just the mouth.

As she was gazing dazedly at the interior of the room, she felt something cold against her lips. She jerked in surprise at the sudden sensation, but it was too late. Mia had something resembling a small golf ball with a lot of holes in it slipped into her mouth and immediately fastened behind her head with a black

strap.

“Mmph?”

“I feel a bit bad about using a mouth gag on a first-timer, but we don’t want you accidentally using your magic in the heat of the moment, now do we? You can breathe through it, so you’ll be fine,” Shou cooed, putting handcuffs around the girl’s wrists and attaching them to a chain dangling down from the ceiling. Mia’s arms were forcibly raised overhead as Shou tugged on a nearby chain, her legs the only part of her body she could move freely.

“Mmh—Um-mph! Mmph?!”

“Hmm, I think a collar would really suit you. I would love nothing more than to put one on you, but let’s save that for Ren. After all, he’s the one who owns you, hehe.”

Owens?! I don’t remember being owned by anyone! Mia stomped her feet, but Shou only watched her indignation idly, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

“Ah, it must be so much fun taming a feisty girl like you. But fear not! You’re a virgin, aren’t you? Let’s save that for Ren, too. The only thing I’ll be teaching you is pleasure♪”

“Mmh-mmh?”

The more Shou babbled, the more uneasy and scared Mia began to feel. What was he saying? What was he going to do to her now that she was tied up? Mia watched him, her face tight with trepidation, as he opened a cabinet, its door creaking, and crossed his arms over his chest, creasing his brow in thought.

“Let’s start with a love egg, I guess? And then we’ll probably need an electric toothbrush. A rope, and... I have no experience dealing with children, so I’m a bit lost. How far should I go? I wonder if it’d be all right to use a dildo if I pick the smallest one. How much can I insert without popping your cherry? I gotta be careful,” Shou muttered under his breath.

Mia couldn’t understand a word of what he was saying, none, zero, nada, zilch. Eventually, Shou mumbled, “all right,” as if he decided on a course of action, and started pulling out a number of different items from the bowels of his cabinet. There was something pink and roundish, something looking like a

wand, a bunch of red rope, something of a weird shape that had a switch on its side, and a mysterious contraption that had something suspiciously resembling electric wires attached to it.

“Mmph?!”

Mia had no idea what the purpose of all the items being pull out was, but that last one with the wires looked particularly ominous, especially when it sparked with Shou’s fiddling. The giggling that accompanied his setup was nerve-racking. It was probably due to it looking like it was created for the sole purpose of applying electrical current to people. A smile spread over Shou’s face upon seeing Mia’s horrified expression. How could he manage such a beatific smile while holding such a horrendous thing?

“Don’t worry, I won’t be using *that*. I just took it out because it was in the way and I have some fond memories using it with...hmm my last guest you could say.”

“Mmh-mmph!”

“Ah, you wanna know what it’s for? Well, it’s for applying electrical current which passes through these wires as you saw. But it feels nothing like an electric shock! It’s more of this sort of buzzing sensation. Although you can up the power, only special guests enjoy that kind of attention.”

As if purposefully trying to strike even more fear into Mia’s already wildly beating heart, Crow Ranger Yellow touched the two ends of the strange contraption that looked like clothespins, connected respectively to a red and a blue wire, to her body. The thing looked so much like a torture device that Mia shook her head frantically upon feeling the metal on her skin, a silent cry stuck in her throat.

After Shou put the mystery machine away, he hauled up some other suspicious thing, holding it in both hands, and deposited it on a nearby table. He then flashed a grin at her. “Okay, I’ll tie you up now!”

“HRMRM?!”

“I could do this without tying you up; handcuffs are more than enough, especially for a first-timer. But this is supposed to be punishment, so... It might

hurt a little, but you'll have to bear with me, okay?" Shou pulled the rope taut between his hands, giggling.

Mia's terror reached its peak. *I'm so scared, I'm so scared! This person is scary!* Just at that moment, Bam! the door into the room smashed open with great force. When Mia's eyes darted there automatically to see what happened, she saw Ren standing in the doorway. He panted heavily, his shoulders raising and falling with each ragged breath he took. He probably ran all the way there at full speed. Large beads of sweat trickled down from his temples.

"Tsk." Shou grumbled with a look of disappointment on his features. "Oh well. I guess you made it just in time. Wow, your stamina sure is amazing!"

"You...seriously mean to tell me...that this is what 'made it just in time' is supposed to look like?!"

"But you did! I haven't even tied her up, or used a love egg on her yet. Just some really tame moans and screams, I haven't even gotten to the pleasurable moments. Her hymen's still intact, too!"

"Ugh, don't say 'hymen'! Were you going to tell me 'oops, you were too late' if you had already broken it or what?!"

Shou cocked his head to the side, and cutely at that, fiddling with the rope. "I didn't touch her ass, either?"

"I'm not into that!"

"Oh? Well, your loss!" Shou mumbled under his breath to himself, detaching the chains dangling from the ceiling and removing the handcuffs from Mia. Finally, he carefully untied the knot that fastened the mouth gag. "Well, our time together has hereby run out! Wasn't it so very nice of Ren to swoop in and save you, Mia?"

"...uh, haa..."

There was nothing covering Mia's mouth now, but she wasn't in any condition to use magic. It had been a tremendously terrifying ordeal. She had felt a horror she had never experienced before. Ren approached her with worry in his eyes and gently rubbed her back. At his touch, the accumulated tension within Mia snapped, and she hurled herself into his chest, holding tightly on to Ren.

“Whoa, huh?!”

“Sniff... Sniff, I was so scared, s-so sc...ared...”

Had she ever clung to him this willingly before? She must’ve been traumatized by whatever she experienced under Shou’s ministrations. Ren thought it was no wonder; being pushed into a room full of things that look like they belong in a torture chamber, having a mouth gag stuffed between her lips and her wrists bound, rope and various torture devices she had never seen before being dangled right before her very eyes. To an inexperienced girl who didn’t know a thing about the peculiar fetishes of the world, this must’ve been the very epitome of terror. Ren, holding Mia tenderly in his arms and soothingly carding his hands through her hair, shot Shou an accusing look.

“Hey, why did you have to bully her so bad?”

“Eh? This can hardly be called bullying. I’d much rather you recognized my goodwill in laying the groundwork for your future enjoyment,” Shou said with perfect sincerity, without any hint of ill intentions in his voice, at which Ren could only sigh. “Besides, it’s not like I would go out of my way for just anyone. She did ruin a perfectly good set of clothes, and dragged me through the sky without warning.”

Having calmed down a bit, Mia raised her head, still trembling slightly. Her eyes were wide and sparkling, from both residual fear and relief she experienced at Ren’s embrace, her cheeks flushed a pretty shade of crimson. ... It was a dangerous face that could send a man’s heart into overdrive. A crease appeared between Ren’s brows.

“R-Ren, what is this room? That bed, that uncomfortable-looking chair, why do they have so many belts attached to them? Why is there a chair hanging above the bed? ...What could this room possibly be for?”

“Ugh, do I really have to explain this? Um, so, you see...” Ren trailed off, scratching his head, uncertain as to how exactly he should put this.

Shou cut ahead, stating casually, “It’s just an S&M discipline room. I had to look for an apartment complex with soundproof rooms in order to make it. Do you know how much trouble that was?”

“Es-en-em? Discipline?”

Ren facepalmed, seeing Mia’s face blanch with fear at Shou uttering a bunch of incomprehensible words again. Ren sent a deadly glare the other man’s way, indicating for him to quit aggravating the situation further for the time being, and opened his mouth, speaking gently and choosing his words carefully to make it as accessible as possible.

“Hmm, how do I put this...? This room is for certain types of men and women using the facilities and tools that you see here to fulfill certain fetishes. Hurting women and men I guess, is a major part of it. Shou gets off on this; it’s sort of like his hobby.”

“Hurting women is his hobby?!”

“Hey, you got it all wrong! I am only helping them awaken to a new way of experiencing pleasure. And while it’s true that the focus of my efforts are women, it’s not like anyone will do. Only after careful selection do I make my move! I don’t usually waste my time with pure doms or sadists, not unless they have enough submissive or machoism tendencies mixed in—”

“Gaah! You keep your mouth shut! Anyway, there you have it. So, the bottom line is, give up on Shou. Trust me on this one; just leave him to his own oddities.”

While Ren was speaking, Mia turned around warily within the safety of his arms to take a furtive glance back. Noticing her eyes on him, Shou let a charming smile bloom on his face and raised a finger.

“Hehe, you’re free to come and pick a fight with me again. This time, I played nice and contacted Ren in advance, but I won’t do that next time. ...There will be no mercy. But if you liked being picked on by me, hit me up whenever!” Shou purred, a corner of his mouth twisting and arching up in a sinister smirk. “Besides, I only play with willing partners, at least they have to be willing at the start.” Shou giggled as he snatched up the gag Ren had tossed aside and mumbled something about calling the lovely cleaner over for some fun and games.

Instantly, Mia’s shoulders quivered, and she gripped Ren’s clothes tighter. It didn’t matter that she was the Supreme Ruler of Evil and Shou was her enemy;

the man was a menace, pure and simple. At the very least, Mia's instincts were crystal clear on the matter—going up against Shou was out of the question. At least until she was a little older...

Chapter 7: Strategy Meeting about the Enemy's Love Life

SUMMER break was over, and the coming of autumn ushered in the busy season for all kinds of events. At Mia's school, they were holding a sports day. A handmade sign with "32nd Sports Day" written on it was proudly put up at the school gate for all to see. At the side of a wide sports field, students huddled together, divided into two groups.

"Go Red Team! Let's win this thing!"

"Yeah!" Everyone cheered in response to the words of the head cheerleader.

There were probably very few schools where students displayed this level of excitement about the school sports day, but the school where Mia was enrolled went wild like this every year. Maybe it had to do with the school tradition; here, athletic activities, clubs, and classes were historically favored over more academic ones. Thus, it had always attracted sports-minded people which formed the majority of its student body.

Also, the winning team received an assortment of traditional Japanese confections as a prize. One might wonder if an opportunity to receive Japanese sweets would effectively motivate someone to do their best, but don't underestimate how sweet a red bean paste bun that tastes of victory can be—it's a flavor one never forgets.

"Let's go for it Mia! And the cheerleading squad!"

"Y-Yeah, we practiced for it so much," Mia nodded a bit hesitantly to one of the girls from her class calling out to her with her fist balled in a display of fighting spirit.

When drawing lots for participation in various events, Mia ended up having to take part in a cheerleading routine. This meant that during the cheerleading competition, she would have to dance in a frilly skirt and shake pompoms to the

music. This felt so embarrassing, she almost felt like cursing her bad luck that put her in this position. However, she felt enthusiastic about the rest of the events: she would also participate in a sprint, a three-legged race, and a scavenger hunt.

The sprint was the first event of the day for her. Mia psyched herself up, the flame of passion burning in her eyes as she started warming up. Eventually, all sprinters were asked to stand on their marks, and then POP! The starter pistol went off. Mia dashed, running as fast as she could, easily overcoming her competitors and zipping through the obstacles. She took second place, only outdone by someone from the track team. Mia returned to her team, to everyone's deafening cries of support, and had to go get changed immediately to make it in time for the cheerleading routine.

She cast a quick glance to the seats reserved for the parents on the bleachers; a sizable number of seats were filled by the students' family members who came to cheer them on. Mia figured there would be fewer spectators than there had been in middle school, but the crowd was quite impressive. When she was a freshman and her father was still alive, he had come to watch her too.

He had taken a paid leave, a very rare occurrence, just for that purpose, and hadn't taken his eyes off her from the opening ceremony till the closing ceremony. Whenever an event came up where Mia participated, he cheered for her at the top of his lungs. To Mia, it was one of her most heartwarming memories.

She stared absently at the seats, lost in the recollections of her father, when she suddenly had to do a double take, her eyes zeroing in on several faces in the crowd that were far too familiar for comfort.

"Eh?! Wh-Why?!" Mia yelped involuntarily, earning herself a curious look from a concerned classmate who had been standing nearby.

"N-No, it's nothing," Mia waved her hand frantically and plonked down on a seat.

Why, why are they here?! The people she had noticed on the bleachers were the Crow Rangers. *The whole team too! But it's the middle of a workday! What*

about their jobs?! But more importantly, how did they know that there was a sports day at my school, and why are they in the section reserved for parents? There were so many things that didn't add up; Mia could hardly stop her mind from racing a mile a minute.

"Mia, the cheerleading competition is about to start!"

"Gahh! I completely forgot about it!" she cried out, cradling her head in her hands.

She didn't think she could live down the shame of having to dance in front of her foes in a cheerleader's outfit. However, she couldn't drop out at the last minute just because of that, so she trudged listlessly towards the sports field, her face twisted up in shame.

"**WHYYYY!** Why are you rangers here?!"

"Hee-hee-hee, your cheerleading dance was really cute!"

"Don't worry, we're just gonna eat lunch, watch you a bit more, and then we'll be off."

Mia glared at Misaki as if to say she absolutely refused to be watched, even "a bit more", but then froze in place, her mind catching on the magical word "lunch". Lunch break had indeed just started. All around them, people were looking for a nice place to settle down and eat, and pulling out their lunchboxes. In fact, Subaru slowly revealed a five-tiered lunchbox of their own.

"This will be our lunch. Let's dig in."

"Wow... You brought food with you."

Subaru nodded at the bewildered girl, and pulled out the multi-tiered food boxes one by one. There was a box stuffed full of sandwiches and *onigiri*; a box containing fried chicken and meat and veggies on skewers. A box with an assortment of small appetizers, like omelet rolls, asparagus wrapped in bacon, and meatballs and cheese balls stuck on toothpicks for easy grabbing. Finally there was a box where summer rolls lay side by side with small aluminum foil cups overflowing with spoonfuls of potato salad; and for desert, a container

housing a lemon pie. Mia regarded the colorful small feast before her with gleaming eyes.

“Incredible! Everything looks so good... Did you make all of it by yourself, Subaru?”

“No, I cooked together with Aya.”

“I made the sandwiches and the *onigiri*, oh, and I baked the lemon pie too! Let’s save it for last,” Aya grinned, gesturing for Mia to take something from the *onigiri* box, to which she eagerly complied.

“Th-Thank you for the food,” Mia mumbled, tilting her head down in a small bow, and bit into her *onigiri*.

The saltiness was just right, and the seaweed sheet around the rice ball was perfect—not too mushy, but not too dry either. Inside was a piece of smoked salmon. Salmon was the undisputed number one in Mia’s *onigiri* preference for fillings, so this discovery put a broad smile on her face.

“Aww, the face you just made is so cute! It’s that good, huh?” Shou chuckled, and took an *onigiri* for himself.

Ren, who was sitting beside Mia, also took one. “You a fan of *onigiri*, Mia?”

“I guess you could say that. They’re cheap and filling, and tasty to boot—there’s nothing bad I can say about *onigiri*,” Mia answered Ren’s question, munching on her rice ball all the while.

Ren snorted, and then burst out laughing at that. Misaki rolled his eyes but laughed too, taking a sandwich out of the box. “I thought you sounded like an old housewife before, but now you sound like a pauper.”

“Well, I have to scrimp and save to make ends meet! It would be easier if I could get a part-time job, but I don’t have the time for it,” Mia muttered, reaching for the omelet rolls with her chopsticks.

As she put it in her mouth, the salty flavor of soy sauce tempered by the sweetness of *mirin* spread over her tongue. By Mia’s standards, this was how omelet rolls should taste—sometimes, people made them so sweet it made you wonder whether they put in too much sugar. She couldn’t stomach those;

omelet rolls were a side dish, and as such, they had to go well with rice.

Fried chicken flavored with ginger, crispy and savory asparagus wrapped in bacon, summer rolls drizzled with chili sauce, potato salad with plenty of mayonnaise—Mia's chopsticks flew from one appetizer to the next, the Crow Rangers' chatter picking up around her. They had the lemon pie Aya baked for dessert. The crust was crunchy, crumbling easily under her teeth, and the filling mildly tangy and zesty, tasting that much more wonderful because Mia had been craving something sweet after exerting herself earlier.

Naturally, she still felt obliged to treat the Champions of Justice as her enemies; just the other day, she picked a fight with Shou and had a terrible time as a result. At the same time, though, she had grown used to spending time with the group of five like this, and although Mia felt the glaring paradox of this situation eating at her, she still learned to appreciate and even relish the fun times they had together little by little, like the one they were having now.

Lunch was over, and the afternoon part of the program was about to start. The first event was the scavenger hunt, in which Mia was also taking part. The Rangers said they would leave after watching. After asking, she found out that most of them were off duty, but Ren and Subaru went so far as to take paid leave to come. Theirs was an unfortunate occupation that always ran the risk that they could be called in should something happen and there wasn't enough manpower to deal with it, so they preferred to go home earlier than stay until the end of the day.

If Mia was being honest with herself, she really appreciated the Rangers taking a day off and even going so far as to make and bring a boxed lunch for her sake. ...This was where normal people would say "thank you", but in Mia's case, pride got in her way and her lips refused to form those words.

Mia psyched herself up—she would take first place in the scavenger hunt and impress the Rangers. With the Red Team's cries of support in the background, Mia took her place at the starting line. POP! The shot crackled through the air, and she sprinted straight for the place where the long desks were lined up to secure a piece of paper indicating the item she would have to find.

This was where it all stood or fell. If she picked something weird, she would

be in trouble. The scavenger race was an event where victory largely depended on one's luck after all. She unfurled her paper scrap, took a quick look at it, and froze. Panicking, she gave the paper another glance, but the letters spelling out "hunk" didn't change.

Hunk?! Uh, I'm almost sure this is meant figuratively, and not in the sense of a large piece of food. A shame. ...So, a good-looking man, was it? But I don't know any good-looking men! I have no idea what makes a man attractive in the first place!

Mia was completely stumped. She looked around her and saw there were some other participants shuffling their feet, unsure of what to do. However, there were others who darted around the field, looking for their designated item. She had better start searching for hers too, but...

What in the world is a "hunk"?! Mia racked her brain desperately. Suddenly, a certain man's face flashed in her mind, and she took off on an impulse. Shoving the onlookers aside to make way, she entered the section reserved for parents, and stopped right in front of the Crow Rangers who were watching the race.

"Hey, what's up?"

"Ren! Come!"

Mia grabbed a startled Ren's hand and ran, pulling him along. Just like the sprint, she ended up in second place. She would've preferred first place, of course, but with an item like that, second place was a godsend. While she was panting at the finish line, a number of her classmates rushed over to her.

"Great job, Mia!"

"Hey, hey, what was your item? Who is this guy?"

"Argh! Th-This is... Um... It was!" Mia sputtered, trying to hide her piece of paper behind her back, but it was torn right out of her hand by someone standing behind her. That someone was a sports day student on staff.

She briefly checked the paper, looked Ren up and down, and then nodded approvingly, "He's a bit scary looking, but he's a hunk all right. Approved!"

Apparently, she was in charge of appraising the items—if someone brought

something completely unrelated to what was on their paper, their entry would be deemed void.

Ren's face tightened at the mention of his scary looks, which he was very self-conscious about, but then one of the other female students peeked at the paper in the hands of the committee member.

"Hm? What was her item again? Huh, a hunk?! Wow, that must've been a nightmare to look for!"

"Lucky you, huh, Mia, having a hunk among your acquaintances!"

"So, who's the guy? Wait, could he be your—"

"Gaah! Quit using that word, 'hunk'! No! Uh, I just happened to think of him, there's no deeper meaning to this!"

"Hunk?" Ren tilted his head curiously, staring at Mia's flustered expression.

He then borrowed the paper from the girl who had it, examined it briefly, and made a wry face. "Huh? So you think I'm a hunk?"

"N-No! It is a misunderstanding! You were just the first person that came to mind! I was not thinking straight!"

Mia's head started spinning from working herself up over this, her cheeks burning red. The other female students gazed at Mia with wide eyes for a brief moment, puzzled over her strange behavior, and then cracked up.

"Hehe, Mia, you're blushing... So cute! This is the first time I've seen this side of you!"

"I am not blushing! This is a complete misunderstanding!"

"Hey, mister, are you Mia's boyfriend?" one of Mia's classmates asked, causing all the girls around to squeal.

Mia was flapping her arms around, desperately trying to insist they got it all wrong. Ren, on the other hand, just observed the screaming girls and hysterical Mia for a while. In the end, he flashed a devilish smirk and pulled Mia close, casually dropping, "Mm, yeah, something like that."

"Ren?! What in the world are you saying, you numbskull?!"

“See ya around,” Ren sang, adding a mischievous smile at the end, stuffed his hands in his pockets and went back to the bleachers, leaving a gobsmacked Mia behind. He was clearly messing with her. He only said that in front of her classmates to watch her squirm from the sudden attention of her peers.

“Da-Damnation! I will get you for this!”

“Wow, Mia, so you have an older boyfriend?”

“Did he take a day off to come watch you?”

Predictably, Mia had to endure a barrage of questions from her classmates before she ran out of patience and hightailed it to the Red Team seating area.

“Seriously! I solemnly swear that I shall uncover what his weakness is, and then I shall utterly destroy him!” Mia sniffled as she ran.

The next day, the school was abuzz with rumors about Mia and her older boyfriend.

THE sports day that put Mia in such a tight spot ended and autumn rolled on; it was now November. Whir, whir, vroom, vroom. Mia was skipping class, riding a bus for a change instead of flying. As a general rule, she didn’t use magic except for when she acted as the Supreme Ruler of Evil. Today, she had something she wanted to discuss with her legal guardian. Mia had no relatives, so there was a person that managed her property, which mainly consisted of her father’s life-insurance money, and kept an eye on her. That’s not to say they were particularly close—he was her lawyer.

They weren’t chummy, sure, but he oversaw her finances in a conscientious manner, and for that, Mia was grateful to him. Apparently, he was an acquaintance of her father and their relatives knew each other. The lawyer didn’t like talking about private matters much, and Mia had little interest in finding out more anyway, so their relationship was strictly business.

Mia held onto a strap in the moving bus, absently staring out the window. Speaking of the bus, it was very crowded, probably because it was the time when most people commuted to work. Mia always went to see her legal guardian at his office early in the morning, so every time she took a bus to get

there, she was amazed at how packed it was.

One time Mia was even harassed by a pervert on the bus. It was the first pervert she had ever encountered. Rather than get angry, she was surprised. *Ah, so they really do exist*, she thought. The hand that groped her breast was gone before she knew it. A weird calm overtook her as she was musing how unexpectedly short the fondling had been, but then she heard a voice at her ear saying, “So flat”. Her calm instantly flew out the window, and so did the guy standing behind her, blown away by her kick. It was a memory she wouldn’t soon forget.

As Mia was revisiting her sad past while staring out the window, she heard a tiny voice saying, “No...” somewhere close to her. She looked to the side and noticed a woman standing some distance from her, squirming in place, discomfort written plainly on her face. She was obviously upset about something, twisting her arms. Mia lowered her body a bit and observed the woman for a while. Through the tiny gaps between human bodies pressed together, she spied a stray hand digging its fingers into the woman’s behind. As soon as Mia noticed it, she shot into action. She weaved her way through the crowd, drawing close to the woman, grabbed the hand that was touching the woman’s posterior, and raised it overhead.

“Gah!”

“What are you doing, making an unwanted pass at a woman? If you want to fondle bums so badly, go and pay money to do it!”

“Wha—I-I wasn’t—”

The man agitatedly tried to defend himself, but the people around him had probably noticed what he had been doing, so everyone looked at him with disgust in their eyes. He then yelled at Mia, “Nonsense! Stop making strange accusations! I didn’t do anything!”

“How can you say that after having groped her buttocks that firmly? I have heard from Father that there are special establishments for people with your kind of proclivities. A go-go bar in a train car was it, I think? It’s not a bus, regrettably, but apparently it is a place where you can choose a girl you like by touching her butt. It is part of their service, so you can fondle bottoms all you

like there.”

She had no idea why anyone would go so far as to shell out actual money just to grope women’s asses, or what “choosing” a girl entailed. She was just passing the information she had heard from her father on to the man, but he, for some reason, only screwed up his face in disbelief instead of gratitude.

“D-Do you even realize what you’re saying?!”

“Naturally. There are a lot of different establishments available. There is also one with an army setting, or a place where you can pretend to be a baby; there is a wide variety to choose from. What I am trying to say is, if you are so desperate for a touch of a woman’s body, just go to that kind of... Ah! Hey!”

They were arriving at a bus stop. The man violently slapped Mia’s hand off and hopped off the bus as if the devil himself was chasing him. She wanted to try and give chase, but couldn’t move her body properly in a bus chock-full of people. While she was standing there at a loss about what to do, the bus started moving again.

“Hmph... He escaped, huh. Well, I shall have to teach him a lesson the next time I find him.”

While Mia was imagining how she would lead the man to the train car go-go bar and lecture him there, she heard the woman who had been harassed by the groper address her timidly in a small voice, “Um, thank you so much.”

“Huh? You do not need to thank me. I failed to admonish that man, after all.”

“No, you helped me plenty just by chasing him off. You’re amazing. You’re just a girl, but you can speak your mind so freely... That’s remarkable.”

Strangely enough, to Mia’s ears, it sounded more like words of envy than words of praise. She studied the woman curiously.

She was slender; a wisp of a woman would be an appropriate way to describe her. She had a dignified presence about her, as if she enjoyed a high-class upbringing, and was dressed with impeccable taste. Unlike Mia, she seemed to be the kind of person who found it difficult to be assertive. She looked like she’d get swept away if you blew too hard on her.

Mia was stuck for words to reply, and the woman seemed troubled too, not knowing where to go from there. Mia was just thinking about what to do with this tense air between them, when the stop she had to get off on came into view.

“Oh! Stop the bus, I’m getting off—”

Almost squished to death by the mass of bodies around her while fighting to exit the bus, she reached the front doors, paid the driver and stepped off. As she was rejoicing at the feel of fresh air on her skin, she noticed that the woman from the bus was standing next to her again.

“Huh?”

“Um, this is my stop, too.”

“Oh, I see. I need to go to that law office over there. ...I have to say, every time I ride this bus, I am amazed at how packed it is. I wonder if there’s anything I can do to improve this,” Mia lamented the current state of public transportation with her arms folded over her chest, which elicited a small chuckle from the woman.

“You’re speaking like a town mayor.”

“Town mayor... Well, you’re not entirely mistaken there. I’m not the mayor, but I do wish to create a town where the ordinary citizens can lead more fulfilling lives.”

She had said that with utmost seriousness, but the woman, widening her eyes for a moment, dissolved into giggles as if she had said something very amusing. “You are so funny! Ahaha!”

“Funny?! I had no intention of making a joke here.”

The woman only started laughing harder.

Her smile was as pretty as spring flowers, so captivating that Mia felt like admiring it forever. The woman put a hand over her mouth, trying to suppress her laughter, and refocused her eyes on Mia.

“I’m sorry my voice was so quiet back on the bus. I would like to express my gratitude again for what you have done for me. My name is Sayoko Tougou.”

“I’m Mia Oonari. Yeah, when something like that happens, the best thing to do is to yell and make sure everyone knows what is going on. When someone did that to me, I kicked his ass, though.”

Sayoko’s eyes grew round like saucers at the phrase “kicked his ass”. All of her facial expressions screamed class and grace, which served to reinforce Mia’s belief that she must be from a wealthy family.

“You are amazing! I never seem to have the heart to express myself so spontaneously. I’m a bit jealous of you in this regard, Mia.”

“You should be honest about your feelings with other people, Sayoko. Bottling it all up is not good for you, you know.”

“...That’s true,” Sayoko answered, her gaze slightly dropping. Then she raised her face again, as if having remembered something suddenly. “Oh, you had somewhere you need to be, right? I’m sorry for holding you back.”

“Don’t worry about it; it’s right there, so I don’t really mind. By the way, where were you going, Sayoko?”

“I need to speak to someone at the police station.”

Police station? Mia cocked her head to the side in confusion. There were police in the area, sure, but...

“Did you ride the bus all the way here just for a visit to the police box? There’s one practically at every corner though?”

“Police bo... Huh? Police box?! There’s nothing but a police box in this part of town?”

“Yeah. The town’s police station is in the opposite direction from here,” Mia explained, pointing out the way with her finger.

Sayoko blanched, “Oopsies...”

“Oopsies?”

“Ah, no, I meant... I, uh, seem to have gotten lost. I don’t know this town all that well.”

Mia sympathetically looked the woman in the eyes. There was something so

vulnerable about her that appealed to the natural instinct to protect; she was the type that was especially irresistible to people like Mia who were born with a strong sense of justice.

Mia crossed her arms, conflicted. “If you are all right with waiting until I’m done, I could take you there? Dropping you off at the door should work out fine, I think...”

After all, the town’s police station was hostile territory to Mia. Sayoko, though, was blissfully unaware of that fact, and a bright smile bloomed on her lips at Mia’s words.

“Yippee! That’s so kind of you!”

“Yippee? Well then, let’s drop by the office first. This way.”

With her heart beating like a drum at the sight of Sayoko’s radiant smile, she took Sayoko’s hand and led her into the office building. The lawyer appointed as Mia’s legal guardian received her immediately, and, after exchanging pleasantries, he checked her bank statements, and handed her several months’ worth of allowance and grocery money. After their usual exchange was over, Mia left the building with the woman in tow.

“...Mia, what kind of business did you have at the lawyer’s office? ...Ah, was that question too personal?”

“No,” Mia shook her head to Sayoko’s timid question. “You see, my parents are gone. I’m scraping by with the money that my father has left me. The lawyer I met at the office is my legal guardian. I have to meet with him regularly.”

At Mia’s explanation, a contrite expression overtook Sayoko’s face. “I-I am so sorry! I see... Your parents... You really are incredible, Mia. Despite being burdened with such a sad past, you’re staying so positive. You have such a strong spirit!”

“Yes, because I’m one of ‘the strong’! I cannot allow myself to feel lonely. I feel heartbroken about the fact that they are not with me anymore, but there is something I have promised Father I would see through to completion. I have inherited his will, and in order to honor it, I must push forward. I cannot afford to be negative!” Mia proclaimed passionately, balling her hand into a fist.

“You’re incredible,” Sayoko whispered, seemingly impressed, and lowered her gaze.

After a while, the bus heading to the police station arrived, and the pair hopped on. Inside the moving vehicle, Mia asked Sayoko to tell her more about herself. It turned out that she had come all the way from Kyoto.

“Do you come from a high-class family?” Mia asked eagerly.

To which the woman, biting her lip, answered, “We can hardly be called the elite, but my father is a business owner.”

According to her, her purpose in coming here was not sightseeing, but meeting someone. Also, she didn’t have much time because this was supposed to be a day trip.

“Wow, coming all the way here and having to be back within the day must be hard. You should at least take some time to see Tokyo Tower.”

“I was able to see it the last time I was here. I really wanted to climb Tokyo Skytree though,” Sayoko said wistfully.

Eventually, the bus reached the police station, and the two disembarked after paying for the ride. However, Sayoko just kept on looking towards the police station, seemingly unable to take even one small step in its direction, an air of indecision hanging above her.

“Are you not going?”

“...N-No. Of course, I must go. I must go, and, set things straight,” Sayoko said, but her feet were still rooted to the spot where she stood. The expression on her face was completely unlike the one she wore while she was chatting with Mia. Now it radiated pain. Sayoko suddenly gripped Mia’s hand. As she looked up at her, startled, Sayoko stared her in the eyes imploringly. “C-Can you come with me, Mia, please?”

“Eh?! Um, well, I... I would really rather not—”

“I’m begging you. Walk me up to the doors at least...”

“Don’t make those puppy-dog eyes at me!”

Mia was conflicted. But could she just shake the woman’s hand off like it was

nothing? No.

“Up to the doors, okay?” Mia let out a small resigned sigh in answer.

“Thank you,” Sayoko breathed out in relief.

The two entered the station. Mia stepped foot inside, praying she wouldn’t run into the Crow Rangers. The station lobby was abuzz with people’s voices. As Sayoko stepped up to the front desk, she asked a female officer manning it in a trembling voice, “Um, is Mr. Saeki in? I’m aware that he must be busy with work, but there is something I absolutely have to talk to him about.”

“Excuse me, but what is your relation to Mr. Saeki?”

“My name is Sayoko Tougou, and Mr. Saeki is, um, well...he’s my fiancé.”

The bemused female officer gave the woman a long, hard stare, then told her to wait, and dialed a number on the internal line. Within the minute, a man came running down the stairs. Mia flinched at the sight of him.

“Re-Red!”

“Sayoko, why—Wait, what are *you* doing here?!”

Both Mia and Misaki yelled simultaneously, pointing fingers at each other. Sayoko gave the both of them an astounded stare.

“Mia, Misaki... Do you know each other?”

“Well, we sort of do, I guess... Work-related, you could say,” Misaki said, scratching his head in frustration, clearly at a loss about how to explain this, and fixed Mia with a glare.

Her eyes bore right back into him, saying without words that she’d gladly give him a fight if he wanted one.

“...You didn’t do anything to Sayoko, now, did you?”

“Hmph, not only did I not lay one finger on her, I actually saved her. From dirty hands seeking to defile her, no less! Now, I should expect you would want to express your gratitude to me. Kneel at my feet and say, ‘Please accept my heartfelt thanks, o mighty Supreme Ruler of Evil!’”

“Dream on! And today’s a regular weekday! Why aren’t you at school? If

you're cutting class, you're in a world of trouble, missy!"

"I had something I needed to do today, so I skipped school! Stop acting like my big brother!"

Sayoko stood there helplessly with her brows knit together, unable to follow their noisy bickering. Misaki, catching on to her change in mood, hastily turned to face her.

"S-Sorry. Anyway, pay this little runt no mind. But, what happened? You didn't even let me know you were coming. ...You came all the way from Kyoto just to see me, right?"

"Y-Yes. Th-There is something I have to talk to you about. ...I have to hurry because I don't have much time. So, can you give me just a little bit of yours?"

Misaki nodded and started walking towards an interview room with Sayoko. However, Sayoko wouldn't let go of Mia's hand, so she ended up being dragged there as well.

"Eh?! Am I going there, too?!"

At the doors to the room, Misaki cast a sharp look down at Mia. "How long are you planning on following us?"

"Don't tell me that! Look at this!"

Mia raised her hand for Misaki to see, it was still joined with Sayoko's. He stared at it, dumbfounded. "Sayoko, why are you so attached to her?"

"Ah, I'm sorry. It's just that her presence is reassuring to me, somehow... There's something very reliable about her, if that makes any sense..."

"I'm here right now, so you don't need her anymore, right? Didn't you want to talk to me about something? Let's talk, just the two of us," Misaki said sulkily, probably irritated that his lover trusted someone else besides him so much, and opened the door to the room.

After some inner struggle, Sayoko softly let go of Mia's hand. "Mia, I'm so sorry. Thank you very much for coming with me this far. That was really nice of you."

"Not at all. I don't really mind, but...will you be all right?"

“Yes. I have to stand my own ground. Bye-bye and thanks.” Sayoko entered the waiting room, the door clicking shut behind her. Mia stood in front of the door alone, her arms folded over her chest.

I-I’m so curious!

The gloom that hung around the creases of Sayoko’s features told Mia that whatever the woman had to tell Misaki, it wasn’t good. She knew that eavesdropping on people’s private conversations was terribly improper, and yet she couldn’t help but wonder what was going on behind the closed door. After a debate of exactly one minute with herself, Mia carefully pulled the door open a crack. Her curiosity had won out.

Misaki and Sayoko were sitting on a sofa in the office, facing each other. Apparently the beginning of the conversation that she had missed consisted of an exchange of greetings and some small talk.

“So,” Misaki gathered the wits to address the elephant in the room, “What’s up? You didn’t call or text me in advance and you came when I’m on duty... Is something wrong?”

“...Yah. Our time has run out. I’ve agonized over this for weeks, but... I can’t betray my daddy. From the bottom of my heart, I am truly very sorry.”

Misaki’s expression stiffened almost imperceptibly. Sayoko had slipped into Kansai dialect.

“What do you mean?”

“I came here to say goodbye. I love you, I really do! But...we’re not to be. Don’cha know how my father has never approved of us dating? Well, now he says he wants to marry me off.”

“Marry you off?” Misaki’s eyes bulged.

“It’s the president of another company. He buys from our company a lot; he’s a regular customer who spends quite a bit... But recently, he has started asking other companies for estimates. My father wants to ask him to order only from us in the future, so he came up with the idea to arrange our marriage.”

“But, it’s a marriage of convenience then, isn’t it? And you’re thinking of

agreeing?!” Misaki said hotly, snapping his mouth shut quickly afterwards, realizing how his words came out as if he was blaming Sayoko for her decision.

Sayoko stared at her knees, a single tear gliding down her cheek. She clenched her fists and then released them, the tension going out of her body.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t go against my daddy’s wishes. When he told me that the company might go bankrupt if I don’t... I couldn’t say ‘no’...” She whispered the words of apology, over and over again, refusing to raise her head, muted sniffles the only other sound coming from her.

Mia gulped audibly at the unexpectedly dismal scene playing out before her, her eyes glued to the people inside the room. Suddenly, she felt a strange tightness in her chest. She dropped her eyes to check what was causing it, and noticed long arms that had snaked around her middle at some point in time.

“...?!”

She was about to cry out in surprise, but her opening mouth was immediately covered by a hand. When she looked up, Ren’s face floated above her. Standing on one knee, he was hugging Mia to himself from behind while peering into the waiting room. Above Ren, Aya was sandwiched between him and Shou, who stood with his body awkwardly bent down the middle. And on top of this pile of bodies was Subaru, draped over the rest of them. All of them were peeking inside the room too.



When did they all assemble here?!

Mia felt panic rise in her throat, but then she heard a resigned, "...All right," in Misaki's voice and returned her gaze to the scene in the room. Sayoko's hand twitched at her fiancé's words.

"If this is something you have decided for yourself, it's not my place to say anything. Let's end this," Misaki dropped and slowly rose from the couch.

Sayoko, who was wiping the corners of her eyes with a handkerchief, looked up at him hastily. However, the man wouldn't spare her a glance.

"Thank you for everything. Sayoko... Heh, saying this only makes me look like a huge sap. I'll be praying for your happiness," he said over his shoulder in a tone of voice so detached it sounded almost cold, and then he headed for the door.

Oh no, he's coming! Wh-What do I do? Mia floundered about, not knowing where to run, when the world before her eyes made a sudden turn. Bam! A big thud resounded behind Mia's back.

"...Guys, what are you doing...?" Misaki asked exasperatedly.

Mia looked around and saw Subaru facing the wall, writing something on a piece of paper; Shou pretending to talk on the phone, twisting his body sideways, away from the office; Aya was touching up her makeup in the middle of the hallway; Ren, still holding Mia close, sat with his back turned to the office door, and was braiding Mia's hair.

"What do you mean, what am I doing? Can't you see? I'm fixing my makeup."

"Here, in the dead middle of a hallway?!"

"Ah, I'm taking a call."

"You guys are way too obvious!" Misaki retorted to Aya's and Shou's excuses. He then directed a look full of suspicion towards Subaru, asking, "And what are you doing?"

"I'm copying sutras."

"Why would you copy sutras in a police station?!"

“Sometimes I just feel the urge. It calms me down. Do you want to give it a try? Heart Sutra is full of wisdom.”

“Ugh, are you being serious or just messing with me? With you, I really don’t know!” Misaki fumed, and turned his gaze to Ren at last.

“So, what are you doing, Ren?”

“Oh, I’m playing with my darling Mia’s hair. See? Cute, right? French braid chignon looks great on all girls!”

“Darling?!”

“I have no idea what you’re saying! Also, how are you this good at hairstyling?!” Misaki ranted, and gave Ren, who had by then parted Mia’s hair in two, braided both sides and put them up in two neat bundles, a karate chop to the head, whispering, “Ugh, seriously. You bunch of busybodies. ...Hmph. Well, since you’re all here, do me a favor and escort Sayoko to the exit for me, okay? I’m gonna return to my duties. See ya, lazy bums,” Misaki bit out moodily, and stormed off.

Subaru stopped his sutra-copying and stared at Misaki’s retreating back. “This looks grave.”

“The way the conversation went must’ve been a shock to him. So this is it for their long-distance relationship, huh?” Shou remarked somewhat wistfully, folding his arms behind his head.

Aya, who put away her makeup bag, peeked inside the room. “Yeah. But Sayoko looks devastated, too. She must’ve agonized over this.”

“I’m sure she did. It’s, what, their fourth year together? If you’re in a relationship with someone for this long, well...”

Ren stood up, still cradling Mia in his arms. She hastily whipped her head around and snapped at him, “Hey, when did you appear?! And stop clinging to me! Do you have any idea how much you startled me?!”

“Aw, but what else could I do but hug you after seeing you huddled by the door?” Ren said without a shred of remorse, and then patted Mia on the head in a placating manner. Then he inclined his head to the side, as if having

remembered something suddenly. “But hey, what are you doing here anyway?”

“Um, well, I was the one who brought Sayoko here,” Mia confessed meekly, and everyone gathered around her with curious looks on their faces. Mia grudgingly summed up the events leading up to this moment in a few words.

Shou nodded sagely. “Well, then it might be a good idea for you to be the one to see Sayoko off too. I gotta get back to work, anyway.”

“Yeah, Ren and I as well. We’ll ask you how it went later,” Subaru said, squeezing Mia’s shoulder as if to say he’s entrusting the matter to her, and walked away.

“Later!” Shou and Ren exclaimed, and walked off in the opposite direction from Subaru. ...To think that they really skipped work to spy on their friend.

They truly are textbook examples of bad adults, Mia seethed, eyes boring into their backs disapprovingly, but there was someone still standing by her side, namely, Aya.

“Aya, are you not going?”

“Nah. I’ll hang out with you and Sayoko for a bit. I have nothing else to do, anyway.”

You have nothing else to do?! Mia gaped at Aya. So this was the biggest loafer of them all!

Aya only snickered and offered her a weird excuse, pulling the door open, “I’m a very fast worker, so slacking off in moderation is a must for me!”

In the waiting room, Sayoko was sitting motionless on the sofa, silently crying. She probably felt like she could stop holding her tears back now that Misaki was gone. She only shed a single tear when she was talking to him, but now they flowed without end. Such a copious amount of tears traveled down her cheeks that Mia feared that she might cry out all the moisture in her body.

“Um... Sayoko. I know this isn’t the best thing to say, but if you’re crying this much, wouldn’t it be better to stay together with Misaki?”

“You’re right. It’s unfair of me. I was the one who broke up with him, so I have no right to cry now.”

“No, that’s not what I am trying to say. You said that it was something you have decided for yourself, but I can plainly see that you are miserable. Is your father forcing the marriage on you despite this?”

Sayoko dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief. When she raised her face to meet Mia’s gaze, she clearly saw that her eyes were puffy and bloodshot.

“My father has never approved of my dating Misaki. He said that I’d never be happy if I married him. That marrying someone of different status, who views money differently, would only end in regret. So, the president of our partnering company would be better for me... Father said he would make me happy, and the future of our company would be secured. He asked me if I really wanted to put our workers out on the street...”

Mia crossed her arms over her chest in annoyance. She didn’t like how Sayoko was answering her question. Growing irritated, she cut in, “No, I’m not asking what your father said to you. I am asking if he knows how heartbroken you feel right now. If, knowing how you feel, he still insisted on arranging your marriage.”

“...I think he knows that I feel heartbroken right now.”

Mia, who finally got the answer she wanted, nodded. And then she winced, her face darkening. A father who wants to marry his daughter off despite knowing the effect it would have on her—how can he say that he’s only thinking of her happiness? If he really wanted her to be happy, he would let her marry the man she loves. Also, despite all his talk of how this was all for Sayoko’s sake, she couldn’t help but feel that he placed more importance on the company’s profits.

This really is unforgivable, Mia thought.

“Okay, but status and opinions about money do matter a lot. I can see that you come from a wealthy family. You’ve never had to work a day in your life, right? Misaki’s salary isn’t low by any means, but it’s not like he earns so much that he can throw money around. At the end of the day, he’s just a civil servant in a small provincial town. Your father’s misgivings are understandable,” Aya asserted bluntly.

Fresh tears formed in Sayoko’s eyes at her words. Aya, however, had no

intention of tormenting her. She was trying to sound out her true motives and feelings by purposefully being harsh.

Sayoko pleaded, her voice thick with tears, “I know how much Misaki makes, we’ve been together for four years. I don’t care. He said he wanted us to live on his salary alone, but I was going to work too. But Misaki wouldn’t propose to me...”

Misaki couldn’t make up his mind about tying the knot with his girlfriend Sayoko. He couldn’t take that step when he thought how, even if he stole her away from her parents who opposed their relationship and married her, Sayoko wouldn’t be comfortable with the life he could provide for her.

Sayoko was in the same boat. She, too, felt stuck. The anxiety that would come with her lifestyle suddenly changing, her parents who didn’t approve of them being together. “Love conquers all” is something that only happens in books. Reality will inevitably start slipping in through the cracks. She could understand her father’s worry for her well-being, his concern for the company’s future. That was the reason why after agonizing over everything, she made the decision to break up with Misaki.

Aya, as if sensing that, sunk into silence, folding her arms. Mia, however, gave Sayoko a puzzled stare.

“Hey, what did you really come here to do? Did you come here to say goodbye to Misaki? Or did you come hoping he would propose to you?”

“Huh?” Sayoko and Aya uttered simultaneously.

Mia crossed her arms over her chest with an inscrutable expression on her face. “I found it weird when I was listening to your story... Despite saying that you have come here to break up with Misaki and talking about your father’s company, you mentioned that Misaki wouldn’t propose to you. What did you really want in the end? Did you want to part ways with him, or did you hope he’d say ‘marry me’ instead?”

Sayoko and Aya were struck dumb. Aya was the first one to recover, opening her mouth to say, “Wow, you don’t dress things up, do you, Mia? That’s me, the pot, calling the kettle black, of course, but you’re in a league of your own. ...But you’re right. Sayoko, what kind of response did you expect from Misaki?”

“I... I, uh...” Sayoko lowered her eyes.

Mia kept cutting in mercilessly, pressing her for an answer, “Sayoko, if you really only wanted to say goodbye to him, surely you could do that over the phone or by texting? And yet you came all the way here from Kyoto, on a weekday, first thing in the morning. Misaki was on duty, so you came to his workplace. Why? Was there a reason for choosing to make this long journey just to break things off with him?”

Listening to Mia’s words, Sayoko realized what her true motive in coming was. Yes. Why had she come all this way, despite there being a multitude of ways she could’ve broken up with Misaki? ...She panicked because she was pressed for time. That was why she had boarded the first train out of Kyoto. Because it had to be today. For tomorrow...

“...I-I’m really the worst... I should’ve realized this sooner! What a fool I am...” She whispered, spontaneously slipping back into her Kansai dialect.

Mia and Aya exchanged glances and quietly listened to Sayoko’s confession.

“I was testing Misaki. Some part of me hoped that if I told him my feelings, he woulda said the magic words. I tried to push the decision on him because I couldn’t bring myself to say ‘let’s get married’. Even though there was no way he would, not with how he always respects what I want. I was bein’ silly, thinking that if maybe I saw him face to face, he would... I’m terrible.” She hid her face in her hands.

The tears that had stopped flowing for a brief pause started trickling down her cheeks again, sobs wracking her small frame. Her heart-wrenching wails didn’t stop echoing in the waiting room for a long while.

“...**ARE** you really okay with not saying anything to Misaki?”

“Yes. I’m going through with Daddy’s request. Misaki will hate me if I tell him that I want to marry him after all. I was the one who broke up with him, and so that’s what I’m going to do—put an end to our relationship.” Standing in front of the police station, looking like she could burst into tears at any moment, Sayoko tried to muster a smile.

If Misaki found out that Sayoko harbors lingering feelings for him, it would cause him unnecessary pain. Sayoko was probably thinking that as an adult, she shouldn't put him in that position. The more this dragged out, the more it would prevent Misaki from moving on.

After considering this, Mia inquired, "Hey, you're going back to Kyoto after this, right? You must be in a hurry. Do you have some urgent business back home?"

"Ah, yes. I am going to meet my future husband tomorrow."

"Wow, that sounds awfully rushed. By the way, when did your father first bring up the idea of the arranged marriage?"

"...Three days ago, I think."

Three days ago?! Mia and Aya were shocked. This was way too sudden. Maybe he did it to cut off any potential routes of escape for her, but Mia felt her blood boil at the idea of a father who disregards his daughter's feelings to such an extent.

"...I understand the respect and love you feel for your father, but isn't he going too far? Why didn't you say something to him, Sayoko?" Mia huffed.

"You're right," Sayoko breathed out in a small voice, looking at the ground. "I have two elder sisters. Both of them have married according to Father's wishes. So, you see, how can I marry the man I choose, when they couldn't? That would be terribly unfair. That was why I couldn't disobey my daddy."

"What the heck? How much does he rely on marriages of convenience, this old—Ah, um, never mind. Hmm, well, if both of your sisters married in this manner, I can see how it might be hard for you to marry for love." Aya was about to blurt out her true thoughts on the matter, but managed to catch herself in time and steer her tirade into a more sympathetic vein.

Sayoko stretched her lips in a thin smile. "...Maybe things would have been different if I were strong like Mia. In the end, I'm just a coward who cares too much about what other people think of me, so this was the only option for me. ...It's fine, I've made my peace."

Sayoko looked like she had given up on everything. Ever since Mia met her

that morning, she had seen different expressions flicker across Sayoko's face, and each time she saw a new one, she thought, "ah, so beautiful and refined", but Mia found herself repulsed by the face she was making now. It was rubbing her the wrong way for some reason.

"Sayoko, if you were like me, what would you have done?"

"Huh?"

"I'm saying, if you had my personality, what would you have said to other people?" Mia pressed on growing more agitated by the second, her hands on her hips.

Sayoko seemed a bit scared of Mia's aggressive behavior, but after thinking for a moment, she opened her mouth, "I would properly refuse Daddy's plans for me, and tell Misaki I want us to get married, I think. But because I couldn't say that, I'm in this situation now... Haha," Sayoko let out a hollow laugh just as the bus was pulling up to the stop.

The bus was headed for the train station. Sayoko stepped inside as the doors slid open and glanced down from the window at Mia and Aya. "Thank you so much for everything. I'm glad I could talk about this, even for a little bit. I'm especially glad I got to talk to you, Mia. ...Take care."

The vehicle's doors closed, and off it took, snorting out a cloud of exhaust fumes. Aya and Mia watched it grow smaller and smaller, until it disappeared from view completely.

"Ugh, all this doom and gloom, and for what? I hate it."

"I know. Hehe, Mia, you're so honest with your feelings. You're such a cutie!"

"Cutie?! I fail to understand how you came to that conclusion! I do not understand Sayoko! If she wants to say something, she should just do that! But she is so hesitant and wishy-washy... Ugh! I feel so mad!"

Aya affectionately looked at Mia, who was blowing up with frustration. Mia still lacked understanding of the intricacies of romantic relationships. Being in love was not only a pure, untainted feeling. Inevitably, somewhere along the way, ugly, dirty, unseemly feelings would get mixed in.

It wasn't as if she couldn't understand Misaki's position, but Aya felt that she could relate to Sayoko's point of view better as a fellow woman.

"I can understand the feeling of wanting to test your partner. Women always crave being loved. We want to be told that our man wholeheartedly adores us, is devoted to us, that he loves only us. Even when a woman harbors no tender feelings towards someone, she still wants to hear that she is loved, one-sided as it might be. Pretty selfish, isn't it?" Aya mused.

Mia screwed up her face, looking more and more lost as Aya spoke.

It was probably still too difficult to comprehend for a child like Mia. Aya patted her on the head as if to say, "you'll get it in due time", and looked back at the station.

"Ah, but... A lot of our boys are wimps, don't you think? I thought Ren was a bit wimpy, but Misaki is above and beyond him."

"Hm? Wimpy? What do you mean?"

"Hmm... Wimpy refers to when someone's being pathetic. Ren's acting pretty pathetic, right? He's quick to hug you, and kiss you, and fuss over you, but he can't bring himself to tell you the most important thing."

"You mean about why he's acting like that? He explained that his kisses are just a way to spite me."

Aya dissolved into bright peals of laughter at that. "See, he's a wimp, just like I said!"

Mia, not really understanding what that was about, frowned. "...I have to say, I do not like this. I wonder why that is. It's not as if ordinary citizens are in trouble, but I feel so irked, I'm just itching to do something. I can't let it end like this."

If Sayoko had really come to say goodbye to Misaki, Mia wouldn't feel this way. But this was different. Sayoko was about to step right over her feelings and enter into an arranged marriage. This was, of course, her life and her choice. Mia didn't have to step in. Nonetheless, she wanted to do something. This strange contradiction took root in her heart, making her clench her fist decisively.

“So,” Aya stared at Mia with the corner of her lips quirked up in a small smile, “Wanna call a strategy meeting?”

“Strategy meeting?”

“Yeah. Misaki’s on duty, so he won’t be coming, but the rest of the gang should be able to gather. I’m sure everyone wants to do something too. Hence, a strategy meeting.” Aya beamed, her previous gloom all but gone.

Normally, this would be where Mia would angrily burst out about how she would rather die than have a strategy meeting with the enemy, but on this occasion, she allowed herself to give an enthusiastic nod.

IT was late in the evening when Mia and the Crow Rangers who had finished work gathered in a family restaurant on the main street. Misaki was on duty, so he wasn’t with them. When Mia and Aya explained Sayoko’s situation to the rest of the group, Shou hummed thoughtfully,

“Hmm, so it’s a lady and the tramp situation, with a long-distance angst twist. Misaki’s living in a melodrama.”

That was when a waitress appeared to take their orders. Mia hurriedly flipped through the menu.

“I’ll have a loin steak and a scallop gratin. Set A, please. With a side of rice.”

“Set C, and omelet rice with demi-glace for me, please.”

Mia was intimidated by how quickly and smoothly Shou and Ren rattled off their orders. While she was staring at the menu in desperation, however, Aya and Subaru finished their orders too. She felt everyone’s eyes converge on her.

She awkwardly peeked out from behind the menu, and inquired timidly, “Um... Excuse me, could you please tell me what a ‘self-service drink area’ is?”

Not only the Rangers, but the waitress, too, widened their eyes comically. Mia realized that she had asked something stupid and dropped her eyes to the table in embarrassment, but Aya spoke to her softly, “See that area over there, with the drink machines? You can pour yourself juice, tea, or any other beverage you want. It’s like a buffet, but for drinks, you know?”

“I see. For just two-hundred yen, it’s very reasonably priced. A-All right, then I will go with a Japanese-style steak and set A.”

“What would you like on the side, rice or bread?”

“Bread?! Er, ah, um, ri-rice, please,” Mia stuttered out shakily.

After that, the waitress confirmed the group’s orders and walked away.

Mia, relieved by the waitress’s departure, let her eyes flit around the restaurant. It was packed, likely because it was dinnertime. Just as Mia was musing about how most people were with their families, which made sense for a family restaurant, she heard someone snickering next to her.

“You really don’t know anything, do you?”

“Hmph. This is my first time coming here. Not knowing how this system works is only natural if one has never been to such an establishment before,” Mia replied grumpily, taking Ren’s words to be a mockery of her ignorance.

She was about to fix him with a glare, but when she looked at his face, instead of his usual wicked grin she found a soft smile. He gently carded his hands through her hair, “Yeah, that’s true. Well, you can start learning about these things now. I’ll take you places.”

“...” Mia’s mouth formed a small O in surprise.

She felt her cheeks grow inexplicably hot, and she started babbling uncontrollably, “Wha-a-ah, er-r, tha—, you don’t ha—, thank—, um, no...”

What was she getting so flustered about? It was all Ren’s fault for smiling at her in such an unusual way! She desperately tried to convince herself that this was only her being surprised at his actions, nothing more. To distract herself, she confirmed how the drink self-service system worked with Shou and Aya and poured herself a cup of grape soda.

“Well now, let’s decide what we’re gonna do, shall we?” Shou breached the topic, taking a big gulp of his melon soda.

“Hmm, well first of all we have to know what Misaki’s feelings on the matter are. If he’s given up, then that’s that,” Aya answered, stirring her iced tea.

“That’s not possible,” Subaru declared resolutely, sipping on his cup of Assam

tea. “Today, before coming here, I witnessed Misaki’s bad temper hit a new record. It was so foul even the section chief cowered in fear before him. That man’s oozing bitterness.”

The rest of the gang hummed, resting their chins in their hands.

Eventually, the food came, plates lining up before each member of the group. Mia was brought a steaming Japanese steak and some rice served on a plate. But wasn’t rice supposed to come in a separate bowl? Mia was certain that was the norm.

“There’s rice on my plate!”

“Yep, you’re right,” Ren snorted.

“Hmm, would you look at that,” Aya agreed.

“Why is rice served like that with a Western-style meal? Who first thought of this, even?”

“Isn’t it because it’s easier to eat from a plate with a fork?”

“I think I heard somewhere that it’s because rice isn’t supposed to be served in bowls in Western cuisine.”

After Shou and Subaru shared their expert opinions, everyone dug in. Mia started on her steak, armed with a fork and a knife. She was ashamed to admit it, but she wasn’t very proficient with the cutlery.

The meat was delicious, though. It couldn’t compare to the steak Subaru could cook, but it was nice and moist, juice bursting forth at every bite. The flavors of grated daikon, ponzu and shiso complemented it well, lending it a mild, aromatic sweetness. The only downside was that it was pretty small for its price. Even the roughest estimate said that she could have Subaru make the same thing for about a half of what she had paid here. Mia secretly decided to ask Subaru to make a Japanese-style steak one of these days.

As the amount of food decreased on their plates, Shou brought up the reason they had gathered here again, “First of all, we have very little time. The meeting with her fiancé is scheduled for tomorrow. Subaru’s off duty then, and if there isn’t any extra work or incidents, he could travel to Kyoto, but realistically, that

doesn't sound like a viable option."

"We don't know the time or the place of their meeting. Subaru can't ask Ms. Tougou that, we don't even have her contact info," Ren pointed out the fundamental problem, chewing on a piece of his steak.

The meeting would take place all the way in Kyoto, which was quite far from where they lived, and without knowing the place and time, they couldn't act even if they wanted to. Shou and Aya both heaved a frustrated sigh.

"Hmm, let's see, if this is the first meeting for an arranged marriage, their parents will probably be there too. Let's go from there," Shou declared. Shoving his omelet rice aside, he procured an A4-sized LED tablet from his bag, and started typing away.

Mia was patiently nibbling on some potatoes when Shou pushed the tablet to the middle of the table excitedly, exclaiming, "I think this is them! I tried searching for companies based in Kyoto with a president whose surname is Tougou. I found two on the web. Tougou's a pretty rare last name. I wonder which one's our guy?"

Tapping on the LED screen with his finger, he opened the homepages of the companies he mentioned.

Ren touched his hand to his chin. "I think it must be this public stock company. The other one's a limited liability company, it seems too small-scale. Misaki's girlfriend is obviously from a very wealthy family. This company's performance seems great for a middle-sized business, plus it has history."

"A subcontractor of a famous kimono shop, huh? I see. That explains why her father felt so threatened by the potential bidding war. The market for Japanese clothing is rapidly shrinking. Does that mean that her future husband is supposed to be the owner of that kimono store?" Aya, who was the first to finish her food, cocked her head to the side, bringing her cup of iced tea to her lips.

Shou nodded, swallowed the last piece of his omelet rice, and took out his smartphone. "Well, let's find out right away!" His face split into a sly grin.

Mia, who was technically taking part in this so-called strategy meeting but

didn't participate in the ongoing conversation, observed Shou's actions with bemusement. Crow Ranger Yellow squinted at the screen of his tablet and typed a number into his phone, then he put it to his ear. Apparently, he was going to make a call.

"Hello. Excuse me, am I speaking to Mr. Masataka? I'm Yamada of Ito Textile."

The group snorted and then burst out laughing. What was Ito Textile? Who's Yamada? The scariest part was, Shou was spouting those lies with ease, without any hint of nervousness or hesitation. Mia was reminded of how utterly terrifying this man could be.

"Yes, the president has personally asked me for an estimate. Yes, yes. He asked that we get it to him as soon as possible, so I made it all in haste, but I'd like to hand it over to him in person... Oh, is he gone already? How about tomorrow? Ah, he will be away. I'll bring it to him, wherever he is. After all, this is very urgent, you see? Haha," Shou's genial laughter tinkled melodically.

With his talents, being a conman might suit him better than being a policeman. It was probably his sense of justice that kept him on his path as an officer of the law.

"Yes, yes. Restaurant Kaede... In Gion, right. What a fine establishment! President Tougou has excellent taste! Oh, a first meeting with his daughter's fiancé and his family? Why, what a joyous occasion! I feel extremely bad for intruding upon such a private moment, so I will give him the documents and be gone. Yes. No, no, that is too kind of you. Thank you very much for being so helpful! Have a nice evening, goodbye!" Shou, who had continued to smooth talk the other party without any pangs of conscience whatsoever, grinned broadly and hung up, hiding his phone in his pocket.

He quickly scribbled down the name of the restaurant in his notepad and looked it up on his tablet. "The nice receptionist lady even went so far as to tell me about tomorrow's meeting. This is definitely the company that Sayoko's father is managing."

"Sometimes you really blow me out of the water. I couldn't do that if I tried," Ren intoned with fond exasperation.

From her place next to him, Mia vehemently nodded.

“Really?” Shou tilted his head to the side, and then frowned, worrying his lip. “I can’t find Kaede’s website. It looks like they don’t have one. ...Ah, wait, I see the name on the Kyoto restaurant directory. And there’s a phone number, too!”

“We can find out their address if we call them. I’ll get on it,” Subaru said, and immediately dialed the number.

Apparently, decisiveness was a hallmark of police officers.

“We don’t know the time, but most restaurants don’t open until noon or evening. I’m pretty certain we don’t have to worry about them scheduling it for early morning. So, what are we going to do, manhandle Misaki onto the bullet train?” Aya wondered aloud, making pushing motions with her hand.

Ren knit his brows, folding his arms. “Yeah, but...bursting with regret as Misaki might be, he already gave her his blessing. He’s definitely not going to hop on that train with a smile. Even if we manage to convince him after he gets off work, it’s gonna take one and a half hours to get to Kyoto, and he’ll still have to get to the restaurant in Gion.”

There was just too little time. Moreover, this wouldn’t work unless Misaki was prepared to do everything in his power to get Sayoko back. In the end, it was all up to the two of them. Even if they tried to persuade him to go for it, there was no guarantee that he’d actually listen. Ren and the rest of the gang turned it over and over in their heads, worry etched into their features. Misaki was a stubborn person. Besides, how far could they go in meddling with another person’s love life?

Mia raised her voice sheepishly, “It’s just a suggestion, but I could take him to Kyoto?”

“Huh?”

All eyes went to Mia.

“If I fly at top speed, I should be able to go as fast as the bullet train. I have ridden a bullet train during a school trip, and I have seen it go by from the outside many times, so it would be easy for me to form an image of its speed. I can also easily spot the restaurant from up above, so I think that all in all we could get there quicker than if he were to take the train,” Mia elaborated to

everyone's astonishment.

She felt anxious that she had maybe said something weird again, but then Aya inquired, concern apparent on her face, "Mia, can you really do that? Bullet trains can go crazy fast, and it would take you at least an hour to fly all the way to Kyoto. Won't that be too hard on you?"

"I've trained to fly ever since I was a small child, and I've studied how to achieve different speeds. Father has always told me that command of the skies is crucial in any battle. I have never actually tried to fly for a whole hour, but it can't very well be that difficult, I suppose." Mia explained that it would most likely feel like running an hour-long marathon.

"Okay," Aya and the others nodded in understanding, but there was just one person among the group left scowling. It was Ren.

"...Mia, how can you be so certain you can fly a distance you've never attempted before?"

"Huh?"

"Um, so... Right, Mia, lemme ask you something now that we're talking about this. Have you ever felt your magical power reserves on the verge of running out? Like, if you tried to cast any more spells, it would hurt you?"

Mia blinked in surprise at Ren's question. Why was he asking her that, as if he was concerned for her well-being?

"I don't know if it's my powers running out, but I have experienced a feeling as if I could pass out from exhaustion if I continued to use magic. I'll resort to using the marathon simile again, but it is the same sensation you get when you push past your limits when running for a long time. Father told me to remember how it feels when we were studying magic together, so I understand what you are talking about," Mia answered truthfully despite herself.

"I see..." Ren mumbled, pondering her words for a brief moment, hanging his head a bit. Then, he snapped his head back up sharply. Everyone stared at him. "Who doesn't have work tomorrow?"

The other Rangers shook their heads.

“I thought as much,” Ren tutted, apparently he wasn’t free tomorrow either.

“Mia, you have school tomorrow, right?”

“I do. But I want to do something about this situation so bad, it’s all I’m thinking about, so I must act upon it. ...Which is why I shall have to skip classes.”

“Ugh. Normally, I’d give you an earful about this, but right now you’re the only one we can rely on. All right. I’ll leave the matter in your hands. I don’t expect that you’ll be able to convince Misaki to do it, but you can use magic, so take him there by force if you have to. But if he outright refuses to go through with it, let him off the hook. It’s his choice, after all.”

Even if she were to take Misaki to Kyoto against his will, if he didn’t want to fight for Sayoko anymore it would just end up being a waste of effort. Mia understood that much, so she nodded.

“Oh, and one more thing,” Ren added,

“When you’re headed there, if you ever feel like you’re too tired to do this anymore, stop flying, okay? If Misaki still wants to get his girl back, he can choose from any number of public transportation options if the need arises. Anyways, don’t push yourself too hard. You gotta promise me that,” Ren insisted, tightly grabbing her shoulders.

Why did he worry about her so much? Mia nodded, as if in a trance, her heart drumming against her ribcage. She shouldn’t care if she made him fret, but she couldn’t resist the earnest expression he wore on his face. Without noticing, she found herself nodding to Ren’s requests.

Chapter 8: Versus Crow Ranger Red!

THE morning after his shift ended, Misaki was lying sprawled on his bed, lifelessly staring at the ceiling. There were plenty of opportunities to meet someone nowadays: arranged marriage, speed dating, school, work... Of all the possible ways, Misaki had met Sayoko on the Internet.

Misaki was a bonsai enthusiast. With bonsai being a more mature hobby, he feared if his friends or family found out about his interest in it, they would no doubt all laugh and ask him, “what are you, ninety?”, so he enjoyed his hobby in secret. The potted microcosm existing just under a foot tall let him feel one with nature and savor the changing seasons. The time he spent pruning his bonsai on his days off let him fully relax and recharge. However, as time went on and he continued to practice his hobby in solitude, he started feeling lonely. So, he did a quick search on the Internet and stumbled upon a community comprised solely of bonsai lovers.

There, amid exchanging opinions on different matters, Misaki found the pleasure and warmth that human contact can bring. Whenever someone shared stories of some new type of bonsai Misaki had never worked on before, he felt a whole new world open up before him. Among all the different types, the one called “moss bonsai” piqued his interest the most.

Until then, Misaki had preferred the traditional trees and shrubs for potting, but moss was a new and intriguing discovery. Out of all the people in that community, the person he hit it off with the best was Sayoko. She had devoted all her spare time to growing moss bonsai since high school, and sent him several pictures of her treasured plants, each one tastefully arranged and obviously very well-tended. Sayoko’s love of bonsai was clear as day from those photos. For her part, Sayoko’s heart was stirred by the refined beauty of Misaki’s maple and black pine trees, and the loveliness of his plum and cherry trees.

The two became fast friends and eventually moved on to exchanging private

messages. Before they knew it, they started calling each other on the phone all the time, and one year after they had first met online, they progressed to visiting each other in real life. It didn't take them long to begin dating after their first face-to-face meeting. Maybe it was because they had talked so much over messages and on the phone, but they clicked almost immediately. Misaki was twenty-six, Sayoko was twenty-four.

They both envisioned marrying each other, but there was a very big obstacle standing in their way. Sayoko was the youngest daughter of a company president; her father's company was not very big, but still a significant player in its market. Misaki had graduated from a local university to become a police officer; he only had four years of service under his belt. It wasn't as if his salary was very low, but he wasn't a high earner either. He was nothing more than a humble public servant. Naturally, the woman's parents did not look upon their relationship favorably and openly opposed it. Misaki thought they were being reasonable.

If he waited one more year, just a year more, he would get a raise and be able to afford a little luxury here and there, earning enough to support Sayoko... He spent his days entertaining these vague hopes, and then it all inevitably came crashing down. The sudden arranged marriage—it was clear what drove Sayoko's father to do this. When Sayoko told him about it at the police station, he had been overcome with two distinct feelings: a quiet resignation of "I knew it was coming," and a bubbling resentment in wondering, "Why did Sayoko choose her father over me?"

And then the painful realization struck him that in the end, he couldn't muster the courage to take the plunge, pushing the ultimate decision onto Sayoko instead. He couldn't blame her. He had no right to. Besides, marrying a rich man might very well afford her happiness. He couldn't deny those obsequious thoughts. He found himself hating his own pathetic brooding self that only ever looked for excuses like a wimp, so much so that he wanted to punch himself.

Misaki turned over in his bed so that he was lying faceup, a sleepless morning ahead of him.

DING-DONG, his doorbell almost never rang, and yet now it suddenly came alive with sound. *Who the heck is it this early in the morning?* Misaki decided to pretend he was out. He wouldn't answer even if they were conducting a census.

Ding-dong, ding-dong. Ding-dong. *Ugh, stop it. Just give up already.* Misaki hid his head under a pillow and covered his ears. But then...

Click! The unmistakable sound of his door lock opening. He had to raise his head for that.

"Hey, Red! I know you're there! Don't pretend you are not, you fool!"

The door loudly opened, and in his hallway, with a black cape behind her back and a magic wand in her hand, stood none other than the Supreme Ruler of Evil Mia Oonari. Misaki gawked at the girl, shell-shocked, but there was something he needed to confirm, so he shot into action.

He stood up, barreled towards the hallway and pressed the girl for answers, "Y-You! You unlocked my door! How did you do that?!"

"Huh?! You would not open it for me, so I used magic to do that myself. A cylinder lock like that is a piece of cake for me!"

Forcing a lock open with magic?! Misaki's facial expression changed to astonishment. Wow, nothing was impossible with her powers. If she didn't need a key to open doors, she could commit all the crimes she wanted! ...He knew very well from their time together up until now, that she would never do that.

Realizing that he had started blindly trusting Mia somewhere along the way, he hastily raised his voice, questioning her further, "Wh-What do you want? Actually, why aren't you at school? It's a weekday, you know!"

"I'm afraid to say, I shall be missing class today. Skipping it to be precise."

"Hey, don't you dare cut classes and then strut into my apartment like everything's cool! Did you come so I could chew you out for this or what?"

"No. I came because there is something I have to talk to you about. Why else would I be here? Now, get ready, we're going to Kyoto!"

Misaki's jaw dropped. *Kyoto? Why?* He couldn't understand what Mia was talking about. "I can't come up with a single reason why I'd want to go to Kyoto

though.”

“Oh, there is a reason all right. Sayoko will be meeting her fiancé today. We don’t know what time the meeting will start, so we best get there as quick as possible. Honestly, we don’t have much time. So, chop-chop!” Mia’s tone brokered no argument. She forcibly took Misaki by the hand and moved to step out of his flat, but he violently shook her hand off, taken aback by her actions.

“Wait just a minute! What’s this about Sayoko and her fiancé? I don’t get what you’re talking about!”

“Ugh, you irksome man! Sayoko is going to meet the person her father arranged for her to marry today. If we don’t go right now, we won’t make it in time. If it goes through as intended, your chances of having her will be destroyed for good. Are you all right with that?”

They would be meeting each other today. It was so soon. He felt Sayoko’s father’s hand in the arrangement progressing at a breakneck speed. It suddenly clicked in his mind why Sayoko had appeared out of the blue yesterday. She had been running out of time. That was why she had come to Tokyo so suddenly. She had boarded the first bullet train out of Kyoto and had come to see him. Had it been just to break up with him? Or—

Misaki stumbled back a step, his legs moving of their own accord. “I can’t go,” he uttered in a small voice.

Mia gave him a puzzled look.

“I can’t go. What am I gonna do there? Are you telling me that I should go to their meeting, spout some chick flick worthy line like, ‘No, that woman is mine!’ and sweep her off her feet? You know I can’t do that. Her father’s reputation and the company’s profits are at stake. Moreover, Sayoko has made her choice already. And even if I do whisk her away, there’s no way that’ll go well. It can only result in them tracking us down and taking her back, and that’ll be the end of it.”

Mia clearly looked incensed at what had just come out of Misaki’s mouth. Her mouth was curled down at the corners in annoyance. *She’s like an open book*, Misaki thought, *but this time, there’s really nothing she can do. This is no fairy tale where there’s always a happy ending.*

Even if they did manage to elope, what were they going to do next? Misaki had a life. Even if he quit the job he had now and they ran away to some faraway place where no one knew who they were, what were they supposed to do after that? Was he supposed to look for a new job, one which would let him support Sayoko? ...The answer was “no”. This would only serve to make life harder for the both of them and bring them nothing but misery.

“Love conquers all” was nothing but a bunch of sweet words ringing hollow in the face of reality. Misaki didn’t expect Sayoko, who had enjoyed a life of luxury and privilege up until now, to get used to hardship, and even if she braved it with him, that would ultimately amount to him imposing self-denial on her. This wasn’t the happiness he envisioned for them.

“It’s fine, Mia. She was out of my league from the beginning. All that matters to me is that Sayoko’s happy. If she is, then I don’t care that it’s not me who’s by her side. So you can stop—”

“Argh! Stop talking! Her father, the company—whatever! Who cares! What do *you* want to do? You sure spoke a lot about how Sayoko’s happiness is your number one priority, but guess what, she is not happy! She was crying the other day. When you didn’t propose to her yesterday, she felt so forlorn she wept!” Mia snarled, flailing her arms around in a fit of anger.

Misaki, completely dumbstruck, helplessly gazed at the girl raging in his hallway. Sayoko had wanted him to propose? She had come to end things with him, what did proposing have to do with anything?

“Why would I propose to her? She made the choice to leave me, you know!”

“Admittedly, I fail to comprehend that part too, but Sayoko said something about how she was being unfair. How she wanted to test you, how she put selfish, one-sided expectations on you. And then she let out a defeated laugh and was gone, just like that. She said that she was swayed too much by the opinions of other people, and that was why this was the only way for her, or something along those lines. But, I hated that laugh so much I...” Mia mumbled on and on, but Misaki stopped listening halfway.

She had been testing him. She had wanted him to say, “please, be my wife”. She had imposed that choice upon him—but he was no better. Misaki had been

testing her, too. He had hoped that she would choose him over her family and their company. He had wanted her to ask him to get married right away. However, unable to get his feelings across, he could only accept what the woman he loved had to say. It had been easier that way. If he took his anger out on her, shifted the blame to her inside his heart, then he could continue to avert his eyes from the ugly, dirty truth of his own feelings. He wanted to be the “victim”, so he had to push Sayoko into the role of the “victimizer”.

“...I’m the worst...” Misaki whispered, hanging his head and hiding his face in his hands.

If Subaru or Ren were here right now, he might’ve asked them to punch him.

“Huh?” Mia screwed her face up in exasperation.

“Sayoko said the same thing.”

“...Yeah, we’re two peas in a pod, all right.”

“I see. So, Kyoto. You are going, right?” Mia asked him as if it was a rhetorical question.

He felt almost envious of her childish neglect to imagine how their actions would affect the future. Misaki, though, was an adult. He now knew how Sayoko felt and had finally realized what had been brewing in his own mind all along, but he wasn’t easygoing or rash enough to rush into this gamble headlong without a plan.

When instead of answering her, he lapsed into silence, she frowned and crossed her arms over her chest. “Say, Misaki, what do you want to do? ...Do you not want Sayoko anymore? If that’s the case, I’ll give up on it too. Ren told me that I should. He said that there is no point in taking someone who has no wish to do anything about the situation all the way to Kyoto, and I agree.”

If Misaki took Mia’s hand and let her take him to Kyoto, what would he do once he was there? What could he do, if not whisk her away, which was hardly realistic? What had he even been doing up until now? What had he been doing to make Sayoko his?

...Nothing. He had done nothing but stall—just a year more, just another year. He had never tried to talk to her parents in person, or put his wish to marry her

into words. He had only been waiting for some impossible miracle to happen and change everything overnight.

“Misaki, do you really have no desire to go to Kyoto? ...Did you, in your heart of hearts, actually want to break up with Sayoko?”

“Of course I didn’t! I wanted to be with her forever. I wanted her to marry me. I couldn’t imagine my life without her anymore! But then real life happened, and it was way harsher than I expected! I can’t wield magic like you do, I’m not a great fighter like Ren or Shou, I don’t have the monstrous strength of Subaru! ...Even if I want her so bad it hurts, even if I go there and try to steal her away, how do you expect me to do that?!” Misaki yelled, unconsciously hurling all of his pent-up frustration at the girl standing in front of him, but Mia only leveled him with a neutral gaze, taking his tirade in stride.

Then, an inexplicably relieved expression overtook her face, and she uttered, “I’m glad to hear that. ...Hearing you say all this and admit that you still want Sayoko is good enough for me. You can think about what you are going to do once we arrive in Kyoto,” Mia said, whipping her wand out in an instant.

Misaki tried to brace himself desperately, but it was already too late.

“O verdant green, turn into shackles!” As soon as Mia pronounced these words filled with intent, vines slithered from under Misaki’s feet, crawling up his legs until they were completely entangled in the green tendrils.



“Wha—”

“Fly with me into the sky!”

Having cast two spells in quick succession, Mia grabbed Misaki who was wrapped up in the vines, and the two of them levitated out of the flat. Misaki frantically ripped at the green stems binding him with all his might, reached for the stun baton he kept in a holster fastened to his jeans and pressed it into her body. Blue sparks erupted, crackling, at the point of contact, and she let out a sharp cry. Her concentration thus disrupted, they started falling. Mia plummeted to the ground, slamming into it ungracefully, while Misaki managed to land feetfirst.

Eventually, Mia staggered to her feet, and the pair glowered at each other, standing in front of Misaki’s apartment door. “What are you doing?! You startled me!”

“Sturdy as always, I see! I haven’t said I was coming yet!”

“It was as good as saying you are coming! I know you want Sayoko, you hypocrite! You are such a wimp!”

“Wim... Shut up! That’s how I am! What am I supposed to do about it, huh? Look at yourself, Miss It’s-all-gonna-be-fine! You’re just an airhead! How can you stick your nose in everybody’s business like that when you’re dumb as a brick? No one asked your opinion on adult love matters, little virgin!”

Strictly speaking, that last bit was sexual harassment. Mia narrowed her eyes, emitting a growl. “Oh, right... I have not tried challenging the buffoon of the Rangers yet. I shall use this opportunity as the Supreme Ruler of Evil to put an end to you, Red! I shall beat you to a bloody pulp and abduct you to Kyoto even if it shall be the last thing I do!”

“That does it, you villain wannabe! I know you’re all talk! I’ll teach you something—you’re no good in a battle!” Misaki yelled out, bracing his baton.

Mia, too, brandished her wand, twirled it and cried, **“O sour taste, be transposed!”**

“...?!”

As soon as the girl finished her spell, a terrible, acrid sourness assaulted Misaki's mouth, spreading over his tongue. What was that—lemon? He hadn't drunk anything, so why was his mouth overflowing with lemon flavor?

As his hand automatically flew to his mouth to cover it, she whirled her wand again, chanting another spell in addition to the previous one. **“O ice, become my projectiles and fall down as rain!”**

With a loud, rumbling noise, a storm of ice lumps the size of a marble tumbled down on Misaki's head. Disoriented, he broke into a run towards Mia, his hands still plastered over his mouth. He had to seal Mia's lips. He had heard Subaru and Shou's accounts of their fights with Mia, and the first thing they had done was curtail her ability to speak.

“O earth, collapse!”

“Who do you think I am?!”

He remembered every spell he had seen Mia cast. Misaki pushed off the asphalt, gaining momentum for a big leap upwards. The next moment, a gaping hole opened up with a low moan right under where his feet had been, but he evaded it, landing safely on solid ground. Mia was now within his reach.

“I'll close that big mouth of yours!”

“...! **O e-earth, become covered in ice!**” she stuttered out, closed her eyes, squatted and touched her wand to the ground. As if spreading from where it touched the asphalt, a wave of frost ran over the pavement, tiny ice crystals melding together in its path to form a single shiny surface.

“...?!”

Misaki couldn't stop his feet from slipping; he skidded on the icy strip of asphalt, teetering wildly, and crashed, bruising his back.

“...Ow!”

Misaki tried to get up jerkily, willing the throbbing pain in his back to subside. Mia used this moment to make a grab for his hand and fluttered her wand in the air, intoning, **“Fly with me into the sky!”**

Immediately, their bodies floated up, as if they were two sparks spat out by a

bonfire. Eventually, they ascended so high they could reach out their hands and touch the clouds.

“You cannot run away from me now, Misaki. If you fall down from this height, you will die.”

“Argh, you little twerp! Dammit. I really am hopeless at combat. ...Why did I get picked for the Rangers again? Crap.”

“As if I would know. Okay, we’re heading for Kyoto. It will take us about an hour and a half, I expect. While we are flying, think about what it is you want to do, Misaki,” Mia instructed and promptly shut her eyes.

Was she conjuring up another image in her head? Mumbling something incoherent under her breath, she opened her eyes and uttered the words, pouring intent into them, “**Bullet train!**”

“Huh? Bulle—Waah?!”

Air roared in his ears as his body was now being propelled through the air at incredible speed. The two advanced towards the west. Strangely enough, he felt no wind pressure, although it should be more than tangible considering how fast they were moving. It seemed that a cloud of mist hanging around Mia and curling over Misaki’s body, was protecting them from the effects of high-speed flight.

“...Mia, can I ask you something?”

“What is it? Make it quick so that I don’t lose concentration.”

“Okay. What did you do to fill my mouth with lemon taste just now?”

“Oh, that? I arranged my taste transferring technique a little bit, now it turns your saliva into lemon juice. It took me a month to perfect it. Bwa-ha-ha!”

“Ugh, why did you spend a month of your life on a stupid prank like that?!” Misaki shouted inadvertently.

It was stupid, but pretty mean. Hoping desperately that the girl would discover the weaknesses of his teammates too, he traveled through the air with her.

TO the west they went, onwards and onwards, without changing their course. Mia, focusing her will, kept her mouth shut. Misaki, helped along by her silence, sunk into thought.

He pondered about what he was going to do now. Maybe it was time he started doing the things he had been running away from in fear. Indeed, this was a turning point; the turning point he had been waiting for like a miracle. He had been hesitating, unable to make a decision. He had been holding himself back, afraid that he wouldn't be able to make Sayoko happy. But he hadn't wanted to lose her, hadn't wanted her to walk away from him, so he had been showering her with affection. And what a cowardly affection it had been, now that he thought about it.

He wouldn't say the words Sayoko wanted to hear the most, basking in the bliss their always too short trysts brought, shutting out the inconvenient parts, picking and choosing only what was enjoyable. He had been behaving like a selfish bastard, hadn't he? So, it was time for them to really confront each other.

If Misaki loved Sayoko, if he wished to spend his life with her by his side, he had to take action. Even if it came out pathetic or if she rebuked him for it. Even if they called him feckless, a disgrace. Even if she refused him, it would be okay. He had already heard her bid him farewell. He had nothing to lose. Determination burning bright like a flame in his heart, Misaki steeled his resolve.

THEY had been flying for so long they lost track of time.

"...Are we close to Kyoto?" Mia panted out.

"Yeah. We're already within the city limits. ...Mia, are you feeling okay?"

Big drops of sweat beaded on Mia's forehead, labored breaths starting to sound almost like wheezing. It was understandable that she got so tired after flying this whole distance. Her exhaustion was overwhelmingly clear at first glance.

"...Let me...take you...to Gion...at least..." she got out between gasps.

“All right. See that mountain over there? Head for it. At its foot there’ll be... See the temple gate that came into view just now? That’s where it is,” Misaki instructed Mia, consulting the map that he had brought up on his smartphone.

Mia nodded once and maneuvered through the air according to his directions, slowing down a little bit. Misaki’s wristwatch was showing 12:30 p.m. He had already inquired about where the meeting was to take place on the way. Restaurant Kaede’s business hours ran from 12 to 2 p.m. for lunch, and from 6 p.m. for dinner. Considering it was the first meeting between families whose children were about to enter an arranged marriage, it was very likely that they had set it around noon. In fact, he was more than certain that it had already started.

Finally, they crossed over the big red temple gates, and chose a quiet little backstreet to make their landing. As soon as their feet touched the ground, Mia’s body dangerously careened. Startled, Misaki hurried to steady her by the shoulders.

“Okay, we’re very close. Can you walk, Mia?”

She was panting hard. Apparently, she had really pushed herself to the limit with this trip. Misaki forcefully tugged the cape off her shoulders and stuffed it into her backpack. Her wand suffered the same fate. Then he heaved her up, draping her over his back so that she hung there, supported by his arms under her knees, and stood up.

“Huff... I’m all...all right... I can...walk by...my...self,” she wheezed.

“Don’t try to convince me you’re all right when your legs are wobbling like jelly! Shut up and sit tight!” Misaki barked at the girl huddled on his back. He took a quick glance at the map he had open on his phone and started walking.

Passing through a couple of alleys and across the street, they found a storefront with a sign saying Kaede.

“We’re here! Well, there we go, Mia!”

“Right. Ah, Misaki, I really am fine now. ...I rested up a little.”

Mia looked a lot better than before; she was still sweating, but she wasn’t deathly pale anymore.

“If you say so,” Misaki replied as he let Mia slide off his back and stepped boldly inside the restaurant.

“Welcome,” two girls dressed in kimonos greeted them.

However, likely due to Misaki and Mia wearing ordinary clothing that looked out of place at a luxury restaurant, the hostesses’ expressions soon turned wary.

“We beg your pardon, but unless you have a reservation...”

“Yeah, I gathered that much from the look of this place. ...However!”

They were at the right address, which was excellent in and of itself, but how were they going to even begin to explain what they came here for? While Misaki was gaping like a fish, lost for words, Mia leaned forward, peering out from behind his back.

“Ugh, I can’t watch this anymore! Sorry, but we are in a hurry! Kimono-clad ordinary workers, I shall hear your grievances out at a later date!”

“Huh?! O-Ordinary workers?!”

Ignoring the wide-eyed hostesses stupefied by Mia’s manner of expressing herself, she gripped Misaki’s hand and took off into the main hall. Then she began doing things that made even the Crow Ranger raise his eyebrows. Bam! Thud! Crash! Mia went about arbitrarily opening doors and sliding screens one after another. Naturally, the guests sitting inside the rooms regarded her with bewilderment. Upon seeing that her quarry wasn’t there, Mia slid the door closed without a word, and reached for the next one.

“H-Hey!”

“Miss, stop, please!”

“I thought I told you I would hear out your grievances at a later date! I sincerely apologize for the commotion, but we are really short on time!”

Mia disregarded the panicking voices of the restaurant staff and Misaki’s grunts of confusion, choosing to concentrate on her door-opening mission instead. And then, she reached the room she had been looking for. Behind one of the doors that she threw open with a dry creak of the wood, sat Sayoko,

wrapped in an exquisite kimono.

“I found her! Misaki, she’s here!”

“Huh? Yeah, I can see her. ...Hello, Sayoko.”

“M-Mia... Misaki, too. Wh-Why?”

Naturally, Sayoko was not the only person in the room. Next to her was a middle-aged couple, her parents most likely. Opposite of her sat a man in an expensive-looking suit, a pair of glasses perched atop his nose. Beside him Mia could see a genteel elderly man. The fiancé’s parents most likely took on the role of the go-between. Misaki moved forward, brushing past Mia. He took a firm step inside the room where Sayoko sat.

“Sayoko, I came here for you. I couldn’t tell you this for the longest time because I was scared. Sorry for being such a pathetic man. But I can’t bear to lose you, Sayoko. I just can’t, because I love you.”

Misaki fished around in his pockets, hoping to find something, anything. Sadly, he had nothing set aside for the occasion. Really, he was terrible at arranging things right. If he could produce a gorgeous ring to everyone’s gasps of amazement now, it would’ve been like a scene out of a movie, but alas it was not to be. So, to make up for that in some way, Misaki opened his mouth and started speaking the way Mia chanted her spells—pouring his heart and soul into each and every word.

“Sayoko, please, marry me. You are the only one for me. I want us to become happy together. I want to enjoy growing bonsai together with you, watch your lovely moss arrangements, and be with you—always and forever!”

“Mi-Misaki! “ Sayoko cried out, tears uncontrollably bursting forth.

Misaki rushed toward her, almost tripping over his feet. Sayoko took unsteady, faltering steps in his direction, her legs having fallen asleep during the meeting, and he caught her in his arms halfway, holding her close in a tight embrace.

“I am so happy, doncha know! Finally, you’ve said the words I’ve dreamt of hearing! This’s gotta be the best day of my life! You are the one for me, too, Misaki! I wanna be with you!”

“Yes, I want to be with you, too. ...I love you so much, Sayoko.”

The two, forgetting where they were, exchanged a kiss. The young lovers looked so perfect in that moment, everyone in the room found themselves entranced by the sight of them leaning into each other so eagerly.

The first one to come to his senses was Sayoko’s father, raising his voice, “Wh-What are you doing?! Are you even aware of what was going on here in this room before you—Urgh, get your filthy hands off my daughter and get out of here!”

“I’m not going anywhere. Do you know why I came here? I came here to ask for your daughter’s hand in marriage. And until you agree to give it to me, I refuse to leave this room!” Misaki proclaimed, looking straight into the fuming eyes of Sayoko’s father, as he gently let go of his beloved.

Then he kneeled, sitting on his heels in a formal manner. “My name is Misaki Saeki. I am the man that has had the pleasure of dating your daughter. I am well aware that you were having a meeting to arrange her marriage. To the man who was to be her future husband and her esteemed parents, I understand how impudent my request is. And yet, I must have Sayoko, no matter what. Please, let me take your daughter as my wife!”

Misaki bowed his head down low, pressing his palms into the tatami flooring. It was truly like a scene out of a TV drama. Or at least that was how it appeared to Mia, but it seemed like the others shared in her impression. The hostess girls who had tried so hard to chase Mia down to get her to stop, and the other staff and guests who had gathered to see what the commotion was about, all of them hung on Misaki’s every word and gesture. Of course, that included Sayoko’s father as well. At first, he seemed dumbstruck by Misaki’s gallant speech, but then he regained his composure and spoke. Naturally, the words that came tumbling from his mouth were far from approving.

“Th-That’s out of the question! I heard all about you from Sayoko! I know you’re just a lowly police officer; you’re not even part of some elite squad! A provincial public servant with a laughable salary! Never will I give Sayoko away to a man like you! Were you saying all that knowing what kind of family she comes from? A-Are you trying to insult my daughter?!”

“Absolutely not. I am well aware of your family’s social standing. It’s the reason why I spent four years hesitating. I know about my financial situation better than anyone. It is true that I cannot promise your daughter a life of luxury. However! I swear that I will make Sayoko the happiest woman alive! No matter what... No matter what, I will make sure that a smile never leaves her face!”

Was there a woman who wouldn’t be touched by those words? Sayoko couldn’t stop crying. His determination filled her heart with so much joy it could burst. Sayoko didn’t want an extravagant lifestyle. All she wanted was a chance at creating her own happiness together with the man she loved.

Certainly, “love conquers all” was nothing more than a romantic fable, but without love, there was definitely no true happiness either. If she had to choose between love and money, she would pick Misaki without a shadow of a doubt. Her father evidently disagreed. Popping a vein, he glared at Misaki with burning hatred in his eyes.

“Can you get it through your thick skull that I have already found a man worthy of becoming Sayoko’s husband? It’s this man right here, who is the heir to a well-reputed kimono store. He is a class above you! You are not welcome here. Your continued presence in this room is completely preposterous! Know your place, you scum!”

“Father, what do you gotta be so cruel to him for? What does it matter what Misaki’s social standing is? I don’t care about it at all! You’re the only one who does! You’ve married off both my sisters just like that to gratify your pride. You are not in any position to talk to him like that!”

“Silence, Sayoko! Just do as I say! Do you understand the situation at all? And I have explained it to you so many times! Our company is at stake in this marriage. Do you mean to put our workers out on the street?!”

When Sayoko, who hadn’t offered a shred of resistance thus far, finally snapped, blurting out what she had really been thinking to her father, he exploded, white-hot anger coloring his words.

When it seemed that this would devolve into a shouting match, a girl’s voice rang out softly but clearly, “What is your true concern, your company’s fate or

Sayoko's happiness? What is more important to you? What is happening here right now makes it very hard to believe that what you wish for is the latter."

Instantly, it went so quiet you could hear a pin drop. Everyone turned their attention to Sayoko's father; not only the people in the room, but the crowd of onlookers too. The man, feeling everyone's eyes trained on him, inadvertently shrunk back.

"Wh-Who are you...? What an obnoxious little brat. Of course Sayoko's happiness is my priority! She may feel upset now, but I have confidence that this is the path that will lead her to happiness in the future."

"That means that the fate of the company is the least of your cares, does it not? And yet you invoked it in your tirade just now. Why is that? Let's say that Sayoko does marry this man, but what are you going to do if he does not contribute to your company as expected? If all you care about is your daughter's happiness, this should be fine with you, right?"

"Huh?" The father breathed out, lost for words.

Then, a rumbling laughter suddenly rang out. Mia sought out where it originated from with her eyes; it turned out to be Sayoko's fiancé-to-be. The man hid the twist of his lips elegantly with his index finger, his shoulders shaking convulsively.

"That young lady has it right. By the way, I failed to tell you, but even if Sayoko and I were to marry, I had no intention of making you our exclusive subcontractor. Just like before, you would have to compete with other companies so I can make a fair judgment based solely on the merits of your offer."

"What?!" The father burst out, and hurriedly closed his mouth.

He looked around the room nervously, as if mortified that he had inadvertently revealed his ulterior motive to everyone present.

Sayoko's prospective husband continued speaking, an amused lilt to his voice, "And here I was wondering why you were so persistent in suggesting I marry Sayoko. I see, so you were seeking to exploit our relationship as your stepping-stone? I took the liberty of doing a background check on your family, including

Sayoko's lovely sisters. As it turns out, both of them were joined in holy matrimony with the company presidents or top managers of your business partners at points in time where your company suffered a decline in profits by some intriguing coincidence. Did you think it was time for another petty trick like that?"

Sayoko's father blanched at the man's words. Mia took over the conversation from Sayoko's fiancé, rubbing salt in her father's wounds, "How pathetic. Is this your only way of turning around your company's fortunes? Protecting it at the cost of your daughters? Ha. What were you going to do after you married Sayoko off, then? You have no more children. Are you not ashamed of yourself as a parent for maintaining your company by treating your progeny as if they were disposable?"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! What a jocular young lady! I like you. Would you like to be my wife?" the fiancé-to-be offered. "I feel like marrying you would make my life much more entertaining."

"Wha-?! How did you even get such an idea in your head?! I am a high school student, you know! N-No, more importantly, I have the lofty long-cherished desire of world domination to accomplish! Th-That is why it is with my deepest regret that I must inform you that marriage is not on the table for me currently," Mia refused fervently, only to have the man snigger at her.

It was that baffling kind of adult laughter where you have no idea whether the person was joking or being serious. Mia felt the same fluttering in her chest that she experienced with Ren.

The man then directed a reproachful gaze at Sayoko's father who was sitting motionlessly with his shoulders slumped. "Mister Tougou, I am not asking you for quotes just to spite you. We are living in a world where the market for kimonos is in steady decline, the overall profits are constantly dwindling. It's in these conditions that we must fight to keep Japanese sartorial traditions alive. Other companies are doing their best to improve their business practices and are making a concerted corporate effort to respond to my requests as much as they can. Isn't that what you are lacking? What sort of effort were you making to protect your company other than using your daughters as bargaining chips?"

...That must've been the final straw. Sayoko's father's body went limp. His wife gently rubbed his back. "Darling, I think this is where we admit defeat. We better let Sayoko do as she pleases."

Her husband didn't say a word. ...That seemed to be his answer.

OUTSIDE Kaede, Misaki and Sayoko both bowed their heads in apology before the man her father wanted her to marry.

"We are so very sorry for causing a scene."

"Not at all. I'm glad I could witness such amusing...ah, er, I mean, such a lovely couple radiating happiness. I'm especially glad about how it turned out for you, Sayoko. If I compare you before and after Misaki came, it would be as if you were a porcelain doll sitting across from me in that room, and now the woman I see before me is brimming with life—it's clear as day which one is happier. Cliché as it may be, I wish you all the happiness in the world," the man spoke warmly, gesticulating gracefully with his hands in a way that was the very picture of an adult.

He was handsome too, with chiseled features. Mia's father had also been a looker, so she thought she was used to good-looking men, but she still ended up inadvertently staring at the man who possessed a different type of male beauty than her father. Was it the elegance he radiated, maybe? The object of her gawking silently directed his gaze away from the couple to look down at Mia, the corners of his pretty eyes arching upwards.

"Do you mind telling me your name?"

"M-Me? I'm Mia Oonari."

"Mia... A lovely name for a lovely young lady. My name is Sensui. If you ever have the need for gorgeous bridal attire, please visit my store. I will personally seek out an arresting garment worthy of your beauty. If possible, I would like us to further our relationship in the direction of exchanging nuptial cups someday. ...But that is a talk for another day. Let us take the time discussing it once you are a bit older, hm?" Sensui lilted with a sweet smile on his face and handed Mia his business card.

“Nuptial cups? Bridal attire?” Mia took the proffered card, stunned by the out-of-place expressions she didn’t understand the intent of.

Meanwhile, the elderly man who had been waiting on the heir to the kimono store pointedly cleared his throat from behind them, “...Master Sensui, please try to exercise your wit in moderation. Leading an innocent young girl astray does not befit a gentleman of your caliber.”

“Lead astray? What a terrible way to put it, considering my relatively honest intentions. Haha...”

“That is precisely what ‘leading astray’ means,” the elderly man muttered exasperatedly just before a black-lacquered car arrived to pick up his master. He opened the back door for Mr. Sensui, and the latter stepped inside.

“Goodbye. Ah, since we have had the pleasure of getting acquainted, I would be delighted if you were to invite me to your wedding. I am after all getting close to the age where I would love to share in other people’s happiness on their special day. Until then, please take care,” the man said, a pleasant smile still gracing his features.

Then the door closed, and the car took off. Misaki, Sayoko, and Mia silently watched it go.

“What was that Sensui man trying to tell me in the end, I wonder? Was he trying to get me to buy a kimono from him?” Mia mused with her head cocked to the side quizzically, leisurely examining the business card he had given her.

Misaki jerked back in shock. “Seriously?! Ah, well, I get the distinct feeling Ren will eat me alive if I say too much. Maybe it’s better for everyone if you stay in the dark,” Misaki sighed, almost rolling his eyes, and glanced back at Restaurant Kaede.

Sayoko’s parents were still inside. Her father felt too weak to move, and her mother, speaking to her husband softly, had asked Misaki and Sayoko to give him some time and space. Sayoko’s mother had also been opposed to her daughter’s relationship with Misaki, but probably not as much as her other half. Maybe witnessing Misaki’s resolve earlier had affected her somehow, because there was tangible warmth now in her eyes whenever she looked at her daughter’s significant other.

“...I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt your father. I feel bad about making him seem like the only person in the wrong, and in such a public setting too. I’m sure he had his reasons.”

“Doncha worry about it. I believe he’s getting his just deserts for relying on his daughters too much. ...But it’s fine. My sisters seem happy now; it’s not as if it’s all doom and gloom. I mighta found a modicum of happiness with Mr. Sensui if I had married him. But I’d much rather be with you. ...Thank you so much, Misaki. Your words have brought me great joy.”

The two clung to each other in a tender embrace. They were a hallmark of a couple of happy lovebirds.

“I am so glad it worked out,” Mia whispered, a broad smile lighting up her face.

BEFORE they knew it, evening came. Mia and Misaki faced Sayoko on a platform in Kyoto Station, waiting for their train to arrive. If they left now, they would be able to arrive back in Tokyo by nighttime.

“You came all the way to Kyoto, issa a pity that you can’t stay and see more of the city,” Sayoko lamented, earning herself smiles from Mia and Misaki.

“Mia, thank you so much for taking Misaki here.”

“Don’t mention it. You have thanked me so many times already, and look at all these things I received from you.”

A paper bag Mia held contained all sorts of Kyoto souvenirs courtesy of Sayoko: rice flour crackers flavored with sugar and cinnamon called *Yatsushashi*, baked dumplings made of roasted sweet bean paste in soft dough wrapping called *Ajari-mochi*, Kyoto-style pickles, and dried young sardines. It also included oil blotting paper from a famous local maker and ornamental boxwood combs, with enough to share with Aya.

Sayoko tightly clasped Mia’s hand. “Next time, please come to Kyoto with lots of time to spare! I’ll show ya around.”

“I most definitely shall.”

“I’ll drop by here again very soon too. Next time, I’ll pay a proper visit to your house to pay my respects to your parents. There’s a lot I need to talk to them about.”

Misaki hadn’t even finished his sentence when the bullet train arrived. Unwilling to part from Sayoko even for a short time, he draped his hand over her shoulders, tucking her into his side. He gave her a light peck on the lips, and hopped onto the train.

Sayoko, her cheeks a pretty shade of pink, waved them off. “From the bottom of my heart, thank you. ...See you soon!”

Her smile unfurling like a flower bud breaking open, just like the first time Mia had seen it, she watched the train speed by, disappearing into the distance.

WHEN Mia returned to her hometown, it was pitch-dark already, the clock showing just a little past 7 p.m.

“Phew, I’m beat.”

“I feel quite tired too, although I feel less physically drained after taking a nap on the train.”

As they were stretching their arms, a truck stopped at a roundabout near the train station they had just exited. The front door opened, revealing Ren as the driver.

“Mia! And Misaki too. Welcome back! Good job out there,” Ren said, approaching them and patting Mia on the head as soon as she was within arm’s reach.

Mia just nodded while trying to hide a yawn.

“I explained what happened briefly in my text message. Well, I really owe you guys one this time. I ended up dragging everyone into this though...”

“Yeah, well, you know how fun it is to stick your nose into people’s personal lives. I really don’t mind. Just be happy that it all turned out well in the end, Misaki. I know I am.”

Misaki gave a sheepish smile, to which Ren answered with his typical grin.

Then he invited the two weary travelers to get in the truck and stepped on the gas.

“Is everyone off from work already?”

“Yeah, including our overtimers. I think the gang’s gathered already—we were all planning to meet up to go to a barbecue place.”

Apparently, their destination was a grill restaurant.

“Barbecue, huh?” Mia drawled absentmindedly, feeling hunger pangs start at the mention of food.

“By the way, Mia, how are you holding up?” Ren suddenly asked, his hands on the steering wheel.

“Eh?”

“There’s a limit to how much magical power you can spend in one day, right? You didn’t push yourself too hard like you promised me, right?”

This sounded almost exactly like something the kind man from the police station whose name Mia had forgotten to ask had said to her. Her father had never mentioned such a limit, so Mia tilted her head to the side, and replied to Ren in a puzzled tone of voice, “I’m not sure what you mean, but I don’t think I’ve strained myself too hard. I do feel fatigued though.”

“Really? Well, you don’t look so bad at a glance,” Ren hummed, his voice not losing the worried edge to it.

“She’s fine now,” Misaki asserted, lightening the mood in the car. “She did look like she had just raced her way through a marathon after flying all that distance to Kyoto, but after taking a bit of a rest, she was walking and talking like nothing even happened. She slept like a log on the train to Tokyo, and when she woke up as the train stopped, she looked fresh as a daisy.”

“That so? Okay then. ...I’m glad to hear that,” Ren let out a sigh of relief.

In Mia’s opinion, there was really no reason to make such a fuss about it. *Ren is such a worrywart, although one could never tell just by looking at him*, she thought, throwing a leisurely glance at Ren.

Before long, they arrived at a grill restaurant which was a part of a larger

franchise Mia had seen many times around town. A cheerful staff member escorted them to a booth towards the back of the store, where Aya, Shou, and Subaru were already sitting, sipping on their drinks.

“Good to see you back!”

“Great job out there, Mia! You really saved the day!”

“Come on, sit down and drink something. You must be starving too. We’ve already ordered, so let’s dig in right away.”

Mia took a seat to the accompaniment of varied appreciative greetings. Shortly after that, the food that the others had ordered arrived. The meat Mia had eaten at the barbecue party was, of course, of unparalleled taste, but the meat this restaurant served was very good too; besides, they offered a huge variety of sauces to go with it. She felt positively ravenous, so, just for today, Mia emptied her head of all notions of restraint and practically inhaled the food on her plate. Subaru fondly watched her going to town on the meat and slipped her piece after piece.

The topic on everyone’s lips was, naturally, Misaki and Sayoko.

“Yippee... Finally, our Misaki bit the bullet! But wow, the way you dealt with it, so manly!”

“Stop teasing me about it. Well, what can I say, I knew I was being a total wimp, so when Mia told me as much, it made my blood boil. But if she hadn’t given me that push, I probably would’ve given up on Sayoko. So, thank you, Mia,” Misaki flashed a broad smile aimed at her.

Mia hiccupped, accidentally swallowing the whole piece of meat she was chewing on.

“D-Don’t mind it,” she answered quickly, blush high on her cheeks, after hurriedly gulping down her glass of water. Mia wiped her mouth with a hot towel.

...That was a bolt from the blue. Misaki had never smiled at her before. Feeling flustered, she devoted her full attention to devouring the heaps of meat Subaru deposited on her plate with the regularity and speed of a conveyor belt. The group regarded her antics with tenderness; after all that had happened,

they all knew how shy the girl was and how much of a front she liked to put up to hide her feelings.

This time, Mia had acted purely upon her feelings without trying to justify it with speeches about her duties as the Supreme Ruler of Evil or the good of the ordinary citizens. The Crow Rangers were happy to see that. They all agreed that doing what she felt was right suited her much better than all that talk about being a villain and taking over the world. ...What could they do to break the chains of “achieving world conquest” that were holding her back?

Until Mia’s father had passed way, he had been her whole world—that much was clear from her behavior. She was shockingly naïve, often oblivious about things everybody else thought were common sense. She had followed her father blindly, learned magic per his instructions, and knew nothing but that and her pride as the Supreme Ruler of Evil. That was all she had.

Her father’s words had been her entire world. How could they break that chain of dependence cast over her like a binding spell? The Crow Rangers, especially Ren, were serious about finding the solution to this problem. They wanted to take her to all kinds of places, make her feel and see myriads of things she had never even dreamed of before. Through that multitude of new experiences, gradually, she would grow, so that someday, the chains wouldn’t be able to contain her anymore.

Scarfig down all the meat in her immediate vicinity seemed to mollify Mia; with the last piece of meat disappearing in her mouth, she let out a satisfied exhale. Then, as if having remembered something, she energetically rummaged through the contents of her paper bag.

“By the way, I received some souvenirs from Sayoko. Aya, she got you a box of oil blotting papers and a boxwood comb.”

“Really? Nice! I’ve always wanted a boxwood comb. It’ll make my hair extra glossy!” Aya rejoiced, accepting her souvenirs.

“Wait, there’s more,” Mia announced, and began taking out the Japanese sweets and pickles, a lone business card falling out from the depths of the bag in the process.

“Hm, what’s that? A business card?”

“Yes. I got it from the man who was supposed to marry Sayoko.”

“Why are you carrying his card around?” Ren’s face twisted in a malicious scowl, not liking the fact that Mia had a card with some strange man’s name on it with her one bit.

Misaki hastily tried to say something, but Mia beat him to the punch, replying nonchalantly, “He gave it to me. Apparently, he wanted to sell me a kimono or something.”

“A kimono? Oh right, it says kimono store right here.”

“Yup. He told me to visit his place if I ever find myself in need of bridal attire.”

This news induced a violent coughing fit in Ren. “Bridal attire?! Why so specific?!”

“I have no idea. Oh, do you happen to know what ‘nuptial cups’ are? He mentioned hoping to exchange them with me someday.”

This caused Subaru and Aya to choke on their pieces of meat and suffer the same fate as Ren. Misaki clutched at his head.

“Wha—Misaki! What happened in Kyoto? Why did Sayoko’s fiancé hit on Mia?!”

“I don’t really know either! What I do know is that he seemed to be really into her. Actually, rather than just hitting on her, he seemed to be pretty serious about her, now that I think about it.”

“That’s even worse!” Ren mumbled sullenly into his cup of oolong tea.

Mia observed Aya’s empty laugh and Subaru muttering darkly about how he would never forgive the man who had dared to say such things. “What’s the problem? I fail to understand what is going on. Are ‘nuptial cups’ some dangerous object?”

“Haha, don’t worry about it. Ren’s just losing it because of your newfound popularity, and Subaru’s all up in his father-of-a-teenage-daughter mode,” Shou snickered.

His explanation failing to enlighten Mia, she tilted her head to the side in utter confusion.

Chapter 9: The Life of the Man of Contradictions

THIS man's heart held a profound contradiction at its base. It was a contradiction so clear-cut you could almost say he had a dual personality. One side of him embraced evil and longed to fulfill his duty, the other side rejected evil and yearned for someone to put a stop to his actions.

It had been due to his experiencing love that this contradiction was born in him. If it hadn't been for that all-consuming love, he probably wouldn't have turned out to be such a failure. However, he didn't regret the way he was, neither did he feel bitter about it. The only thing he did was apologize inside his head, over and over again.

Please, forgive me. Please, forgive me. Please, forgive your good-for-nothing father. Mia. My sweet daughter born from the woman I loved so dearly. Please, forgive me for the choices I have made.

THE man's earliest memories consisted of the endless lessons his father, the former head of the family, gave him. These memories felt more like an imprinting than anything else. The man was a sorcerer, an evil one at that—an enemy of all mankind. He had been taught that the mighty magic he wielded was to be used for one purpose only—to make a long-cherished desire passed on through the generations come true.

That long-cherished desire was “world domination”. A silly ambition, very much like something out of a comic book. However, the man did not think it foolish, not even for a minute, for since a tender age, he had been immersed in the philosophy of world domination to the point that it had been an integral part of his entire worldview.

There was no crack through which doubts or questions could seep into his thinking. Ever since he had been but a small child, he had been learning magic and striving to master it in order to achieve world conquest. This had been the

only use of his time that had been tolerated.

There were appearances to be kept up since they had lost so much to the Champions of Justice, so he went to school and kept his identity secret. However, he could never blend in with his surroundings, sticking out like a sore thumb wherever he went. He didn't talk much to his classmates; whenever he said something, it was always in a high-handed, peremptory manner, with him looking down on everyone else. Who would want to be friends with such a child?

A part of him always wished the hidden schools and the numerous servants that taught past generations of his organization were still around, but all of that had been lost along with their wealth and influence.

The man was always alone. ...He was special. It was preposterous to think that he could be categorized as a mere "human". He and his kind were something beyond the limitations of *human*; they were the chosen ones of the world. Why else would they possess such arcane power? As the man thought everyone else to be beneath him, he never regarded being lonely and friendless as a nuisance.

His father stood at the head of the remnants of an evil organization and fought the Champions of Justice, all in order to fulfill the longstanding ambition of world conquest. To his father, the man was a "spare". If the father whom he revered were to breathe his last before he could realize his goal, the man would inherit his will and take up the fight. That was one of the reasons he continued to study magic. Day in, day out, he strived to perfect the magic meant to cement his family's goal of world domination. His body and mind existed solely for that purpose, for if not that, what other meaning did his existence have?

TIME passed, and he advanced to university. Despite his strong misgivings about stooping so low as to sully his hands by participating in worldly matters, he now had to make a living as his family's wealth grew more minuscule with each passing day. To do that, it was necessary to get an education. That put him face to face with all sorts of dilemmas, but he continued on his path, throwing himself into his studies. It was there that he first met *her*.

A cheerful and free-spirited girl, she never put on airs. Her manner of

speaking was clear and brisk; when she presented her research paper, she did so in a very accessible manner, her findings thought-provoking. Dynamic, guileless, and lively, she wasn't one to think about things too deeply. And yet, during group discussions, she somehow displayed the ability to identify the heart of the matter with surprising precision, positively influencing their pace.

She was easily inspired, her intuition extraordinarily keen. She was popular among both men and women; making friends came to her just as easily as breathing. She spent her days surrounded by animated talking and laughter. The man wasn't immune to her charms either—and so, he fell in love.

At first, he wasn't even aware of his sudden attraction—his eyes just seemed to follow her whenever she appeared in his sight. In their shared classes, he always chose a seat where he could see her. When they were assigned group work, she would always randomly pick people in her immediate vicinity to form a group with, so he made an effort to sit closer to her so that he would end up on her team.

...While still oblivious to his own feelings, as he got to talk to the girl more, schoolwork ceased to be the only topic of their conversation. They began eating lunch in the university cafeteria together, went to the library to look for materials for their next group presentation, and read said materials over tea. Each time they met, the man discovered new charms about the girl. The man yearned to learn more about her, and soon, she was all he could think about. He was completely captivated by her.

As he spent more and more time around the girl, he began behaving in a different manner. It was probably thanks to her influence. Like how the passage of time polishes the surface of a rough, pointy rock down to reveal a rounded, smooth pebble hidden underneath, so did the man turn calmer and kinder in her presence.

He had been blessed with good looks from birth; now that his beautiful features were tempered with newfound softness, he made many a young woman's heart beat faster. The girl didn't remain unaffected by the way the man was changing either; in the spring two years after they had first met, they became lovers.

The man only ever revealed the fact that he was a sorcerer to two people—one of them being the girl, the other being the man he was closest to at the university. When he first showed them his magic, he watched the doubt on their faces make way for wide-eyed amazement. He was actually not supposed to let anyone know about his true nature, but he found himself wanting to share it with the two closest to him no matter the consequences, for they were the most important people to him: his lover and his best friend.

They asked him all sorts of things about his magic, their eyes sparkling, and he answered, explaining to them about the way his powers worked. He never knew that opening his heart to people could feel so wonderful. The man discovered the bliss that was being surrounded by the people you love. Maybe it would've been better for him if he hadn't.

HE found out that she didn't have much longer to live two years into their marriage, after their daughter had been born. The doctor letting him know she had a disease was like a bolt out of the blue. And yet, that was an undeniable fact, a part of his reality now. He desperately searched for a way to cure it, like a madman. When he soon discovered that it was impossible through scientific and medical means, he was left to rely on his arcane powers.

Pouring his heart and soul into the words and then chanting them—that was his magic. He detailed the image of the girl recovering from her illness countless times in his head; he even did research on her ailment, and imbued his words with a fervent wish to eradicate the cancerous disease eating away at her body. Then he pronounced the formed words, again and again and again. He cast spells upon her an infinite amount of times, but he couldn't achieve the impossible. Magic, it turned out, wasn't all-powerful.

He had been so sure that if he spoke the words with the right intent, he could do anything, but he discovered that all his spells could produce was an “external” effect: protecting his body from physical attacks, conjuring up hailstones or blades of wind, materializing jewels. Those were all “external” phenomena. Tampering with internal affairs, especially those of someone else's body, was something he couldn't do. He didn't know that. Understandably so, for before he had met the girl, he had never shown interest in other human

beings.

The man wept, apologizing to the girl, but she continued to smile at him kindly until her last breath.

“Thank you. You know, meeting you and becoming your wife has made me so, so happy. Thanks to you, our little Mia was born into this world. I love her so much it hurts. But, I’m sorry. I’m the one who has to apologize. I’m so sorry I have to leave you and Mia. I love you both with all my heart. And I love the world you both live in too. So, please, don’t give in to despair. You still have Mia.”

...A few days after that, she passed away.

WAS she consciously trying to impress something upon him or were her words devoid of some deeper, hidden meaning? The girl had died without revealing that secret. However, it was those last words of hers that drove a wedge in his heart, splitting it in two.

World domination, the long-cherished desire of all sorcerers, the calling that begs to be fulfilled. That was supposed to be the way of it, but her words had shaken the man to his very core. Part of him insisted, “I must,” while part of him cried, “I don’t want to”. It took the man loving the girl, and then losing her to start having his doubts.

He continued studying magic under his father’s tutelage. He went through with the training, his heart being torn apart by the irreconcilable contradiction all the while. It was as if another version of himself now resided within him, asking him, “Is this what you really want?” whenever he obediently followed his father’s teachings.

However, there was no erasing the lessons ingrained in his very being. He could not deny the part of him that worked towards world conquest, but there was now also a part of him that grabbed him by the hand in a bid to prevent him from going through with it. It was pure madness. The man felt himself going crazy.

That was why, after searching his soul, he reached a certain decision. Using

technology he had developed for his job, he planted transmitters inside his own and his daughter's body and handed his best friend a tracking device connected to them.

His father's days were numbered. It was obvious that his health had been deteriorating since the day he fought the last of the true Rangers and obliterated their suits and weapons. If he continued to use magic in an attempt to take over the world at the current rate, he would soon perish. Yes, his father was wasting away, clearly so. When his father died, he would have to come forward to take up the mantle of Supreme Ruler of Evil.

However, his father's time in power had stretched on for far too long. Most of the people that had been attending to him as part of their organization were no longer of this world. In fact, there were no field agents of the organization left; all that remained of the members was just a single lawyer who had a minor, background role in their circle.

No longer could his family call upon their bound servants, their homunculus, or the contracted eldritch abominations they had bound in pocket dimensions when they sought to feed upon the Earth and its inhabitants. All of their power was now limited to only the sorcerers.

This meant that the man would have to fight alone. That was true for the Champions of Justice as well, though. They, too, would have to entrust their mission to a new generation of young people with the passage of time. The new generation would no doubt see a marked decrease in manpower, and with the loss of their last base and the focal point of their power suits, they would not compare in the slightest to the giants of the past who had fought in giant mobile armor made in the image of animals capable of combatting even the greatest of eldritch horrors.

That was why he had given his friend the tracking system. It would display his current position on the map as soon as he cast a spell. This would enable them to find him wherever he would be, just like how the Champions of Justice always appeared before the villain in the nick of time to save the day in superhero shows. This would give them back the advantage they lost in that last horrific war.

When it came down to it, he wanted his best friend to become his opponent. His friend's transfer to the police station tasked with monitoring the man's evil organization might have been just a coincidence, but to the man, it was as good as fate, for he knew he could trust his best friend to stop him when he needed him to.

The man couldn't break the hold his father had on him. All those things he had imprinted on his mind since a tender age: the necessity of world domination, wielding magic, the pride as the Supreme Ruler of Evil. If that was his very life, wouldn't denying all of it mean the death of him?

When his love had breathed her last, the man had actually felt a momentary urge to follow her into oblivion. However, he couldn't go through with it. ...It had been because he had Mia. His darling daughter Mia, born from the woman he had loved so deeply.

Before long, his father passed away. The man, with the insurance of tracking devices in his own and his daughter's body, lived on, struggling to bridge the gap between the two halves of his heart. His purpose in life was to reach world domination as the Supreme Ruler of Evil, to pass the secrets of magic on to his daughter who would eventually become his successor, to instill in her an indomitable pride as the Supreme Ruler of Evil, and to impress the necessity of world conquest upon her.

The insurance put in place by the man had worked as intended; whenever he caused a commotion, his best friend and two of his comrades would arrive and do battle with him. He fought until he felt his reserves of energy dwindling, and then he would always run. Every day, he felt relief at the way things had played out.

Phew, another day went by where I could avoid taking over the world, a part of him thought, and he couldn't deny its existence. Even though a part of him knew that if he truly sought world domination, the current generation of rangers would not be able to stop him. But that's why he chose his best friend as his opponent—he couldn't bring himself to kill him.

At the same time, he further advanced his daughter's education. Everything his father had done to him, he in turn applied to his child, in precisely the same

manner. A part of him insisted that he had to raise her as the next Supreme Ruler of Evil; another part of him feared for the girl's future and begged him not to do that to his own daughter.

The man spent his days trying to reconcile these colossal contradictions, both as a father and as the current Supreme Ruler of Evil. He taught his daughter magic, apologizing to her in his head all the while as he sabotaged her skills in magic—he just couldn't bring himself to turn her into a menace. His little girl, hanging on his every word, reminded him very much of himself, the way he used to be when he had been but a young boy. And so, every day, guilt filled his chest, feeling as though it were tearing his heart apart.

I'm sorry. I am so sorry that you have to call such a disappointment your father. If only I could set my heart on one path, but it seems that I am an even bigger failure than I thought. Please, forgive me for the choice I made.

IT was too hard to live constantly battling with himself, feeling as if two different people existed within him. It felt as if he were slowly killing off a part of himself every day. His daughter was always by his side, but against this, he stood alone. No one could understand what he was going through. The only person who could comprehend his ordeal was his best friend. However, that best friend was now his enemy.

The man decided to relinquish his life. He would usually retreat when he felt himself run out of magic, but that day, he didn't run. He fought with all he had in him. If his best friend and his comrades-in-arms lost, he had every intention of using the spell that would complete world domination.

However, the outcome of the battle wasn't in the Supreme Ruler of Evil's favor. He tried to sling more spells at his adversaries, but ended up going over his limits. The amount of magic that a sorcerer can use in one day was limited, and once that amount was exceeded, the sorcerer's soul would disintegrate, resulting in his death. The man proved to be no exception to this law of nature.

HIS end came all too soon. The man collapsed to the ground in a heap, his limbs refusing to move. He couldn't discern the sensation of his soul wearing

away, but he could tell that the candle of his life was about to flicker out. There was no pain, no suffering. Only the sound of his ragged breathing felt oddly loud in his ears, maybe due to the strain casting too many spells put on his body.

When he died, his daughter would become the next Supreme Ruler of Evil. His best friend and his fellow Champions of Justice were getting too old to put themselves out on the frontline, so they would probably retire too, making way for the next generation.

Mia, his darling, sweet little girl. She was still young and ignorant of so many things. Mia, who knew only the world her father had shown her and nothing beyond it. He had given her everything he had. Why was it then that he felt as if the things he couldn't provide her outweighed what he could?

I'm sorry. I'm sorry that I forced the binding spell I myself struggled to overcome so much upon you. Just like he could never escape this curse, his daughter, too, would end up getting tangled in those ties binding her down into the identity he fostered in her. ...He felt a dark sense of joy and a terrible sadness thinking about how he had sought to weaken his daughter.

How sick and twisted I am, the man let out a small, bitter chuckle.

Would his little girl be able to find a different path and escape this fate? Could she overcome what he couldn't and surpass all her ancestors in the process? Or would she end up going down the same road he did? The only thing he felt was a blessing, a tiny one as it might be, was that his daughter was still young, and had no children of her own to pass this curse down to. That was the man's last thought before he quietly passed away in a broken field under the gaze of the victorious Champions of Justice.

Chapter 10: The End of Peaceful Days

FALL had passed by and thick winter clouds filled the skies for days on end. Mia had continued to spend her days flying, watching over the city from above.

“In a few more months it will have been a year,” she thought.

Although she had trained to fly until the day her father had died, she had never had to do it this much, almost on a daily basis.

“So cold,” she shivered. She never knew that winter skies could feel this terribly icy. “C-C-Cold!”

Her body was shaking, her teeth rattling. Mia was gliding through the air, her form trembling, for a while now. Her outfit was a sight to behold; the girl wore a duffle coat and a scarf, a cape draped over the ensemble, with fluffy earmuffs topping it all off. If not for the cape, she would have looked just like a normal girl, but the cape ruined that image.

Anyway, even though she had taken all precautions against the cold, the skies were freezing and she had had enough of this.

“Ah-choo!” She sneezed loudly.

Mia, deciding she couldn’t bear it anymore, opted for cutting today’s patrol short.

“I did not expect this... Why is the winter sky so awful? It has only been a month since Kyoto, so where did this sudden biting cold come from?” Mia grumbled as she picked up her chopsticks while enjoying another meal at Subaru’s apartment.

In front of her, a tabletop burner was placed on the low dining table. Subaru’s face darkened with worry as he placed a big pot on top of the burner grate.

“I can see how it would be much more freezing up there than down on the ground. ...Don’t push yourself too hard. I can see your face is flushed, and your

voice sounds hoarse. I'm afraid you might have caught a cold."

"This is just the way I am. I have never caught anything of the sort."

What was that saying about people who were too slow and dumb to catch a cold?

"Fat chance,' is what I'd like to say, but in your case, nothing is impossible. Here, lemme take a look." Ren, who was sitting next to Mia, gently put his hand on her forehead.

"Let's see..." He put his other hand on his own forehead, thoughtfully tilting his head to the side. Then, he cupped Mia's face with both hands and lightly bumped their foreheads together.

"Gah!"

"Well, you don't have a fever. That's good news," he said softly, his breath fanning over her face.

A furious blush crept up her cheeks at that, her mouth opening and closing like a fish gasping for air. Her heart beat hard in her chest like a drum; for a moment, she felt mortified, fearing Ren would hear it. He pulled his head away, and took up his chopsticks, mirroring Mia.

"What's wrong?" he asked, his head inquisitively cocked to the side.

"N-Nothing!"

"Yeah? Well, even though you don't seem to have a fever, you should probably take it easy for a while. If you catch a cold, you can forget your plans for world domination."

"Y-Yeah. Th-That's true," Mia nodded feebly as Subaru took the lid off the pot.

Steam wafted up, and a delicious smell carried through the room. ...Why was she feeling off recently? Until now, her heart only sped up when Ren hugged her or when he was flirting with her as a part of his efforts to rile her up.

Recently, however, something seemed to have changed. Having him sit next to her was already enough to get her heart pounding. Whenever he ate something, she couldn't help but stare at him, caught in the moment. Even his

thoughtless gestures and accidental touches made her face flush red. She would catch herself thinking how cool he looked smoking one of his cigarettes or feel her heart fluttering at the possibility that him bumping their foreheads together just now might've grown into a kiss...

“Argh!”

“Wh-What’s wrong, Mia?”

“Nothing, you fool! Dimwit! This is all your fault!”

“Hey, if you keep insulting me with no rhyme or reason I might just get angry...”

Mia cowered, drowning in anguish at an unnamed feeling clawing at her from the inside, surrounded by Subaru, who rubbed her back with confusion on his face, and Ren, who furrowed his brows at the unexpected abuse the girl had showered on him out of the blue.

What is happening to me? For some reason, she felt too embarrassed to voice this question pounding in her head. Mia’s heart seemed lost, as if trapped in a maze it didn’t know how to escape.

She regained her composure, and all three of them started digging into the steaming pot. She had never eaten hotpot before coming to Subaru’s place for dinner, but she couldn’t get enough of the variety of ingredients and tastes and of the way it warmed her body from the inside.

Today, they had tofu hotpot. This was a fun one because they were making fresh tofu skin themselves. First, they boiled soymilk, then using their chopsticks to remove the skin that formed on top they dipped it into sauce lightly fragrant with yuzu before eating it. The sauce perfectly complemented the light sweetness of gloopy soymilk melting in her mouth.

They enjoyed the tofu skin for a while, Ren laughing that it made him crave hot sake. Then Subaru, having had his fill, asked permission from his two guests before adding some meat and vegetables in.

“Just wait until we finish, tofu hotpot can be full of surprises,” Subaru said mysteriously with a hint of amusement in his voice.

Ren and Mia gorged themselves on boiled meat and vegetables, excitedly wondering what it was Subaru was hinting at.

Hotpot was such an amazing dish. Mia disliked bitter vegetables like crown daisies, but somehow putting it in a hotpot made them delicious, making it possible to relish even napa cabbage.

The show playing on TV in the background kept the mood going as they picked at the pot. After a while, Subaru stirred some clear liquid into the broth that had been plucked clear of meat and vegetables.

“What is that?”

“It’s bitter.”

“Bitter?” Mia cocked her head questioningly, to which Subaru grinned.

“Just wait and see.” He gingerly stirred the pot, and covered it with a lid. After some time had passed, Subaru removed the lid, showing Mia the pot’s contents. “Look, we made tofu!”

He gently scooped some of it out with a ladle, revealing a solid glob. Definitely tofu.

“Ohh, so that’s how tofu is made.”

As she was staring at it with wonderment in her eyes, Ren chuckled at her and scooped some of the tofu out for himself with a noodle spoon, promptly eating the piece he fished out.

“Yeah, isn’t it nice how you can still taste the broth in it? And once we’re done making tofu, we can use the leftovers to make rice porridge, and we’ll have another completely different dish.”

Her eyes wide in awe, Mia tasted some of the tofu Subaru had prepared from the noodle spoon too.

It was different from the regular tofu she ate so often; remarkably soft to the point that it was melting in her mouth. It felt like the fresh tofu skin they had eaten at the start of the meal, only rolled into a small lump.

It would probably still retain this delicious creaminess even when made into porridge, Mia thought dreamily, already imagining what the final dish they

could make from the same broth would taste like.

“By the way, Misaki said he wants to take us out for a meal sometime soon.”

“Really? Why would he?” Ren’s eyes snapped wide in surprise at Subaru, who had already started cooking the rice porridge.

“Must be his thanks for your help in Kyoto,” Subaru gave a brief reply while adding some beaten eggs to the pot.

“Kyoto... Ah, that thing with Sayoko.”

“Apparently. It seems that he was busy with work or something before, but now that things have settled down a little, he wants to give us a proper thanks, or so he says. Of course, this would include you as well, Mia.”

“All right,” she flushed a pretty pink under Subaru’s kindly gaze and nodded.

“Sometime during spring next year, Misaki will probably be going to Kyoto to pay Sayoko’s family a proper visit. He wanted me to ask you if you’d like to tag along and do some sightseeing.”

“Oh, right, Sayoko did invite me to visit her in Kyoto again. Hm, I shall think about it,” she nodded, as Subaru’s eyes crinkled at the corners while he poured the now-ready rice porridge into her bowl.

“You should do that,” he said, handing her the full bowl.

The three of them feasted on the soup.

In the end, they agreed that Mia would wait for the other members to let her know the place and time of their group outing, since they had to work it around everyone’s schedule.

A week passed with little happening except for the normal day-to-day activities. In a conference room at the police station, Ren stretched his mouth wide open in a huge yawn. All of the Crow Rangers, Misaki, Subaru, Shou and Aya, sat inside, each of them trying to kill time in their own way.

“Man, Chief’s late...”

“He’ll probably come once he’s back from smoking who-knows-where again.”

“Ugh, he’s the worst. Doesn’t he know there are people waiting on him? And we’re supposedly already off the clock, too!”

Recently, all the rooms inside the police station had been marked as nonsmoking, so the chief, whose love for tobacco was well-documented, was always loitering about looking for someplace to light one up. All of the Rangers were of the same opinion, namely, that a man like that was probably unfit to be their boss—or anyone’s boss for that matter. Since it had become very difficult to smoke inside the station, he resorted to doing it outside. Though they would’ve really appreciated if he deigned to do his job every once in a while too.

All the members were talking animatedly to each other, except for Subaru, who was researching something on his smartphone instead of participating in the conversation.

“Subaru, what’ve you been looking up so zealously these last few minutes, huh?”

“Oh, I was just wondering if there’s some food that’s good for curing a cold. If I make lots of vegetable soup with ginger and give the whole pot to her...would she eat it in the morning?”

“This ‘she’ being Mia?”

Subaru confirmed Misaki’s guess with a nod. Over the past few days, Mia had developed a cold; there was no mistaking it this time around. She didn’t seem to have a fever, but her face was slightly flushed and her voice raspy. As the days went on, Subaru, having long since taken on the role of her older brother, became worried. He wanted her to recover before her flu became aggravated and developed into a serious concern.

Normally, he only cooked her dinner, but lately he wanted her to have a nutritious breakfast as well. He had been putting in an admirable amount of hard work toward her health. He was probably quite serious about counting Mia among his family members now.

A few moments later, the door clicked open. In came a man with his trousers held up by suspenders, a crooked necktie worn over a wrinkled shirt. This wretched excuse of a man was their boss, the commander of the Crow Rangers.

“Oh, you’re all already here. My bad,” their boss apologized halfheartedly and walked over to stand in front of the window. He then craned his neck to look back and surveyed the team members behind him over his shoulder.

“Well, it’s been a while since we met up face to face like this. There’s something I want to talk to you about today, but before we go into that, there’s something I’d like to confirm first. How’s the Supreme Ruler of Evil been behaving lately?”

Was it a habit of the chief’s to cut straight to the chase without any lead up? Come to think of it, when he came up with the terrible-sounding, stupid name “Crow Rangers”, he had brought it up in a similarly abrupt manner.

Those memories playing through his mind, Misaki, who had been appointed the Rangers’ leader, answered in his capacity as the representative of the group, “Her recent movements, huh...? Well, I heard she hurt a few delinquents who were lighting up firecrackers in the parking lot of a supermarket yesterday.”

“Ah, those guys. They were so noisy! No wonder she woke up with all that cracking and banging in the middle of the night.”

“Right, right! She came out wearing her pajamas with a scarf and a cape, her hair sticking out in all directions. She was so cute, right?”

“The cutest! Remember her nightgown? Surprisingly girly, huh? You know, with all those frills and ribbons.”

Whenever the girl used magic, Ren and the others would rush to her, even if it happened to be the dead of night. Afterwards they’d usually mess about a bit, or “do battle” as Mia would put it. Then they’d make up some excuse and send Mia back home. This was what the Crow Rangers normally did, but the confrontation this time took place so late at night, Mia had been way too sleepy to go through the usual motions. Leaving the delinquents to Misaki and the rest of the team, Mia had Ren escort her home.

“Other than that, let’s see... On Monday two weeks ago she caught a vendor who was dumping garbage illegally in the mountain forest.”

“Well, she’s pretty serious about sorting garbage and all that.”

“That mountain was an illegal dumping ground for the longest time now. But Mia used her magic on that disgusting mess to bring everything to the correct trash drop-off locations.”

“Yeah, that was a huge help!” All of the Rangers nodded in agreement.

Illegal dumping was one of the main problems the local police struggled to resolve. While she had been busy cleaning everything up, the Rangers promptly put in a request to erect a fence or something around the area to prevent further incidents from occurring.

Having listened to their brief reports on Mia’s activity, the chief crossed his arms. “I’d like to ask one more thing,” he man began, “The way you’re telling me about her behavior, it seems like the current Supreme Ruler of Evil isn’t actively trying to fight you. Or am I missing something here?”

“I wouldn’t say that. But, frankly speaking, even though she can use magic, her combat abilities are negligible.”

They didn’t know how it was during their chief’s generation or even their distant predecessors’, not that they really cared to research the history of the Rangers and the various overlords of the past anyway. They didn’t even really care what Mia’s father had been like, but Mia’s combat skills were essentially nonexistent.

She probably had no prior fighting experience, so her solution to everything was magic. That meant that if they could just cover her mouth, they were able to render her completely powerless. For regular police officers such as Misaki and Aya who didn’t have too much confidence in their combat abilities, it was admittedly a very difficult feat to pull off, but the fighting prowess of Ren and the other two was considerable.

Furthermore, according to those three, the way Mia used her magic was dreadfully amateurish. If only she fought dirty, then no matter how much the three of them improved their combat skills or physical abilities, they would still have a hard time subduing her.

Mia only seemed to engage in head-on fights. She refused to resort to foul play or surprise attacks, she never started a fight without declaring her intentions, and she always prefaced her attacks with a loud, “Here I come!” It

was no wonder they could fend her off with ease when that was the only way she ever came for them.

Sometimes she'd open up a pitfall under Misaki's feet, but that was the extent of her sneak attacks. Incidentally, she had once tricked Ren in this manner, but he had devised a "special" punishment for her after that as a payback, and she hadn't tried it on him since.

"I see," the chief nodded in understanding after hearing their explanation. "Not only is she a terrible fighter, but she's playing fair and square to boot. ... Haha, she's just the way I imagined her to be."

"Chief, do you know Mia?" Subaru, who was just listening without saying anything thus far, asked with a great deal of surprise.

"Well, kind of," the chief laughed and scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Hmm, but the way she acts, combined with her personality... Plus, the fact your battles with her aren't even real fights...This must mean she doesn't know."

"...What do you mean by that?"

"Hm, or rather, she hasn't been told, would be the more correct way to put it. It seemed like he knew, so he must've kept her in the dark for some reason. ... No, he couldn't bring himself to tell her, that must've been it," the chief muttered the last part under his breath, seemingly speaking to himself rather than the team members who sat around him.

"Chief, I'm asking you one more time... What do you mean by 'she doesn't know'?" Ren inquired with unease, a sense of foreboding rising inside him like a tidal wave.

The chief's head snapped up at the question, eyeing the team members sitting around him. For a while, he stayed silent, his expression pained, but then, making his mind up, he opened his mouth and uttered, "The spell to take over the world."

As his words cut through the room, the space was filled with shocked silence, everybody in it at a loss for words.

SHE coughed, a soft dry sound escaping her lips. The cough turned white as soon as it left her mouth and disappeared into the dusk.

“It is positively freezing...” Mia mumbled, perched on a bench.

It was a small bench in front of the police station. Mia was waiting for everyone to finish work and come out. Today was the day Misaki was finally going to make good on his promise to treat the group to a meal. Having asked Subaru what time they clocked out in advance, Mia decided to wait. After school had ended, she changed out of her uniform, and after idling some time away in her room, she came to the police station to wait on the bench.

Sometimes she had difficulty believing her own actions. Before she knew it, she had gotten used to spending time with the Crow Rangers. And...there was a part of her that felt like she belonged with them. It felt nice, so she wanted to be with them. She had fun around them, and that made it so easy to nod along with their antics.

Whenever she went about her duties as the Supreme Ruler of Evil and dusted the floor with some small-fry who opposed her morals, the Crow Rangers always appeared for reasons beyond her. She had every intention of giving them a proper fight, but in the end, they always let her slip through their fingers and escape.

Somewhere deep inside, Mia knew she was no match for them, especially Subaru, Shou, and Ren. With her own petite stature, she stood no chance of winning against their bigger build and speed. Moreover, they fought her with terrifying efficiency stemming from prior experience battling her; she always found her mouth covered and her arms restrained within mere minutes.

She should have been more frustrated, but Mia was finding that it didn't bother her as much as it used to anymore. That didn't mean she had given up though...

She still wanted to realize the one true dream of all Supreme Rulers of Evil, which was, of course, world domination. However, Mia struggled to see a reason to fight the Crow Rangers. It wasn't as if they arrived to interfere with whatever it was she was doing. If anything, it seemed as if they appeared to check in on her. She'd fight them, naturally, but would unsurprisingly fail to get

the upper hand, and eventually be let off the hook. Some days, Ren even went through the trouble of walking her home.

“Am I doing something wrong?”

She had originally envisioned fierce clashes between herself and the Rangers, but from the very beginning their skirmishes turned out to be mild at best. If she continued down this road, could she ever truly take over the world? What was this “world domination” her family was aiming for anyway? Whenever she was alone, all kinds of thoughts would slip into her head, plaguing her. Mia was no deep thinker, so this resulted in a downwards spiral of doubt overtaking her mind, making her feel as if her brain could short-circuit at any minute.

She was wondering what was keeping the Rangers while she had her eyes trained on the police station, breath escaping her in small white clouds, when she suddenly noticed a man leaving the building through the back door.

“Huh? That man...” Mia stood up and walked towards him.

Alerted to her presence, he let out a small cry of recognition, “Mia Oonari, was it? It’s been a while!”

“Indeed it has. Please, let me express my gratitude again for all the help you provided me the last time we met!”

It was the same kind middle-aged man who had shared the Crow Rangers’ personal details with Mia. Like the last time, he wore a wrinkled shirt and a necktie skewed to the side. He had no jacket on despite the terrible weather, which slightly surprised her.

“How have you been? Your voice seems a bit off, are you getting sick?”

“I wonder... To be honest, I have never caught a cold before, so I am not entirely sure.”

“Now, now, we can’t have that, can we? One’s health is one’s most prized possession. If you stay out here in the cold, you’ll definitely come down with the flu. Are you waiting for someone?”

Mia nodded affirmatively while the man calmly squinted at her. “Hmm... I see. I take it you’re getting along swimmingly with Ren and the others?”

“Ugh! N-No, it’s nothing like that! I’m only here because I was promised food!”

When confronted like this, she felt an overwhelming urge to deny everything. As Mia frantically corrected him, the man laughed in a booming voice, “Ha-ha-ha! It’s cute how you get so defensive. Well, they’ll be coming out soon—they should be done for the day. You can wait inside the station if you’d like?”

“N-No! I-I am j-just fine r-right here, th-thank you,” Mia stammered out.

The man dubiously cocked his head to the side, and went back inside, throwing a quick, “See you later then,” over his shoulder. As she blankly followed his retreating back with her eyes, his phone suddenly rang in his pocket and he took it out. ...At that same moment, a piece of paper fluttered to the ground at his feet. The man didn’t seem to notice as he was already entering the building.

“You dropped something,” Mia called out to him automatically, and went to pick up the said piece of paper, but he was too absorbed in his phone call to hear her. “What do I do with this? Hm? A photograph?”

She flipped over the paper the man had dropped, discovering that it was a picture. At first glance, she had to do a double take in sheer shock, her eyes flying open, “Huh? Why...this...?”



Mia's head shot up, and she almost tumbled over her own feet running after the man into the police station.

The picture showed three people. One of them was most likely the man who dropped the picture. But the other two... One of them, a woman, had the face of Mia's mother who she remembered from a picture her father had shown her long ago. And then there was the last person, in whom she recognized beyond a shadow of a doubt as her father. Why were her parents in that picture? Did the man know them personally? Just who *was* he?

As Mia chased after the man, she saw him open the door to a conference room and step inside. She stretched her hand towards the doorknob with urgency, but then she suddenly took notice of the awfully familiar faces in the room, and her limbs froze.

The Crow Rangers! The whole team is here. Wh-Why? She opened the door just a fraction and peeked inside through the opening.

The man walked to the back of the room, whipped his head around and asked, "How's the Supreme Ruler of Evil been behaving lately?"

"...!"

Ren and Misaki repeatedly used the name "Mia" during their report. The man knew that Mia was the Supreme Ruler of Evil. Come to think of it, Mia remembered him asking her something about her magic once. She quietly bit her lip.

The conversation continued, no one aware of the fact that Mia was listening in the whole time. Then, Ren asked the man a question, and the man opened his mouth to utter a single phrase, 'The spell to take over the world'.

A spell to take over the world? What is that about? Does he perchance mean the great magical art of darkness that I was told to activate after I defeat the Champions of Justice?

Mia crouched before the door and listened to the conversation inside with bated breath.

REN asked the chief, “What is the ‘spell to take over the world’?”

“I believe it’s commonly called the great magical art of darkness. I only learned of it yesterday myself. There were very few sources I could dig up on the subject... Opinion on this matter is divided among the top brass too, so no one would give me the whole story. Instead, I had to lock myself up in the archives for a while,” the chief complained, making a show of rolling his shoulders.

Aya put a finger to her lips as if having remembered something, “...Now that I think about it... Mia did mention something about completing world domination by activating the great magical art of darkness in the wake of our defeat at her hands. Is this what you’re talking about?”

“Yes. ...But that’s not entirely correct. Actually, she doesn’t even need to beat you. If Mia... If a sorcerer chooses to cast that spell, regardless of the circumstances, that alone will suffice for them to achieve world conquest.”

The Crow Rangers were dumbstruck. Simply casting the spell would be enough to conquer the world? Did that mean that if right now, wherever she was, Mia tried out that magic on a whim, she’d accomplish world domination just like that?

Shou raised his voice in alarm, “That doesn’t make sense! Why are we even needed then?”

“Well, obviously, to prevent the Supreme Ruler of Evil from perpetrating ‘evil deeds’, the gravest of which would be world conquest.”

“But you’ve just said that as soon as Mia activates the spell the world will get conquered? In any case, what does world domination even entail? Doesn’t it mean she’ll subjugate every single person in the entire world? ...That sounds like a vastly unrealistic scenario to me.”

No one could hope to be in complete control of *literally every single person in the entire world*. No matter what kind of miraculous power they had, anyone could see that was absolutely impossible, which was why Shou and the others never took Mia seriously whenever she spoke of “taking over the world”. They wrote it off as a case of a bunch of lunatic sorcerers striving for an absurd goal unattainable even after generations of attempts. For some crazy reason they

always failed. That was why they wanted to set Mia free; free from some moronic ideal, passed down through the generations in her family like some sort of heirloom, free from the nightmarish hold it had on her.

The chief quietly shook his head. “I didn’t know about it myself at the time. But now that I do, I think I understand him better. Every single time he lost and had to flee, he had a relieved look on his face. ...He must’ve rejoiced that he could avoid taking over the world for another day.”

In spite of the nonsmoking policy in the police station, the chief took out a cigarette with a practiced movement and put it between his lips. Nobody stopped him. They just silently urged the chief on to continue his story.

“What they call ‘world domination’... It doesn’t mean ruling over the entire world population. Rather, it’s complete control of the world itself. More precisely, it’s reshaping the world according to their ideals. ...That is the true nature of their ‘world domination’ plan.”

Silence enveloped the room at his words. What could they say, really? The story was too ludicrous to follow. Taking control of the world without taking control of mankind. Technically, that would indeed constitute “world conquest”. However...

“...It just doesn’t make any sense. World domination without bending mankind to one’s will? Humans are the most powerful living creatures on this entire planet. You can’t say you’ve taken over the world unless you’ve got mankind in your grasp,” Subaru reasoned, his arms crossed.

All of the Crow Rangers nodded in unison, agreeing with him. The chief lit up his cigarette, inhaled, and blew out some smoke, shifting his eyes to peer out the window. Outside, darkness had enveloped the city lit up by streetlights and the headlights of cars zipping back and forth.

“Mankind... That’s what you’d normally expect, right? But that’s not how *they* saw it—the generations that lived way, way before Mia Oonari. How many generations ago would it have been? ...That’s something I don’t know, but I do know that they were quite mad and insanely powerful. In their deranged minds, their yearning to fulfill this idiotic ideal was born. That was the beginning of it all.”

The story that the chief told them sounded much like one of those fairytales beginning with a, “Once upon a time, in a land, far, far away...”

It all began a long, long time ago with Mia’s ancestors who had been sorcerers, just like her. Those sorcerers had lamented the state of the world they lived in. Humans, in their eyes, were such foolish creatures. They fought with each other, at times whole countries clashing in bloody conflict, leaving scars upon the face of the earth.

In order to advance their selfish interests, they destroyed this blue planet, violating the world itself. They repeated their deplorable behavior over and over again with arrogant abandon, as if they were kings ruling over the earth. If this were to continue, one day, this world would be destroyed by those parasites called “humans”, at least this was what the sorcerers believed.

That was the reason for its creation—the spell that could restore the world to its original form. This implied neither masking the consequences of human activity, nor was it a way to “reset” it. It truly meant reshaping the world itself by means of magic. Creating a world that was optimal for the planet’s continued survival and prosperity.

Ages passed by, history faded back into myth, but they didn’t let the bloodline go extinct nor lose sight of their goal. Generation after generation of sorcerers worked towards their ideal, weaving the spell together thread by thread. When it was completed, they called it, “the great magical art of darkness”.

“This spell is already in place all over the world. It seems like in the olden days, there used to be more than one sorcerer per a generation. Branches of the family were scattered across the planet. The same is true of the Rangers, at least before the different bases were destroyed. The Rangers and sorcerers wiped each other out. After all the conflict, little by little, the sorcerers used magic to give form to their images and ideals even while fighting the Rangers. And now, that monumental effort seems to be entering its final stage.”

“...Final stage?” That didn’t help the bad premonition Ren had. His face darkened even beyond his usual menacing scowl, morphing into the scariest expression anyone had ever seen on him yet.

The chief took a lighter out of his pocket, a small flame appearing at its top

with the scraping of the flint. He positioned it at the end of his cigarette, lighting it up, the grainy sound of burning paper uncommonly loud due to the deathly silence in the room.

“You could say there’s only one switch left to flick. They say it was Mia’s great-grandfather who ushered this stage in. That was also when the war between the Champions of Justice and the Supreme Rulers of Evil came to an end with both sides utterly depleted in manpower, bases of operation, and resources. It means the fight we are fighting now is the second generation after the war ended.”

In the beginning, the Champions of Justice had been one of the many servants created by the evil organization to serve as a vanguard for them. Supposedly it was some of the very original sorcerers who crafted the armor and facilities the Rangers used to eventually fight them.

When the great magical art of darkness that could reshape the world was completed, they realized how disastrous the atrocity they themselves were about to commit would be. They were ordinary people who attended to the sorcerers, their henchmen. They turned against the sorcerers, taking the very powers they had been granted to use against their prior masters. Soon afterwards they aligned themselves with the governments all over the world and were integrated into them as a special organizational body that served in nearly every major country ranging from ancient China to the Aztec nations of old. That was the truth of the war between the Champions of Justice and the Supreme Rulers of Evil.

“That’s why long ago, there were so many of them spread all over the world. Up until her grandfather’s generation there were so many sorcerers and their servants that you could truly call them more of a country in their own right, rather than just an organization. However, in this day and age almost their entire organization has kicked the bucket, with barely any people to speak of during Mia’s father’s generation.”

And now that Mia’s time had come, all that was left of Gealach was its leader.

“Anyway, during her grandfather’s generation they still had some of their numbers. That’s when the sorcerers tried to activate ‘the spell to take over the

world', having their organization's members use gas explosions, mass kidnappings and such as decoys. However, the Champions of Justice were still numerous as well, and still had access to a number of facilities and resources. The sorcerers were under constant scrutiny and thwarted at nearly every turn.

"But, during my generation the number of people in the team suddenly dropped. He must have felt the danger looming. He feared that if the trend continued, there would be no one left to stop his actions, to prevent him from performing the great magical art of darkness. That's why he gave it to me, that tracking device Ren is now carrying."

Ren involuntarily glanced at his smartphone. The transmitter that was embedded in Mia's body. Her father had one implanted in himself and in his daughter, all because he wanted to make sure someone could stop them. How paradoxical was that?

Mia's father had probably been imprinted with the sorcerers' ideals from a young age. Being groomed for his role as the next head of the sorcerers, he must've undergone a hellish training that was more thorough and brutal than anything that Mia might have experienced. Being the Supreme Ruler of Evil had been his very life, so quitting that job must've meant the same as dying.

Whatever it had been that changed him, Mia's father had wanted someone to put a stop to what he had been trained to do. But his own power had been insufficient to overpower the intent he had imprinted in his mind. He entrusted that task and the tracking device with it to the man before them, to the chief, silently wishing that he would put the device to good use and stop him when needed.

"And, what does this great magical art of darkness that made Mia's father come to you and ask you to stop him do? What happens when the world is reshaped?" Misaki finally breached the main question on everyone's mind.

They needed to hear the answer in order to grasp the complete picture. After all, what could world domination mean to a deranged sorcerer?

The chief quietly breathed out some smoke. "A deep blue sea, beautiful, lush vegetation, fish and animals rejoicing in their existence, each contributing to the energy flow of the food chain. Truly a utopia. However, in this world, there

would be no humans. There's no need for humans in a beautiful blue world. That's the kind of world they pictured in their mind, and the intent that they poured into their words. They'd be creators of a new world, a title fit for people trying to bring about world conquest. Heh, sounds stupid, right? There'd be no more sins or evil though, because there'd be no more people to commit them."

Ren and the others were stupefied at the sheer absurdity of what taking over the world entailed.

"Ahaha, what do you mean, people would disappear...? That's just stupid, there's no way they could do that," Aya started laughing inadvertently, an edge of hysteria to her tone, putting her hand on her forehead in disbelief.

However, the chief looked more serious than ever, and he nodded, affirming once more that the ideal the sorcerers were aspiring for was indeed just that.

"...It seems quite likely that they can pull it off too. Well, no one's actually tried it yet, so I can't say for certain. ...This does mean that they have put forth every effort to make their long-cherished dream possible. Or, at least that's how the story goes in the documents left behind for us by the people who belonged to the evil organization in ages past, so it might be nothing more than their hypothesis. But I think both you and I have seen it, haven't we? 'Things that should not be possible'."

Magic. As if in a fairytale, whenever Mia spoke the magic words, the arcane manifested itself right before their very eyes. The thing they had scoffed at, thinking it impossible, turned out to be very real; Mia only had to work the details of an image in her head, and she could conjure up a breathtaking rain of light, a beautiful field of flowers, or sparkling jewels... There was no denying that what they had deemed unreal did in fact exist. After all, they had all witnessed the arcane with their own eyes, on more than one occasion. Things that no one could possibly do, if Mia just spoke the words...

"...You said that we're in the final stages now, and mentioned a 'switch'. Does this mean that if Mia were to activate the great magical art of darkness, it would serve as that 'switch'?"

"Yeah, that's pretty much it. She's probably been taught magic ever since she was just a little girl. She must've been trained to produce the right image over

and over again, so she could easily picture the ideal world imagined by the generations of sorcerers before her. All that is left is to put that ideal world into words with her heart and soul...and she would achieve world domination.”

Ren frowned deeply, touching his hand to his chin. Magic that had been scattered all over the world by sorcerers throughout the generations. How exactly would it converge and in what manner would it alter the world? He couldn't comprehend a thing about the way it would work. The only thing he understood was that the moment Mia used that specific magic, the world would be reshaped, as if painted over, and humanity may very well cease to exist. Himself, his family, his friends... What about Mia?

“What's gonna happen to Mia? When she uses her magic—what's gonna happen to her?”

“I'm afraid I don't know that much. She will either end up as the only person left on Earth, like a god, or she might run out of magical power and die. The latter option is almost poetic—she'd be committing suicide together with all of mankind for the good of the world.”

In the former scenario Mia would end up all alone, in the latter she would perish.

“What the heck! Her ancestors were the worst kind of scum! Both options are absolutely terrible! I'm not gonna allow her to die, that's a given, but even if she were to survive, ending up all alone is just... Do you have any idea how lonely she is? How much she craves human contact? I couldn't bear that!” Ren shot up, his chair almost toppling over, and slammed his fist down on the table in a fit of anger he didn't know where to direct.

Bam! A crack appeared in the poor, rickety piece of furniture designed for meetings.

“...Say, Ren, what does, ‘she might run out of magical power and die’ mean? If Mia's uses up all her powers, she'll die?”

Aya's words startled Ren. His face twisting up in anguish, he turned his eyes away from the woman and gave a tiny nod. “Yeah... I just couldn't bring myself to say it. Sorry. If Mia's powers are depleted, she dies. Apparently that's how her old man went.”

Color drained from his teammates' faces upon hearing Ren's words. So that was why Ren had been worrying so much whenever Mia used magic or looked tired. Misaki, who had seen Mia utterly exhausted from using magic, chewed his lip. A heavy silence fell over the conference room, soon ripped apart by Ren's smartphone suddenly making an urgent beeping sound.

"What's going on?"

"It's Mia's tracking device. ...She's using magic."

When they saw her location on the map, she seemed to be midflight. The trajectory began at the police station, moving towards the outskirts of the city.

"What is she doing flying out of town? I told her specifically that Misaki's taking us out today, so she was supposed to wait for us in front of the station!"

"Oh, I saw her outside before coming here," the chief said, looking down at Ren's smartphone.

Suddenly, Subaru turned his face towards the entrance of the conference room. Then he walked over to the door.

"Subaru?"

"The door, it's open. ...Hm? A picture?"

Subaru seemed to notice something lying on the ground and crouched down to pick it up. He then placed it on the conference table.

"A photograph? Why is it here? ...Hey, wait a second, isn't this Mia's father? He looks very young here, though," Shou said, stealing a glance at the picture.

Hearing his words, the chief blanched all of a sudden. He rushed forward and grabbed the picture.

"Wha—but how? This picture's supposed to be in my pocket. Could it have fallen out when I answered my phone?" he stammered out, his face rapidly draining of color. His hand holding the photograph trembled, and with the other hand he covered his face in mortification. "Mia... She might have seen this."

"Huh? If this picture was left lying here, it means that Mia must've been where you found it until a few minutes ago, right?"

Everyone froze at Aya's words. If Mia had been outside their door the entire time, that would mean she had overheard their whole conversation.

"...CHIE-E-E-E-EF! You're the most thoughtless boss ever! Incompetent idiot! Don't leave something that important in the same pocket as your phone! What are you, some teenage ditz?! You can't go 'oh, I'm so clumsy, he-he' at your age and expect everyone to laugh and forgive you! Ugh, you make my skin crawl!"

"Oh man, I really did it this time, didn't I?! I'm sorry, okay? I was feeling a bit blue when I went outside for a smoke, so I took a look at the picture! Then I stuck it in my pocket without thinking and... Argh! Now's not the time to be talking about that! If she overheard our conversation, she must feel shaken to the core right now, and what if..."

What if, feeling lost and confused, Mia ended up trying to cast the great magical art of darkness?

"This is **NOT** good!" Ren surged from his seat and sprinted out of the conference room.

The other members ran out after him. They were probably going to hop in a car to try and chase Mia down before it was too late.

Only the chief remained in the room now. He glanced again at the old photograph which was starting to fray at the edges. His best friend, a woman he had harbored an unrequited crush on, and himself.

He let out a heavy sigh betraying his old age, and chewed on the tiny filter in his mouth, all that was left of his cigarette.

Chapter 11: Mia's World

HOW old was she in her earliest memories? She was probably too small to even know her own age; it was since then that Mia had learned one kind of magic, and one kind of magic only. Other forms of magic were merely derivative: ice projectiles, blades of wind, opening up holes in the ground, flying through the air—all of them. Even creating her own original spells. All her training served the sole purpose of perfecting the image of just one spell—the quintessential spell known as the Great Magical Art of Darkness “Miangaia”.

This magic, also known as “God’s Hope”, had been passed down from generation to generation since ancient times, from parent to child. Mia had learned it from her father, who had learned it from her grandfather, who had learned it from her great-grandfather.

What Mia experienced after training for and learning about the great magical art of darkness every single day was *history*. She was studying natural history; just as any other person had to sit through history during social studies in elementary school, so too did Mia learn her family’s history.

How did this blue planet come to be? The sky was made, the sea was made, the earth was made, and so, life was born.

There was no need for a scientific explanation or a profound understanding of the processes. The important thing was to picture that primeval world.

Life eventually turned into plants, into fish, and into animals, each contributing to the flow of energy in the food chain as they kept going through the circle of life and death on the lush, green earth and in the beautiful azure sea. A beautiful world. That was the image that lay at the heart of the great magical art of darkness Mia had been taught since she was but a child.

Without thinking, she meticulously followed her father’s instructions, dutifully picturing that world inside her head. She imagined scenery: the sky changing in tune with the seasons and weather, a bright-blue sea hiding mammals within its

depths, which she pictured with some help from the encyclopedia illustrations. After creating the sea, next was the land with its flora, and then fauna: animals, insects, birds. An abundance of life. One by one, she purposefully conjured up a highly detailed image of each in her head. Over the period of many long years, she shaped the world in her mind.

However, one thing conspicuously absent from that image was humanity. She'd never questioned it or thought it was strange. ...Why was that? Was it because she had naively expected people would exist there as a matter of course? Was it because she had been instructed in a way that didn't allow for doubts or questions, this one included? She didn't know anymore. Because the father who had been guiding her was no longer with her.

MIA flew aimlessly through the air, and she recognized the place she decided to alight on a whim as a riverbank. Now that she thought about it, this was where she had met Ren and the rest of the Rangers for the very first time. Spring had been in full swing. According to the traditional Japanese calendar, it was the very beginning of early summer. And now it was winter, and the riverbank was cold, a freezing wind blowing in from the river. She exhaled slowly and sure enough, her breath formed a white mist.

"I have to do it," Mia murmured and looked up at the sky.

The winter's night sky was captivating. Mia wasn't particularly fond of this season, but she did like the sky it produced. The stars looked clearer and brighter than during summer.

She thought of something Father had once said about how, "If you perform the great magical art of darkness, the stars in the sky will become even more beautiful." That's why she had felt such pure joy at the prospect. How wonderful it would be if the things she found beautiful became even prettier! That was why she had been looking forward to defeating the Champions of Justice, their defeat enabling her to cement world domination through the final spell—it felt like a reward for her efforts. It would have been like a gun salute, celebrating her victory. The thought of humanity disappearing when she cast the spell to reshape the world hadn't even crossed her mind.

...A world of sparkling blue and verdant green. In her naiveté, she had imagined many people there too, rejoicing in its beauty. It was easy to see that wouldn't be the case, if only she had given it more than a perfunctory thought. She remembered how Ren and the others affectionately said she "lacked smarts", and she couldn't help but laugh self-deprecatingly. Indeed, she lacked the smarts to think things through and see the consequences her actions would beget.

"I have to do it..."

She fished her cape out from her backpack and tied the cord in a bow around her neck. Then she took out her wand and gently raised it.

"For I am the Supreme Ruler of Evil. For it is I who now stands at the head of the evil organization known as Gealach."

Mia softly closed her eyes and pictured the image in her head. She could recall it effortlessly; after all, it was the only thing she had been training to do all the years of her life. Envisioning the image of the world that her father had taught her came as easy to her as breathing.

"This is my will that I have inherited from you, Father. To fulfill our hearts' desire, I have endlessly studied and trained for this one spell. For taking over the world is the very reason I was born," Mia exhaled hotly, her voice a bit breathless.

This would be the first time she would use this magic. Was she exhilarated or was she nervous? Was she, perhaps, afraid?

"Right, world domination is our long-standing ambition. Having the world in the palm of my hand is what I wish for. S-So, whether or not there will be any humans inhabiting it, if that is what my ancestors wanted, then I...I have to do it!"

Utter the words...with clarity and intent.

"A blue world—"

"Don't jump the gun, you dummy!"

Something hit her on the forehead with a loud thunk. The carefully crafted

image in her head instantly dispersed, and Mia cowered right where she stood, covering the forming bruise.

“O-Ouch!”

Something had hit her on the head. Wondering what it was, she looked down and discovered that it had been a smartphone. ...A familiar one. It was Ren’s phone!

Mia scrambled to her feet and scanned her surroundings. She noticed Misaki’s car at the end of the road by the riverbank, the Crow Rangers scattering out of its doors and rushing towards her. Ren in particular ran exceptionally fast, and it seemed as if he would close in on Mia’s position in mere moments. The girl urgently brandished her wand.

Stay back, stay back, stay back—

“Do not come any closer to me!”

Her cry involuntarily turned into a spell, the magic activating of its own accord. It had been a jumbled mess of an image, but the force with which she had invoked it made it manifest in a very concrete form. A colossal wall, made of translucent stone and circular in its shape, now protectively surrounded her at its center. Ren, the fastest of them all, managed to barrel his way inside its perimeter, while the rest of the Rangers, slower on their feet, had their way forward cut off by its tall smooth expanse.

“Ren! Mia!”

Aya started hitting the wall of stone. Next to her, Subaru kept vehemently slamming his fists into it. However, the clear stone wasn’t quite as responsive to such treatment as ice had been; not a single crack appeared in its surface.

“Wh-What is this? ...Is this some kind of precious stone?”

“Feels like crystal. This must’ve been what came to mind when she had to conjure up an image of something tough on the spot,” Misaki speculated, standing near Shou who was probingly tapping on the stone.

Mia had mentioned before that materializing something universally regarded as valuable required spending a great deal of magical power. She must’ve

forgotten about this fact when she had fired off this spell in desperation. As was to be expected, Mia's shoulders were heaving up and down. That was most likely due to how much this spell had taken out of her. If she exhausted her reserve of magical energy...

"...Ren. Do something about it, promise me!" Aya forcefully struck the crystal wall, gazing at Ren's back imploringly.

THE space within the confines of the crystal wall looked very much like something out of a dream. Mia was out of breath. She had formed so many large pieces of crystal and melded them together. Crystal was a mineral that was recognized as a precious mining resource all over the world. That must be why she felt this worn out.

Even breathless, Mia squeezed the wand with steely determination and stared Ren squarely in the eye. Her eyes conveyed a whole range of emotions, flitting one after the other: confusion, fear, resolve.

When the pebbles crunched under Ren's foot, signaling his approach, a small tremor shook the girl's shoulders and she flinched.

"Cool your head, Mia. You heard the chief, right?" Ren asked in as restrained a tone he could muster under the circumstances to soothe her.

Mia slightly nodded, glaring Ren down all the while.

"The spell to take over the world and the effect it creates—it's not your fault you didn't know about that stuff. And don't go blaming yourself for lacking the brains to figure that out on your own, either. Your old man just never told you. No... He couldn't tell you."

Even though he taught his daughter such dangerous magic, he chose to omit those vital pieces of information. It was no different from teaching a bomb expert how to work with said bomb, but never explaining what the detonation switch did. It had been her father's weakness that had sealed his lips shut, for this was a testament to how much his original point of view as a "sorcerer above the constraints of human morals" had shifted to that of just an "ordinary man".

Ren didn't know what had sparked the change in Mia's father. However, what was clear was that the man had loved Mia. He had experienced love, an emotion that was useless to a true Supreme Ruler of Evil.

Because he had known love, he couldn't bring himself to speak about what the effect of the spell to take over the world would be. ...For he had been in love with an ordinary human. He was no evil sorcerer, rather, he was a failure as a sorcerer. Who could this good-for-nothing raise if not a successor that was equally unfit?

He had showered his darling daughter with affection, and so she tasted loneliness and alienation after he had died, but also learned what it was to love and be loved by someone. This, in turn, morphed into roots of righteousness in her soul, and thus the girl had become the polar opposite of evil; she overflowed with virtue ...That was who Mia truly was—a lonely, misunderstood Champion of Justice.

"Mia, come on, take the time and think about this. You don't have to rush. I'm not asking you to give me an answer right now, but talk to me. Your thoughts, your worries, anything that comes into your head. Let's think about this properly and reach a decision. If you take the time, then, surely..." Ren reasoned with her, talking in a slow, soothing manner.

Mia couldn't bear it. Shaking her head vehemently, she poured all her confusion and anger into her voice and screamed, "And how will 'taking my time' make this any better, pray tell?! What are you going to do to help me if I decide that I do not want to go through with this, huh? This is all I have! This is my will, the will of my father, my grandfather, my entire lineage! I do not want to think. I do not want to agonize over this anymore. For this is something I *have* to do!"

Convictions instilled in her concerning her destiny and blood ties had Mia in their clutches, coiled tightly around her heart in a cunning binding spell.

Ren scowled, painfully aware of this fact, feeling his temper flare up, he shouted, "You *have* to do this?! The will of your entire lineage? What the hell does that matter? What about you? What ran through your mind when you learned what would happen if you activated the great magical art of darkness?"

“Wh-What r-ran through my mind?”

“Yeah! The world will be restored to its original splendor and mankind will cease to be. When you learned that, did you think that you’re up for the task to become a tyrant prepared to commit genocide against an entire species, or did you think you’d rather not do it? Which one is it?”

Did she want to activate the spell, or did she not? ...That had been clear from the very beginning.

The answer’s obvious, but it’s... Mia unconsciously bit into her lip. She couldn’t accept this. The teachings her father had instilled in her, her pride as the Supreme Ruler of Evil, the entirety of her life principles up until now, all of them worked together in synergy to suppress Mia’s own will.

That was why she didn’t want to think. That was why she didn’t want to worry. Because if she started thinking, the answer would end up slipping from her lips. Because she knew it would mean she would lose the resolve to wave her wand.

“...I have to...do it. I have been trained for this moment ever since I was a little girl. World domination is our cherished ambition, a destiny I must fulfill,” Mia rasped out, her throat constricting, each breath more difficult than the last.

Tears she valiantly tried to hold back with all her might spilled, rolling slowly down her cheeks. Ren’s frown deepened, his face darkening into a terribly somber expression. However, after a short while, he cast his eyes down as if he had given up on something.

“I see...” he muttered, “So that’s your desire?”

“Yes. That is my will. That is my choice. For I am the Supreme Ruler of Evil.”

This was the only way of life for Mia, the path that she had chosen for herself. Or that, at least, was what she was trying to convince herself of, proclaiming to be the villain while desperately trying to stamp down her stubborn emotions that threatened to burst out from under her control.

“...All right,” Ren affirmed softly, raising his face again to take a good, firm look at Mia’s face.

She in turn stared right back at him with wide, startled eyes. Despite having essentially just said he understood her choice, the man's foot slid forward a step. Mia stumbled back and readied her wand.

"Wh-What is it?! Are you going to fight me?"

"Why would I? I told you, I get it. I won't do a thing. I'm just moving closer to you."

"Moving closer?! S-Stay back! I am going to perform the Great Magical Art of Darkness 'Miangaia' now!"

"Mee-ahn-guy-ah? Your naming sense is as awful as ever, I see. Is this a hereditary trait passed down in your family? I feel sorta sorry for your clan," Ren taunted, drawing nearer all the while.

Mia shrunk back, making a few quick steps backwards, and after having put some distance between them, raised her wand.

"I told you to stay back! **O sky of ice, turn into arrows and fall down!**"

The very instant she spoke the words, imbuing them with intent, a multitude of slender spears made of ice rained down right before Ren's nose, burrowing into the ground and blocking his path.

It looked like he was shaking his foot when the ice cracked after he kicked it aside. Without breaking his pace, he leapt lightly over the icicles and continued his relentless approach.

"Why do you keep on coming? Did you not say you were all right with my choice? Just stay put and watch me activate the spell!"

"Huh? I said I understood, that's true. But when did I ever say I'd take orders from you? ...I'll go wherever I please. If you don't like it, try and stop me if you can!" Ren scoffed, the crunch of gravel on his shoes growing louder as he drew nearer and nearer to where Mia stood.

How...? Why do I feel so scared? Stay away. Don't come closer. I don't want you here. You are only going to get in my way. If I get a whiff of your scent, if I feel the touch of your hand, it will ruin everything.

Mia's mind went blank. The only two things on her mind were how she had to

complete her mission no matter what, and how that meant never seeing Ren again.

Making the most of the cramped space inside the crystal wall towering around her, Mia ran along its perimeter, calling forth a veritable downpour of magic, one spell after another. Any and every form of magic she could conceive. She sent hailstones flying everywhere, created gaping holes in the ground, hurled blades of wind. However, they were all spells that Ren had seen many times before, so he dealt with them in a speedy and efficient manner, never even breaking a sweat.

Seeing the futility of her efforts, Mia decided to take a different approach, twirled her wand around, and ascended into the air. Ren dashed forward suddenly, forcefully grabbed on to her cloak and pulled with all his might until he dragged her out of the air and down to the ground. She crashed into the gravel helplessly and looked back over her shoulder with a start. There, she saw Ren, looking down on her with uncharacteristically cold eyes.

“Oh, I ain’t letting you go!” he growled, his large hand reaching out towards Mia’s cheek.

She slammed her eyes shut, shook her wand and chanted, despite being right next to Ren, **“Dance, o wind!”**

As soon as she uttered the words, a strong air current picked up, roaring to life between Mia and Ren. The wind swelled up like a typhoon, tearing Mia and Ren apart and blowing them away in opposite directions. Ren, being propelled backwards by a gust of wind, twisted his body so he could brace his foot against the crystal wall, stepping down from it and landing on the ground nimbly. Mia, however, slammed gracelessly into the slab of crystal with her back, the force of the hit knocking the wind out of her. She slid down the wall awkwardly, landing in a heap. She was gasping for air, as if she had just run a marathon at full speed.

Her head was spinning and her back hurt. *Quick, I have to cast the next spell!* Mia thought, but her mouth could only open in shaky, oxygen-starved inhales. Why did every little action feel so taxing all of a sudden? Had she really used that much magic? She shook her head in confusion and grasped her wand

tightly, as if holding on to a lifeline. This wand was an important treasure she had received from her father.

“Sorceresses use this kind of wand. Come on, give it a twirl. See how the bit with the star lights up? Pretty, right?”

When she was little, her heart had filled with excitement over the wand that lit up when she waved it around. Nowadays, the part that used to light up was broken, and even replacing the batteries didn’t make it shine again, but Mia still couldn’t cast spells properly without it.

Her father may have been a man full of contradictions. He may have been suffering to an extent she may very well never fully grasp. But her father had always been kind to her. He had been strict during their lessons—about magic, about his way of life, but he had also been kind to her and had given her plenty of love. Mia’s father was her everything.

“...Magic... Have to...use...magic...” Mia rasped, ragged breath like sand in her throat. She pulled what little fight she had left in her together and brought herself up to stand.

She gripped her wand so tight her knuckles turned white, raised her head and there—right in front of her was Ren.

“Re-Ren.”

Her body tensed involuntarily. When did he get so close to her? Ren stood silent. He was scowling, a usual and very familiar wrinkle in his brow; his upturned eyes making him look like more of a villain than she could ever hope to be. His hand stretched out towards her. Mia closed her eyes automatically, her shoulders trembling.

Was he going to cover her mouth so that she couldn’t use magic against him anymore, like he always did? But as the seconds went by, no hand curved over her lips. Instead, she felt enveloped in something soft and warm.

“...Huh?”

Ren was holding Mia in his embrace. Her eyes opened wide in surprise. He held her tight against his chest, his arms pulling her in ever stronger.

“I’m not gonna stop you, silly. I’m done with being a Champion of Justice. I quit. Instead I’ll be your minion, you’re hiring right? I have good references, I once worked for the good guys, you know?”

Mia was panting and out of breath, her mouth hanging open in a small “o” out of sheer shock. She couldn’t seem to close it. The only sound that passed through her lips was “huh”, which hung above her like a question mark rather than transform into an actual word.

“Go on, use it, the great magical art of darkness. If that’s what you wanna do, then so be it. I’m not gonna judge you for your choice. ...But, please, let me do this, at least,” Ren beseeched, his arms, holding her to him with almost crushing strength now. As if he never wanted to let go, not even for a moment. As if he wanted to carve the sensation of Mia’s form against himself.

“You know, I have no idea how it’ll feel to just disappear. I gotta say, I’m terrified. Going out in an instant, like a light, seems okay as far as the choices here go, but fading out slowly, bit by bit, now that sounds pretty nasty. But if I’ll feel you right next to me while I cease to be, well, what’s to come doesn’t seem so scary anymore.”

Even though his expression was so dark until just moments before, right now he looked calm, almost serene.

“If I am to be erased, I want to disappear feeling the girl I like by my side. I want to fade away feeling you with me until the very end... I’m sorry for being so selfish. Now, go on Mia, use the spell.” As if emphasizing his resolve, Ren hugged Mia all the more tightly. He seemed to have said his piece, content with his last words, so he stopped speaking.

Mia, wrapped in Ren’s arms, slowly raised her wand overhead. *I have to speak the words. I have to say them! This is our wish that has burned in our hearts for so long. My father, my grandfather, my great-grandfather, all of my ancestors... they lived their lives toiling away to perfect their craft, and then they perished, entrusting that dream to the next generation...*

She just couldn’t put a stop to this long chain of tradition in her own generation. She couldn’t trample on their hopes and dreams like that. For Mia, world domination was an aspiration she had to fulfill no matter what. Once

again, she brought up the image in her mind.

It was one of a beautiful blue world. The sky, its colors shifting and mingling endlessly. The azure sea so clear you could see all the way to its bottom. The land with its lush greenery. Fish swimming about leisurely, all kinds of animals being born, finding a mate, giving birth to the next generation, and meeting their end. Plants growing luxuriantly, blessing all the living things with their boon, then growing old and withering. And then the next seed sprouts.

Now that she had the abundant beauty of the ideal world pictured vividly in her head, it was time for the last step. She had to pour it all into words and speak them out loud. However, right at that moment, she caught a whiff of Ren's scent. The smell of his favorite brand of cigarettes mingling with the musky odor of a man's body.

She hadn't even noticed it happening, but somewhere along the way, she had begun to associate that smell with safety. She felt at ease whenever she smelled it. ...She had grown to love it. She had liked it so much, she would subconsciously start sniffing at Ren to get more of it.

If she uttered the words, this smell would be gone, forever. She didn't even know what would happen to herself, but what she did know without a trace of doubt, was that Ren's scent would disappear. So would his arms, wrapped around her, holding her tightly, as would the silky-soft feel of his hair, his mischievous smile, his teasing words. All of that would be wiped out, once and for all.

And it wouldn't just be Ren. Misaki, Subaru, Shou, Aya, her next-door neighbor Mrs. Ozawa, her friends from school, Sayoko, and Kana... Everyone, every single person Mia had crossed paths with in her life, all of them would be erased from existence with just a few words falling from her lips.

Thunk! The wand slipped from her now-limp hand and fell to the ground.

"I... c-cannot..."

Salty drops welled up in her eyes and started flowing in an endless stream down her face. The silent tears eventually gave way to sobs. Mia lifted her face up towards the night sky and through her convulsive cries, she repeated, "I cannot" over and over again.

“I cannot do this. I just cannot... I don’t want everyone I know to vanish! I am sorry, I am so sorry, Father... I am so sorry. But this is too much for me... I do not want to be left all alone!” Mia blubbered like a small child.

Within the safety of Ren’s arms, her face wet and puffy, the girl apologized to her father, who was always in her heart, to her grandfather, to all of her sorcerer ancestors. Though apologizing didn’t make any difference, it was the only thing Mia could do. Like a broken record, she said “sorry” time and again.

Ren trailed a gentle hand along Mia’s back in a soothing gesture. Then, he hugged her tightly. He put his strength into the hug, as if telling her with all his heart that he would never let her go, would never leave her side.

“Mia, I won’t blame you for your choice, I won’t try to stop you, whether you go through with it or not. Whatever you decide, I’ll always be right by your side. I won’t ever leave you alone. Whether we live or we disappear, we do it together. I know you hate feeling lonely. You don’t have to worry about that, I got you covered.”

Mia cried upon hearing those words. Letting out heart-wrenching sobs, she clutched Ren’s clothes in her hands.

She wept, feeling a myriad of different emotions erupt within her with explosive force, warring with each other. There was joy and relief at hearing Ren say that he would stay by her side no matter what she chose, and that he would never let her feel lonely again, but also heavy, crushing guilt. Ren kept holding her close to him and caressing her head throughout this conversation, as if he were comforting a small child or soothing a bawling baby.

“Do some soul-searching, apologize for it if you must. And amid it all, pave your own way forward. Shape the future on your own terms; forget about what the sorcerers want. Don’t worry, whatever you decide, I won’t leave your side. If thinking things through ain’t your strong suit, talk it over with someone. You’re not alone, okay? You’ve got me, and all of us Crow Rangers. ...You can talk to us, I promise you we’ll listen to whatever you have to say.”

Ren’s words sizzled in her chest. The moment she felt she couldn’t go through with world conquest, she lost the very guiding principle around which her whole life had been built. She felt immense guilt towards all sorcerers

throughout history, and yet she couldn't help her own decision. She didn't know how she should live her life from now on, but she couldn't bring herself to choose death, either, so Mia had to continue her existence. She had to find her own path in life.

...But she wouldn't have to do it alone. The arms that encircled her, the gentle hands, they told her she was not alone. There were people that would listen to her, people who would help her find her way through her troubles. And there was someone who had promised that no matter what choice she made, they would always be together.

"Thank you..." Mia quietly whispered the words of appreciation, tears streaming down her face.

Mia tightly squeezed Ren's body in an affectionate embrace, pouring all of her unspoken feelings into the hug. After a while, the sobs shaking her frame began to gradually subside.

Ren gently stroked Mia's back and let out a small sigh. He felt bad for making her cry. Felt bad for letting her, his beloved, make a choice that brought her suffering and agony. He had really meant it when he said he didn't mind being erased from existence. If that was what she chose, that was fine. The thought of dying together with her somehow seemed much more palatable than leaving her all alone in the rebirth of a pure beautiful world.

His team members, his family, friends, colleagues—it wasn't as if their faces hadn't flashed through his mind back then.

But, "Sorry," he'd said lightly, apologizing to all of them in his mind, "I'm choosing Mia over you guys, bummer, huh?"

He could have chosen to restrain her against her will to make sure she couldn't use magic, but he couldn't possibly keep her subdued indefinitely. Killing her was never an option. He had reasoned that the only choice he had left was respecting her will.

Mia had decided she couldn't go through with it. In the end, that was what her final choice had been.

Let us be together then, he thought. That was his fault too, for it had been him

who had ultimately driven her to pick that option. Mia kept on saying “sorry” over and over again to her ancestors, but she, in turn, was unknowingly also receiving silent words of apology from Ren for the way things had played out.

I’m sorry... If you did perform the great magical art of darkness, your conscience probably wouldn’t bother you so much. Mia would likely have to live out her life apologizing to her father, grandfather, and all of her ancestors. She had lost her way and would have to find herself a new course to follow. It would be a long, agonizing road filled with pain and hardship.

...I’m sorry, Mia. But at least I’ll be by your side every step of the way. I won’t leave you alone to face your anguish, your troubles. Let’s be together forever. I’ll shoulder your pain for you. Let’s find it together, a new path of our own, Ren secretly swore to himself.

Maybe it was because she had used up all her tears after a long bout of crying, or maybe she just felt better, but she slowly lifted her head. Her eyes met Ren’s, and he instinctively brought their lips together in a kiss. ...As always, he astounded her with his crazy antics. His actions never ceased to catch her off guard. In spite of herself, Mia’s cheeks flamed red, her eyes dropping down. Ren let out a small chuckle.

“Are we feeling calmer now?”

“...Hmph. Y-Yeah.”

Mia’s tiny nod came accompanied by a loud rumbling noise. With a gasp, Mia put a hand on her stomach to the sounds of barely contained amusement above her ear.

“W-Well, I haven’t had dinner yet!”

“Ha-ha-ha! You really are something... Sheesh, Mia, your voice is all hoarse! Definitely a cold. You’ve barely recovered, and there you go firing off spells left and right while fighting a cold in the chilly breeze... You silly girl!”

“Oops...”

He was right—her throat hurt and she felt weirdly fatigued. She could feel that her magical power reserves were decimated. Could what she was feeling be the effects of the first flu of her life? She felt tired to the bone, more

exhausted than ever before.

“So, what are we gonna do about this mountain of crystal?”

“I should be able to smash it, I think. Not all of it, but one slab should be within my powers.”

Mia should actually be able to erase the wall with a poof by giving her wand a light shake, but she generally wasn't good at making things go away.

“Smash, huh...?” Ren murmured, and looked at Mia with worry in his eyes. “How's your magical powers reserve?”

“I still have some left. It should be enough for this one task... It will be by the skin of my teeth though.”

Mia exhaled gingerly, regulating her breath, and picked up the wand. She felt like she was going to start gasping for air again as soon as she let herself relax, so she brought her breathing under control and focused.

“...All that has a form must someday fall apart!”

As soon as she spoke the words, cracks started to spread through the crystal wall blocking their path. Then, the wall started to crumble, pieces of it clattering to the ground.

Ren couldn't help but pipe up in an exasperated tone of voice, “What was that spell just now?!”

“Bleh, this is what improvised magic is like. I can't come up with cool words for the spell on the spot,” Mia grunted sullenly, which only made Ren burst out laughing.

“Ah, so that was improvised! You don't say! You mean, you've actually put some thought into spell names up until now?!”

“Shut up! Shut UP! I'll think up some good names one of these days!” Mia bit back in the spirit of their usual bickering.

When she tried to take a step forward though, her legs refused to support her, her body dangerously swaying. Alarmed, Ren quickly shot out an arm to steady her and keep her from falling.

“Hey, take it easy, okay?” Ren commanded as he pulled her up by her arm and hoisted her up so that she was draped over his back. Her arms over his shoulders, Mia cast her eyes down apologetically.

“Sorry...”

“How about you just stay still, then you won’t need to apologize in the first place. Hey! Over here!”

At Ren’s loud shouting, the Rangers who had been standing on the outside of the crystal wall came running.

“Dear me! Do you have any idea how worried we were about you?! Oh my, Mia, look at you, you can barely stand!”

“Ah, that’s because of her cold, and overdoing it with magic. Also, she says she could eat a horse.”

“Yeah, that must’ve messed her up good,” Shou cooed, patting Mia on the head.

Subaru stepped up to them, clearly anxious over Mia’s state. “Speaking of which, we haven’t had our dinner yet. ...So, what are we going to do? If you’re tired, should we go home and eat there?”

“No thanks, I should be just fine if I rest a bit. That’s how it was after Kyoto, at least. I’m hungry for some...meat. I want Misaki’s...deliciously plump wiener.”

“Please don’t say that ever again! Okay, all right. I did promise to treat you to some meat. Eat well and get your protein fix so you have lots of energy to beat that cold, you dummy,” Misaki grumbled and hit Mia on the head lightly.

“I will,” Mia nodded, gingerly rubbing her forehead.

“**WE** can report back to the chief by phone. Let’s tell him we’ll give him the details tomorrow.”

“Yeah, sure. The real issue is that wall, or rather, now heap of crystal on the riverbank. Can we file it under lost property? Who should we even contact for that?”

With Misaki behind the wheel, Aya took out her cell phone; Shou followed her example, both of them probably calling the police station. Mia was sitting in the back, spacing out due to the flu, her head resting on Ren's shoulder, swaying whenever the car shook. ...It felt so nice. Now that she had realized her true feelings, she could bask in the comfort Ren offered her.

Ren looked down on the peaceful girl, lovingly narrowed his eyes and stroked her shoulder. The two of them looked like the very picture of a harmonious, loving couple.

Shou, stealing a sidelong glance at them, gave a good-natured chuckle. "I guess you could call it the silver lining to the cloud."

"Nah, that sounds wrong. Still, all's well that ends well, right?"

The two laughed together in perfect unison. Eventually, Misaki gave the steering wheel a sharp turn and stopped the car in the parking lot of a grill restaurant.

By the time they were getting out of the car, Mia was able to walk without stumbling again. Nevertheless, Ren placed a careful hand around Mia's shoulders to support her just in case as they walked towards the restaurant. They had to cross the street to get to the grilled meat place from the parking lot they had stopped at, so the six of them stood at the pedestrian crossing, waiting for the traffic light to turn green.

"Ugh, I'm so hungry!"

"Me too, I'm starving! Oh right, did you get in touch with the chief?" Misaki asked Aya.

She nodded and held her phone up for everyone to see. "Yeah, I gave him the brief version. As in, 'don't worry, humankind isn't getting erased for now'," Aya said jokingly, but Mia immediately cast her eyes down as if slapped.

"I...I am very sorry. Now that I think about it, I was about to do something truly horrific. Yes, I was acting out in confusion at the time, but that doesn't change the fact that I almost made the choice to erase everyone from existence."

The more time she spent with everyone, the more the reality of what she had

been so close to doing seeped in. With just one word, she could've lost everything. Realizing how terrifying that would've been, Mia trembled at the thought. Then, a hand gently plopped down on her head. She looked up, and met Subaru's eyes, warm and compassionate.

"You're a good kid, we all know it. Your smile will mean more to us than a thousand apologies. Trust me, that's what will make us the happiest."

Such kind words. Mia felt as if she could burst into tears again, her heart constricting inside her chest. She hastily wiped her eyes and nodded at Subaru, a smile on her lips.

Not long after, the traffic light turned green. Just then, a family exited the doors of the barbecue restaurant. They were walking towards the pedestrian crossing, merry chatter and laughter hanging in the air around them.

"...Ah! It's the sorcerer lady!" someone exulted in a tiny voice.

The child, huddled next to his parents, seemed familiar to Mia somehow...

"Oh! It's the good little future workforce member!"

"...Huh? What future workforce member?" Ren raised an exasperated eyebrow, prompting Mia to tell him a brief version of their encounter.

The boy started running towards Mia, gushing at his parents with an excited gleam in his eye. He was probably telling them how, "that lady is a sorceress, pinky swear". The parents had a slightly embarrassed look on their face, probably telling the boy in a placating manner, "sure she is, sweetie".

The light was still green. Mia regarded the child scampering towards her across the road, her head blissfully blank.

Until a huge truck came swerving around the corner down the road.

The piercing sound of screeching brakes mixed with the horrified scream of the mother, and over that, two voices yelled simultaneously,

"Wait!" Ren shouted.

"NO!" Mia shrieked.

It was exactly like an hour ago, when she had erected the crystal wall.

Without thinking, she shouted out the only feeling that filled her mind. Her emotions pouring into it, the yell became the trigger that activated her magic. The image that Mia had pictured in her head on instinct gained form, manifesting in the real world.

Magical vines, sprouting from the asphalt, surged up into the sky, and then cascaded down, snaking around the truck and stopping it in its tracks. Some vines shot up from under the boy's feet, lifting him up in the air. The vines quickly deposited the boy to safety on the sidewalk where the vines unraveled from around his limbs, dropping him safely into the outstretched arms of his parents.

The next thing anyone knew, the scene, already outlandish, gained an otherworldly beauty to it. The entire ground became filled with a medley of colorful flowers, sprawling widely out from the concrete. Daisies, gerberas, marigolds, dandelions, violets, tulips, and many other kinds of flowers. It was clear Mia had studied the tomes on flowers night after night, for there were even more kinds of flowers than they had seen in the flower garden she had conjured up that summer.

A jumbled image she had in her head probably broke free of her mind's constraints and materialized in the physical realm. A beautiful world. A world of vast, endless flower fields. A world in which everybody was smiling. A world where everybody was happy. Mia's dream world as she envisioned it, childish and naïve as it may be.

"Thank goodness!" Mia breathed out in relief at Ren's side, evidently glad to see the boy returned unharmed to his parents.

Her voice sounded completely normal. It didn't sound particularly tired, so Ren didn't think much of it. "You can say that again! You okay?" he addressed Mia, concern tingeing his voice, as he looked down at Mia standing next to him.

She should've been next to him. Only, she wasn't there.

Mia lay face-down on the petal-littered road.

“...HUH?!” Ren uttered weakly, unable to comprehend what had just happened.

Mia had collapsed.

There was no discernible exhaustion in her voice, so he'd thought she was all right. But now, she lay on the ground unmoving, unnaturally still. She looked as if she were sleeping, so Ren, thinking he had to wake her up, knelt down amid the flowers and started shaking Mia.

“Rise and shine! You can't sleep here on the cold ground... You have a cold, don't you? It'll get even worse, you dummy.”

A part of him knew what had really happened. He felt terribly ridiculous, spouting empty, lighthearted nonsense like that, pretending everything was still fine, running away from the ugly reality by faking cheerfulness. Mia showed no sign of movement.

“Mia, hey, Mia? Come on, wake up! At least wait until you've had some food before you sleep!” Ren chided, desperation mounting in his voice.

A particularly forceful shake flipped the girl's limp body over, and now he could see her face. Her eyes were closed, her lifeless lips parted slightly.

“Mi...a...?”

Empty-eyed, Ren gazed at the girl. At her motionless, limp, wilted form, all life drained from it. Immediately, Aya came running, wild-eyed, and grabbed Mia's wrist. Then she hovered her hands over the girl's lips.

“I feel...no p-pulse... A-And she's...not breathing either...” Aya stuttered out, deathly pale.

Never before had Ren seen Aya make such a face. Subaru was the next one to sprint over to them, his face drained of all color, and put his ear to Mia's chest. He listened intently for a while, and then his big body started quaking all over, his gaze fixed on Mia lying prostrate on the ground.

“Her heart...”

Misaki staggered over with unsteady steps, Shou stood stock-still, rooted to the spot.

“No way, it can’t be over just like that! Her body’s just in shock, right?”

“Uh-huh, in so much shock that her heart stopped?! Hey, Mia! This isn’t funny, stop joking around!” Misaki barked, approaching the girl’s body with a few determined, angry steps and knelt next to it, shaking it violently.

Everyone stared at him, hoping against all hope that Mia might jolt back to life. That the girl would open her eyes suddenly, and go, “Hm, what is it?” while quizzically cocking her head to the side as she was so prone to doing. Then everyone would go, “Hey! You really scared us there, you silly girl!” and they would all poke her teasingly and have a good laugh about it. They wished so hard for that to happen.

But no matter how much they stirred her, no matter how many times they called her name, she remained still and lifeless, not even an eyelid twitching. Their hope soon turned into despair. Feeling the dark claws of anguish tear into their hearts while they sat in a sprawling field of gorgeous flowers felt like cruel irony. How could it be that the girl who created such a beautiful world, the one who would’ve been the happiest looking at it, just lay there with her eyes closed, motionless?

Ren carefully wrapped his arms around Mia and propped her up against his chest in a sitting position. When he carded a hand through her hair, it felt soft and silky against his fingers. When he gently touched her cheek, she still felt warm. He couldn’t believe her pulse wasn’t beating anymore, her heart stopped, her breathing ceased. However, when he put his ear to her lips, he indeed felt no breath, just like Aya had said. The dreadful realization dawned on him. Ren hugged her body close to him, so tightly she could break.

“No... This... This can’t be...” he sobbed, tears streaming down his face.



However unseemly it might be for a twenty-six-year-old man to cry, both his pride and his self-control utterly failed him. Just when they had finally started reaching out to each other, this happened. He hadn't properly put them in words yet, but he was certain that his feelings had reached Mia, and that she, in turn, had opened her heart to him. He was certain their hearts had reached out to each other and made a real connection.

"Not like this. It's too soon! Not when we finally broke the hold of your old man's spell over you!"

It was way too soon. It was supposed to be just the beginning for them! When things calmed down, he would've taken the time to say those three magic words to her, and find out if she felt the same way about him. He would've told her that him being so tactile with her and all his "efforts to annoy her" actually hadn't been what he had made them out to be. Then, he would've hugged Mia, who would no doubt get all flustered as she tended to do, and he would've placed a sweet kiss on her lips.

"This can't be it! I haven't done a thing yet. I promised you I'd take you to all sorts of places, but we haven't been anywhere together yet. You haven't even given me a proper smile. You've been giving away your smiles to Subaru and Aya, you even started showing them to Misaki recently, but I've never seen a full-face sincere smile directed right at me. It used to drive me nuts, you know!"

Because her reactions were so hilarious, he poked fun at her a lot. Because he enjoyed her matching his fire, her eyes taking on a defiant glint, he ended up teasing her despite himself, never quite managing to stop himself from doing it. It was very much like how an elementary school boy would pull on the pigtailed of a girl he liked. He had done nothing but act like a child. He thought that he still had time after all.

If they spent more time together, he was certain she would've smiled for him too. That's how he could stand Mia smiling at Subaru and the others, but not him, despite feeling upset with that fact. Because he had been so certain that eventually, she'd show him her true smile too.

Ren shook his head, looking at Mia, who still lay motionless, not a fingertip moving. This couldn't be happening, it just couldn't.

He just couldn't wrap his mind around the fact that Mia would never move, never smile, never get angry again. It was unthinkable. Accepting that she would disappear from his side would drive him to certain madness. That was why he couldn't believe it, wouldn't believe it. That she's...dead...

"AAAGH!" Ren cried out.

His wail was suffused with pure, unadulterated agony. It was a painful sight to watch. Subaru dropped his head down, Aya was sobbing, fat tears flowing down her cheeks in a torrent. Misaki turned his face away from the group, his brows tightly knitted, Shou looked at the ground, still rooted to the same spot he had been standing in ever since this all started.

Unable to stem the tide of his overflowing emotions, Ren closed his arms around Mia's body and wailed amid the beautiful field of vibrant flowers. He wept, tossing aside any shred of dignity or pride. To hell with that useless garbage! If playing the cool guy and fighting back his tears would make the girl open her eyes again, he'd stomp down his grief endlessly if need be. But there was no helping the fact that her breathing had stopped, that when he put a hand to her chest, he couldn't feel the pulse that was supposed to be there. How else was he supposed to let out the growing despair in his heart, but by wailing and crying?

"No! I won't have it! I don't want to lose you. I want you here, right next to me. It's just too cruel, to disappear after stealing my heart away, right when I've irrevocably fallen for you!"

Please, please just open your eyes. If there are any miracles in this world at all, please make one happen here, right now. Ren didn't believe in God, yet now he was praying with the desperation of a drowning man clutching at straws. Stroking the cheeks of the girl he loved, not even trying to wipe away his streaming tears, Ren stared intensely at Mia.

"I'll give you anything you want. If there is anything that is mine to give, then take it, just, please, open your eyes. I.....I love you, Mia."

If I could split my years of life on this Earth and give half of them to you, I would. If you needed an organ, I'd cut open my belly right here and now. So, open your eyes. Make this heart beat again. Putting all of these thoughts and

feelings swimming through his mind into his one greatest wish, Ren pressed his lips to Mia's in a kiss.

It was a long, deep kiss. Ren kept their lips melded together for so long it seemed like an eternity. He was afraid to break away. Afraid of the despair he would feel, seeing Mia still unmoving as no miracle came to save her. He couldn't even bring himself to open his eyes. However...

Ren felt as though a small current of air hit his lips.

"Wha—"

When Ren broke the kiss, faint though it might have been, he felt the smallest of breaths come from the tiny gap between Mia's lips.

"She... she's breathing..."

"Huh?!"

At Ren's astonished murmur, Subaru, who was standing to his side, lifted his head. He frantically put his ear to Mia's chest.

"It's... beating? It's beating! Her heart is beating!"

"What?! But, but, but how?! No, wait, wh-wh-what, what do we do now?! Go to a hospital?"

"W-W-We, w-we've got—we've got to calm—just calm down for now!" Misaki stuttered to a panicking Aya, pacing about in circles.

Shou, dazedly watching the four Rangers freak out, raised his voice, an idea popping into his head suddenly, "The police! Let's get back to the station! The chief will be there, too. A hospital probably won't be able to help us anyway."

He was right. Mia was neither sick nor did she have any injuries. Ren lifted Mia in his arms and scurried to Misaki's car. Crow Ranger Red was the last one of the group to squeeze into the car, taking the driver's seat. He floored the gas, zooming off towards the police station.

MIA might've returned back to life, but she still wouldn't open her eyes. She lay in the bed of the police station medical office, her chest rising and falling,

seemingly sound asleep. Sleep, however, was all she did. She didn't move a finger, nor twitch an eyelid. She just continued breathing.

"I wonder if there's anything we can do..." Shou scratched his head in vexation.

Ren was gazing at Mia, almost boring holes in her with the intensity of his stare. She was breathing. That, however, didn't mean much on its own. Unless she woke up, opened her eyes, started moving and talking, she might as well be dead.

Ren was shocked at his own selfishness. That time in the flower field, he had thought nothing would make him happier than hearing her heart beat again, and yet now that his wish had been granted, he just wanted her to make another step towards recovery.

The chief, sitting in the back, slowly exhaled a cloud of cigarette smoke. "Okay, I now understand the situation, more or less, but to be honest, this is a first for me too. When Mia's father used up all his magic powers and collapsed... He just ended up dying then and there."

"Hmm, magic powers. Magic powers..." Aya muttered with her arms crossed, mulling it over in her head.

Subaru frowned in contemplation too.

Misaki, who had been silently ruminating all this time, lifted his head and asked, "Speaking of which... Why did Mia come back to life? I'm absolutely certain her heart had stopped beating, and she wasn't breathing. There must've been something that triggered her miraculous resurrection, right?"

"Ren, didn't you kiss Mia back there?" Aya asked.

After Shou nodded in agreement, everyone turned to look at Ren.

"Well...yeah, I did... But that couldn't have..." Ren felt embarrassed at being reminded of what had transpired. He scratched his head awkwardly at Aya's question.

"If it worked once, it might work again! How about you try it one more time?"

"Look here, that's not—No, wait... All right, I'll do it..."

If a kiss was all it would take for the girl to open her eyes, he'd kiss her senseless. It felt incredibly embarrassing to kiss her here though, with everyone's eyes on him. His discomfort was, however, a small price to pay for the prospect of Mia moving again. Looking uncomfortable, he touched Mia, who was lying on the bed, and mutely pressed his lips to hers.

...But the miracle that had occurred before did not repeat itself. Mia's eyes did not open, her fingers did not move. She just continued lying there, breathing quietly.

Slowly but surely, anxiety swelled in their hearts. The despair that had enveloped Ren before, struck once more, this time besetting all of them. An awkward tension filled the room.

Then, Subaru uttered under his breath, "Pour intent into the words, and speak them."

Everyone looked at Subaru. Even Ren turned around to stare at him. Subaru uncrossed his arms, stared soundlessly at Mia, and said it once more, "Pour intent into the words, and speak them. That's how Mia's magic works."

"Sure, we know that, but..."

"I don't know why, but for some reason Ren's kiss acted as a trigger. Some kind of force must've worked to activate the magic. So, the important thing must be to pour intent into your words, speak them, and be in physical contact with Mia... Right?"

Everyone's eyes flew open in astonishment at Subaru's hypothesis. If what they thought had been a miracle had actually been magic, then indeed, just like Subaru said, imitating the way Mia used her powers was the best course of action. It was unclear why such a phenomenon had occurred, but even though they didn't know the reason behind the miracle, the important thing was to spare no effort in trying to get Mia to wake up. Misaki whirled around to look at Ren and pointed a finger at him.

"All right, go on, pour that intent and say the words! And then smooch away."

"Wh-What?! Pouring intent and speaking the words... What are you expecting me to say?! Besides, I don't have to kiss her, right? If touching her is all I need to

do, we can just hold hands or something...”

“Now is not the time for this nonsense! What are you suddenly getting embarrassed about, you’re twenty-six years old for crying out loud, get a grip! So before, when it didn’t matter, it was an all-you-can hug, all-you-can-kiss sexual harassment buffet for you, and now you’re shy all of a sudden?!” Aya snarled at him, almost pouncing on him. “Don’t think I wasn’t paying attention all those times you forced yourself on her! If not for our situation and carte blanche given for our actions, I would have dragged you in and tossed you into a cell myself! Now get kissing!”

However, for Ren, this felt different somehow. It was different from his previous touchy-feely attitude bordering on sexual harassment. It felt like he was doing something extremely, terribly shameful.

“If you’re talking about molesting her, surely, I don’t have to be the one...”

“Ugh, just shut up and do it! Think and say the same things you did back then, and you’ll be all right! It’s how the miracle happened before. So, quit your whining and just do whatever you did last time!”

Ren was taken aback by the angry tirade directed at him. So, he had to think, say, and do the same things he had done when Mia had first collapsed? Did that mean he had to say *those* things again? How...? Those words he had uttered in the spur of the moment—he’d have to say them in this quiet medical room, with everyone’s attention centered on his person.

“Ugh, do you guys all get off on embarrassing me or what?” he grunted spitefully, clutching at his bangs. Everyone just kept looking at him, as if wordlessly ordering him to get on with it. ...Well, it seemed that there was no getting out of this. Ren resigned himself to his fate and sealed away his sense of shame.

Once again, he turned towards Mia, bent his back slightly and brought his face close to hers. He could hear the whoosh of her breath, in and out, in and out. *Ah, she’s alive all right*, he thought, and it made a warm wave of happiness rise in his chest. But he couldn’t settle for just that.

I’m sorry for being so egotistic, so selfish. But the way you are now, I’ll never get to see you walking next to me ever again. Mia... I want to see those defiant

eyes of yours. Want to hear your cute voice. I want to see your face light up with a myriad of different expressions. I want you by my side, forever.

“...Mia, I love you.”

Putting all those feelings into it, he pressed a kiss to her lips. Just like before, he didn't break off immediately, closely watching her instead. He held his breath so that he wouldn't miss even the slightest change in her condition. He stayed like that for a while, and eventually, Mia's eyelids started fluttering. Ren stared at her, eyes wild and round like saucers.

Aya, who was watching them with hawk eyes, shrieked in surprise, “Ah! Mia!”

Ren called her name too, parting from her lips. “Mia!”

She blinked a few times, letting out a small groan, and opened her eyes a tiny crack. Then she wiggled her fingers slowly, and languidly turned her head towards Ren. “Ren? Everyone, why the long faces?”

“Waah! Oh, Mia! My dear little Mia!” Pushing Ren aside, Aya gripped Mia in a bear-hug. Ren pinwheeled, a look of panic on his face as he fell onto the floor with a loud bang.

“Wh-What's happening?” Mia asked, flustered, but Aya, crying tears of joy, just rubbed their cheeks together.

Shou let out a long sigh of relief, and Misaki put his hand on his forehead, muttering, “You really made us worry there, you silly runt!”

Subaru held out a hand to help up Ren, who lay flat on the ground moaning after Aya had shoved him quite forcefully out of the way.

“Worked out great, huh, Ren?”

“Yeah, you can say that again. It worked out amazing. ...But, really, *how?*” Ren tilted his head in puzzlement, the entire situation nothing but a mystery to him.

Of course, he was immensely glad it worked—he was over the moon about it. He was almost literally jumping for joy. He felt so ecstatic he barely suppressed the urge to let out a cry of triumph. But at the same time, a question plagued his mind, “Why did Mia open her eyes?” Because he knew for a fact that he couldn't use magic. Did this mean that the reason for this miracle lay with Mia,

after all?

“C-Can someone please explain what’s going on?”

Ren’s grumbling was lost in the joyous clamor around him.

“**THIS** is just a hypothesis, all right?”

A few days later, all of the Crow Rangers, the chief, and Mia sat together around a grill. Which, by the way, was not being paid for by Misaki. The Rangers had put their foot forward and insisted that it was a celebration, and as such the chief should pay. The chief had nodded, deeming it to be a fair argument. Several days after treating them, he’d end up cocking his head to the side and asking himself, “What were we actually celebrating back there?” But that was a later problem.

Be that as it may, Misaki inclined his head curiously towards Shou, who held his finger up while chewing on some grilled ribs. “Is that a hypothesis about the Mia incident?”

“Yep, it’s about why Mia woke up at Ren’s declaration of undying love and subsequent kiss,” Shou confirmed, upon which Ren, who was sitting next to Mia drinking beer, spat out his entire drink in surprise.

In a coughing fit, he huffed angrily, “Aren’t there other ways to put it? ‘Declaration of undying love’?! How can you say these things with a straight face? How can I trust you anymore?!”

“Yeah, yeah, but that doesn’t make it any less true. So, about my hypothesis, right?” Blithely ignoring Ren’s protests, Shou went on to expound upon his theory. Everyone present listened to him in silence interrupted only by the clatter of their chopsticks as they helped themselves to the grilled meat. “I’m pretty sure that was it. I believe it’s because Ren and Mia’s hearts are one.”

“Eh, what do you mean their hearts are one?”

“I mean that their feelings are mutual. I’m fairly certain that if they were unrequited from any one side, it wouldn’t work. Hey, Mia, you like Ren, right?”

At the blunt question, Mia cast her eyes down and turned beet red. She

looked irresistibly lovely, the very picture of a young girl in love. Flipping over a few slices of meat sizzling on the grill to try and hide her embarrassment, she nodded her head. “Yes. I, um, do like him.”

Happiness burst forth like colorful fireworks inside Ren’s chest at hearing her say the words confirming her feelings, even though they had been barely more than a whisper. He also felt very self-conscious all of a sudden and started scratching at his nose.

“Ooh, is it here that this spring breeze of young love is emanating from?” Aya grinned, circling her chopsticks between Mia and Ren.

“Shut up!” Ren snapped at her through his teeth.

Skillfully avoiding getting sucked into the exchange between them, Shou continued speaking, “And that’s precisely why, just as I had thought, it must’ve been Mia’s magic at play. Mia, a sorceress, likes Ren. Ren also likes Mia. The words of love resonated with their shared feelings. With that as a medium, when Ren wished with all his heart for Mia to start breathing, to open her eyes again, he established a link with Mia, and activated the magic sleeping within her.”

“Or maybe, when their hearts are one, it replenishes the magic reserves within her? Mia’s heart stopped once because her magical powers were depleted, right? I don’t presume to know how exactly it works, but in Mia’s case, when Ren said he loved her and kissed her, it made magic spark back to life within her,” Subaru countered Shou’s hypothesis with utter seriousness, chewing on a piece of pork jowl.

Ren’s face turned red and he let out a resigned sigh. “So, to sum it all up, what do we think happened?”

“Well, to sum it all up...” Shou gulped down the meat, fixed Ren with a solemn stare, and cleared his throat with a cough. Then he clenched a fist tightly and pumped it. “Moral of this story is—the kiss of Prince Charming is the solution to all problems!”

“Ugh, that is such a load of bull!”

“Love and peace overcome any adversity! Love is all you need!”

“What kind of crazy reasoning is that?!” Ren shouted in irritation.

Shou, slurping on his beer, muttered to the side, “Even if I do say so myself, that was a pretty solid argument I made there, thank you very much.”

“Well, Shou’s hypothesis is just pure speculation. There’s no way we can validate it. Subaru’s theory was interesting though, huh? A union of hearts and souls creates a wellspring of magic. That would imply free limitless magic, right? I wonder if the sorcerers of the past exploited this lifehack,” Misaki mused, putting some more meat on the grill, and directed his gaze at the chief who was, of course, puffing on a cigarette.

The chief crossed his arms, mulling it over. “There’s no account of any such theory in the documents we have in our possession. After all, he... Ah, I mean Mia’s father. Up until his generation, there are remarkably few mentions of female names. Probably, the women were treated as nothing more than human incubators, to bear children so that the sorcerers’ bloodline wouldn’t get extinguished. Akin to a baby conveyor belt.”

In the records, there was no trace of mothers ever being in the picture. That is, when they had their babies, those women... Were they bound by some contract? Or were they regarded to have become “unnecessary” after they had fulfilled their roles by bearing an heir? He didn’t know that much, nor did he want to. There was, however, one thing he could say with certainty.

“I don’t know about the past generations, but Mia’s dad loved his wife. He was head over heels for her, completely, irrevocably smitten with her. That’s why while she was alive, he always glowed with happiness. Sometimes, he would get this haunted look in his eyes, but even then, he was actually happy. Truly, the man was a walking contradiction!” The chief laughed, and Mia beamed back at him.

She had known her father loved her mother but hearing it from another person made it more real somehow. The two of them had loved each other. That simple truth made her almost squirm in elation.

“So, maybe, if Mia’s mom was still alive, her father might not have died in the way that he did. I guess we’ll never know for sure, but I want to believe that.” Misaki crossed his arms, humming in understanding.

Subaru opened his mouth after putting another piece of grilled meat on Mia's plate, "All the more reason to verify our theory, then. I can't help but be curious about it. Mia, back then, when you were being kissed by Ren, did you feel anything? Like, sensing some changes in your magical power?"

Mia hummed, sinking into thought. She had heard the account of what had happened to her. She had already been told how she had used up all of her magic, which resulted in her death, and how Ren's kiss had brought her back to life.

"In all honesty, I do not really remember much at all. But when I opened my eyes, I think I felt something warm and fuzzy...spreading around in my chest."

She couldn't find the right words to describe that sensation and furrowed her brow as she dipped the cow tongue Subaru had put on her plate into lemon juice and kept eating.

"I see," Shou grinned, seeming intrigued. "This might be fun! Confirming the theory seems worthwhile. Wouldn't it be great to know for sure? We can't predict when or where she'll get close to depleting her magic again. If Mia had some kind of magic power gauge, that'd go a long way to help us. I'm not up for a repeat of the last time, so I'd like to have some sort of insurance in place."

"Hm, that's true. I'd like to avoid having Mia expend that much magical power at all if possible. But still, I'd feel a lot better if we'd know for sure that Ren can always supply Mia with additional magic in an emergency," Subaru nodded vigorously in approval.

Ren felt like he was about to be turned into a lab rat against his will and piped up gruffly, "Well, let's say we try to prove the theory. What do you suggest we do? I am not going to say 'I love you' or kiss Mia in front of you guys ever again and have you get off on my embarrassment."

"Ha-ha-ha! That sounds like it'd be a ton of fun to watch, but we've already verified the hypothesis with that, haven't we? You can, of course, try that a few times in private and make absolutely sure it works. What I'd like to know is whether saying something other than 'I love you' works as well, or if holding hands, or even just touching her would suffice too. If you can restore her magical powers with just a kiss, would getting to the next base restore them

even more? Stuff like that.”

...*The next base?* Everyone froze at Shou’s words, except for Mia, who didn’t catch Shou’s meaning.

“What is this ‘next base’ you speak of?” she asked out of curiosity.

“Hm? Well, I can only think of one place where you’re touching deeper than when you’re touching with your lips. I mean, that would involve Ren putting it inside your body. I can’t imagine any way in which you could be in more physical contact with each other—”

“Ga-a-ah—Shut your trap right now!” Acting on pure instinct, Ren threw his lighter, which hit Shou square in the head with a thud.

“Ouch!” Shou called out and made a display of rubbing his head although it was plain to see he didn’t actually sustain much damage. “Ren, you’re surprisingly self-conscious, considering the amount of inappropriate touching you’ve been doing with Mia since the day you met her. Is that what you’ve been making all those girls swoon with, your secret soft side?”

“Ack, please, I’m begging you, just be quiet!” Ren moaned, sliding down in his seat, dropping his elbows on the table and covering his face.

Mia still didn’t understand what was going on and looked at Ren, her head inclined quizzically, “Um, I must admit, I failed to comprehend what Shou said earlier. What is this one place we would be touching the most in? And what would Ren put inside my body, and where?”

“You shut it too! I’ll tell you all about it one of these days, but definitely not right now!”

“Ah, so it’s settled that you’re ‘telling’ her soon?” Misaki shot playfully at the casual air with which Ren had announced this.

Aya, sitting next to him, muttered exasperatedly, “Ugh, that settles it, all men are animals and deserve to be thrown in jail!”

“Don’t forget to give us the full report!” Shou quipped, grinning. Shou would never learn his lesson, it seemed.

Chapter 12: Epilogue

IN a police station in a certain provincial town, within the Criminal Affairs Division. Ren, who had two years prior fulfilled his biggest dream—becoming a detective—tapped the report he had been working on against his desk to straighten the papers in one pile. Not that he had any particular reason for it, but he had wanted to become a detective for the longest time. However, real life, unlike his dreams, had been harsh, and it had taken him six whole years from starting as a beat cop to achieve his ambition. Even so, he was on the luckier side compared to many of his peers.

Now, after having worked as a detective for two years, what he had realized about the job was that it involved a lot more paperwork than he had expected, and that about eighty percent of it was patience and hard work away from the spotlight. Not to mention, that he now had a lot less vacation than during his beat cop days, and that taking all of his vacation days at once was frowned upon.

Ah, I'm really not making it easy on her, huh? Ren let out a small chuckle.

Having finished all the tasks requiring his immediate attention, Ren stretched his arms out over his head, rolled his shoulders, then opened his bag and took his lunch box out. Conveniently, lunch break had just begun. Ren's stomach growled, drawing attention to the fact that it was empty and starving for some food. What would it be today? He always looked forward to unpacking his lunch box to discover what was inside. Amid all of the brownnosing he had to do for work, inevitably landing him in a bloodthirsty mood, eating his packed lunch was one of the few ways he could find peace again.

When he slid the lid off, his eyes were immediately greeted by a plethora of colorful side dishes. In a small drawstring pouch, an assortment of three kinds of *onigiri* lay snuggled next to each other, the fillings invariably pickled plum, cod roe, and salmon. Apparently, those were the top three best rice ball fillings

of all-time according to her.

In the beginning, she couldn't make a single dish right, but in the four years of them dating her cooking skills showed impressive growth. ...Well, at least that was what she believed, anyway. The slightly burnt omelet was savory to taste. She properly flavored it with both soy sauce and *mirin*, but going a bit heavy on the soy sauce was how she preferred it.

The main dish was yesterday's leftover Salisbury steak. She must've made a smaller sized one for the lunch box. Either the grind was too coarse, or the pieces of onion too big in comparison with the patty size, but when he stabbed a chopstick into it, it crumbled apart miserably. It tasted really good. The fact that it made him laugh inadvertently was the cherry on top.

"Dang it, seeing you smile like a fool while eating the lunch your wife lovingly made you really ticks me off!" A groan came from behind Ren's back.

Before Ren could whip around, a hand extended towards his lunch box, nimbly plucking a stalk of asparagus wrapped in bacon from it. When he did turn around, he saw a senior detective chewing on the snack.

"...Isn't the asparagus a bit chewy?"

"She says she likes it like that."

Indeed, the bacon asparagus roll-ups she made were a tiny bit tough. Otherwise, they were properly made, and it didn't make them inedible. They were pretty yummy in fact, so he guessed he shouldn't complain.

"Ah... Guess I'd better get started on my lunch too..."

His colleague, seated at the desk next to his, rummaged around in his bag from within the depths of which he produced a cup of instant noodles. To it, he added the flavoring and the powdered soup stock, and then stepped out of the office to boil some water. Ren continued eating the contents of his lunch box, and by the time his colleague returned, he was biting into one of the rice balls.

Her *onigiri* always scored a perfect ten. The amount of salt was absolutely perfect, so much so they would taste great even without any filling. As he was savoring the taste, the office door creaked open again and another one of his fellow detectives entered the room, muttering, "Ugh, I'm beat!"

“Ah, finished the interrogation already?”

“Yeah. I mostly stood on the sidelines, watching a senior officer do it though.”

That alone must’ve been mentally draining, because the man heaved a huge sigh before plopping down at his desk which stood back to back with Ren’s. He took out his store-bought lunch box. Snapping his chopsticks open, he piped up again, as if reminded of something, “Ah, by the way, I saw your wife on my patrol route!”

“You lucky dog, scoring such a young wife! She’s what, ten years younger than you?”

“Nine, actually,” Ren mumbled curtly.

Not that he minded it much. Nine wasn’t much different than ten, but hearing their age difference being amped up to double digits just rubbed him the wrong way. Working in the same place as his wife was an inexhaustible source of teasing. He was looking forward to the day it became old news.

Now’s the time for patience, Ren shrugged mentally when the door opened, just in time for him to throw the last piece of his *onigiri* in his mouth. ...It was Subaru.

“Ren, have you finished your report? Oh, I see you’re done with your lunch too. Perfect timing! We’re about to conduct a door-to-door investigation, but we’re short on manpower, so if you would join us?”

“Yes, sir!” Ren swiftly put away his lunch box and ran out the door to catch up to Subaru who had already gone ahead.

Subaru had been promoted to detective two years before him. He was really glad to have a senior who really had his back. Subaru was bringing him along on a lot of his cases, which was an excellent learning opportunity for Ren.

While the two of them were heading to the parking lot, Subaru uttered a short question, “When is she quitting?”

“Huh? Ah, the job. Next month. She keeps saying she wants to work until she really can’t anymore, but it’s our first child, you know? She’s having a bad case of morning sickness, too. I can’t help it, I’m just too worried about her.”

Subaru scratched his head and smiled, turning to look at Ren over his shoulder. “Ever the worrier, aren’t you?”

“I know! I used to think I’m a very chill guy, but when it comes to her, I’m hopeless. In fact, I’m worried about her even now, right this very moment.”

Subaru chuckled, and when they finally reached the parking lot, he fished his keys out of his pocket and tossed them over to Ren. Ren nimbly caught them and hopped into the driver’s seat.

“Well, that’s only natural, I suppose. The more precious someone is to you, the more you fret over them.”

“Guess you’re right. Well then, let’s get to it!” Ren exclaimed. He confirmed that Subaru, sitting next to him in the front, had fastened his seat belt, and revved the engine.

A two-lane road a few blocks away from the main street was busy at this time of day. Not only was this a busy residential road, but it was also often used as a bypass in case of traffic congestion on the main street, so there were quite a number of cars running up and down it every day. If someone left their car parked out on a street like that, it was only natural that they would get reported. It would just get in the way of too many people.

Aya was just doing her rounds in her small patrol car when she received word of the parking violation, so she had to turn around before heading out to where the illegally parked car sat.

She addressed a female officer sitting in the front next to her, who was currently confirming the location on the map, “So, have you figured out which way to go?”

“Yes. Turn to the left over there, then turn right at the end of the street, and we’ll practically be there.”

“Ah, thank goodness. You know, it’s already been a year since our GPS broke, but will someone fix it? Noooo!”

To think that the wave of cost-cutting would hit as far as their backwater little

town... Apparently, it was pretty hard to get the funds to buy a new GPS system for a patrol car. Aya uttered a small sigh and shot a quick glance at her coworker's belly.

"Hehe, look at that baby bump! Aren't your clothes starting to feel a bit too tight?"

"Yeah, a little bit. Actually, I've removed all of the hooks on my skirt. You know, there are these suspenders, but small, so I clip them on where the hooks are supposed to be, and then the skirt does not slide around and it is easier on my stomach," the woman popped a few buttons of her uniform jacket open to demonstrate.

"Five months, huh? Don't push yourself too hard, okay, Mia?" Aya chuckled.

The female police officer nodded. It was Mia Oonari, only looking a few years older.

Maybe it had been the influence of the now-disbanded Champions of Justice, the Crow Rangers that had inspired Mia to become an officer of the law. Maybe it had been the "new path" that she had been looking for ever since that fateful day. Either way, after graduating high school, Mia had become a policewoman. She had been assigned to the Traffic Division, the same as Aya, where she displayed her characteristic sense of justice while throwing herself into her new job with impressive zeal. With her optimistic and cheerful nature, she had fit in at her workplace in virtually no time, and everyone adored her, including her seniors.

Then, when she had turned twenty, she had married Ren, who was twenty-nine at the time. Ren making his dreams come true by getting promoted to detective was probably one of the big contributing factors to that decision. He was going to get much busier and have a lot less vacation days, so it was a logical step for the two of them to get married when they always had to fight for those precious few minutes spent in each other's company. They loved every precious moment they had together now that they shared a home.

And now, two years later, a new life was budding inside Mia. She was at the five-month mark at the moment. As for the gender, the doctor's answer was a vague, "I think it's going to be a girl, probably." Well, as long as they arrived

hale and healthy, it didn't really matter, Mia would welcome them whether her baby turned out to be a boy or a girl.

She had actually wanted to continue working until it was almost time for her to give birth, but her husband, who was supposed to be the laid-back one out of the two of them, wasn't taking any risks when it came to her well-being. He talked her ear off until she had agreed to quit her job starting next month. She had been considering taking a maternity leave, but her husband had begged her to just focus on her health and raising their child, so she decided to take the plunge and leave the force.

Well, it's not as if him fretting over my safety like a madman is something that began yesterday, Mia giggled to herself, remembering the past.

"Oh, right, it might be a little too early, but your morning sickness has faded quite a bit, hasn't it? So, we've been thinking that we should all gather and have a meal together sometime. It'll double as your baby shower, too!" Aya announced with a big smile on her lips.

"Aw, that is so nice!" Mia returned the smile after scratching her head shyly.

"I see you and Subaru almost every day, but it's been at least six months since I've last heard from Shou or Misaki. It's probably because they left before I received the good news."

"Yeah. But don't worry, you aren't missing anything. When you're young, every time you meet up with your friends after a while apart, you think 'wow, they've changed!' But people their age, well, they don't really change all that much anymore," Aya giggled, making a sharp turn.

They must be getting close to where they needed to be.

Misaki had gotten promoted in recognition of his impeccable work ethics and was dispatched to work in a prefectural police department. It wasn't as if his primary concern in life was the advancement of his career, but he did put in hard work, so both his work situation and his standard of living were improving in leaps and bounds.

Sayoko, who was now his wife, had moved to live with him immediately after their wedding. At the time, Mia, Aya, and Sayoko often used to meet up for a

stroll around the town, some tea at a café, or to do some shopping. After Sayoko's first child had been born, she had had no time to go out with them anymore, but Mia and Aya still managed to regularly scrape together some free time to go to Misaki's to see her in person. Misaki was so busy with work they barely saw him anymore, but they were a regular presence in Sayoko's and her baby's life. Mia hoped that when she had her child, he or she would grow up to be great friends with Sayoko's children.

Then there was Shou, who had also advanced to work in the prefectural police department. How he managed to pull that off is somewhat of an enigma. He was neither as passionate about his job as Misaki, nor had he booked any outstanding achievements.

"I've gotten assigned to prefectural police, toodles, guys!" he had uttered airily one day with his hand wrapped around a stunning beauty of a woman with a bright blush coloring her cheeks as he whispered words into her ear, and the next moment, he had been gone from his old police station.

Misaki, who had once again become Shou's coworker, mentioned that he was now apparently in forensics and dating the chief's daughter who happened to be the same woman Mia saw that day in the police station. His career path up until that point was also shrouded in mystery, so how he had managed to go from a regular police officer to a lab guy was anybody's guess. Although everyone thought it might have to do with the shy chief's daughter who was always fidgeting around Shou with a deep blush on her face.

The one thing everyone could agree on about Shou was the certainty that he hadn't changed at all. He was as happy-go-lucky as ever, loved dirty jokes, and could be a bit, or rather, quite mean. According to the rumor mill, he was pretty hot stuff and he may have found his opposite in love fetishes with the chief's daughter. Not that Mia really understood what that meant.

"Oh, he's being ooh'd and ahh'd over like a celebrity all right. I have no idea what they see in that perverted sadist," Aya, who had a lot of acquaintances in the prefectural Traffic Division had said once, rolling her eyes.

Eventually, the car stopped, indicating they had arrived at their destination. Mia wasted no time in getting right to her job; while jotting down the license

plate number of the illegally parked car, she subconsciously found her eyes drifting up to steal a brief glance at the sky.

...Once, just for a short while, I sure used to fly a lot. I should probably pick this habit up again. Yeah! Taking Ren for a midair date seems like a fun idea. He's such a worrywart though. I'm sure he will go all, "At least save it for after you've made it through childbirth safely, okay?" Mia mused to herself and chuckled.

Mia almost never used magic anymore. It came in handy in some situations, so she still resorted to it from time to time, but choosing flight over walking, or casting flashy spells didn't happen anymore. She had no use for it now.

She wasn't completely sure what she was going to do when her baby came though. After all, until now, the sorcerers had always passed their magic on from parent to child. Did she have the right to put a stop to this tradition in her generation? However, she knew very well she should under no circumstances teach her child *that* great magical art of darkness. ...But then she inevitably ended up thinking that there was no meaning in teaching the child ordinary magic if she didn't teach them "Miangia". Mia was just the tiniest bit conflicted on the matter.

ONE afternoon, when their days off overlapped, Ren and Mia headed to the mall in front of the train station. They had decided it was time to start stocking up on baby products. They couldn't match their days off for a long while now, so they jumped on the first chance they got to go shopping and get prepared for the coming of their baby, merrily chatting about nothing and everything on their way to the store.

"Ugh, I have no idea how many of these we actually need."

"Yes. Babies grow up fast, they say. Ah, but I remember Sayoko saying that it's best to have as much underwear on hand as possible."

"Hm, that's true, it'll get dirty often. Let's buy two sets of three, then."

There were many kinds of underwear to choose from: short ones, long ones, romper somethings, onesies... Anyway, there were just too many of them, which prompted the endless questions beginning with whether they had to buy

at least one of each kind or a few of just one kind. Looking over this and that with Ren, Mia put selected pieces of tiny clothing into their shopping basket.

“Socks... Look at how small they are! So cute!”

Baby clothing was all so tiny and adorable. Looking at those little socks made them realize anew just how small the baby’s feet that fit in them would be. Watching a starry-eyed Mia admire the fluffy socks, Ren chuckled, taking the tiny garments in his hands and feeling the softness of the material.

“Wanna buy a pair?”

“The sheer amount of options is making me dizzy! There’s so much we need to buy, but look at me, I keep on lingering in the clothing section.”

“Yeah, but we’re getting a crib and a baby seat handed down from one of my seniors at work, so let’s go wild and buy what we like. Within reasonable limits, of course,” Ren said, stretching his lips in a big, happy smile, and patted Mia on the head.

Becoming a husband had done nothing to change Ren’s scary face making him look like a villain, but his eyes were incredibly kind. Mia nodded and, after careful consideration, chose just one more cute animal onesie to put in the basket, and then they went to the checkout counter, adding several more baby necessities along the way.

“**YOU** know, I’ve been thinking a lot lately,” Mia uttered softly, addressing Ren who was sitting next to her.

After they had finished shopping, the two of them had been unpacking their new goods at home. Taking another sip of her rooibos tea with a dash of maple syrup that Ren had made for her, Mia let out a sigh.

“Hm?” Ren, seated on the same sofa, turned to face her, his mug of coffee still attached to his lips.

“We are going to have a baby, right? But should I teach them magic, or should the sorcerers’ lineage end with me?” Mia doubted aloud, softly stroking her barely rounded belly.

The first time she had felt the baby move had been just at the end of her fourth month of pregnancy. She remembered feeling startled at the sudden sensation; it had felt as if something had bubbled up from within her. ...She had felt such overwhelming joy bloom inside her at that, but gnawing doubt had accompanied the happiness, almost overshadowing it.

Magic had been passed down through blood in her family. Even if she wouldn't teach her child magic, they might still end up casting a spell accidentally. However, originally, the very reason for the existence of Mia's magic had been to activate the great magical art of darkness. That is what she had been told growing up.

Maybe, hiding this truth from her baby was what was best in the long run. Having special powers, the pride and the whole manner of thinking associated with magic, was something that Mia had learned through growing up as the future "Supreme Ruler of Evil". However, the last vestiges of the Supreme Ruler of Evil had already vanished from within the young woman.

How should she bring up this kind of topic with her child? It's not as if there is the 'Magic Talk' and no, not the one that deals with your body going through changes... What should she do when her child discovered magic for themselves? Mia couldn't help but worry about these questions.

After giving her belly a gentle stroke, Ren asked her quietly,

"What about 'Miangia'?"

"I have no intention of teaching such a spell to our child. I will not tell them that there once was a 'Supreme Ruler of Evil' or about the spell to take over the world. The ideals I have inherited from Father end with me. Those sins are mine to bear. I will keep on carrying them my whole life, and I intend to take them with me to my grave...apologizing to my ancestors all the while."

Mia was still not done asking forgiveness for what she had failed to accomplish. After all, they had been working hard towards one ideal, and one ideal only since time immemorial, and it had been none other than Mia who had ruined their effort. It had been her foot that had squashed the will, the hopes, the fervent wish of all the sorcerers of the past. That alone was unforgivable, but to add insult to injury, she had chosen the dishonorable

option to live on.

And to make matters even worse, despite the fact that the matter would be resolved once and for all if she perished without leaving anything behind, she was about to give birth to the next generation. Mia was both happy and sad at the same time about bringing this “next generation” into this world. It had unmistakably been this sprout of a life within her that had opened up a new path before her and all the people she loved. As if sensing Mia’s inner turmoil, Ren suddenly put an ear to her stomach.

“H-Hey!”

“Hm, is this the baby moving? I can’t really tell yet. I hope I’ll be able to feel it too.”

“Well, yes, right now it’s more of a light popping sensation. It doesn’t feel like kicking that people talk about so much.”

“Ah, okay,” Ren said and stroked her belly again, his ear still pressed to it.

Then he slowly raised his head back up, put an arm around Mia’s shoulders and pulled her to his side. “Whether you’re gonna teach our kid magic or not, I’ll leave that up to you. You’re gonna have to be the one to do any teaching in that regard after all. If you wanna know my opinion, I’d like you to teach her, though.”

“Really? ...But—”

“It doesn’t have to be strict and nothing-but-magic like it was with you. Just teach her in bits and pieces whenever you have a spare minute and make each time a chance for mother and child to bond. Something that only the two of you will have together.” Ren smiled gently. “Of course you can always bring the old man along on any trips to the mountains or flights across Japan!”

Whenever I have a spare minute?! Mia’s eyes bulged.

“How about I teach *you* a lesson about the lofty and noble art of magic,” Mia began, but Ren placed his lips over hers in a bid to nip the brewing argument in the bud.

“Mmph?!”



Ever since she had met Ren, they had kissed countless times—first it was unprovoked touching, then he claimed it was a sort of means to annoy her, and now, when their hearts were one, the kisses became a part of their daily routine, akin to a greeting. But no matter how many times he claimed her lips, it always felt wonderful. However, he would always kiss her at the most unexpected of times, so he never failed to catch her off guard.

Tearing away from her lips finally, Ren let a lazy grin overtake his face. “Look, I was pretty serious when I told you I want you to teach our kid magic. Of course, you don’t have to teach her offensive spells and stuff. Pour intent into your words and speak them—this, the very basis of your magic, and some of those cute spells you’re so good at. Conjuring up flowers, making any drink taste like hot chocolate, stuff like that. I’m sure you’ll instill all the necessary morals and ideals needed to not be a future Supreme Ruler of Evil.”

...Because Mia was earnest and kind. From garbage sorting to people’s morals, she was a righteous woman through and through, despising everything that was wrong and crooked with all her heart.

“Any child that you’re raising will turn out great,” Ren crooned.

Mia, her cheeks tingeing pink, inquired from him in a tiny voice, “...Why do you want me to do it so much? Teaching our child magic, I mean...”

“Well, it’s just that it’d be so great to have a magic-wielding daughter, don’t you think? I am secretly so proud, you know, that my wife’s actually a sorceress. When I think that my daughter will be one too, it just thrills the heck outta me!”

“What kind of nonsense are you thinking?!” Mia’s eyes narrowed in suspicion at the chuckling Ren.

Is this what he had been thinking about the whole time? Unease resurfaced on Mia’s face; she was unable to shake the discomfort that rose in her at the idea of “teaching magic”. The pride, the entire philosophy surrounding the arcane arts. It was too heavy of a topic to approach casually. The whole system of thinking her ancestors had built and she had trampled underfoot was difficult to push aside lightly.

Ren hugged the brooding Mia close to him and carded his hands through her

hair soothingly. *You don't have to deal with it alone, I'm right here*, said the man's gaze as he looked his beloved wife in the eyes. Then, he raised his index finger, indicating he had an idea,

"If you're uncomfortable with using the word 'magic', there's a handy replacement for it. You can use it instead to teach our girl simple spells."

"...And what would that handy word be?" Mia asked with raised eyebrows.

He pressed a kiss to her lips and whispered, "You can tell her it's a good luck charm."

The End

Afterword

HELLO, dear reader!

My name is Kaede Kikyou. Thank you very much for reading *The Champions of Justice and the Supreme Ruler of Evil*. If this story made you laugh, even just a little bit, and maybe shed an emotional tear every once in a while, I, as an author, would be very happy.

Originally, I published this story as a web novel on a Japanese website. I don't speak a word of English, so, naturally, I have been writing with a Japanese audience in mind. But then, I received an offer to get my story translated into English and published as an e-book.

At first, I was shocked. Then I felt anxious. Would people across the globe really have fun reading my novel? But at the same time, I was excited. So far, I have always received comments and reviews in Japanese, from Japanese readers, but if even a single person living in another country would read my book and enjoy it...how wonderful and amazing would that be, I thought. I'm very happy that you are now one of those people.

I asked the publisher to give me some time to revise the text and prepare it for translation. I rewrote some bits of it, but it still features a lot of Japanese local flavor and scenes from Japanese everyday life. There are small apartments in wooden buildings, police chasing down monkeys, *onigiri* lunch sets at Mia's school cafeteria, the popular entertainment venue in Japan known as *pachinko*, and people going to hot springs for a nice long soak. What would the people living abroad make of these things? Would they be able to make sense of the Japanese dishes Subaru is making? Thinking about all these questions while working on the revision of my novel was a lot of fun.

This is a story about the Supreme Ruler of Evil plotting world domination, and a group of Champions of Justice called the Crow Rangers that are trying to put an end to Mia's evil deeds. However, the Supreme Ruler of Evil turns out to be too full of goodness to be called a villain, and there are times where you

question whether the Crow Rangers can truly be called the Champions of Justice. It's about the positions they are in and the actions they actually end up taking, and, of course, about Ren toying with Mia's maiden heart. If you could enjoy any of the different factors that come into play in my story, then I am satisfied as an author and writer.

Now, and I digress, I have heard that there is an American remake of a Japanese Super Sentai movie in the making. A question an American has asked me when we were talking about it has stuck with me so much I can still remember it: "Why are there five Champions of Justice?" It's a good question!

The superheroes popular in America often fight alone. Why is it that the Japanese superheroes usually form a unit and battle the forces of evil together? I have pondered this question for a while, and, I regret to say I haven't been able to find an answer. In the minds of the Japanese people, the Champions of Justice are a group by default, and have been for a long time now, was the only answer I could come up with, so I hope that this will do it for you! This is also why there are five Crow Rangers. They each have a distinct personality, so quintuple the fun, right?

With this, I will say goodbye for now, but I hope that we will meet again someday.

Kaede Kikyou.



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