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FAILURE FRAME

I BECAME THE STRONGEST AND **ANNIHILATED EVERYTHING**

WITH LOW-LEVEL SPELLS

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“F-from what I’ve heard, then...
Y-you two are like totally, er...
a thing? I mean, I figured
from the mood that
there was somethin’
there, but...I wasn’t
expecting this.
Whoa. Like...whoa.”

Itsuki was flustered
and turning a little red
herself.

TAKAO ITSUKI

“ANEKI...
THEY’RE
LIKE...
SERIOUS!”

TAKAO HIJIRI





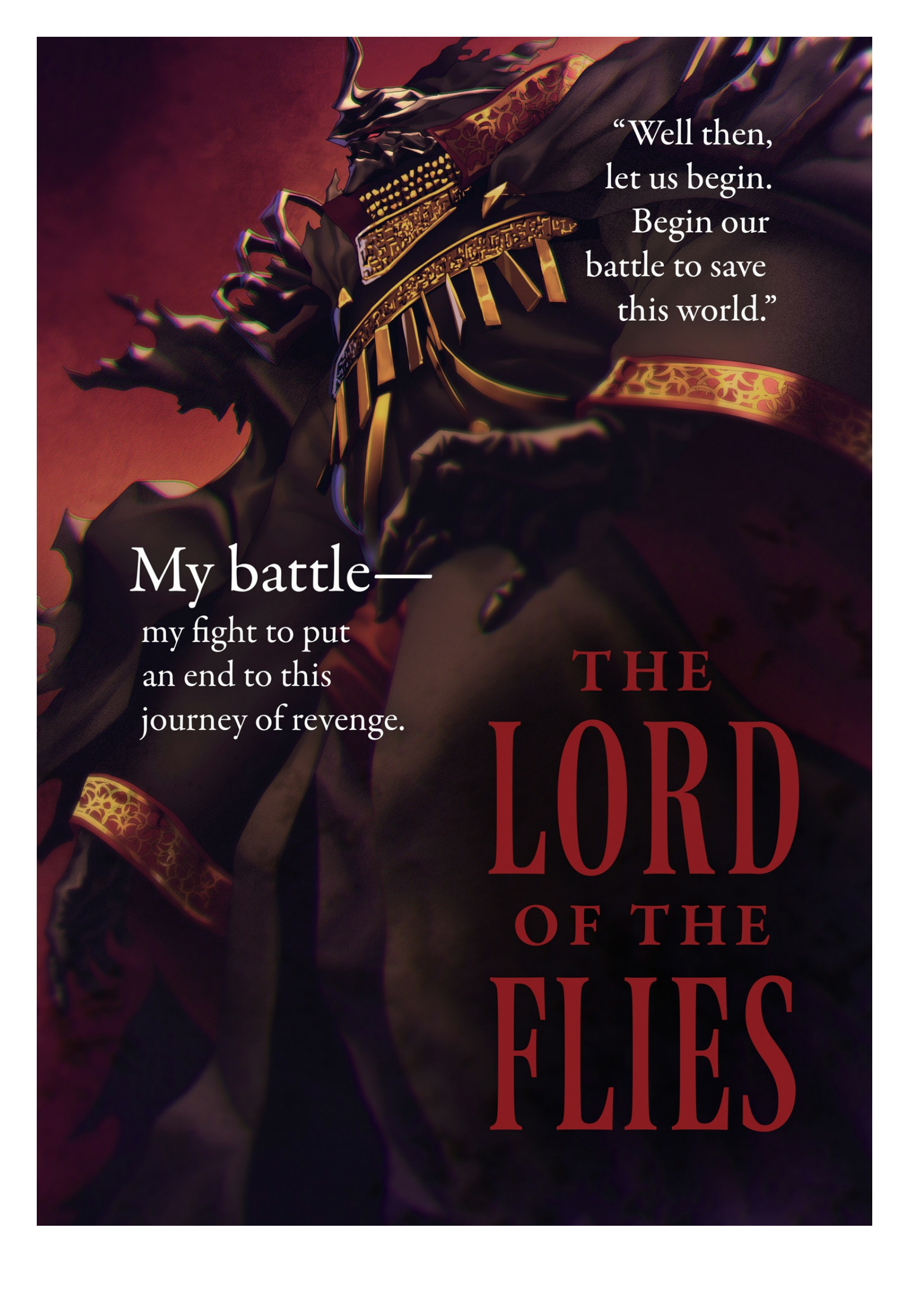
NYANTAN KIKIPAT

“Nee-nya, Nee-nya,”
she cried, mumbling it to herself
unconsciously as she ran at full tilt toward her.

“NEE-NYAAAAA—!
WAAAAHN!”

The one who had just entered also ran, heading
straight for Nyaki. The two of them grew closer.
The newcomer opened her arms, ready to
receive Nyaki, and they embraced.

NYAKI



“Well then,
let us begin.
Begin our
battle to save
this world.”

My battle—
my fight to put
an end to this
journey of revenge.

THE LORD OF THE FLIES

FAILURE FRAME

I BECAME THE STRONGEST AND ANNIHILATED EVERYTHING

WITH LOW-LEVEL SPELLS



WRITTEN BY
KAORU SHINOZAKI

ILLUSTRATED BY
KWKM



Seven Seas Entertainment

HAZURE WAKU NO [JOUTAI IJOU SUKIRU] DE SAIKYOU NI NATTA ORE
GA SUBETE WO JUURIN SURU MADE VOL. 11

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Illustrations by KWKM

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Prologue

“FIRST OFF—I’d like to know if we’re going to cast Freeze on Kiri-hara.”

Sogou Ayaka’s face was still buried in Takao Hijiri’s chest, but I was speaking mainly to her. Her shoulders twitched in response and I waited for her reply. When nothing came, Hijiri spoke in her stead.

“Right... I agree that matter is one that we should discuss in short order.” She looked down at Sogou, whose face was still pressed against her chest. “Sogou-san, there is one thing that I must tell you now—the person who saved me when I was on the verge of death...was someone whom Mimori-kun saved. I should also add that Vicius is an enemy who must be defeated. If you wish to know exactly how I came to be here now, we can take our time talking that over in private.”

I waited and chose my moment to speak.

“About my Freeze skill... Look, all I can do is ask that you trust me. If you’re worried about Kiri-hara’s injuries, then we can treat them before using Freeze on him. Sleep still has enough duration left to keep him under.”

Hijiri turned her gaze in my direction.

“This insect that you first used your Freeze skill on... three hundred days haven’t passed since it was put on ice, right? Nobody can be sure what it will look like after those three hundred days are over,” she said.

“For some reason, my skill draws a distinction between living and dead targets. For living ones, Freeze is like a preservation—I think of it kind of like suspended animation. Have you ever heard of cryosleep? Comes up in science fiction sometimes... Like when there’s no treatment available for some disease, people get frozen so they can be thawed out when one’s been developed. I think that’s one of the ways this skill can be used. Like a preservation tool for the living.”

That might have been laying it on too thick... But there's also no way of disproving my theory. It's even possible that Mimori Touka believes that from "the bottom of his heart."

"There must be some reason why the skill responds differently to living and dead targets... I think that must have some significance."

It was then that Sogou spoke, her face still buried in Hijiri's chest. "...Hijiri-san... What d-do you think? A-about this Freeze ability..."

"Well...I think he makes a convincing case. There's a logic to what he's saying...and he isn't lying. My unique skill has evolved and now allows me to see through deception. And I know that Mimori-kun isn't lying to us."

"..."

So, she's got that ability now then, eh? That's news to me... But it's just like Takao Hijiri to be cautious. Come to think of it, Hijiri's unique skill is Wind—and Seras relies on her spirit of wind to see through lies, too. Maybe their abilities work on the same principle. Regardless, revealing that Hijiri has the ability to see through lies is likely going to be effective in this situation. If Sogou believes anything Takao Hijiri has to say—then I can use her as a seal of truth to get Sogou to believe what I'm telling her too.

"Hey, Hijiri-san..." said Sogou, her voice trembling. "Don't you th-think...we might be able to convince Kirihara-kun to help us? I-I thought if we could get through to him, then..."

"Unfortunately, I don't think it's feasible for us to build a cooperative working relationship with Kirihara-kun at present."

"..."

"Given the erratic and unstable nature of Kirihara-kun's actions and mental state, I believe we would constantly need to remain on guard against his...*violent outbursts* while fighting by his side. Also, I am not confident in my own ability to control him. This is why I am in favor of Mimori-kun's plan. At

least, that is my opinion.”

Takao Itsuki broke in, cheerfully picking up where her older sister had left off, “Aneki’s for it, so like... Let’s just go with Mimori’s idea, yeah? Mimori’s freezing skill can keep him alive and on ice for ages, right? I figure we’ll be in real danger if we go easy on the restraints, y’know? Anyway... Kirihara’s deffo gonna be nothin’ but trouble! He was like... *always* a pain, though, I guess.”

Sogou’s shoulders trembled as she sobbed, and Hijiri softly placed a hand upon her head.

“Itsuki.”

“Yah?”

“Be a little more considerate with the words you direct at Sogou-san, if you would.”

“Nh—S-sorry. Ahh... Now Aneki’s made me...uuugh...”

Itsuki’s shoulders sank in despair.

A word of warning from her sister was enough to make her that sad, huh?

Hijiri kept Sogou in her warm embrace as she spoke.

“It is because I failed in my attempt to assassinate Vicius that you were forced to carry these heavy burdens to begin with, Sogou-san... There is no need for you to feel responsible for any of this.”

Suddenly Sogou’s head jerked upwards. “Th-that’s not true! The things I’ve done... They aren’t your responsibility, Hijiri-san. I decided to do them all on my own. In the end I’ve always relied on you...far too much.”

That said, she’s still relying on Takao Hijiri right now. The only one that she can turn to... That’s why, when it comes to making these major decisions, Sogou’s answer will depend on what Hijiri thinks. Watching the two of them, I feel like I know that for sure.

Sogou started sobbing again.

She wants Hijiri to make sense of her confused and jumbled emotions. At least, that's how it looks to me... She must've really been at her breaking point, in more ways than one. The dangerous aura that was emanating from her before Hijiri arrived feels much weaker now. I made the right call in inviting Hijiri here to deal with Sogou.

“So...” I said. “Do we have an agreement on the Freeze matter, Sogou? No matter what Takao Hijiri says, I won't use Freeze on Kiriara without your permission—and I don't intend to do so unless you agree.”

I don't feel great about doing things this way—leading her down a path that ultimately leaves her with only one “decision” to make—but making her decide is the best way to have her accept this.

...Ah, now I get it. This is how Vicius does it, too. She forced Sogou to be the one to choose.

“You chose this yourself”—so now you must carry that burden on your own. It's like a curse she cast on herself. And now I'm doing the same thing that Vicius did.

We're the same.

“...”

I could see how conflicted Sogou was. Neither Hijiri nor anyone else present tried to rush her for an answer.

We're just waiting. There's no point in a decision reached through pressuring her.

Eventually—Sogou opened her mouth to speak, eyes still downturned.

“I...”

“Please, Lady Ayaka. Will you trust the words that Sir Too-ka has spoken to you?”

She was suddenly interrupted by Seras Ashrain. Sogou looked up and turned her eyes toward Seras.

“Seras-san...”

“If Takuto Kirihara dies...then I will die with him.”

I looked over at her, a little surprised. “Seras...?”

So, this is her decision.

“Seras-san... Th-that would mean...” Sogou looked completely caught off guard by her words.

“I have no desire to die,” replied Seras calmly, one hand placed over the left side of her chest.

“...”

“However... I believe so strongly in Sir Too-ka that I am willing to stake my life on it. Sir Too-ka... It is true, that...there are many whom he has killed. Others whom he has deceived. He declares that this journey of his is a personal one, carried out for the purposes of his own revenge. However, in our travels, I have seen his actions save many good people with my own eyes. He has saved me countless times, as well. Without Sir Too-ka...I do not know what would have become of me by now.”

Seras’s long eyelashes fluttered downward. She smiled, seeming to savor her next words as she spoke them.

“Sir Too-ka has always taken steps to save the good and powerless from the unreasonable evil-doers of this world. In that respect, I believe he has done everything he can. At times...he has even chosen to sacrifice himself. Sir Too-ka has made this decision because he has found another whom he believes must be protected... That is what I think.” Seras looked straight forward, eyes fixed directly on Sogou.

“...”

Sogou’s clearly been affected by Seras’s words. Hijiri was already starting to bring her around, but it might be that Seras is what decides this.

Sogou looked down.

“...Okay.” She squeezed her hands into fists, then looked up. “Cast your Freeze skill on Kirihara-kun.”

“...Thank you, Sogou,” I answered.

She laughed—a twisted laugh, with tears still pouring down her face.

“To be frank with you...I just don’t know. How would we convince Kirihara-kun to stop...? What would we say to him? I don’t know... I don’t believe in myself right now... It’s easier for me to trust in Hijiri-san and Seras-san. I just I can’t...”

Sogou dived back to Hijiri’s chest, clinging at her once more. They started to speak, back and forth, whispering so softly that I couldn’t hear what they were saying...though I thought I could make out the words *“So long as you trust him, Hijiri-san.”*

After a while, Hijiri nodded.

“Mimori-kun... We’ll have you cast Freeze on Kirihara-kun once his injuries have been treated. Can you accept those terms?”

“I can, yes.”

“That’s fine by you too, right, Sogou-san?”

Sogou Ayaka nodded her head, her face still buried in Takao Hijiri’s chest.

It was decided that Seras would treat Kirihara’s injuries, as she was the most familiar with first aid. I waited by her side, ready to take action at once if Kirihara caused her any...*problems* during her work. Seras wiped the sweat from her forehead as she concentrated on treating her patient.

She’s doing great, especially considering she’s not had time to recover from the exhaustion of the fight. She hasn’t uttered a single word of complaint.

“ ... ”

It speaks to who Seras is as a person that she got through to Sogou. She's straightforward and clear. The words of the pure-hearted resonate best with others who are pure of heart as well. In the end, she clinched the deal at the final moment.

Maybe Sogou and Seras should have been the ones to team up together. What if this was the story of Sogou Ayaka and Seras Ashrain's travels across the continent? If only this world wasn't so infested with evil. This might have been a nobler tale—something pure and heart-warming instead.

"I-I've barely been of any use at all—have I...?" pondered Munin.

Slei brayed and gave her an encouraging nuzzle in reply.

A short while later, Seras's first aid was done.

"Freeze."

And so, Kirihara Takuto fell into slumber beneath the ice—to awaken in three hundred days' time.

Chapter 1:

After the Deathmatch

AFTER SOGOU watched Kirihara's body freeze, she lost consciousness—falling asleep against Hijiri's chest.

"All the threads that were stretched so taut within her have been cut loose, I imagine. By the looks of her, I don't believe she's had a proper night's sleep in several days. There is also the burden that her *kyokugen* ability places on her body to consider. I believe we should let her sleep for a while," said Hijiri, softly stroking Sogou's hair.

"Excuse me, Sir Too-ka," began Seras hesitantly. She stood beside me, looking like a student fully prepared for a scolding from one of her teachers.

"You don't need to apologize about taking the initiative by trying to convince Sogou to believe me earlier," I said, jumping in before she could apologize. Seras's eyes widened in surprise, then a few seconds later she gave me one of her wry smiles.

"You knew what I was about to say, Sir Too-ka."

"It was Takao Hijiri who managed to talk her over, but I think you're the one who gave Sogou the final push. In the end, I think you made the right call."

Putting your life on the line might have been going a bit too far, though. I suppose the strength of those words was effective, though. Not to mention that even if Kirihara had died, Sogou would never have allowed Seras to take her own life and make good on her promise—that's just the kind of person that she is. I could tell from Sogou's reaction to Seras's words that she wouldn't have let her die.

"You've really been a huge help, Seras. Your first aid and in the fight against Kirihara."

“Not at all,” Seras replied. “It was your multitude of strategies that won the day, Sir Too-ka. I do not think for a moment that I could have defeated Takuto Kiri-hara alone. Not to mention...” Seras quickly turned away from me, joining her white hands behind her back. “I am more certain now than ever before. Certain of how reassuring it is to have you by my side in a fight. It was due to your presence that I was able to fully focus on my own role in combat, Sir Too-ka.”

“You’re not the only one,” I replied. “I mean, we only won this fight because of you, Munin, Piggymaru, and Sle-i. I’m always telling you, aren’t I? There’s no point in a plan...”

“...If there’s nobody who can put it into action,” Seras interrupted me, twirling on the spot to look straight in my direction. “Am I correct?”

I snorted at her. “I guess I didn’t even need to say it.”

“Too-ka, you were sharp as a tack!” exclaimed Munin, bouncing over and putting her hands on Seras’s shoulders. Sle-i was behind her, in her first stage of transformation.

“Pak-yu-h!”

Itsuki looked over at Sle-i from a distance as she raised her forelegs happily into the air.

“Ehh? What’s that cute little thing over there...? Did I just hear a *pak-yu-h...?!?*” She looked quite taken with Sle-i.

“You did well too, Munin,” I said.

“Hoh hoh, I’m glad to hear you say so...” Munin’s eyes dropped to the palms of her hands. “I am happy that the plan worked.”

This was a test run of her forbidden magic, I guess. I want to make sure to avoid any activation problems when it comes to using it for real. We ran into the worst-case scenario during the battle with Kiri-hara...but in the end we were able to use that to our advantage and settled the issue of whether Munin’s forbidden

magic is going to be effective before the final fight.

“With that in mind, that’s how I want our fights using forbidden magic to go. We don’t just need to get in close enough to be in range with your spells, but also create an opening to actually use them.”

The range on the forbidden magic’s disable ability is about the same as Paralyze—roughly twenty meters.

“Whether we can manage that or not is going to be the issue,” I noted.

None of my status effect skills are going to be of any use against Vicius unless we can land that forbidden magic first.

Munin looked over to the Takao Sisters and Sogou, who stood some distance away. The two sisters were checking on how Kirihara and Sogou were doing.

“You don’t believe that Sogou could defeat Vicius?” asked Munin.

Takao Hijiri’s an S-class hero too, and she lost to Vicius in a fight. Apparently that Goddess has some way of powering herself up. Back when Hijiri fought Vicius, she was weakened by the effects of the Demon King’s essence—Hijiri said the two of them were about evenly matched under those conditions. She had to be weakened to be brought down to the level at which an S-class hero could fight her. But Sogou seems to be even stronger than Hijiri in combat...

“...It’s a real unknown at this point,” I said.

Then there’s Ikusaba Asagi’s unique skill, Queen Bee. If she could land that on the Goddess—it could drag Vicius down to our level. The problem is still getting in range, though. There’s also a possibility that Asagi’s skills might be blocked by the Goddess’s Dispel Bubble. Not to mention I don’t really know how much I can trust Asagi as an ally, come to think of it.

“From my perspective, given how much Vicius seems to be avoiding it... This forbidden magic and status effect skill combo seems like it has the highest chance of succeeding against her.”

“Yes, I am of the same opinion. *Ho ho...* I do feel that if you defeated Vicius

with your own skills, it would also feel *much* more like settling the matter personally. Like *destiny*.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to get too caught up in all that.”

Anyway...

“How do you feel about this, Munin?”

“Me? Well...I do feel that if my forbidden magic played some part in Vicius’s defeat, it might allow me to return to my clan with my head held high.” Munin giggled, changing her tone. “*Heh...* But we can’t have this important battle hinging on my pride, can we?”

“I’ve always been motivated by my personal goals. That’s how I got this far. I have no right to deny your motivations.”

Yeah. Personal reasons are fine by me. Just as long as we all want the same thing.

“I’d like if we could speak together alone for a while. Would you mind?”

The person addressing me was Hijiri. Seras, Munin, and Itsuki were off having a conversation some distance away.

“Seems like we’ve got a lot to talk about,” I replied, watching as Itsuki placed a cloth over Kiri-hara. “There were limits to what we could get to through that familiar—you mind if I just call you Hijiri?”

“It’s a little late for honorifics now. I don’t think they suit you, either.”

“Right. So, Hijiri... What is it you want to talk about?”

“First, the Mimori Touka I knew from the old world...was that an act?”

“Well... That’s one place to start.”

“Now that I’ve met you, you seem to be a completely different person. Your face is identical to the one I remember, but it’s as if your personality has been entirely replaced. That would require some significant stage talent.”

“You’re not wrong in thinking that the Mimori Touka from the old world was an act.”

“Then this is the real you?”

“That’s probably closer to the truth.”

“You had some reason for hiding your true self, I take it.”

“My family situation was a little complicated, you understand? Made me try my hardest to stay in the background in our old world. I needed to pretend I was harmless, blend into the crowd.”

“I see,” said Hijiri, her expression nonchalant as always. “Well, all people cultivate a persona for the purpose of existing in society, to some extent. Most of the masks we wear are taken up by choice, temporary selves to suit a purpose. In your case, the mask you wore was exceptionally detailed and well-crafted, it seems.”

...I remember now that Takao Hijiri’s always been a bit long-winded with her metaphors. She must really have had to hold back when we were talking through that familiar.

“Personally speaking, I don’t *dislike* the way that you are now.”

“Never thought I’d hear those words from Takao Hijiri.”

“I believe the real you is better suited to surviving in this world. And I must add—you and the rest of the members of 2-C all think too highly of me.”

“Does 2-C think the same way about Sogou, too?”

Hijiri gazed over at Sogou. “Sogou-san is still just a teenage girl... I think I must have lost sight of that fact somewhere along the way.”

“She’s a skilled athlete, with incredible grades and stunning good looks. She’s the leader of her own group of heroes and our class rep. Then there are those ancient martial arts she’s trained in, yeah? She’s considerate and honest, with a strong sense of what’s right... She’s *pure*. Sogou’s a fine person. She’s got... *everything*.”

“One of those traits is a double-edged sword.”

“...Purity, yeah?”

“The pure are often exploited by the wicked. That is the way of the world.”

“Her purity makes it easier for others to dye her in their colors.”

Easy to brainwash, in other words.

“I think that purity is a sacred thing, in and of itself,” said Hijiri, never taking her eyes from Sogou, a hint of some fleeting emotion in her gaze. “But if she’s going to live free and pure in this world, then someone’s going to have to be her catcher in the rye. That’s just my interpretation of the situation, though. My personal theory.”

“Catcher in the rye?”

Isn’t that the name of a novel? I think I’ve heard it before.

I thought I understood what Hijiri was trying to say. “You mean people like Sogou need protectors—people who know the evils of the world and can guard them?”

“Yes, that is what I mean.”

Like the princess, back when Seras was a Holy Knight of Neah, perhaps.

An ever so slight hint of complex emotion flashed through Hijiri’s eyes. “In truth, it is because Sogou-san is so pure that my decision was difficult.”

Apparently Hijiri hesitated in the moments before attempting to assassinate Vicius, unsure of whether to reveal her plan to Sogou Ayaka or not.

She wavered over whether to talk about her connections to Mira, and the way that they might be able to return home... About all of the plans she’d made against Vicius.

“On the off chance that I were to fail in my attempt to assassinate Vicius, I thought for a time that I might entrust all of my plans to her,” said Hijiri.

She went on to confide that she had prepared two different letters for Sogou.

“You figured that the letter which detailed all of your plans would make it too difficult for Sogou to hide its contents from Vicius?”

“She is far too pure. In addition... Revealing my plans to Vicius might have placed a certain individual in danger. That person may be the key to defeating Vicius. I prioritized that individual’s safety and used Sogou-san as a decoy. In other words, she was also a method of distracting Vicius.”

“Seems possible to me that you were also just worried about Sogou’s safety.”

“...”

“If Sogou knew about your rebellion against Vicius, that foul Goddess would surely see her as a coconspirator.”

She might never have forgiven Sogou for that. But if Sogou knew nothing at all...? That would leave her in a position to continue being used by the Goddess, safe from any unreasonable punishment by association. Isn't that what Hijiri was thinking?

I continued to look in Sogou’s direction.

“You don’t exactly hate Sogou either, do you?” I asked.

The roundabout question left Hijiri in silence for a few moments.

“Upon reflection, I believe the emotions I felt were quite unusual for my character. You’re right...it was a rare, odd flash of ego, I think.”

That wasn't a clear answer to my question, but it did basically sound like a yes.

“So—you failed to assassinate Vicius and decided to re-establish contact with Sogou once you were back on your feet. You were going to wait for the right moment to tell her your plans, drawing her over to the anti-Goddess side. But then disaster struck...”

“And I lost consciousness,” Hijiri finished. “Taken by the poison that Vicius used against me.”

“Then Itsuki—whom you’d told to take a message to Sogou—ended up choosing to prioritize saving your life instead.” I looked from Itsuki to Sogou. “And Sogou was brainwashed by the Goddess. Then it was too late.”

She broke.

Hijiri shook her head in woe. “After my failure to assassinate Vicius... Everything was delayed by my poisoning at her hands and Sogou-san was swayed by the Goddess in the worst possible way. I told you, didn’t I? Everyone thinks *far* too highly of me. Look at my track record and you’ll see a series of failures.”

“You might call it that, but I think you’ve avoided the worst-case scenario.”

Hijiri’s gaze dropped to her own feet at my remark. “I wonder...”

Now that I see her up close, her eyelashes are almost as long as Seras’s.

“Both of you survived to make it here, didn’t you? And we’ve got Sogou for the time being, alive and well. From my perspective, yours is the kind of failure that we can recover from...in terms of results, anyway.”

“Is this your way of trying to cheer me up, Mimori-kun?”

“Yeah.” I gazed over at Seras and the others. “Having more expectations hurled at you than you can handle, and trying in earnest to live up to them all... That can be tough.”

“You speak as if from experience.”

“The Lord of the Flies and Mimori Touka aren’t as omnipotent as the people around them think. I’m not flawless or perfect, but I have to continue to *appear* that way. And I intend to spare no effort to do so. I need to keep getting results, even if means biting off more than I can chew, and doing so as hard as I can.”

Hmph. I snorted.

“This is a selfish journey of revenge that I’m dragging everyone on, so it’s my duty to be like this. I can’t make excuses for my lack of experience, like Sogou, or say I’m just a teenager.”

“Shouldering it all yourself, then, are you?”

“Don’t plot revenge if you aren’t prepared to get your hands dirty.”

Hijiri gave a short, wry chuckle. “Vicius ended up disposing of quite the hero, didn’t she...?”

“If I’d been left in that castle, I might have ended up being used by her just like the rest.”

“Like Sogou-san and Kirihara-kun?”

“Yeah. Anyway...thanks for your help with Kirihara. Your analysis of him came in handy.”

“Do you mind if I ask something, Mimori-kun? Regarding that Freeze skill of yours...” Hijiri started the question but stopped herself. “No, forget it. I’ve decided against it.”

I have a fair idea of what she was about to ask. Is Kirihara really going to be released from my skill “alive” after three hundred days have passed? In truth—I don’t know. I’ve never had a case that has passed the three-hundred-day mark, so I can’t be certain. When I explained my skill to Sogou, I believed in what I was saying from the heart. But if it turns out that Kirihara isn’t alive when Freeze is lifted, I’ll have lied. She might lose trust in Hijiri, who was the one who talked her into trusting me.

“I’ll take all of the blame for whatever happens. At least once all this is over...”

“An avenger who forges onward has many burdens to bear, I see... And no escape routes.”

“That’s what revenge is, though, isn’t it? Anyway...revisiting the past is well and good, but shouldn’t we get to what we’re going to do next?”

“You’re right,” said Hijiri, stroking her wet hair.

“First, that foul Goddess. Doesn’t seem like she came here with Kirihara, after all,” I noted.

“I think it’s possible her concerns about our possession of forbidden magic kept her from coming in person.”

“Or she wanted to use Kiri-hara to test whether we have the disable spell.”

“I see.”

“It’s also possible she was focusing on some other plan to defeat me while Kiri-hara and Sogou were butting heads. When it comes to items that Vicius is known to have an obsession with...”

“...The heart of the Demon King,” finished Hijiri.

“Most likely, yes,” I answered.

“There’s nothing among Kiri-hara-kun’s belongings that appears to be the heart. A certain collar was also missing.”

The collar that was meant to absorb the Demon King’s essence upon his death —also called Source Essence, according to the notes in that sealed room. Kiri-hara might have used that to absorb the Demon King’s power. He didn’t have it in his possession when he came here, meaning...

“There’s a good chance that the Source Essence is now in Vicius’s hands.”

Hijiri told me about the black sphere that Vicius had swallowed during Hijiri’s assassination attempt.

“The energy that lurks within the heart of the Demon King... Could it be connected to these black spheres?”

“You mean Vicius might be collecting Source Essence to increase her power as a divine, perhaps? But if sending us heroes home consumes a lot of Source Essence, then...”

“It follows that Vicius will want to keep all of it for herself and never return us to the old world.”

“There’s a chance that none of the past heroes have ever been returned to the old world. They might have been disposed of by Vicius or forced to stay and

live here against their will.”

“That sounds possible,” noted Hijiri.

“If she was getting rid of heroes, she would have used the Ruins of Disposal.”

Seems like there’s something keeping her from doing it with her own two hands...but as long as the heroes die in the Ruins of Disposal, that’s not a problem for her. I think that’s the reason why she goes through the trouble of sending people there.

“...”

Source Essence, huh?

If that stuff can be used to send heroes back to the old world, I feel like it must have other uses too. Things other than just increasing her divine power. This is Vicius we’re talking about. Her true objective might be something else.

“While we’re on the topic... Do you, your sister, and Sogou *want* to return to the old world?”

“We intend on doing so, yes. I believe that all our classmates following Sogou-san are also of the same intention.”

“With the forbidden magic of *sending home*, you’ll be able to return with or without Vicius herself. Of course, there’s no guarantee there’s enough Source Essence left to get you back... All we can do is hope for the best on that front. But unless we eliminate Vicius, I doubt we’ll be able to get our hands on any.”

Hijiri and I had already spoken about the forbidden magic of *sending home* in our conversation through the familiar.

“In other words, you’re saying that this fight will secure 2-C’s ability to return to our home world? And...you wish me personally to convey that message to Sogou-san.”

“I appreciate that you’re so quick on the uptake.”

All you have to say is, “We aren’t getting home unless we can defeat Vicius.”

Right now, that's what 2-C needs to be convinced of...and Takao Hijiri is the best hope I have of winning them over from within.

"About Sogou... Do you have some ideas about how to handle her, moving forward?"

"Once she has regained consciousness, will you leave that matter to me? Her mental state needs to be tended to, first and foremost."

"All right. I figure you're the only one capable of doing that now, anyway."

I'm sure that's the best move.

"How should we represent this to the public, I wonder?" asked Hijiri.

"Well, for now... Putting out that she's either dead or missing seems best."

"You're right. I don't think we should release anything that suggests she might have gone over to Mira's side in this conflict. Especially given how many of our classmates are thought to still be in Alion at the moment."

"Right... As soon as Sogou wakes up, they're who she's going to be most worried about. They're her greatest weakness, as things stand."

Sogou can't make any big moves so long as Vicius still has the rest of our classmates in the palm of her hand. Until we can ensure their safety, we won't be able to make use of Sogou Ayaka on the battlefield.

"If we could just find some way to get them out of Alion..."

Worst comes to worst, we might have to give up on using Sogou in combat entirely.

"Those who are left—there may be a way to get them out safely," suggested Hijiri.

A way? Ah, she must mean...

"The individual you mentioned—the one who may be the key to our fight against Vicius..."

"Yes... My collaborator on the inside, in other words. They may be capable of

leading our classmates from Alion, given the right timing to do so.”

“Will they be safe?”

“I think so, yes... But I have conveyed that they should prioritize their own safety above all else. In their heart, this individual cares nothing for Vicius—but the Goddess trusts them all the same.”

“Huh... I didn’t know there was anyone like that around.”

She’s not going to give me the name of the person who’s trusted by Vicius but is also capable of betraying her.

“...”

Certainly doesn’t sound like any of the people around Vicius that I knew.

Hijiri began tapping the ground with one shoe.

“Come to think of it, there’s no sense in hiding their name from you. From now on, we should be sharing as much information as possible with each other, I expect. My collaborator is Nyantan Kikipat.”

“Eh?!”

Nyaki.

So this is how we’ve made a connection, right here.

“Do you know her, perhaps?”

“No, we’ve never met. It’s just...”

She...

“I’d really like to get her here safe and sound is all,” I said.

I see. It does make sense that Nyaki’s “Nee-nya” is Hijiri’s collaborator on the inside.

Hijiri was unaware of the relationship between Nyaki and me, so I gave her the short version of events.

“I see. If we can convey this information about her sister Nyaki to Nyantan,

we may be able to secure her cooperation more firmly,” said Hijiri.

“We’ll end up using her, though—putting her in our debt,” I said.

“That seems all right, doesn’t it? No good deed goes unrewarded, does it?”

“Good deed? Well...”

I suppose I was just pissed off at how the Sword of Courage were treating Nyaki. In any case, having a collaborator in Alion would be huge.

Hijiri then went on to tell me specifically what she had asked Nyantan to do for her.

“The recording function on your phone?”

Apparently Itsuki’s skill has solved the charging issue. Given how soon our phones ran out of battery life, it’s hard to imagine Vicius knows what they’re capable of doing. The very fact that she knows so much about our world might have been what made her write them off. Even if she did know what smartphones can do, I bet she wasn’t too worried with all of them out of action.

“We can’t make calls or connect to any networks here, but our phones still have all of their offline functions.”

“You can take pictures and use them as a solid way to provide evidence, then,” I noted.

Convincing Nyantan to trust her was impressive stuff—I’d expect nothing less from Takao Hijiri. She even has a plan in place for saving Nyantan’s little sisters, who’ve been taken hostage by the Goddess. Not to mention that Vicius’s suspicions turned to focus on Sogou, giving Nyantan much more freedom to move. Sounds like she’s been changing her plans on the fly, adapting to the changing series of events.

“Unlike me, you’ve got your eyes on the big picture, haven’t you?” I asked.

“I created insurance when the ideas struck me and when it was possible to do so, that is all.”

Is that modesty or honesty? I can't tell based on her expression and the tone of her voice. Seizing those opportunities and moving to take action is what's really impressive.

"Nyantan Kikipat, huh..."

To be honest, when it comes to getting the rest of 2-C out safely and figuring out Vicius's true motives...in the worst-case scenario, I don't need to fulfill either objective. If I abandon our classmates, there's a high chance I'll lose Sogou Ayaka as a potential ally—but whatever Vicius might be planning has little to do with me. That foul Goddess might have some grand scheme in mind, but that changes nothing about my revenge. I'm going to crush her, no matter what.

What's most important to me now is knowing where Vicius is and what she's up to. With the forbidden magic in hand and my alliance with Mira established, everything I need is in place. But there is one thing I'd like to get done before the final showdown.

Regardless, I need to know where Vicius is and where she plans to go next. I'll use her movements to plot our own trajectory and plan of attack. For that, I'm going to have to depend on Erika's familiars, as originally planned. Erika understands that too. I also plan on asking her to search for Vicius's spies and agents in Mira, as a precaution.

"In our fight against Vicius, Nyantan isn't strictly necessary to our cause."

She was an element that I hadn't accounted for during the final battle.

Hijiri watched silently, as if waiting for my next words.

"But..." Nyaki's face floated into the back of my head—the way she looked when she said her Nee-nya's name. "Nyaki... Saving her is what's going to save me. We need to rescue Nyantan."

Lis, Nyaki—they're "me," after all.

"I feel like I understand it now," said Hijiri, turning to look at Seras. "Seras, Erika, Eve, Lis, and the rest... I see why they have such affection for you."

“The Lord of the Flies is a popular guy. He gathers followers wherever he goes,” I said.

“You don’t actually believe that, do you?”

“...I guess not.”

I see. Her unique skill told her I was lying.

“Mimori-kun.”

“Hm?”

“I still feel like I’m talking to a completely different person.”

“I feel weird too. Never thought I’d ever end up talking to *the* Takao Hijiri like this.”

Hijiri and I went on to talk further about our plans. First, we would use Erika and her familiars to track Vicius’s movements and attempt to make contact with Nyantan.

Depending on the situation, we might even have to consider sending her a verbal message.

“If Nyantan is being treated as a part of Vicius’s inner circle, she might be able to give us details on her whereabouts.”

I decided to consult with the Wildly Beautiful Emperor about the future treatment of the Takao Sisters, Sogou Ayaka, and Kiri-hara Takuto.

The emperor should be somewhere to the south-east of our location right now.

I sent out the magical war pigeon that I had prepared in advance, directing the bird toward the Miran group who were bringing the fake Seras and fake Lord of the Flies head to our meeting spot. I intended to use their group as a means of getting around once my fight with Kiri-hara was over. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor had gathered a group of men he trusted to hold their tongues for that very purpose.

“I’m going to keep you sisters, Sogou, and Kirihara in his present state a secret from the public for now. I think you’ll be in hiding somewhere for the time being.”

“This Wildly Beautiful Emperor—can he be trusted? I have never met the man in person,” said Hijiri.

Hijiri had planned her rebellion against the Goddess in collaboration with the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, but the emperor’s present knowledge of Hijiri Takao was only that all communications from her had ceased.

He should still consider her as an ally... They’ll be easy enough to connect.

I told Hijiri a little about my impressions of the emperor and my analysis of his character.

“Very well,” she answered when I was done. “Your thoughts align with my own. Incidentally...I did not ask for details, but Kashima-san and the rest are on Mira’s side, aren’t they?”

I explained to Hijiri what had happened—that Kashima and the others hadn’t been able to convince Sogou to join us.

“So I figured you’d be able to help us out with Sogou if Kashima wasn’t able to win her over. That’s why I invited you here.”

“Failing to persuade Sogou was one of your worst-case scenarios, then, Mimori-kun.”

Especially after that foul Goddess got to Yasu and Oyamada, yeah.

“I considered that she might have been brainwashed, leaving us no way to get through to her. The best-case scenario was always managing to sway her, of course.”

“Do you think we can trust Ikusaba...Asagi-san?” asked Hijiri.

“I don’t know,” I replied after a brief pause.

“Of course not. She’s—*different*.”

“...”

“I might even describe her as alien. I’ve observed her since I came to this world...but unlike you, Sogou-san, and Kirihara-kun, she appears to have no clear intentions or objectives. She has been far from inactive, however. It does not seem that Vicius is manipulating her, nor that she is simply being swept along by the flow as many of our classmates have been. And yet, there might be some part of her that does not particularly *care* how any of this turns out. It is not simple self-abandon. No...perhaps attempts to analyze her actions are meaningless. It’s just...” Hijiri was silent in thought for a few moments. “...Kashima-san.”

“Kashima?” I asked.

“It wasn’t this way at first, but...I feel as if the way that Asagi-san speaks with Kashima-san is different from the way that she interacts with everybody else. There’s something special between the two of them. At least, that’s the impression I get.”

“Asagi thinks I’m an idiot, that’s why...”

Isn’t that what Kashima said?

“The ability to detect lies seems to mean little when it comes to Asagi,” I explained. “I’ve never revealed to her that someone on our side has that ability, but it seems like she’s *noticed*.”

“You mean to say it would be difficult to determine her true intentions using my ability?”

“Even if you’re able to hide your ability from her, Asagi won’t talk to you about her true feelings. Or rather, I think it’s possible that’s just the way that she talks to *everyone*—assuming that we’re all able to see through lies. There’s a lot about her that I can’t make sense of.”

Ikusaba Asagi. I feel like she and I are similar.

...An alien, eh?

“Do you think she will stand in our way in our fight against Vicius?” asked Hijiri.

“...Not sure. She’d sure be a capable ally if we could trust her, though.”

Could it be that Kashima is the key to handling Asagi? We need to create an opening by distracting Vicius in our final battle. That’s going to be easier to achieve if we present her with more enemies to split her focus.

Then we need to cheat. We need to have more allies than she does.

“Though we’ll be fighting side by side, we should remain cautious of her. Maybe that’s the best we can do for now?”

“...Yeah, that sounds about right.”

Right then... Sogou’s showing no signs of waking. Hijiri did mention that the mental shock might take her a while to get over.

“Come to think of it...we spoke a little of Yasu-kun’s situation through that familiar, but...” began Hijiri.

“If Mira has the people to spare, we might consider sending out a search party,” I answered.

If he’s made use of that writ of passage somewhere, that would make him easier to locate.

“Do you think he’d be willing to join our side?”

“I can’t give you a firm yes on that. He still looked unstable when I last saw him. He said he wanted to get a good look at this world with his own eyes, so—I don’t really think it’s our place to ask.”

“But from what you said, it seems unlikely he will oppose us.”

“Not so long as Vicius doesn’t capture and brainwash him...again. But, well... considering the Sogou situation, it might be best to seek him out and bring the two of them together. I’ll give the Yasu matter some thought.”

The mention of Yasu seemed to bring another of our classmates to Hijiri’s

mind.

“Regarding our plan to have Nyantan take the opportunity to lead Zakurogi-sensei and the others from the castle while Vicius isn’t looking... It’s unclear whether she’ll be able to take Oyamada-kun with her. His mental state was severely damaged at the Battle of the White Citadel. I don’t believe he’s currently in his right mind, and very few of our classmates have had any contact with him since the Great Invasion. Vicius claimed to be treating him, but given his condition, there is a real danger he may have been brainwashed and manipulated.”

I hadn’t told Hijiri about Oyamada yet.

“Oyamada Shogo is missing.”

Hijiri let a look of confusion spread across her face.

“...Mimori-kun?”

“He got out of Alion, but nobody knows where he went after that, apparently.”

Her stare said, *You know, don’t you?*

She knows I’m lying.

“Look...if the topic of Oyamada comes up with Sogou, that’s what I want you to tell her.”

“...”

“Once all this has been cleared up, I’ll explain everything.”

Even if we win this fight and have everything we need to return to our old world, Sogou Ayaka won’t leave until she’s found Oyamada Shogo. If I’m going to have Hijiri working as a go-between to make use of Sogou’s power, then at some point I’m going to need to talk to her about him.

“Telling her now would only place unnecessary obstacles in the way of my revenge. I don’t intend to do anything that will lower my chances of victory.”

Hijiri seemed to catch my meaning. *I knew she would.*

“Understood. I won’t pry any further into the matter...for *now*. But when you do reveal all of this to Sogou-san once everything is over, I can’t be held responsible for how she reacts.”

“Fine.”

I knew that Takao Hijiri would be on board.

After a moment, she folded her arms and looked up at me.

“You... You aren’t trying to get rid of her at all, then, are you?”

“Nope.”

“Is it because of what she did for you? Trying to protect you as Vicius disposed of you?”

“I dunno. You could say I’ve already repaid her by protecting her at the Battle for the White Citadel. It’s more that if the strongest S-class hero is willing to fight for us against that foul Goddess, then she’s welcome to tag along, I guess.”

“...”

Hijiri didn’t say anything in response, but looked quietly at me, sizing me up. Once she had finished, satisfied that she had found whatever she’d been looking for, she sighed.

“I’m glad we had the chance to speak in person like this. Our conversation was so limited through that familiar. I’m happy to have been so wrong about what a reliable ally it seems you are going to be, Mimori-kun.”

“Same,” I answered.

“In addition...meeting you has convinced me of one thing: just how much it is that you detest Vicius.”

At the end of our conversation, Hijiri hit me with a question out of the blue.

“So, Mimori-kun...”

“Hm?”

“Being considerate—do you think it’s egotistical?”

“Sure it is.”

She said something about ego before too, right?

“I think that it was my ego that caused me to fail in my mission,” said Hijiri.

“Being considerate can get in the way of achieving your goals... something like that?”

Or is this about something other than Sogou? She must have some reason for bringing this up.

“I just thought that it might be a factor in my lack of positive outcomes.”

I sighed, exasperated. “If you ask me, there’s nothing wrong with being considerate.”

“But decisions born of egotistical emotions tend to interfere with the rational decision-making necessary to secure success, and—”

“All you’ve gotta do is succeed, then.”

“Wha—?”

“You’re just working backward from defeat.”

“W-working backward...?”

“You couldn’t kill the Goddess, and you’ve decided that being considerate was the deciding factor. But if your plan had succeeded, you would have thought what you did was right. In other words, it wasn’t you being considerate that was the problem—it was that you weren’t strong enough to make it happen. That’s all.”

“...I can hardly say anything in retort to that.” Hijiri looked a little taken aback, but then she smiled at me. She looked down and slowly let her eyes drift off to

the side. “But, well... It might sound as if you are being harsh there, but that was a very kind response.”

Being considerate... That’s what Hijiri’s blames for her failure. My foster parents were full of that sort of kindness. Whether I’ve got it within me or not—best to set that aside for now. Consideration for others is what saved my life. That’s why...

“Kindness ain’t the kind of thing you can just reject out of hand.”

After Hijiri and I finished talking, we went to rejoin Seras and the others.

“Aneki,” said Itsuki, gesturing behind her with her thumb without looking back. “No change in Kirihara’s condition. Class rep’s sleepin’ like a princess and looking pretty as *heck* doin’ it.”

“We should let her sleep for now, then,” replied Hijiri.

“She sure is cute when she’s dreaming... Anyway, like—is this the *real* Mimori or what?” Itsuki peered up at me. “Might be ’cause of how he’s speaking? Voice makes him sound different too, y’know? Meh... Did his face always look like this? Totally didn’t. Right? You think his hair’s grown out a bit? You think Touka’s got a twin, just like me and you...and this is, like, the *other* Mimori?”

“From what he has conveyed to me, this is the real Mimori-kun. It seems there were circumstances in the old world that forced him to wear a mask—play a Mimori Touka-like character, if you will.”

“Seriously...? He totes seems like a whole new guy! So, he’s just, like, super good at acting... Anyway, Aneki! Forget that...”

“?”

“...Because this is crazy! Messed up!” Itsuki spun around on the spot, and circled behind Seras who was walking toward us. “It’s *literally* insane, Aneki! This is the *real* Seras Ashrain! It’s nuts, Aneki!”

Seras’s expression was somewhere between a wry smile and a polite grimace.

Itsuki's mouth hung open in the rounded shape of a chestnut.

"I had a bit of a chat with her, and looked her over for a while... I think she's one of those *real beauties* you're always talking about, Aneki! Like, it ain't just 'bout looks but how she acts, stands, and holds herself, right? Like, even the way she talks. And her *personality* is beautiful! Compared to *everyone* I've ever met before, Seras is just so far above the rest!"

Everyone seems to have about the same reaction when they meet Seras in person for the first time. Still—I feel like Itsuki's a bit less prickly than she used to be. She used to be harsher...like when she was giving her opinion on how we should treat Kiriara. Now she's acting more like a doting younger sister. Speaking of sisters...

"Quite. Discussions of the concept of human beauty typically begin and end at the symmetry of one's appearance and figure. The issue with that is sustainability. Beauty is only skin-deep—you've heard that saying before, have you not? It is meant to refer to those who possess only superficial beauty. True beauty requires symmetry in one's gestures, finely cultivated elegance, a noble spirit, and much else. True beauty, in other words, is beauty that lasts. Only once a person has embodied these aspects can they be considered truly *beautiful*. Regardless of gender, of course."

Hijiri continued, "Of course, this is all on the presumption that we accept symmetry as our measure of beauty in the first place. It is in the eye of the beholder, after all."

Itsuki's eyes were glazed over by the time her sister was done.

"I-I know all the words you're using, but I've got no idea what you're saying. I've gotten all confused again..."

"You mean you get tired of beautiful people who are awful on the inside, right?" I said. "But it's only when someone's *personality* is right that a relationship can be built to last."

"Well—I suppose to put it simply...yes."

“Ohh, I get it. You’re *good* at summarizing, Mimori,” said Itsuki.

Hijiri looked intently at Seras.

“But, well... It is true that Seras-san appears to fulfill all the requirements I outlined for a truly beautiful individual.”

“She could bring down whole nations, I bet! One of those *femme fatale* types, yeah?”

“Itsuki... Calling an individual beautiful over and over can be rather awkward for the person in question, especially when they truly are as beautiful as you are claiming. Please be considerate as you address her,” said Hijiri.



“Huh? You mean Seras doesn’t like us saying this stuff? I-it’s not like I’m trying to get with her or anything...”

“Ah, no—nothing you have said thus far has upset me at all, Lady Itsuki. Please, do not let that worry you. It is only that I am quite a dull and boring high elf...and so I would rather you not expect any witty responses from me. *Heh heh...*” Seras smiled, then went pale. It seemed her humble self-deprecation had caused her real self-inflicted damage.

Are you sure that’s how you want to answer them, Seras...?

“Oh man... I totally struck a nerve just now?”

“Well, Sera—”

“Oho? If those are your criteria, I wonder if I might also qualify as beautiful?” The smiling chief of the Kurosaga Clan interrupted me as I tried to help Seras, saving the day herself. “What do you think, Itsuki? Am I beautiful?”

“Ehh? Yeah—Munin, you’re like a cheerful and beautiful older sister type.”

“An older sister?!”

“At first I thought you’d be super difficult to approach, like a strict nun or something. But I like you! You’re way easier to talk to than I expected.”

“Itsuki—you’re such a good girl! I love you too!”

“Hey, wh—mnh, gh... Yours are even bigger than Seras’s so when ya hug me like that it’s super hard to breathe! Mnhgh—!”

...

“I apologize for my little sister, Mimori-kun,” said Hijiri, her eyes a little cold.

“Hey, we need a little entertainment from time to time... Oh, come to think of it—Piggymaru.”

“Squee—! Boi-oing!” Piggymaru squelched out onto my shoulder.

“Ah, this is the slime that you mentioned?”

“My partner, yeah.”

“Squee—!”

Hijiri looked at Piggymaru, a finger to her lips in great interest.

“*Lord of the Flies*, eh—I see now. The name is a reference from the Golding novel, I take it?”

“Eh? No. This little guy just squeals a bit like a pig... And it’s kind of round...like a pig. That’s why I went with Piggymaru...”

Does Piggymaru remind her of some character in a book?

“...”

“...”

“I see. I think it is a fine name. Nice to meet you, *Piggymaru*—if I might call you that? I am Hijiri Takao.”

“Squ.” Piggymaru stretched out a tentacle toward her, and Hijiri extended her index finger in turn.

“...I may touch it?”

“Sure.”

“Squ-uee.”

“Oh hey, we’re allowed to touch the slime?” asked Itsuki, walking over and poking Piggymaru.

“Squee. ♪”

“Ohh... This thing’s kinda cute...”

Hijiri began to poke as well, her face expressionless.

“Squee-ee. ♪ Squish, squish. ♪ Squuh, squuh. ♪ Squeeeh. ♪”

Piggymaru squeaked and cried with every one of the sisters’ pokes. Itsuki’s shoulders started to tremble.

“Wh—what the hell, Mimori?! We’ve been taking a one-way trip on the raging Kiri-hara Express and duking it out with a back-stabbin’ goddess, and you’ve been hanging out with this squeaky slime and cute li’l pakyuuh pony?! This just ain’t fair!”

“...I’m not really sure what to say to that,” I answered.

I felt the same way when I was talking to her older sister...but it sure is weird to be speaking to Itsuki like this.

The delivery unit arrived at our location, carrying with it the fake head and fake Seras. I wore Munin’s fly swordsman mask for their arrival, as my mask had been broken during my fight against Kiri-hara. I had already taken the time to explain what had happened to the delivery unit ahead of time by magical war pigeon, but there were several things I needed to explain to them in person. Once that explanation was done, I had another bird sent to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

We all boarded a horse-drawn carriage, loading Sogou and Kiri-hara in with us. With a jolt, it began to move.

The inside of the carriage was quite spacious, with plenty of room for everyone. To one side was a step that could serve as a bench for sitting during the journey, and the other side was piled with luggage and other cargo.

Everyone’s tired. We should try to get some rest while we’re on the move.

“You sisters must be tired, with how I pushed you to get here on time. You can take the first rest. I’ve prepared a sleeping bag.”

“Itsuki, the repeated use of your unique skill during our journey must have exhausted you considerably. Get as much sleep as you can.”

“Gotcha!” Itsuki wriggled into the sleeping bag, and... “Zzz—”

“...That didn’t take long.”

“She always was a quick sleeper.”

“You should try and sleep too, Hijiri. You’re tired. I can hear it in your voice.”

“You are difficult to deceive, Mimori-kun. It makes you hard to handle,” she said jokingly, before falling asleep herself.

She’s sleeping in a sitting position on the bench then, huh... Just kind of leaning against the wall of the carriage. Right...I should let Seras and the others get some rest too, but first...

“So... What do you two think about the Takao Sisters?”

Seras answered first. “I believe they can be trusted. It also appears they both trust you, Sir Too-ka.”

“Yes, the pair of them seem like such wonderful girls. Hijiri in particular has such a level head on her shoulders. I almost wonder if she might be even older than I am at times...”

The thought seemed to touch Munin somewhat, and she gazed off at the carriage wall with a faraway look in her eyes.

Well, Takao Hijiri is kind of a...special case. Anyway, it seems like the sisters didn’t make a bad impression on Seras and Munin. Seras is right—I think I can trust the Takao Sisters. All that’s left is to pray that Hijiri can keep a tight grip on Sogou’s reins.

Munin got into a sleeping bag and went to sleep soon after, and I cast Sleep on Seras to give her some rest as well.

Slei was already sleeping, and Piggymaru was in its deep rest mode. I was alone, staring at the Lord of the Flies mask that had been broken by one of Kiri-hara’s attacks.

“Please allow me to mend your mask once I have awoken.” I remembered Seras’s words.

“This rebuilt mask is looking pretty beaten up... Might be time for a change.”

The carriage sped on at a constant pace.

After a while, the Takao Sisters woke up. In time the rest of the members of the Lord of the Flies Brigade followed suit.

Itsuki was completely taken with Slei, hugging her and chatting in the back of the carriage.

“Pumpee.”

“Pumpee? What is that, some kids cartoon character?”

“Pakyuuh, Pakyuri. ♪”

“D-damn it... What the heck?! How are you so cute?! So cu~te!”

Slei seemed to like Itsuki too.

“Ah!” Itsuki exclaimed as if she had just remembered something. “Hey Aneki, shouldn’t we talk to Mimori about *that*? The unfinished magical items at Erika’s place...”

I gave Hijiri a questioning look, and she answered me.

“Erika has been researching for a long time, trying to create magical items to oppose the Goddess.”

Well—yeah. Figures. Erika’s willing to help me take revenge on that foul Goddess, after all.

I had seen the underground room piled high with failed prototypes—and it had been clear most of them were intended to have been used against Vicius.

“She said that she might possibly be able to create an item that can inhibit, if only a little, the powers of a divine. However, it was not yet complete at the moment we departed her domain to meet with you.”

“She told us all about the magical item while we were in her house, and like... Aneki said *something* to her, and it was like Erika’d found the missing piece of a puzzle the moment she heard it! One of them eureka things, right?” Itsuki chimed in.

“Perhaps, as is sometimes the case in certain detective novels, a single word was all it took her to crack the case. Incidentally, Erika stated that she would attempt to inform us of the item’s completion by familiar...but she had her doubts on whether any of her animals would be able to reach us.”

Meaning we might have to consider going to Erika’s place to pick this thing up in person. As for whether we’ve got the time for a round trip... That depends on what Vicius is planning next.

“Also, like, Mimori... I’m kinda sorry, y’know? We totes ended up abandoning you back when you got disposed of by Vicius, huh.” Itsuki bowed her head.

“Don’t worry about that. I’ve talked to Hijiri already.”

“But, like...y’know... *Still.*”

Speaking of that foul Goddess...

“You’ve got unique items, right? What did you guys get?” I asked.

The unique item I got was my magical leather pouch—the one that foul Goddess called a shoddy little thing... But I’ve never really heard what the other heroes got.

“It seems that some were accessories that provided bonuses to stats, while others could be attached to weapons or armor to enhance their quality. Most, however, seemed to be meant to support us for the period immediately after our summoning and it felt like much of their relevance faded as we leveled up. Mine and Itsuki’s unique items were of that nature.”

I see... She’s right that those items would’ve been most relevant when the heroes had low stats and needed the extra boost. They must’ve been meant to improve survival rates while we were leveling up.

“Class rep got earrings or something, right?” said Itsuki.

“Some items were drinkable also, providing bonuses to stats or skills when consumed.”

So consumables, huh?

I listened to Hijiri explain the features of a few more of the unique items before saying anything further.

“From what I’ve heard, it sounds like my unique item is the only one that’s really all that...*unique*.”

Just like my skills...my item is outside of the norm.

“Huh? How’s your item unique, Mimori?” asked Itsuki.

...Seras looks strangely excited all of a sudden.

“It’ll be faster if I just showed you. Here, look.” I took some packs of candy out of my bag and laid them on the floor of the carriage.

“S-seriously? Mimori... You brought *all* these snacks on our school trip, then kept ‘em all through the Ruins of Disposal?”

Nope. Not to mention I left all my bags from the school trip inside that castle.

“Not *exactly*...” I explained to them how my magical leather pouch worked.

“S-seriously?! What the heck?! You got Piggymaru, Slei, now...*this*?! It’s super not fair!” Itsuki was once again floored by the injustice of it all.

“This is how I managed to avoid starving in the Ruins of Disposal.”

“That is quite the interesting ability. Though I suppose you might technically have been able to survive had your things also been teleported with you into those ruins.”

“It’s random. I also get drinks and things that won’t last all that long sometimes, too. Candy I can leave at room temperature, and it doesn’t take up a lot of space in my bags. That’s why I’ve saved so much of it.”

“Hey, um... You gonna eat that?” asked Itsuki.

“All yours,” I answered.

“Heck yeah! Man, I haven’t seen these in *ages*.” Itsuki picked up a bottle of ramune candy, poured some into her mouth, and started crunching. Her eyes

narrowed as she ate, a somewhat bitter expression on her face.

“Our Grandma on our mom’s side used to love this stuff, y’know... She used to eat all of it herself, sayin’ candy didn’t have any *nutrients* in it so we couldn’t have any. Looked like she was really *enjoying* it too. She was just, like, makin’ up excuses to keep it to herself, I bet. Sure takes me back.”

Hijiri ate a little yogurt-flavored treat, daintily scooping the white contents from inside the plastic tub and carrying it to her mouth using the attached wooden spoon.

Man, even that cheap candy looks like it’s from some high-end restaurant when it’s Hijiri eating it.

Seras set her eyes on some of the sweeter options and split her share with Munin.

“Ah... Eating this here sure makes me remember how different this world is from the one we came from. Like, I guess we’ve just gotten used to living here. I could be happy anywhere in the world, s’long as I’m with Aneki.”

Hijiri opened a pack of jerky and offered some to Sleii.

“Would you like to eat too?”

“Pakyu~h. ♪”

Sleii ate the little piece of dried sausage and gave a happy little “*pumpee*. ♪”

“Ah! That’s no fair! Aneki, feed me too~!”

“Under normal circumstances I would refuse, but you did fine work today—and so I will make an exception. Here.”

“Arrright!” Itsuki opened wide, and Hijiri brought the jerky toward her mouth. She then happily munched down on the dried sausage. Seras seemed to be getting ideas, moving slyly to reach for one of the individually wrapped sticks herself—though when she realized I was watching, she quickly pulled away.

“What’s wrong? Don’t tell me... You want to feed me too?”

“N-no... I couldn’t resist, I suppose.”

“There are other people around. Later, okay?”

“Ah—u-understood.”

Seras sat with her legs folded neatly beneath her, turning so red that it looked as if steam might start rising from her face. What followed were a series of questions (mainly from Itsuki) about whether or not Seras and I were a couple.

I bet that interaction just now got them wondering.

I didn’t have any real reason to hide our relationship, so I was honest with the Takao Sisters. Seras sat beside me, nodding a little from time to time. Her usually white cheeks blushed a shade of cherry blossom pink with embarrassment.

She’s managing to suppress her reactions, though. Itsuki, on the other hand...

“F-from what I’ve heard, then... Y-you two are like totally, er...a *thing*? I mean, I figured from the mood that there was somethin’ there, but...I wasn’t expecting this. Whoa. Like...*whoa*.” Itsuki was flustered and turning a little red herself.

“Aneki...they’re like...*serious*!”

...I might’ve been a bit too blunt.

And so we continued on our journey—until our carriage eventually arrived at the Miran army camp where the Wildly Beautiful Emperor was waiting for us.

Yasu Tomohiro

SOMETIME, a while before...

The two horse-drawn carriages headed north after they left the main highway. Their passengers were a dozen men and women in total, people of all

ages. Yasu Tomohiro was in the front carriage. It was around noon, and he saw clear skies through the gap in the cloth at the rear of their carriage. But the face of the middle-aged woman who sat facing Yasu was clouded over.

“Are we really going to make it to Yonato?”

They had been bumped around by the road for so long that their conversations had dwindled, and there were longer silences now. It was as if the woman had forced all their unsaid fears out from the back of her throat. A man jumped in to break the lull that followed, then the others chimed in as if some dam had burst.

“Never thought Mira would fire up some war with Alion, y’know...”

“Not to mention they say them golden-eyes have started roaming around some regions now, eh?”

“Merchant I met t’other day said they was spillin’ out of the nearby ruins.”

“Them weird swarms of white humanoids, though... We just got no warnin’ of them coming, that’s the worst of it.”

Yasu listened to all of it in silence, mostly keeping his head down.

“The emperor’s thinkin’ of war when we’ve got golden-eyed monsters and weird white humans in Mira... I’d rather he was protectin’ his own from them creatures right now.”

The citizens of Mira trusted deeply in the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, some with near-religious fervor. But not all of them had such faith in his leadership, and there were of course those with different points of view—leading to carriages of refugees fleeing Mira, worried for their safety should they remain.

“Wonder what’s gonna happen to Mira.”

The passengers’ town had been attacked by the horde of mysterious white humanoids. Most of the residents had escaped south to the imperial capital, but those who had opted for the carriages chose a different path.

“Don’t worry about it. That’s why we’re headin’ to Yonato, ain’t it? It’s gotta

be way safer up there than in Mira, and I've got family there too... See, this writ of passage'll get us right through the border."

That was the owner of the carriages, a burly middle-aged man with light brown hair and blue eyes.

"We'll just head back to Mira once all this business is over and done with, eh? Best to get out of the country for now."

The man was a former mercenary, and there were other retired and current mercenaries riding with them. They'd been born in the same town and all knew each other.

No... Come to think of it, most of the people in this caravan were born in the same place.

Yasu had been one of the several that they had picked up on the road.

"Hello there. Injured, are you, kiddo? Where're you headed? North, eh... Just happens we're on our way to Yonato. You want a ride?"

Yasu tried to refuse at first, but the mercenary practically insisted—and so he had ended up joining them on their route north.

But this is for the best, Yasu thought to himself. I want to really learn about the people of this world. That's why I'm on this journey. It's okay... I still have my unique skills, if it comes to that.

Yasu had never gotten much sleep when he'd been camping in the forests. It made him remember his experiences with the Sixth Order—the nails they pulled, the three fingers they cut off, and the tendons in his arms that they severed. He had lost his right ear, and a chunk of flesh there too... Each time his mind was drawn to his injuries, the terrifying flashbacks came and followed into his nightmares. The people in the carriage seemed worried about the state he was in.

"You've had an awful time of it, eh...? But it's all right. You can trust us, so try and get a good night's sleep. Heh heh, don't worry 'bout them golden-eyes

neither, we'll take care of 'em."

Yasu remembered the fist that the carriage owner made when he said those words. His wife, son, and brothers were riding in the carriages too. Yasu looked down at a stain on the wooden floor.

Was I right to go north, though? Sogou-san and the others must be on their way there now too, to defeat the Demon King... This gives me a better chance of joining their fight...

There was no internet in the other world, nor news programs on TV. The world had something like a newspaper...but the information was often out of date.

Who knew it could be so difficult to find out about what's happening far away...

Using social media sites to search for information in real time about the other side of the world was completely out of the question. There was always a time lag to be expected as news filtered its way around the world. There were magical war pigeons, messenger pigeons, swift mounted couriers, and letters, but none of them were any match for the speedy packet transfers of the internet. Too much information that was just...unavailable, making intel a valuable commodity.

But, well...not being driven to constantly check my phone is kind of freeing, too. Back in the old world, not chasing the news every day could make you feel like you were being left behind. Living here, I don't feel that strange sense of frustration.

Even if I wanted the information, it's out of reach. But with an internet connection and a smartphone, everything was available, whether you wanted it or not. That's what made me reach for my phone and get lost on the internet... I spent less and less time just thinking on my own, and more time under the influence of others.

Suddenly there was a jab—someone poking at Yasu's arm.

“?”

He looked up to see a little girl crouching quietly in front of him.

Isn't she the girl who was sitting two seats down from me?

Her eyes were big and round, and her hair was bunched into two little pigtails on either side of her head. The woman sitting by Yasu's side was the girl's mother, he knew. With an innocent and happy smile, she held out a piece of bread that she'd torn from the one in her hand.

“Here you are, big bro. For you!”

“Huh? Ah... I-I'm...I'm fine.”

“Get well soon!”

“I-I think th...that you should be the one to eat that.”

“Eh?” His answer seemed to leave the little girl at a loss for what to do next, and she looked at her mother. The girl's mother looked at Yasu in turn, and with some of the exhaustion of their days on the road in her eyes—she smiled at him.

“Sorry...but would you mind taking it? I think my daughter would be happier that way.” She gestured politely for Yasu to take the bread.

But I still have the rations that Belzegea gave me for the road. And it's not as if any of the people in this carriage, including myself, are troubled for food.

Still, the little girl wanted to give Yasu some of her bread.

“Big brother's still hurt? I think so. Eat lots and get better! Yuri will help!” The little girl grinned at him.

So her name's Yuri. Ah, I see. She's giving food to an injured bird—that's what this is. I wouldn't want to refuse her kindness and betray her expectations. Not to mention that the other people in the carriage are smiling and looking over at us now...

Nobody was glaring at him—they all looked happy.

Take it, the middle-aged woman sitting across from him seemed to smile.

Yasu took the bread with some embarrassment, and he thanked her.

“Th-thanks...”

I should eat this right away, shouldn't I...

Yasu bit down on the piece of bread, then put the whole thing in his mouth, chewed, and swallowed.

“Tasted good...”

“Do you feel better?” asked the little girl.

“...S-sure.”

“Good!”

She excitedly returned to her mother's lap, laughing as she looked up at her. Then she turned to smile at Yasu once more with innocent delight—looking just a little proud of what she'd done.

A horse neighed, startled, and the speed of their carriage faltered. Yasu heard panicked voices from outside.

“G-golden eyes—!”

The carriage came to a halt.

“Tch... Avoidin' them monsters was the reason we kept off the road—what're they doing 'ere?” said the carriage owner.

An armed man looked into the carriage from the rider's seat outside, waiting for orders.

“How's it look out there, Oulu?” the carriage owner, Rinji, asked calmly.

“At a glance... Less than ten of them. None of the big ones yet.”

“All right. Let's take 'em out here, then... Come on, you lot.”

Rinji was the first to stand, and the other four mercenaries—some of them retired old hands—stood with him. Yasu instinctively made to follow them, but one of the former mercenaries stopped him at the exit.

“Hey there! Thanks for the support, kid. But you’re going nowhere with injuries like yours. No offence, but you don’t look up for a fight—don’t push yourself.”

“I-I... I’m a...”

...A hero from another world, he almost said—but Yasu stopped himself. A hero? Me? A hero who saves people? No. I...I just thought I was a hero... That’s what made me so arrogant.

The retired mercenary grinned at him, baring his teeth.

“Tell you what—worst comes to worst, you’re in charge of the inside o’ this carriage! You feel better with a big brother to protect you, right, Yuri?” The man called to the little girl, who was now clinging to her mother, and Yuri nodded.

“That’s settled! Look after her for me, kid. Leave what’s outside to us. Rinji’s a heck of a warrior, y’hear? These monsters don’t know what’s comin’ for ’em! *Heh heh...* Now’s the time we mercenaries get to earn our dinner!”

With that, the man leaped from the back of the carriage and out into the battle outside that was already underway.

Yasu sat back down in his seat.

I...

The man had been so forceful that Yasu couldn’t say a thing in reply. It was just like when he was invited to join them in the first place, and he’d just gone with the flow.

Since then... I... Maybe I haven’t changed, after all...

The bravado had left him, and with it, all of the overwhelming arrogance, delusions, and poison that had found him in the new world.

I think I... I'm back to normal. All the way to square one.

“...”

The little girl, Yuri, clung tightly to her mother's clothes and trembled.

“It's okay, Yuri. Look at me.”

Yuri raised her head and looked up at her mother's face.

“Just do as we always do, okay? When you're scared, look at me, okay? Keep looking, keep looking... Mom's still smiling, isn't she? That means we're going to be okay.”

Brave, thought Yasu.

Yuri's mother was smiling, but her shoulders were shaking too. But as he watched, Yasu saw the little girl loosen her grip just a little.

“...Same as always, mom?”

“That's right... The smiling magic.”

“...Heh heh.” Yuri smiled too, as if everything in the world that wasn't her mother had just melted away. She looked so calm and relaxed that it made Yasu feel better too.

Why are these people so kind, I wonder? Kind people really do exist, then. They're here...in this world.

Soon, all of the monsters that had attacked them were driven away, and only two of their party suffered minor injuries in the battle. Everyone emerged safely on the other side of the fight and the two carriages resumed their journey north.

Chapter 2: Swirling Wills

I DESCENDED FROM the carriage once we arrived in camp. The members of the delivery unit also disembarked and went to give reports to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor. For the time being, I was the only one out of the carriage—leaving Seras and the rest on board.

I'd rather have fewer eyes on the Takao Sisters, Sogou, and Kirihara when possible.

Seras had repaired my Lord of the Flies mask while I was on the road, and so I was able to wear that around the camp—though it had somewhat of an *improvised* look to it now. The court chamberlain hurried toward me soon after my arrival and ushered me to a tent where the Wildly Beautiful Emperor was waiting.

“Regarding the concealing of our carriage—the matter we discussed over magical war pigeon...” I began as we walked.

“His Majesty has ordered it done... Your carriage will be taken care of,” replied the chamberlain.

“If you would be so kind, thank you.”

“Right this way, Lord of the Flies.”

I followed the chamberlain into the Wildly Beautiful Emperor's tent.

The interior had none of the extravagance I had expected—it was very practical. The moment I stepped inside, all eyes turned in my direction. I saw the Wildly Beautiful Emperor seated furthest from the entrance with his personal guard clustered around him.

The other faces in here are likely his ministers.

I also spied Yoyo Ord, head of one of the three princeps elector houses.

“Welcome back, Lord of the Flies,” said the emperor.

We traded a few words—a password of sorts devised to confirm my true identity. Everyone in the room besides Yoyo appeared confused by the exchange.

“Well then, Lord of the Flies. What of your objective?”

“The S-class hero Kiriara—the threat he posed has been eliminated.”

The ministers raised their voices in amazement.

“From the appearance of my mask and robes, I believe you can see that he was quite a formidable foe,” I said.

“And yet you defeated him. I expected nothing less. He fell victim to one of your schemes, I take it?”

“So it would seem.”

“Heh... This uninterrupted series of successes gives me much to consider.”

“What do you mean?”

“I believe I will always seek to rely upon you in times of crisis. You are an alluring sort of poison, perhaps.”

“You honor me highly, yet...you judge me too favorably, even if your words were intended in jest. You are great and most wise, Your Majesty. You would have no difficulty accomplishing your goals without my assistance.”

The emperor’s ministers nodded in agreement.

I’ve got to lift their emperor up—can’t have his flattery of me make them mistrust my intentions.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor, meanwhile, propped his head on his hand.

“Yoyo, I wish to speak with the Lord of the Flies alone.”

Yoyo nodded and began to clear the tent. Everyone, apparently used to this, went without objection. Yoyo then bowed to the emperor once and followed

the others out.

I wonder if they should really be leaving me alone in here with him... But I suppose that's a testament to how much he trusts me. And the Wildly Beautiful Emperor's pretty tough himself, so I imagine that's part of it.

"The presence of that many loyal retainers makes my shoulders feel so stiff. Right then, I got the long and short of it through your message... But there are a few things I wish to hear from you personally."

I went on to provide the Wildly Beautiful Emperor with what he needed to know, answering questions as he asked them.

"Understood. I will arrange for that to be done," said the emperor once I was finished.

"Thank you. Might I ask...what is the current state of the Miran army?"

Apparently the combined forces have pushed through the borders of Mira, but they've come to a halt inside of Mira proper. There seems to be a stalemate, with an unsettling lack of movement from either side.

"It appears Ayaka Sogou ordered the Alionese army not to proceed any further until she returned. This was before she launched her solo mission deep into Miran territory."

"Did that information come from Lady Asagi?" I asked.

"M-hmh."

Apparently Asagi and the others are here in camp, too.

"From the complete lack of advancement by the combined forces, it seems Cattlea is dutifully keeping to her word, then," I noted.

"I believe that in the absence of Ayaka Sogou, it has become very difficult for the combined forces to continue on the attack. The Queen of Neah might be a talented military commander, but Ayaka Sogou was the decisive factor in their victories upon the battlefield in my estimation. She is but a single knight, yet as a hero in combat her abilities are unbelievable. Completely out of the norm.

Perhaps it was the precise combination of the battle tactics of the Queen of Neah and the power of that S-class hero that allowed their forces to be so effective in their advance?”

“S-class heroes have the power to sway the course of a war. You are correct that no schemes can be viable without the vital tools needed to enact them.”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor placed a hand to his chin. “Now we have Ayaka Sogou, who was once so key to our enemies’ strategies, in the palm of our hand. Kiri-hara is also unable to fight, and Hijiri Takao has allied with us. We surely have no more obstacles standing in our way.”

“I don’t believe that the A-class heroes will be of any threat to us either.”

“Asagi Ikusaba is also on our side. I believe she will be a valuable ally.”

“I think so too.”

If she remains an ally, that is.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor went on to discuss how he planned to move the Miran forces in the future. Without the return of Sogou Ayaka, the fight against the combined forces could be advanced in Mira’s favor. The main forces of Mira were facing down an opposing army at the border—but with an army of reinforcements led by the Wildly Beautiful Emperor himself, they could go on the offensive at a moment’s notice.

“We have the Lord of the Flies Brigade with us now—those who defeated Kiri-hara. We should be capable of overwhelming them militarily, but I would like to avoid a direct confrontation with the Queen of Neah if possible.”

“Let us consult with Seras on that matter once more. If we convey our plans for defeating the Goddess to the queen, we may be able to draw the Neahan army over to our side.”

“Hmm.”

“I imagine that the unexpected appearance of Ayaka Sogou on the battlefield has affected your plans somewhat...but will you still be marching on Alion as

you first intended?”

“Yes, that remains my intent—though I am still concerned by my military strength.”

“You’re concerned about unexpected variables—such as the White Army that was deployed in the recent attack against the imperial capital, for instance?”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor folded his legs and placed a ring finger to his white cheek.

“There is strength in numbers... And wartime strategy is always something of a tightrope act.” He looked away. “...Perhaps the reserves brigade will not be enough.”

He looked back in my direction. “Ayaka Sogou can create a silver army, they say... Can we count on her as an ally in our fight?”

“At present, I cannot give you a clear answer to that question. I believe you might consider discussing the matter with Hijiri Takao.”

“Quite so... I do hope to speak with her in person.”

“Would you like to do so now?”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor paused for a few brief seconds, then answered. “Very well.”

He stood.

That pause just now... Is he nervous to meet her in person? I might have talked Hijiri up a little too much during my explanation earlier.

The tent that the Takao Sisters were in was surrounded by another curtain and shielded from the sky by a tarp. The carriage that we had arrived in was concealed there, meaning that nobody could be seen boarding or disembarking from it. I’d modeled the process on the entrance routine that a super-popular celebrity might use.

“I can go alone from here,” the Wildly Beautiful Emperor conveyed to his personal guard, stepping into the tent. I followed, and everyone within stood up at our arrival.

“Geh. So he’s the real deal, huh...” I heard Itsuki say under her breath.

He’s more beautiful than the portraits—or exactly as beautiful as they depict him to be. I bet that’s what she’s thinking. The portraits they draw in this world can be a bit over the top, after all.

“I am Falkendotzine Mira Dias Ordseat, Emperor of Mira. I have come to meet with Hijiri Takao.” The Wildly Beautiful Emperor looked around the tent with a stern and regal air.

Hijiri got to her knees and bowed to him. “It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Hijiri Takao.”

“I see... You are Hijiri, then. Raise your head, please. Be at ease.”

Hijiri looked up, and the Wildly Beautiful Emperor smiled at her.

“We finally meet, Hijiri. You have done so well to make it here. Please, rise.”

Hijiri got to her feet.

“I was right to reach out to *you* of all the S-class heroes, it appears,” said the emperor, with warmth in his voice. “It appears the agent I dispatched to Alion had a good eye. This is your sister Itsuki?”

“Ah, yeah, I’m Itsuki Takao,” she introduced herself a little reservedly. A moment later she seemed to remember something and looked at her older sister with a start. She hurriedly tried to get to her knees, but the emperor raised a hand to stop her.

“Please, no more of these dreary formalities. None of my servants are present to witness them. Where is Ayaka Sogou?”

“Inside the carriage.”

“I see. I have a basic understanding of the present situation. Ayaka Sogou will

be left in your hands once she has awoken, Hijiri.”

“I cannot promise she will be able to live up to your expectations,” answered Hijiri.

“You need make no such promises. The Lord of the Flies has recommended this course of action, and I have taken it.”

“He sure seems to trust you, huh,” mumbled Itsuki with a whistle.

“More importantly, I wish to speak with you in the presence of the other members of the Lord of the Flies Brigade. There are finer details to go over, of course, but broadly I wish to decide how you powerful heroes from another world might be incorporated into our fight against the Goddess.”

There was a long table set up in the middle of the tent, and enough lights had been provided to illuminate the dark. With Itsuki by her sister’s side, Hijiri and the Wildly Beautiful Emperor stood at opposite sides and faced each other.

The conversation between the two of them proceeded, and the Wildly Beautiful Emperor showed several times during their exchanges that he was impressed by how sharp Hijiri’s mind was. I stood more or less between the two of them during their talk, with Hijiri on my right and the Wildly Beautiful Emperor on my left, Seras and Munin flanking me on either side. I answered questions and gave my opinions whenever it was necessary, but the majority of the conversation was between Hijiri and the emperor. I could hear birdsong outside the tent as I observed the two of them talk.

“What is your opinion on proceeding in that manner?” asked Hijiri, bringing their present subject to a close.

“Very well. Mira will adopt that strategy for the time being.”

The course of action that they agreed upon was much the same as I had discussed with Hijiri after the fight with Kirihara. Hijiri looked over the map that was spread out on the table, with various troop movements scrawled upon it.

“Given the situation with Sogou, I would like to make contact with Nyantan.

She could serve as an additional ally across the continent for our side—and might also assist us in determining the Goddess's movements."

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor nodded at Hijiri's suggestion.

"I will do what I can to that end as well. For the time being we will use the familiars discussed and the spies of Mira to determine whatever we possibly can of Vicius's location."

We had revealed the familiars to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor during our discussions—though not the existence of Erika, the Forbidden Witch.

"Seras," I said.

"Yes?"

"Princess...no, *Queen* Cattlea now, I suppose. Do you think you'll be able to handle her?"

"The princ—no...Her Majesty the queen and I have previously discussed methods of avoiding conflict with each other, should it appear inevitable that we must fight. I feel, however, that she will agree to join us if the situation can be properly conveyed to her. She is currently prioritizing the defense of her own nation, of course, but she has no more fondness for Vicius than you or I."

"It would be quite nice if turning Cattlea could drag Bakoss out of this war as well," said the Wildly Beautiful Emperor hopefully.

"Is Vicius in Alion right now, by the way?" I asked.

"According to our last report, she is indeed."

For a few moments the Wildly Beautiful Emperor was lost in deep thought—as if some fear had struck him that he could not shake.

"Is something troubling you?" I asked.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor kept his eyes on the table as he spoke.

"Hmph. The White Army... Their sudden appearance concerns me still. From what I have heard, Vicius is now in possession of the heart of the Demon King—

and if the heart is made of the same energy that created those False Eucharists, I believe there is a high possibility that we must face them again...on a scale beyond the previous attack on Mira.”

I imagine his worries are well founded... Considering the black spheres that Hijiri mentioned... The more power Vicius receives from them, the greater and greater numbers of those white monsters she could be capable of spawning. They might even be more powerful the next time around.

“You mean to say—that our lack of military strength still concerns you?”

“It is a worry, yes. As a consequence, I would like to have more manpower—even just a little—to raise our odds of victory. Nothing must be overlooked, as failure is not an option.”

I can understand that. If what he’s worried about does turn out to be true, we’ll need numbers and powerful allies.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor and Takao Hijiri both gazed in my direction. After a brief pause—I understood what they were getting at.

“I see—the Country at the End of the World.”

They’re right. They would be reassuring allies to have in this fight... The Four Shining Warriors and their respective armies would be huge—especially the Band of the Shining Leopard and Geo Shadowblade. If Vicius still has more tricks up her sleeve, and if this battle is about to turn fierce, then we’d be stronger with them on our side.

“I intend on sending couriers to the Country at the End of the World with a request for reinforcements,” said the emperor.

I had already given the Wildly Beautiful Emperor a key to gain entry to the nation, and the camp in which we presently found ourselves was located quite close to the country. It would not take so long for the Wildly Beautiful Emperor’s message to arrive. *I imagine the proximity is partially why he chose to camp here.*

“I should have liked to have sent Luheit or Hawk as my messengers, as they were present at the talks with the Country at the End of the World.”

“You have no couriers who are known to them, Your Majesty?” I asked.

Of course...the people of the Lord of the Flies Brigade are known to them.

“No, that poses no issue. After our talks I had several messengers familiarize themselves with the people of the Country at the End of the World in anticipation of just this scenario.”

He was prepared for this, then. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor himself has to stay and lead the Miran army. I guess there’s always the option of us visiting the Country at the End of the World as messengers of Mira...but short as the journey might be, should we really be spending several days taking it now? Without a clear idea of Vicius’s movements, I feel like the Lord of the Flies Brigade should proceed as far east as possible—making our way toward Alion.

“It might have been wise to send the Lord of the Flies Brigade, if time permitted. It would also have allowed us to communicate before the final battle. I wish, however, to have your group with me as I proceed east. I apologize that my wishes have been prioritized in this respect...”

Oh, no bother for me.

“You are quite right, Your Majesty. We would also do well to avoid being on the road to the Country at the End of the World at some vital moment. Oh—and Your Majesty.”

“...?”

I placed a hand to my fly mask—and removed it.

The emperor frowned and opened his eyes a little wider than usual.

“...So that is your true face. You are younger than I anticipated. But why show me now?”

“If I am to continue hiding my identity from you, Your Majesty...” I looked over at the Takao Sisters. “It would make it difficult for those two to operate. I

believe it would be a good token of my trust if I used this opportunity to reveal my true face and name to you.”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor chuckled, then smiled.

“I see—the Lord of the Flies finally trusts me, then.”

There are no real disadvantages to me revealing my true identity now. We’ve about hit the limit of how useful that card can be. And continuing to hide my identity no longer serves a purpose. The Takao Sisters know—as, of course, does Sogou. Based on my interactions with Kirihara, my identity should already be known to Vicius...and Asagi and the rest of her group should know by now, too. The only ones who still don’t know are Yasu and the other heroes in Alion.

Right now, there is no one left in this world whom I wouldn’t want to know that the Lord of the Flies is Mimori Touka. It’s still going to be worth keeping the Lord of the Flies Brigade name and appearance as a symbol, a way to raise morale. I can think of some other uses for it too, but there’s no need for me to hide from the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

“My true name is Too-ka Mimori. As you have sensed already, I think—I am a hero from another world, just as the Takao Sisters, Ayaka Sogou, and Takuto Kirihara are.”

I told him of my fall into the Ruins of Disposal, cast down by Vicius—of my survival, and of my vow to take revenge.

“—I see. That cursed magic of yours is a power of one of the heroes from another world. The pieces all fall into place.”

I told the emperor how I wished to use the Lord of the Flies Brigade as a symbol in the future—and that I had a particular idea in mind.

“I see. Then let us do as you suggest...” he replied.

“Hm?”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor turned his face to the side. “Too-ka.”

...What, is he a little embarrassed to be calling me by name?

He then looked back at me, and I could see from his expression that he was back to being the normal, calm emperor I knew.

“I will still be wearing my Lord of the Flies outfit, as we discussed, but as for how you might address me—I’m sure that is of little real importance, and is very much at your discretion, Your Majesty.”

“Might I call you Too-ka, then?”

“Of course.”

“Too-ka.”

“Yes?”

“Hmph... Let us summarize.”

And so, we began to nail down the details. Once there was a break in the conversation, the Wildly Beautiful Emperor looked around at all of us.

“Vicius should be under the impression that Hijiri is dead, and so I wish to conceal the fact of her survival,” I said.

“I have prepared the fly swordsman outfits that you requested for the Takao Sisters, Too-ka. ‘They were members of the minority faction of former Ashint members, and have recently returned to the fold’—is that how their origin should be presented?”

“Yes. Please give that description if you are asked to explain their presence here. You two are okay with that, right?”

“I understand, yes,” answered Hijiri.

“Totes,” her sister chimed in.

“However...” began Hijiri. “If I believe the situation requires the use of my unique skill, I will not hesitate to deploy it in battle. I do not think it prudent to hide my survival if the cost of doing so involves risking danger on the battlefields on which I may be fighting.”

“I’ll leave those decisions up to you. Think about hiding your identity as a kind

of insurance, I suppose. It's not like there's some vital reason that your survival *can't* be known to Vicius, as it's not key to our plans," I said.

It was then that the Wildly Beautiful Emperor jumped in. He seemed to have been waiting for the opportunity to speak.

"As discussed, we will keep Kirihara under strict guard."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

The emperor looked over the map on the table, his eyes resting on the location of the combined forces.

"Seras Ashrain."

"Yes?"

"Before we engage with the combined forces that are halted here, I wish to test out this plan of yours for avoiding a confrontation with Cattlea."

"Understood. Then, if you allow me, I will write to her with a message."

"Hmph. I will make the necessary preparations."

I had already heard about her plan—and with the unknown factor of Sogou Ayaka gone, it seemed even more likely to succeed. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor placed both his hands on the table, like a dignified battle commander—*well, I guess he is a commander*—and spoke.

"It seems the time has finally come. Our battle against Vicius is about to be real. We have faced many obstacles thus far, and I will be relying on your abilities to overcome those that are yet to come. I will do my utmost, too."

Outside the tent, a bell rang.

"The bell... There is something important for me to attend to."

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor glanced at Hijiri, who nodded curtly in reply. The two sisters walked to the far side of the tent and drew a curtain across themselves to hide. I put my mask back on, and the emperor rang a bell on the table in front of him. A moment later, the Wildly Beautiful Emperor's servants

entered.

“Your Majesty, Lady Asagi Ikusaba and Lady Kobato Kashima have arrived.”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor sent his servants from the tent.

I recalled the emperor’s words to me from earlier in our conversation.

“Asagi mentioned that she would like to speak with the Lord of the Flies upon her arrival in the camp. Kobato said much the same thing.”

Sogou and the Takao Sisters might have been hidden, but plenty of people saw me arrive in camp with a group of the emperor’s ministers and his personal guard. I don’t imagine we’re going to be able to pretend I’m not around...and I don’t want to arouse suspicion from Asagi or Kashima either.

I had decided to convey to them ahead of time, through Miran messengers, that I was willing to meet with them.

“As I mentioned earlier, the two of them have realized my true identity.”

“You believe meeting them now will pose no issues?” asked the emperor.

“I do. This is the time for us to meet.”

I knew that it would come to this and we would have to talk at some point. I also need to see for myself—get a measure of Ikusaba Asagi as a person.

“...”

Kirihara’s lying on the floor in the other room, covered with a cloth—but that won’t be a problem. But whether I can reveal the presence of the Takao Sisters and Sogou Ayaka right now is a different story.

“Hijiri... Will you stay in hiding, and watch as I talk to Asagi?”

It took a few seconds for Hijiri to answer me from behind the curtain, “Very well. I wish to speak with her personally and see her character for myself, but perhaps it is best for me to first observe. What of Sogou-san, who is resting on the bed over there?”

“Will you put her back inside the carriage to hide her for the time being?” I

asked.

I imagine Kashima's worried about Sogou, so I'd like to let the two of them meet... But I'll have to tell Kashima in secret about Sogou's condition once we're done here. This is Ikusaba Asagi we're talking about. I want to keep whatever I can in my back pocket for now.

Once all of our preparations were done, I had them called into the tent.

“Yo, Lord of the Flies-chin, old buddy old pal...or, like, I guess we don't go *that* far back...but we've *met*—so, yeah? Drama Alert Pidgey Channel says so, at least.”

Asagi and Kashima entered the tent. Kashima looked left and right for a few moments, then turned to me in my fly mask, looking a little apologetic.

“Figure it'd be a bit O.T.T. to rush you with the whole group, so jus' the two of us here to see ya! Some of the girls were feelin' a bit awkward too, given how we left things with you. *Nheh heh heh*, so, like... Mind takin' off that super cool mask for me-ow? Or you don't wanna do that with Zine-chin in the room?”

“It's fine,” I answered. “I just informed him of my true identity, and that I'm a hero from another world.”

“Wow, even your regular voice sounds cool now!”

I took off my mask. Kashima looked shocked—I hadn't removed my mask when I told her of my true identity back in Mira. It was the first time that either of them had seen my face since the Goddess's disposal.

“Who—a! Got a different air about ya, but you're *totally* Mimori-kun, huh...?! So, like, you survived and escaped those ruins? *Ruins of Disposal* really didn't live up to the hype, huh?”

“I wish,” I said, looking down at the palm of my hand. “I survived because of this cursed magic—my unique skills.”

“Ah right, right... That stuff that didn't work on the Goddess-chin, yeah—?” Asagi drew closer to me, and nudged my arm with her elbow, teasing. “Figures

the boss character is gonna have immunity to status effects though, right? That's just, like, old-school common sense. But also, like, status effect skills are starting to get *super* effective against enemies in a lot of recent online co-op games. They're gettin' even harder to cast, with all the requirements. In the games that encourage you to use them, they can be super strong! 'Course, like—only if they're *effective*, though."

"They're supposed to be useless in this world, as a general rule."

"There are totally games like that... Like, where you start wondering why're they even puttin' this mess in the game. Doesn't feel bad when enemies use 'em against you, they're over super quick once combat's done, and it's, like, usually way faster to jus' buff yourself and go to town swinging at stuff."

"Seems like my status effect skills are the kind you were just talking about. The super effective ones that are difficult to use."

"Mmm—hmmm... Then, like, maybe that theory I talked about in the cafeteria was *right*, huh? Like, status effect skills were so powerful that the divines had to nerf 'em into the ground... You reckon that Goddess-chan feels, like, an unconscious kinda revulsion toward 'em? Maybe she just disposed of you 'cause you grossed her out!"

"Well, to be honest...I don't really care either way," I answered.

"Ah-*huh*. 'Kay...'kay."

"She tossed me aside like I was a worm. She knew sending me down into those ruins was a death sentence. She tried to *murder* me. So, I'm going to give her a fate *worse* than death. That's all this is. Nothing more." I locked eyes with Asagi. "That's why I hid my survival—why I've concealed my true identity all this time."

She looked back in my direction, her eyes glossy as prayer beads. Then, ever so slightly, she narrowed them at me.

"Ain't revenge just gonna make you feel *empty* inside?"

“You know it,” I answered immediately.

“That was *fast*—no hesitatin’, eh? Hmm... You’re sure, then? No, like, internal conflict?”

“You want me to be conflicted?”

“Conflict can be charming...but I s’pose you ain’t the charming type now, Mimori-kun. I’m not partial to long conversations ’bout whether revenge is right or wrong, personally.” Asagi’s eyes remained fixed on me as she shrugged.

“Then you takin’ revenge on those classmates who gave you up for dead too, eh?”

“I think a bunch of them are scumbags and terrible people, but I’m not too concerned by them. I will crush anyone who gets in the way of me taking my revenge against that foul Goddess, though. That’s why I took down Kirihara.”

“Oh-ho—you went and killed him, then, eh?”

“He came for me and got what was coming to him.”

“You didn’t say you *killed* him. Ah, come to think of it...didn’t our great hero of justice the class rep pay you a visit at some point? Amirite?”

Kashima gave a worried “Ah...!” at Asagi’s comment—as if this was the moment she had been waiting for.

Asagi brought her hands together.

“Sorry, Mimori-kun~! Seems like we weren’t up to the task of handling Ayaka-paisen...unfortunately. Ah, I mean, it was quite the task, wasn’t it? That’s what I meant. Like, Pidghey-chan ended up not bein’ able to talk her around to our way of thinkin’. That’s why I figure maybe she went over to see you and got in your way...maybe? Yeah...yeah, I think.”

Kashima caught her breath, waiting for me to answer. I left a short pause before I spoke.

“Asagi.”

“Yes?”

“I’ve got a question.”

“Shoot.”

“Are you on our side?”

“Course I am?”

“Until the very end—that’s what I mean.”

“...Should’a known you’d try and pin me down on that one.”

“I heard from Kashima that you once said you were just betting on the winning horse. I want to know what you really meant by that.”

Ohoh, Asagi seemed to muse, twirling her hair around her little finger. “So lemme get this straight... You’re asking if Asagi-san might betray you, right? Worried I might flip to the Goddess’s side if I think she might be ‘bout to win. That’s what you’re gettin’ at, eh?”

“Well...yeah.”

“Thanks for being so direct.” Asagi went right on, never skipping a beat. “Listen: first mission I’ve got is to close out this *hero in another world* story with everyone safe and sound, right? Next up, get everyone back home to the old world. Personally, I could go either way—I don’t mind if I make it home or not. You might’ve already heard all this from Pidgey-chan, though...”

“So if you can get those mission objectives completed you don’t really mind which camp you’re in?”

“Bingo. But hey...I figure staying with ol’ Goddess-chin ain’t gonna let us clear that second objective. That’s how I’m feelin’ at the minute.”

I silently encouraged her to continue.

“Cause, maybe Goddess-chin doesn’t actually intend on sendin’ us back? You actually reckon any of those past heroes made it back to the old world? Maybe they were all sent to them Ruins of Disposal to be trashed and never actually

made it home?”

Asagi pushed her fingertips against her cheeks and pouted cutely.

“Well, the *reason* I’m thinkin’ that is this Demon King essence stuff that the last boss gives off, right? Maybe, like...maybe there’s some other tasty way she could put that stuff to use...*divinely!* Heh heh heh... Going home is just some carrot she’s dangling in front of our eyes, and she’s gonna knock us off right before the goal line... I mean, like, she’d be a serious demon if she pulled that on us, yeah?!”

So Asagi came to the same conclusion, then.

Kashima watched Asagi speak, her expression filled with tension.

“So, you don’t think you can trust Vicius.”

“Dang, it’s like you’re readin’ my mind! Or rather, like, I don’t figure *anyone* could trust that Goddess-chin completely unless they were totally brainwashed or somethin’. Just the way she smiles is just so...so...*fake*, y’know? *Meow-whah-hah.*” Asagi seemed to be in high spirits. “But, like, Goddess-chin’s a being of this world, right? Maybe she’s just got different *values* ’n *morals* to you and me? Maybe it’s just, like, the teeny-little measuring stick we humans are judging her by that makes her hard to trust? She’s like a God or whatever, so maybe she’s got some higher-dimension thinkin’ going on. Ain’t good to discriminate, is it? But then, like, after you died, Mimori-kun...ah, my bad...after you got *disposed of*—I kept watching the Goddess, y’see. And well, all I gotta say is... she’s *evil!* There, that’s the punchline.”

“She always looked like scum to me, right from the start.”

“Well, yeah. You did flip her off and cuss her out a bunch,” Asagi cackled. “But, like, I think the Goddess-chin’s *real* good at brainwashing and winding people up. She’s pretty arrogant, though...relyin’ on the successes of her past and followin’ conservative precedents. Then when she gets stressed out, she has these outbursts that give her tunnel vision, y’know—at least it looks that way to me.”

Asagi raised her index finger and twirled it around in mid-air.

“I feel like she’s super obsessed by all this, though. Dunno what she’s after, but maybe that’s the secret to her success?”

Asagi’s wording it differently, but her analysis is about the same as Hijiri’s... I almost feel like Asagi’s version is more precise, even.

“So Asagi...I still haven’t really heard your true intentions yet.”

Asagi shrugged her shoulders indifferently. “No ulterior motives, y’know? I was havin’ trouble trusting the Goddess-chin, and that’s when Zine-chin sent me an invite to join him. Said there was a way of sendin’ us home without the Goddess’s help. So I accepted.”

Asagi placed a hand on her hip and sighed, looking down at her feet.

“That’s all it is, y’know? That simple.”

She looked up.

“I mean Goddess-chin is *sus* AF and I don’t figure she’s actually gonna send us back to the old world. So, like, that means mission failure, right? Process of elimination says bein’ on Zine-chin’s side is the *only* way we’re getting this done.”

“So you’re saying there’s no possibility of you betraying us?” I asked.

“P much, yup.”

“...”

“Oh, c’mon, Pidgey-chan~! This *only* got so complicated ’cause of the way you worded it to him! Like... We’re only havin’ this witch trial ’cause you made me sound super sketch, yeah?”

“Huh? Ah... I’m s-sorry...” stammered Kashima.

“Kobato.”

“...Y-yes?”

“I seriously need you to trust me, y’know?”

“I—it’s not that I don’t trust you, I... I’m s-sorry.”

“KYS.”

“...Wha—?”

“Hm?”

“Ah, ahem...”

“Hey, I get that you’re mad, but you seriously can’t just say that to a friend,” I interrupted the two of them.

“Uugh—yeah yeah. You’re right. Soz Pidgey-chan. It was just a kinda harsh joke is all~! I’m sorry, really! I mean, like, your beloved Asagi-san’s the mysterious type, ain’t she? Bit hard to see what she’s really about... So people tend to misunderstand me... *Sob*. Hey, I do a good Goddess-chin bit, don’t I?”

The way Asagi looked as she told Kashima to die... Nah, there’s no point analyzing that any further now. There’s something else I want to ask.

“Asagi... Personally, there’s something else on my mind.”

Something that doesn’t quite fit. Something I just can’t quite get a handle on.

“Right then, ask away!”

When I asked Asagi if she was on our side or not—when she started talking about her mission—something she said stood out to me.

“Personally, I could go either way—I don’t mind if I make it home or not.”

Seras stood behind Asagi, a little off to the side with her back to the tent wall—at no point had she given me the signal that Asagi was lying.

When Asagi says she could go either way, she means it. Ikusaba Asagi doesn’t mind if she doesn’t make it home. To her, going home isn’t a goal?

“Making sure everyone in Asagi’s group survives.”

“Making sure everyone in Asagi’s group makes it back home.”

I know those are her two missions—but somehow, it's as if Asagi herself doesn't want to go back.

Then what does she want?!

"What about you, Asagi?"

"Hyoh?"

"From everything you've said so far, I just don't get it."

"...Go on?"

"What are *your* motives?"

I'm motivated by revenge. Most of 2-C are motivated by wanting to go home. Sogou Ayaka wants nothing more than to protect her classmates...and she also wants to get home too, I guess.

"Don't *you* want to go home?" I asked.

Asagi stroked her chin, looking impressed, narrowing her eyes like a cat as she looked at me. "Hm-hmm... You pick up some interesting things, don't you Mimori-kun? I never thought you'd ask me-ow-bout that—!"

"It's not like you've grown to like this world and want to stay here on your own, is it? You said you didn't care either way—you could stay or you could go home. Doesn't sound like you have a strong desire to remain here."

She doesn't want to go back, like our other classmates do...but she also doesn't really want to stay. And she's got no desire to take revenge upon the Goddess like I do. I can't sense any strong emotions from her... What is motivating her right now?

I don't know.

Even if Ikusaba Asagi is on our side, like she says she is, it's going to make it harder for us to plan our next moves if we don't know where she's coming from.

"This is way simpler than you're thinkin' it is, Mimori-kun..." said Asagi, waving her hand in front of her face. "Anyway, like, didn't I already explain? All I

want to do is complete my mission objectives. C'mon, isn't it more fun *not* to talk about any of this stuff?"

I looked at Seras. Asagi wasn't lying.

It doesn't sound like she's being evasive either...

...Takao Hijiri described her as alien.

There was only one thing floating through the back of my mind as I listened to Asagi speak—one motive that I could think of.

This is simple to her, then, is it? Could it be...

"Is this a *game* to you?" I asked.

Ikusaba Asagi's eyes brimmed with a dull obsidian glow as she answered me.

"Oh, hell yes."

At some point after she was summoned to this world, Ikusaba Asagi set objectives for herself. It might have been that she was assembling pawns at random before she had even decided what game she was going to play.

After her mission objectives were in place, she set out to achieve them. I don't think Ikusaba Asagi's motivated to try her hardest because she really cares about the other members of her group... Rather, she's doing all of this because keeping them alive and getting them home are the objectives she's chosen for herself.

In that case, her thoughts are focused in a single direction—how to finish the game she's playing. Everything she does is in the name of completing her objectives.



She described this as “some hero in another world story” that she’s looking to finish, earlier. Is that what she’s calling this game of hers?

I remembered Kashima’s words, back when I revealed my identity to her at our meeting in the imperial capital of Mira.

“Asagi-san... She said she was only betting on the winning horse. Oh, and... She always talked about getting back to the old world as a secondary objective and said her first priority was making sure everyone in her group was safe, I think? She mentioned something like that.”

The way I responded to her back then... Was I right?

“It almost sounds like she’s talking about a game.”

That’s exactly how I managed to reach the conclusion I just came to in our conversation. But if Ikusaba Asagi really thinks of this as some big game...that sweeps away so many of the doubts I had about her actions. All I need to do is base my plans around the mission objectives that she’s set herself.

Anyway, Asagi’s totally using our lie detector against us, isn’t she? I did feel like something was wrong—she’s been giving comparatively straight, direct answers today, often answering with a “yes” or a “no” when she could be more vague if she wanted to. She proved that in the conversation we had in that cafeteria in Mira. Why is she doing this now, then?

She’s trying to clear the air, remove any doubts we might have about her...to prove her innocence. Why?

Because she knows that doing so will help her complete her mission objectives, of course.

So this is a game...

I looked at Asagi once more.

“What’s up?” her blank eyes seemed to say as she craned her neck at me.

If things go badly for her... Success, failure... Life, death...

Maybe she doesn't really have a preference. That's why she can be so frivolous and take all of this so lightly. She's going to die someday if she keeps playing this game. But in games, dying is also a chance to respawn. To start over. If this is a game to her, that might be how she sees it. Dying is just like pushing the reset button, switching out cartridges.

Perhaps Ikusaba Asagi is just that—a character in some game that she's playing. She's a player—and this time around, she's named her character "Ikusaba Asagi."

She's concealing her true self. She's putting on an act. Maybe that's the similarity I sensed between us. We're similar in appearance, but different deep down.

"You mind if I ask you somethin', Mimori-kun?"

"...Sure."

"Just gotta ask, y'know—do you really think this fight's winnable?"

"I've done everything in my power to make it so."

"Oh, that's reassuring. I could fall for a boy who's overflowin' with confidence. Heh heh heh... But, like, you seem totally different now from how you were in the old world. I do get it, *see*? Like, you've really paid your dues...got award-winnin' acting chops now, don'tcha? But then, like, doesn't that mean you might be acting right now, too?"

"Asagi-san." It was Kashima.

"Yah?"

"I-I... I think we can trust Mimori-kun!"

"What's gotten into you? Uh... So... You think we can trust Mimori-kun 'cause you've got the hots for him?"

"I-it's not because I like him! That'd be too much of an emotional decision!"

“Ho ho! You’re bein’ weirdly clever with your words again, Pidgey-chan.”

“J-just think about it, Asagi-san. It’s just like we talked about on our way here. Nothing’s going the Goddess’s way...”

“...”

“She’s trying all kinds of things... But thanks to Mimori-kun and the rest of the Lord of the Flies Brigade everything she’s attempted has ended in failure. *Nothing* is going the Goddess’s way... That’s why we...”

“You wanna say that Mimori-kun’s better than the Goddess, Pidgey-chan?” Asagi interrupted. “Gotcha, loud and clear. I heard all about the Lord of the Flies-san’s sweet deeds on the way here, I’m freakin’ diabetic now... Man, it pisses me off.” She scratched her head and changed the subject. “Mimori-kun... You used Pidgey-chan as a messenger, yeah?”

“...”

“First you told Pidgey about all the Goddess-chin’s plans that you foiled and mixed in a whole bunch of details that *only* the guy who really did the deeds would know to make your story more convincing. Then, like, I’m supposed to get the deeds from Pidgey and start to think maybe the Lord of the Flies is the horse I should be bettin’ on, huh? You wanted to give me the impression that you’re better than her. All to keep me from defecting, right?”

“Well... That’s about it, yeah.”

“I mean, in terms of results, you did good, I reckon. When you wanna convince someone to help you, you gotta talk results, not just what you want from them. Makin’ requests when you don’t got any results to back them up is just lyin’ at the end of the day.”

“But all the plans I laid only worked because Kashima believed what I told her,” I broke in.

“Mimori-kun...” Kashima whispered, sounding a little happy.

“Oh, these tear-jerker scenes *really* set me off. I just can’t stop crying, Mimori-

kun! Jeez, Kobato-chan... He's *using* you! He was lookin' to *use* you to get friendly with the class rep, see? That's what's goin' on here, Pidgey-chan."

"Th-that's...fine."

"What?"

"If he's using me, then that means there's a point to using me—it means I have value, doesn't it? Mimori-kun... If he values me, then I—ouch! Ow! Huh? Asagi-san?!"

While Kashima was talking, Asagi had kicked her in the heel with the point of her shoe.

"Oh yah? Whoa! Ahah hah, sorry Pidgey-chan! I don't mean nothin' by it."

...What was that just now? It looked for a second like Asagi... Like she was genuinely surprised by what she just did, herself.

"Oh, and Pidgey-chan? Wait until it's our turn to speak, yah? This ain't some Heisei-era debate show. I wasn't about to say that we can't trust Mimori-kun as an ally, y'know? I was gonna say that even if he has been foolin' us all this time, I'll happily turn into one of his pawns if it ups the odds of me completin' my objectives. That ain't a lie, neither—is it, Princess Knight?"

Seras looked a little troubled by Asagi's words.

So she's known all along about Seras's lie-detecting abilities. I'm not wearing my mask right now, so Asagi's been able to track my line of sight. I knew she would notice us sending signals back and forth.

"Asagi. You knew right from the start that we could see through lies and used that to your advantage, didn't you?"

"That's why I like you, Lord of the Flies-san. It ain't all about completing the objectives, you've also gotta have fun playing the game! Okay okay, go on, what next?"

"You used Seras's lie-detecting ability to *prove* that everything you've said today has been the truth."

“Yes! Heh heh heh... You’re *interesting*, Mimori-kun, it’s fun to have these talks with ya. This is a conversation worth having—makes it so I don’t even mind bein’ squeezed...much. Heh. We might’a even been friends if we’d met a little sooner...”

“...”

“But, like, let’s wrap this up. I figure it’d be totally pointless for the two of us to stand here and try and work out our true intentions *now*. We gotta get rid of all those doubts or we’ll never get to the next freakin’ level. I don’t want you worryin’ about me as some unknown element and havin’ that use up all your memory and stuff so you start droppin’ frames. I mean, like, seems like you don’t trust me that much...but I guess that’s me reapin’ what I’ve sown, yah? I just love playin’ the trickster! Soz, my bad!”

So that’s why she came to prove her innocence.

“You good, Zine-chin?”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor and Munin had been watching in silence for some time.

“Honestly... Little of my understanding or appreciation of your character has changed in the process of observing your exchange. I see now that you and Tooka have known each other for longer than I first thought, but that is all. I am certain you are no secret agent of Vicius. That is my belief. I had my suspicions, but...you may be at ease. Once all of this is done, I will return you to your old world, as promised.”

Asagi curtsied to the emperor in an exaggerated show of thanks, then turned back to me.

“So, Mimori-kun...gettin’ back to the start of our chat here...what happened to Sogou Ayaka-chan? She was, like, pretty screwed in the head, y’know?”

I felt Kashima’s nerves return. She was on edge.

“I stopped her. She was convinced to join us.”

“...Huh? You talked her down when she was in *that* state—good work, I guess? I mean, she’s supposed to have a *thing* with Pidgey-chan, but even *she* couldn’t manage to win her over.”

“I don’t think she’s completely an ally of ours now, but she’s no longer hostile. Sogou, well...she’s overpowered in some ways, but weak when it comes to her classmates.”

“I mean, we shoulda been able to debuff her since we’re her classmates, but we still couldn’t manage it! Oof! So Ayaka wouldn’t listen to Pidgey, but she did listen to *you*, Mimori-kun... Really? Well, no accounting for taste. Maybe you just talked real smooth. I mean, like, you even fooled *teasing master Asagi-san*, didn’t you?! I don’t really care ’bout how you managed it—but so, like, where in the world is Ayaka-paisen?”

Kashima held her breath.

I’m planning on having Sogou stay disappeared as far as the public’s concerned—but maybe I should tell them the truth. Asagi might sound like she’s accepted my explanation, but I think she’s clearly got her doubts about whether I could actually talk Sogou down. If I lie to her here, those doubts might multiply and she could end up realizing the Takao Sisters are here too.

“She’s sleeping in the back. Wait a minute.”

I pulled back the curtain partition and stepped inside.

The Takao Sisters aren’t here. They must be hiding over by the carriage.

I went over to the carriage, climbed inside, and found the Takao Sisters waiting. After Hijiri and I made eye contact, I took the sleeping Sogou up in my arms and carried her out into the simple bed we had set up for her outside. I then called Asagi and Kashima into the space where Sogou was sleeping. Kashima ran right to her side.

“A—Ayaka-chan...!”

“She lost consciousness after we spoke with her, and she’s been like this ever

since. I think it's just exhaustion, but it could also be the mental shock," I said.

"Sleeping beauty, huh," said Asagi, standing beside me. "Gonna be tough to care for her. Maybe a true love's kiss from Pidgey-chan'll wake her up?"

"A-Asagi-san, what are you saying?! Of course it won't... Well, I don't *think* that would wake her up! She won't!"

"Ohoh! You're bright red! I was only kidding. You two got some serious *yuri* vibes going on, don't you? *Nyah hah hah...*"

"Asagi-san...! S-stop being weird!"

I turned to Kashima.

"We don't know what kind of state Sogou will be in once she wakes up. It might come as a shock to you when you see her, so do you mind if we keep her here for now? You can come to visit of course, if it seems like she's doing well enough to see people."

"S-sure... If you say so, Mimori-kun."

There was a brief pause. Then Kashima apologized to me without turning away from Sogou.

"I'm sorry. If I'd been able to convince her to join us back then...maybe none of this would have happened to Sogou-san."

"You don't need to feel responsible for all of this."

Kashima began to wipe away tears.

"You even thought about what might happen if I failed... But I...I just felt so powerless."

"Yeah, you really were super powerless, huh Pidgey-chan... *Gassho. Di—ng.*"

"You were a messenger, Kashima, just like Asagi said earlier. You've done more than enough to help this situation."

"I got caught up by Mimori-kun's good looks and got taken for a ride myself, *di—ng...* Huh? Mimori-kun... What's that thing over there covered with the

cloth...?”

“Kirihara.”

“H-he’s dead...”

“Go take a look.”

Asagi pulled off the sheet.

“Pfft...” She burst out laughing. “*Whah hah hah hah!*”

“...”

“Kirihara-kyun’s on *ice*? Whoa! Awesome sauce. He looks like one of them bugs preserved in tree sap. *Wah hah hah hah hah.*”

Asagi clearly found the sight incredibly amusing. I took the opportunity to explain my Freeze skill to her.

“Hmm, pretty convenient. But...yeah, okay. Makes sense that the class rep accepted this as a compromise... Best skill I can imagine for disabling the guy without actually doin’ a murder on him. Hm—*hmm*. So, this big block of Kiri-chan is how you got Ayaka to stop bein’ hostile. Settin’ aside what happens when you defrost him, things are looking up, eh? Come to think of it...”

“Yeah?”

“There’s another S-class hero who’s on the level with these two... Right? Takao Onee-tama. You know where she’s gotten off to? Zine-chin says he’s sent out scouts, yeah? Other heroes aside, havin’ that one around would make us way more powerful in a fight, yeah? But, like, if those two sisters got brainwashed by the Goddess-chin and turned against us they’d be a real pain to deal with. You got a plan for that?”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor, who had been standing some distance away, walked toward us. We had discussed the Takao Sisters ahead of time and agreed upon concealing the two of them in fly swordsman outfits on the battlefield.

I remembered what Hijiri had said when we were discussing the matter—that she wished to be allowed to decide whether or not to reveal herself.

She hasn't come out yet, so I guess she's chosen to stay hidden.

The emperor began to give the agreed-upon explanation.

“The Takao Sisters are—”

But no matter what, hiding the Takao Sisters from Asagi as we do this is going to be difficult. It's already taking up a fair amount of my processing power. But hey, that can't really be helped. We'll either need to think about how to move as a whole without revealing their identities, or change tack to...

“Wow.”

It was Asagi's voice I heard next, followed by Kashima's.

“—Huh? H-how—?”

“...”

From behind my back, I heard another.

“Long time no see, Asagi-san.”

“Oh my~! So you *are* here then, Hijiri Onee-tama.”

The Takao Sisters revealed themselves, walking out from the separate curtained-off space where they had been concealed.

“Your lovely younger sister, too!” Ikusaba Asagi smiled easily.

“Are you sure about this, Hijiri?” I asked without turning around.

“I heard the two of you speak—and upon realizing what a sharp individual Asagi-san is, I judged that it would be difficult for us to continue to evade her notice. The labor of avoiding her suspicions would increase day by day, I expect. She is also aware of the nature of a number of our unique skills, and her presence would limit our ability to use them. In addition—I expect even you would find it difficult to handle her, Mimori-kun.”

They've been listening to us talk this whole time, and Hijiri's got a lie detector of her own.

She went on. "I also judged that the advantages of revealing ourselves outweigh the disadvantages."

...So she made this decision out of consideration for me, eh?

"Hmm, now I get a good look at you again...lookin' fine, Hijirin."

"There would be no point to us dancing around our respective intentions at this juncture. I agree with Asagi-san in that respect. Yet I believe it is only Seras-san's lie-detecting abilities that have enabled these conditions to exist."

She's not going to reveal her own ability to do that, then. She doesn't trust Asagi completely just yet.

"And you, Kashima-san. It has been some time," said Hijiri finally.

"Yooo! Kashimaaa," Itsuki chimed in.

"Hijiri-san... Itsuki-s-san..."

Hijiri's voice softened faintly.

"You've had a tough time of it, I hear. You have done well. I'm glad to see that you are safe and sound."

Itsuki glanced at Asagi.

"Kashima...glad the class rep's doing all right, eh?"

"Y-yeah... I-I mean... I failed, b-but... *Heh heh...*" Kashima had tears in her eyes, clearly restraining the urge to sob. "But Itsuki-san... Sogou-san... She's okay... I got to see her again... And you two are okay too."

"Yeah, right!" said Asagi, somewhat interrupting, "This means, like—it was *you* who got Ayaka-san on board, huh, Hijirin?"

"On paper, yes. Perhaps so," Hijiri answered.

"Right, right... Mimori-kun's acting was so good he almost had me for a

second... But I knew she'd never stop for *him!* I mean, he never had any time to form any bonds with her. He covered for her on the bus, but that's weak... And, like, Mimori-kun's basically a whole new person now anyway. But hey...you covered for Ayaka-san when Vicius was assignin' instructors, and you even spoke up against that Goddess-chin! You're the only one I coulda imagined doin' it. Ah, but wait. Oh jeez. Mimori-kun, you talked about convincing her to stop, but, like...you never for a second said that *you* were the one who did it, right? *Hah hah!* You're super good at not gettin' caught out by that kind of stuff, Mimori-kun! I'm learning so much today!"

"You're on our side, then—am I right in that understanding, Asagi-san?" asked Hijiri.

"Yeah! Hand to God." Asagi stretched, like she was trying to bring our conversation to a close. "Let's leave it here for today and get down to the details some other time, eh? I mean, we ain't that strong to begin with, as you probs already know. We're jus' weaklin' little one-shot heroes compared to Ayaka and you Takaos~! We're also basically gonna work on our own and do whatever we want, but if you got some plans you need help with, give a shout!"

Asagi turned on her heels.

"Ah—Mimori-kun. Thanks to Pidgey-chan, it seems like the kids in my group know you're here, so you mind swinging by to say hello later? I figure there are some of 'em you won't wanna see again 'cause of what happened and all, but you should come meet 'em...given what's coming. The Takaos...let's keep them a secret, just me and Pidgey-chan for now."

"All right."

Asagi waved her hand about as she walked toward the door of the tent. "Would sure be nice to get closer to the Princess Knight-chan and the silver-haired big-titty nun sometime too. Ahh, you gals would own the socials if only we could use our phones in this world..."

Around three seconds of silence later, Munin whispered, "*Huh? Was she*

talking about me?”

Asagi’s choice of words... Should I be scolding her for this stuff?

She stopped at the entrance once more before she left. “This is huge, Mimori-kun.”

“...”

“The fact that you’ve been messing up the Goddess’s plans all this time. The way you dealt with Kiri-hara-kun and Ayaka. Even the way you’ve adapted to this changing battlefield has been fine work. The way you didn’t reveal your identity to me until this thing with Pidgey too—huge. All of it.”

She turned her head to look at me, brought her hand up to her cheek, and raised three fingers.

“Three good reasons why I decided that *your* side’s the winning horse.” She set off again, into the sunlight streaming in from outside of the tent. “I want you to stay ahead in this race, y’know~! I’m countin’ on you—Lord of the Flies-sama.”

“What do you think?” Hijiri asked quietly after Asagi had left, leaning herself in close.

“Asagi killed the Banished Emperor. It’s hard to imagine she’d turn down a chance to kill the Emperor of Mira if she was on Vicius’s side.”

“You’re right, yes. She said that she could not trust Vicius, and that her motives were mission objectives that she has decided upon for herself. In addition, she used the existence of our lie-detecting ability in order to demonstrate the truth of her statements. That said—what do you *think*? Is it possible that she will betray us?” asked Hijiri, lightly folding her arms.

“I can imagine her changing her mind at the last minute, but...I feel like she might actually not betray us,” I replied.

“...That is a somewhat unexpected response.”

“Eh? Ah, well... To be honest I’m not sure if I’m wording this right, but... I feel like she had this kind of game going to be on the Goddess’s side before she had her mission objectives set, y’know? But then she went and set those objectives for herself. How’d I put this? I feel like she’s always leaned toward wanting to get back home.”

“But she stated that she would be fine not returning—and that statement was the truth.”

“...Yeah. Right.”

What caught my attention was that reaction when she kicked Kashima’s foot. That all seemed to happen unconsciously on her part, like she didn’t realize she was doing it.

“Maybe some part of Asagi’s subconscious that she isn’t aware of has set these mission objectives for her.”

“A lie detector wouldn’t work against a person’s unconscious mind, or any part of their mind of which they themselves are not aware. *They* wouldn’t know they were telling a lie—is that how you are interpreting this?”

“Yeah. It might be that this secondary objective of hers is...” I stopped myself and shook my head. “...No, this is all just speculation. Relying on speculation without a strong foundation of facts is only going to trip us up. We should treat Asagi as an addition to our forces for now, but remain cautious of her, as we have been.”

“Understood,” Hijiri answered. “But those words she spoke as she left—they were her true emotions. She is impressed by the results that you have achieved, and I am certain that she now believes that we are the winning side.”

“Then we’ve just got to keep our advantage in this fight, so she’ll keep thinking of us that way, huh?”

“I will do my utmost to assist you in that.”

“Aneki,” said Itsuki, walking over to her sister as she glared intently in the

direction that Asagi had just left. “What Ikusaba just said... I know all the words, but I don’t really get what she meant.”

“There were several points at which I struggled to grasp the context of her words too.”

“From the way she talks, you think Ikusaba’s kind of an *otaku*?”

“I do not particularly like casually placing labels on the character and preferences of others, but it does appear that she may have a deep understanding of such subculture references. I believe that you should also refrain from calling her by her family name, as she is not fond of it... Even though I understand that she is not here at present.”

“Kay, I’ll be careful if you say so, Aneki... Uugh, I just got scolded again...”

“Mimori-kun... L-long time no see...?” said Kashima. There were traces of tears still left on her face.

“I guess this is the first time we’ve been face to face since the time I was sent to the Ruins of Disposal.”

“R-right...” She fidgeted for a while, then spoke again. “Ehm... Thanks, okay? For the way you helped me out just now, and...for what you did for Sogou-san.”

“Sogou was all Hijiri’s doing; I just drew up the plans. But still, I appreciate it.”

“...Yeah. *Heh heh heh*.” Kashima’s laugh was feeble.

“Did Kashima and Mimori have some kinda connection in the old world?” asked Itsuki, narrowing her eyebrows at us. “Feels like you two know each other or something.”

“I observed several instances of Mimori-kun attempting to speak with Kashima-san in the classroom, only for her to run away from him—”

“Waaah!” Kashima started flapping about, as if Hijiri’s words had manifested in the air and she was trying to erase them with her hands.

“H-h-how do you know about that, Hijiri-san?! I didn’t think anyone paid me

any attention when I was in the classroom!” Kashima closed in on Hijiri, grabbing her by the shoulders. “How do you know that?!”

“Well...it’s simple. I witnessed the events in question unfold.”

Kashima turned red, right up to her ears, and she looked down at the ground.

“F-forget it...please! And...Mimori-kun, I really am sorry! About what I did back then!”

“I thought we’d already moved past that, right?”

“B-but I... Ah—” Kashima suddenly realized that everyone’s attention was focused on her. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

She crouched down and covered her face with her hands.

“Whoa—I bet you woulda been super popular if you’d been more like this in the old world, Kashima! It’s such a shame,” said Itsuki, looking impressed.

“She was quite well liked by a number of the boys back in the old world, you know?” noted Hijiri.

“Huh? Seriously?”

“I could tell by the looks they gave her and the expressions on their faces. It was all indirect, though. Nobody ever directly approached her.”

It seemed Kashima was so embarrassed that the conversation was no longer even reaching her ears.

“I don’t get it! I know a ton of older people, and people from outside school and stuff... Everyone just kinda starts by asking for your R@IN ID. Then, like, they start callin’, and you go out sometimes...get food... Then just naturally you start dating, y’know? If the boys like her, why don’t they make a move?”

“Not everyone in this world is capable of such action—like the individuals whom you have described. In any case, Itsuki...*you* have never dated a person in that manner, have you? There has been no shortage of suitors?”

“Sure, but...I always have the most fun when I’m with you, Aneki. I mean, you

know what all the guys on mom's side of the family are like, yeah?"

"You mean to say that the men you have met cannot compare?"

"Nhh...I guess that's *part* of it? Nah... I mean, there's just nobody I like right now more than you, Aneki."

"Gender aside, I am your twin sister, you understand?"

"Uhh...I know that, but, like... But uh..."

"Mimori-kun—no, Seras-san is here so I will spare her from using him as an example—do you feel nothing when you look at His Majesty the emperor, Itsuki?" asked Hijiri.

"Huh? I mean, I know he's handsome. Everyone prefers places they've lived before to, like, completely new places they've never been. But like, just cause the *view's* nice doesn't mean I'm gonna fall in love with it, yeah?"

Hijiri smiled faintly in agreement, looking ever so slightly happy at her sister's reply.

"You have always been like this, haven't you..."

I went to visit the rest of Asagi's group as Mimori Touka, without taking the time to recreate the background character aura I had cultivated in the old world. Apparently Asagi had already told them about me, and so the reaction to my character transformation was more muted than I'd expected—though some appeared surprised at just how accurate Asagi's explanation had been. A few of the group apologized to me, mostly for the way they had acted and the things that they had yelled out just before I had been sent to the Ruins of Disposal.

If we're going to be using Asagi's group as a fighting force, we should bury the hatchet.

I openly accepted their apologies and introduced them to Piggymaru, which turned out to be a good way to break the tension.

Kashima chose to stay with Asagi's group of her own free will. I'd asked her about her decision once Asagi had left the tent.

"I've always been with them, so I'd feel awkward leaving on my own. And, like, uhm...despite the way Asagi-san can be sometimes, that kind of stuff never really gets to me. Hah hah, it's weird, right? It's weird to me too... B-but how do I put this? It's like I just can't leave her alone? Hah hah..."

I gave Kashima a few words of warning but respected her decision to stay.

It does seem like Kashima is some kind of key to unlocking Asagi somehow. Might be best to leave the two of them together until I can figure out exactly why.



Once I had shown my face to the members of Asagi's group, we set about making preparations for the journey to come. We gathered in the tent before going over our course.

"We will join up with the main force of Mira in the east and proceed to advance upon Alion. In addition..." The Wildly Beautiful Emperor's finger slid across the map that was spread out upon the table in front of him. "After the issue of the combined forces has been resolved, we will advance down this main road. But once we enter Ulza territory, the north and south of this path is littered with fortresses. I intend to take them down during my march, but I will be making use of a different army set aside for the purpose of doing so."

I understood what the emperor was saying.

"You mean to say that it would be preferable not to leave enemy forces at your back, even the small numbers that garrison those fortresses?"

A part of the main force was to be reorganized into separate legions tasked with taking down the enemy's fortresses. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor would continue east with the bulk of his army.

"My messengers are currently traveling to the Country at the End of the World. The reinforcements they send will group up with the legions we have left behind to take the fortresses. Then both will catch up with us as we advance east. This is only if all goes to plan, however."

It's reassuring to know that even if the enemy is stronger than expected and stops the Miran army in their tracks, there will still be reinforcements following close behind.

"Your Majesty, what of the Queen of Neah?"

"I have sent a messenger on a swift horse with the correspondence that Seras Ashrain prepared for us. The camp in which Cattlea resides has no roost for magical war pigeons, after all."

"The prin—Queen Cattlea's response will come from our messenger's magical

war pigeon. For now, we can do nothing but wait for its arrival,” said Seras.

“If your strategy is successful, it will weaken the combined forces...and may even force a full-scale retreat. Too-ka, have you received any information from these familiars on Vicius’s movements?”

“Nothing as of yet—”

It seems like she’s just relaxing in her castle—that’s all for now.

We had managed to locate Nyantan, and Erika told me that she would try and get in contact with her if possible. I also asked her to confirm whether or not Nyantan had been brainwashed—the Forbidden Witch would be able to tell.

“I think she’s okay,” was Erika’s response.

Brainwashing has the risk of ruining a person’s mind, so it’s usually used on people the Goddess is willing to break. This must mean that Nyantan’s important to her in some way—brainwashing is too risky for her.

I want to tell Nyantan the situation we’re in if I can—including what’s going on with Nyaki. I responded to Erika that she should only make contact with Nyantan if there’s a good, completely safe opportunity for her to do so. There’s also the chance that attempting to get into contact with Nyantan could give away our plans, so I don’t want Erika to force the issue.

“—That is the situation,” I said, finishing my report.

“Hmph, I see. My spies have yet to report to me with any new intel, incidentally. It will be difficult for them to establish contact with Nyantan, I think. We are continuing to make preparations to aid in an escape...but it limits our movements in and around the castle when we must be so wary of drawing Vicius’s attention.”

Taking risks could get the emperor’s spies captured or killed and put all future reports at risk. I’m sure talented spies aren’t easy to come by, either.

“As it is quite difficult to see what Vicius is planning at present, there’s nothing for us to do but advance toward Alion for now. Should we send Kiri-hara

to the imperial capital as discussed, Too-ka?”

“It doesn’t have to be the capital... So long as he’s in a known location and under guard.”

The experimental insect that I’d used Freeze on—I left it in Erika’s house when Seras and I set out to rescue Cattlea at the White Citadel of Protection. When I returned, the insect was just as I’d left it.

Meaning—Freeze isn’t dispelled when the skill user moves away from the target.

“I want to keep him hidden from Vicius...as far away as possible. There’s a chance that she might have some way of dispelling Freeze, knowing her. I’d rather not have her somehow releasing Kirihara during our showdown with her and throwing all of our plans into chaos.”

I also don’t want Kirihara being stolen and used as a bargaining chip to keep Sogou from aiding us in our fight. Speaking of the fight against Vicius...

“Your Majesty, regarding the Lord of the Flies and fly swordsman outfits I requested...” I began.

“Hmph. They have been supplied.”

“Thank you.”

“They are a necessary part of your plans, no?” asked the emperor.

“I want to be prepared for the possibility that we never discover Vicius’s true intentions. We may not end up needing them, of course.”

Vicius knows who the Lord of the Flies really is now...but if she thinks that the Lord of the Flies is Mimori Touka, that makes it easier to convince her that anyone dressed as that character might be the real Mimori Touka underneath.

I’ve had the Wildly Beautiful Emperor prepare a few replicas of the Lord of the Flies outfit, and several for the fly swordsman too. I don’t know if any of these preparations will prove necessary, but given there’s no risk to laying them, I want them in place.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

As we spoke, the curtain opened, and the Takao Sisters appeared from the far side of the tent, wearing the fly swordsman outfits in question. Itsuki had her arms spread wide and was looking down at what she was wearing.

“Size seems, like, pretty bang on to me? You reckon this qualifies as cosplay?” she wondered aloud. “My field of vision is somewhat restricted, but that should pose no issue. The outfit itself isn’t too bulky.”

Itsuki spun around on the spot.

“What’cha think, Slei? Piggymaru? Does it suit me—?”

“Pakyu—h!”

“Squee.”

“Whoa?! Hey Mimori, what’d they just say?”

“They say it suits you.”

“Y’think~?! Sure makes me glad to hear you two say that~. *Smoosh Smoosh~!*” Itsuki crouched and began mussing up Slei with both hands.

Slei nuzzled her and gave a “*Pumpee ♪*” in reply.

“Does this mean that we are members of the Lord of the Flies Brigade now, perchance?” asked Hijiri, drawing her sword from her waist to check it was positioned correctly.

“As your lord, I’m expecting great things,” I replied.

Hijiri bowed softly and deliberately, playing the role of a servant.

“I will do my utmost to live up to your expectations, my lord.”

“...”

“Why are you wearing that expression?”

“Well, I just—I didn’t think you’d go for jokes like these is all.”

Hijiri removed her mask, and lightly shook her hair free of it. “I am not *intentionally* stiff, you know?”

Just then, I heard the ringing of a bell. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor returned the sound in kind, and Yoyo Ord entered our tent.

“Your Majesty, we are ready to depart.”

“Thank you. Let us speak of anything that remains for discussion on the road.”

And so, we set out from camp at the head of an army led by the Wildly Beautiful Emperor—heading east for Alion.

Five days had passed since we left camp. I looked around us as I rode on horseback with Slei in her second stage of transformation, wearing my Lord of the Flies outfit. We were atop a gentle slope. A line of Miran soldiers stretched out before me, making their way down the main road.

We moved like an army when we were fighting near the Country at the End of the World... But the scale here's way different.

I was located close to the front of the column, near enough that I could see the Wildly Beautiful Emperor and his escort of personal guards. He wasn't always mounted at the front of his army and would return to his carriage from time to time. I had been mounted on a borrowed horse from Mira until the day prior to avoid tiring Slei and using unnecessary MP.

Today, though, she came up to ask me to ride her—maybe for a change of pace? Well...I do find Slei to be the most comfortable ride.

“It seems that the people of the Country at the End of the World have answered the call,” said Seras, riding beside me on a white horse, her eyes straight ahead.

“Seems like they're up for a fight too, yeah,” I answered.

The magical war pigeon had come the previous day, indicating that the Country at the End of the World would answer the call to fight and that they had sent out three of their warrior bands and their monster unit. King Zect would stay behind upon his throne to lead those that remained.

I did give him instructions to keep some warriors behind, just in case... Turns out the ones staying put will be the Order of the Shining Dragon, led by Cocoroniko Doran. They were the hardest hit during the battle against the Thirteen Orders of Alion—I think keeping them behind was the right choice. This means that five of the Seven Shining Warriors are coming to join us in battle. More than half. They're really helping out.

I wonder if it's the land transfer agreement that's responsible for this? It's a huge deal for the Country at the End of the World to have land in the outside world. We first approached them with just a simple rental agreement—I was the one who suggested the land idea to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor. Holding land will let them grow their own crops, and more importantly, allow them easier contact with the outside world. We owe them a lot, after all.

In addition, we had decided not to speak with the Country at the End of the World about the Miran reserves brigade. It was unclear how they might feel about them, and there was a possibility of lingering bad blood between tribes from ages past. Even as they discussed an alliance, the Wildly Beautiful Emperor had refrained from bringing up the topic of the reserves brigade due to those fears.

"Is Munin in the carriage?" I asked.

Seras turned to look back.

"Yes. Lady Munin is riding with Lady Itsuki."

Apparently Itsuki's been visiting Munin quite a bit recently, eh?

"Seems like those two have started really getting along."

"It appears they have much in common. Lady Itsuki is also quite easygoing

and pleasant to speak with.”

“Only problem there’s her occasional lack of subtlety, I guess.”

Seras gave me a wry smile. “Lady Itsuki means no harm by her words. I do not have a bad impression of her character.”

She does apologize whenever she thinks she might’ve said something wrong. I feel like she’s different from how she used to be in the old world...though I guess people could say the same about me.

Asagi’s group was a little behind us in the column, as I had asked the Wildly Beautiful Emperor to put some distance between us on the road.

“Sounds like Munin and you had an encounter with Asagi the other day... What did you think of her?” I asked Seras.

I had been watching from a short distance as the three of them met.

Seras gave me a faint, wry smile. She was clearly less comfortable with Asagi than with Itsuki. “It was the first time that we had a proper conversation. I find her to be quite the unusual individual.”

“You’re good at letting people down gently, aren’t you?”

“It’s not that I have a bad impression of her...” There was a tension in Seras’s expression as she continued. “Before we set out... Do you remember the aggressive words she spoke to Lady Kobato during our conversation?”

“Yeah.”

“She kicked Lady Kobato’s foot, then immediately apologized to her.”

“Your signal was that she was telling the truth, right?”

“Yes. Lady Asagi’s harsh words were meant in earnest... But her apology was genuine and honest too.” Seras looked down at her feet.

“...She’s a weird one.”

“She confused me too, embarrassing as it is to admit...”

“Even though you understand she’s telling the truth... That’s what makes her difficult for you to deal with, eh?”

“It does appear that she has positive feelings toward me, and while I am happy—I still find myself completely unable to understand her as a person...”

“Eh?”

Seras’s ears suddenly pricked up, as if she had just noticed something.

“Ah-hem—I am quite all right, Sir Too-ka.” She then straightened her back and puffed out her chest with a dignified air. “I know one of my good points is that I try to understand others, but that that can also be a weakness. Worry not, Sir Too-ka—I have taken that lesson to heart.”

“Hmm... I’m happy you’re learning.”

“I think I would like to set down some of that burden when I feel it growing too heavy.”

“You can rely on me whenever you feel like there’s too much on your shoulders. I’m sure there’s a lot I could carry for you.”

“...U-understood.”

“You don’t need to keep everything to yourself.”

The only one who should be shouldering all of this is the avenger.

“If you force yourself to keep carrying it, then...”

My words trailed off as I turned to look back at one of the carriages behind us. It wasn’t the one that Munin and Itsuki were in. Seras looked back too, concern in her eyes.

“...I hope that Lady Ayaka is well.”

Ayaka Sogou had yet to wake up, and her long sleep was posing a few practical issues. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor, however, had prepared a strange magical device that could be used in just such situations.

“This item was used on one of the former emperors after he fell into a

comatose state due to advanced age. It is always brought along with my retainers whenever I am far from the capital. I never imagined it would be of use to us in this manner."

It was a magical device for keeping humans alive even once they had lost consciousness—mainly meant for supplying nutrition.

A bit like all those life-sustaining treatment machines back in our world, I suppose.

Whenever we made camp, the Takao Sisters would sleep in Sogou's carriage with her. Hijiri also spent much of her day in there, and she was mainly in charge of Sogou's care.

"We used'ta have to care for our grandma on our mom's side back when she was sleepin' all day. Leave it to us!"

"Though grandma's case was somewhat unique."

I recalled the two of them talking about their relatives like they were sharing old love stories.

Seems like their family is close, huh?

"I'd sure like to have her on board. She'd be outstanding on the battlefield..."

"That strike I took from Lady Ayaka... I was just barely able to defend myself from it."

"You were just tired from the fight with Kirihara, weren't you?"

"No... I believe Lady Ayaka was also completely exhausted in both body and mind when she launched that attack."

I think you're pretty outstanding to have blocked that attack at all, really.

"What do you think of Sogou, Seras?"

"Her talent for combat is outstanding."

"Do you think you could match her in a fight, if it came to that...?" I asked.

Seras looked deep in thought as she gripped the reins of her mount. “Well, I would say... If my aim was simply not to lose the battle, then—potentially. If I intended to beat her, however...I apologize, but I do not think I could live up to those expectations.”

“You could focus on defending yourself to buy time, but you couldn’t pin her down, then...?”

“Yes. That is my speculation based on our momentary exchange. It is possible that should it come to an actual fight, I might be unable even to buy time against her...”

Seras must have an incredible sense for combat to be able to even speculate about this stuff after fighting Sogou for such a short time.

I looked back at Sogou’s carriage once more.

“Either way, nothing we can do until she opens her eyes.”

“First, let us pray that she recovers and awakens.”

“...”

Without the shackles that the word “classmate” represents, Sogou Ayaka would likely be the strongest warrior in our ranks, pure and innocent. But if she wakes up now—I wonder how that would play out. It’s possible she’d want to go alone to Alion to rescue her classmates. That might cause more trouble... It’d be best if Nyantan could follow Hijiri’s instructions and lead the rest of 2-C out of Alion.

“I...would like to speak with her privately.”

“What, you and Sogou?”

“Yes. I think that she is a very sincere and straightforward person and, well...” Seras gave me another bitter smile, looking a little apologetic. “I am much the same—and have suffered for it.”

“Well... Yeah, the two of you might be cut from the same cloth...”

Vicius tried to make Seras a pawn, at first. If Seras had become one of her tools, she might have been broken too—just like Sogou.

“I believe that in my case, I have just been protected by those around me... I was lucky. Now I am protected by you, and...in the past by...” Seras raised her chin a little, as if casting her mind back through her memories.

I think I know where her mind is headed.

“The princess—Lady Cattlea.”

Cattlea Straumms

CATTLEA STRAUMMS opened the scroll inside her tent. It had just been brought to her by a messenger from Mira. Cattlea giggled as she looked at the scroll. She had cleared everyone out but the captain of her holy knights, Makia Renaufia, who had just received a report at the entrance to the tent and had returned to the queen to convey to her its contents.

“Your Majesty, I have a report.”

“I told you when we’re alone you may call me *Cattlea*. Constantly being addressed as *Your Majesty* is so stifling it’s going to make me stiff in the neck. My position may have changed, but I am the same woman I have ever been.”

“A-ah, right... Lady Cattlea.”

“That will do. What is it then, new troop movements?”

“No. There is as yet no sign of Ayaka Sogou’s return.”

“Hmm. Her deadline is approaching.”

Ayaka had set a date before she left—stating that no further advances were to be made before it had passed.

“I am concerned about how much our combined forces could accomplish

without Miss Ayaka in our ranks. Well, in any case...”

“What do you mean to say?”

“Makia, come closer.” Cattlea beckoned her captain over and pointed to the scroll before her.

“Excuse me,” said Makia, leaning in to read its contents.

“Could I trouble you to read to me what is written there?”

“Hm? It seems...to be an impassioned plea, urging us to surrender.” Then Makia realized with a start. “This is Lady Seras’s writing.”

Cattlea gave her a wry laugh.

“It is indeed. Incidentally, these letters—they are clearly from Seras—but do you not notice anything strange about them?”

“Now that you mention it...”

Parts of the letters were drawn with strangely exaggerated strokes, springing up in places.

“This is known as letter fetching.”

“Letter fetching?”

“Fetching each of the letters that have these quirks to them will form a new message—it is a sort of puzzle game, you see? I’m quite surprised that Seras remembers it.”

The fact that it has been employed here leaves me in no doubt that she was indeed the author of this letter.

“Meaning... She *isn’t* actually urging us to surrender, Lady Cattlea?”

“Quite so—could you find me something to write with?”

On a separate piece of paper, Cattlea began to decode the letters she had fetched. With every character she wrote, however, the playful look faded further from her eyes. Finally, she stopped, her quill still resting on the page.

“This plan of having myself captured, forcing the Neahan army to retreat... It might have to be scrapped.”

“You planned on being captured, Lady Cattlea?” Makia was shocked—Cattlea and Seras had been the only ones aware of the plan.

No. I expect Seras may have informed the Lord of the Flies of it as well.

Cattlea set her quill aside and leaned back in her chair.

“Oh hoh... He is ever so trusted by her now, isn’t he?”

“...”

“It appears that she does not believe, even in her wildest dreams, that I might betray her.” Cattlea looked down at her lap, knees straight and neatly aligned.

“She is innocent to the very core. And I—”

We were raised like sisters, that former high elf princess and I. Her exquisite good looks tended to draw attention to her, but it in was her purity that her true beauty lay.

Seras was always so innocent and sincere, right from the moment I met her. But I...I lost my innocence and found myself becoming cunning and mean. Those attributes are my weapons now. Necessary traits for the daughter of the Holy Emperor of Neah to possess.

They had served Cattlea well during the disputes at court and allowed her to teach Seras about the underworld. And yet, Seras’s core had remained pure and clear through it all.

“I’m sure that a part of me was saved by that purity of hers,” said Cattlea, with a faint bitter smile. “But it can also be a double-edged sword. That is the exact reason I decided to protect her in the first place. The existence of people like her—so pure and innocent—gives me an irreplaceable sense of hope. Though I may have strayed into being over-protective at times...”

“I feel that... We have been saved by Lady Seras as well,” said Makia, with a wry laugh. “We of the holy knights are not as pure and spotless as we might

appear. While we are not evil, of course, bringing together such unusual individuals tends to involve a level of unpleasant personal conflict that is very human. You have always told us that it was important not to hide the human parts of ourselves, Lady Cattlea, and to bring the bad out into the open...”

Cattlea stifled a faint smile and silently urged her captain to continue. A wry expression appeared on Makia’s face as her mind went to her memories.

“Everyone is different when Lady Seras is around, aren’t they? It’s like they don’t want to let any of the wickedness inside of them out. It just happens that way. I was the same. I wonder why... It’s just as you said, Lady Cattlea. When I’m with Lady Seras, I feel like she is saving me, somehow.”

Cattlea’s eyes softened, and a deep smile spread across her face. Makia’s heart seemed to skip a beat, and her face flushed.

“Purity—or nobility, perhaps. That is the power that she possesses. She has a purifying effect on the people around her.”

That is exactly why there are unpleasant individuals in this world who wish to defile her.

Cattlea’s expression returned to her usual faint smile. She leaned back in her chair, crossing her legs and placing her hands atop her lap.

“If Seras insists...then it might be worth taking this risk.”

Cattlea’s aim was to protect the nation of Neah and all of her people.

It was the hands of the people that won back our nation—and it is to protect those people that I am here, still fighting.

For Neah.

It had been Vicius who had held Bakoss back from invading Neah. When Vicius was displeased, her grip on Bakoss’ ambitions had relaxed—or so Seras had told her.

Earning the Goddess’s favor through flattery and obsequiousness would protect my nation, perhaps...but it would necessitate constantly watching for

her ever-changing whims, and the thought of that vexes me.

“The success of this gamble will not depend on Seras alone...”

“Hm?”

“Yet I am sure that he is still by her side...”

That man.

“If he claims that he has found a path to victory, then perhaps we should follow.”

“Can we be sure of this?”

“We cannot. That is why it is a gamble.” Cattlea was silent for a few moments.
“Makia.”

“Y-yes?”

“We will have our combined forces retreat slowly to the east.”

“Will representatives from the forces of the other nations agree to those orders?”

Cattlea smiled faintly at Makia’s question. This time Makia did not blush, but instead felt a chill run down her spine.

“With Lady Ayaka gone...who do you believe these combined forces consider the one who brought them together? Who made them what they are?”

“Th-that would be you, of course, Lady Cattlea.”

“*Heh heh*, thank you. Yes. It is precisely for that reason that I have been so thorough and worked so hard to promote my own abilities—demonstrating that these combined forces operate solely under my command.”

Now that Ayaka Sogou has vanished, the combined forces cannot hold the line without me. In fact, when I look upon this army, I know I am the only one capable of moving them to action. The majority of the people present here believe that I am holding this operation together. The impact of our original strategy—to allow myself to be taken as an enemy hostage—would have been

greatly amplified by the present situation.

“Do you not think that most will assume I have a plan? That they will believe my retreat to be part of some greater strategy?”

“You’re right. You have almost complete control of the combined forces at present.”

The army of Alion was led by Baron Pollary—the Goddess’s man—but Cattlea’s rush to his aid and success in driving back the Miran legions had earned her the baron’s complete trust.

“I am still somewhat concerned by the Ulzan army...but even if they turn against us, they would be no match for the strength of Neah, Bakoss, and Alion combined.”

The Ulzan forces had also been driven to exhaustion by the Miran army and were terribly drained as a result.

Cattlea smiled fearlessly. “The position of queen is a tiring, stressful one that weighs ever so heavy on the shoulders...but representing a nation gives weight to my words, too. Far more so than being a princess or a noble. Are there any representatives of the other nations within our forces?”

“No. Only of Neah...”

“The grandeur of being Queen of Neah comes in handy at times such as these.”

Ayaka Sogou will not return to us. Not as an ally. Having this information confirmed by Seras is hugely significant.

Cattlea beckoned Makia over with her finger.

“For now, I will offer my rationale and have the combined forces begin to retreat. Should the Miran army follow, I will adjust the speed of our withdrawal—so as not to appear obvious, of course—and join forces with them once the time is right.”

Vicius might set out to intercept us, concerned by the reasons behind our

retreat. That would be a fine development in its own way... Drawing her out of her own base of operations, in which she is most secure.

“How will the other nations react to our betrayal—to our switching to the Miran side?” asked Makia.

Cattlea’s smile was like a ray of warm sunshine.

“I will negotiate with them, of course. To persuade them to join us, you understand? When it comes to Sir Gus, the Black Dragon Knights, and Baron Pollary in particular—I have no wish to come to blows with any of them. Should worst come to worst, however, we may be forced to do battle with their combined forces. Yet I fear that in that event, they will be facing down the Wildly Beautiful Emperor at the head of his army and shall have to do so *without me.*”

Chapter 3:

The Road to Become the Strongest

WE CONTINUED EAST until we reached the border, joining up with the bulk of the Miran army stationed there. The army was staring down the combined forces across the border—but now, the enemy troops were starting to retreat. The magical war pigeon from the messenger that we had sent to Cattlea had returned with her reply the previous day and a declaration that her forces had no intention of surrender.

“This letter was written using a code that only Queen Cattlea and I understand,” said Seras upon reading her reply. “I used an identical strategy to communicate with her in my own message. I believe that she has used the same coded method to avoid detection should her letter be intercepted.”

Our attempt to convince Cattlea to join us had been successful, and it seemed this retreat by the combined forces was taking place on her orders. We planned to continue east through Ulza, headed for the Kingdom of Alion.

“You look happy. Relieved that the queen’s agreed to join us?” I asked.

Seras was riding beside me on her white horse. “Yes...well...*no*. I knew that Lady Cattlea would agree. But it does make me happy to learn that she trusts me.”

“The queen’s taken a gamble by throwing in with us. We’ve gotta win this fight, no matter what.”

“Yes.” Seras gripped the reins of her horse, smiled faintly, and nodded at me.

“I feel a bit bad getting her wrapped up in my plans for revenge—but I do appreciate the extra strength she’ll bring to this fight.”

“...” Seras looked back at the carriage behind us, a worried expression on her face.

“She’s awake, but still worrying you, eh?”

“Ah, I’m sorry...but, yes.”

Three days earlier, Sogou Ayaka had regained consciousness. Hijiri was by her side the moment she awoke.

From what I hear—she wasn’t in the best mental state when she came to.

Hijiri’s been tending to Sogou, almost constantly with her ever since she woke up. Apparently, she was really confused when she regained consciousness. She blamed herself, lashing out at herself with harsh words. Cornered and battered, she went on a rampage—went to war with herself.

The words of her own classmates, the ones she treasured so much, had yet to get through to her. Sometimes I could hear her voice as she got emotional, even from outside of the carriage. At other times, I could tell that she was clinging to Hijiri and sobbing. I had told Kashima that Sogou was awake, but asked her to wait a little longer before visiting.

She still seems really worried about her other classmates—the ones she left in Alion. She asked Suou Kayako to look after everyone, but there’s no way of knowing what that Goddess might do to them. She’s already asked to leave and go to Alion alone... It was only Hijiri who managed to calm her down.

Firstly, Vicius should think that Sogou’s missing right now. That means there’s no point in taking any of her classmates hostage. There is still a risk that Vicius might dispose of them...but she should have no motive to do so right now, either.

Secondly and most importantly, we already have a Miran spy in the capital of Alion, with a plan for getting them out. Sogou making a move on her own might ruin that.

It was only after those facts had been explained to Sogou that she’d had to back down.

As we watched, Hijiri emerged from the carriage. She mounted her horse,

which a Miran soldier had been leading for her, and rode toward us.

“I just cleaned her up. She’s sleeping now.”

“Sorry you’re the one doing all of this...”

“Don’t let that concern you. This is a kind of atonement on my part.”

Hijiri and Sogou had been talking together for hours and hours, it seemed—but despite how mentally unstable Sogou was, Hijiri didn’t appear at all tired by their exchanges.

She might just not be letting it show...

“How is she?”

“Much better than she was on the day she regained consciousness. When she first opened her eyes, she was hit by such a flood of emotions and information... It overwhelmed her, and left her confused.”

“Right... Do you think Kashima is okay to see her?”

“I wonder. I am not sure if she is ready to face Kashima-san, Asagi-san, or any of her classmates just yet.”

“Still?”

“Yes...though perhaps meeting Kashima-san would be good for Sogou-san now.” Hijiri turned back to glance at the carriage. “I managed to calm her down enough to have a conversation last night, and cautiously asked her a few questions. But...”

She sighed.

“The Goddess’s methods appear to be a textbook case of manipulation. For instance, after the retreat from the north, and following the cancellation of their expedition to defeat the Demon King, it appears Sogou-san was almost never allowed to meet with the other heroes. This is one way in which control can be achieved— completely isolating an individual from the people close to them.”

I've heard about that somewhere, too.

“Sogou-san was bombarded with information that strongly affected her emotions... Yet another tactic meant to avoid giving one’s target time to think, impairing their ability to properly process what is happening to them. These are strategies employed by salesmen and conmen, too. The Goddess drove her to a state of anxiety intended to induce insomnia, further degrading her ability to reason. Then, despite Vicius leading her by the hand, Sogou-san was forced to make all of these decisions by herself—a trick that gave her the illusion of having made her own choices. This only increased how cornered she felt, having *chosen her own path*. Finally, presenting her with salvation or some sort of absolution completed the brainwashing. Should no respite have been provided, she would have broken. There are many other ways to manipulate a person, of course—and I see evidence of a number of them in what Sogou-san has experienced.”

“How do I put this... You seem to know a lot about these sorts of things.”

“I believe that the extent to which Sogou-san backed herself into a corner, causing her to lose control to this extent, is partially due to certain aspects of her character. I am versed in these matters for reasons of personal interest...but my family on my mother’s side are also very familiar with such things.”

Her mother’s side of the family again, eh? It sounds like they might have had a big influence on the Takao Sisters’ personality.

“In addition...she wishes to apologize to you.”

“If accepting her apology will help her find closure and get her feelings in order, then sure. But I also think it is only natural for her not to trust me...”

Sogou tried to save Mimori Touka, after all, and I hid my survival from her—even though I had the opportunity to tell her at the White Citadel.

“I am not wholly convinced I am worthy of her trust at present. Sogou-san may simply conclude that I am trying to brainwash her as well.”

“She’s important to you, isn’t she? Vicius never cared about Sogou, but you’re not like that Goddess.”

“Indeed,” Hijiri nodded. “We are indeed different in that respect.”

“Yeah.”

“That noted, Sogou-san is slowly making progress in the right direction. It’s just...I may not be the right person to truly cheer her up. I am...well, I am not adept at expressing my emotions.”

“I think you’re doing well enough... But I’ll check in with the Wildly Beautiful Emperor to see if we can do anything about that.”

“Hm?”

I had already passed my message through the emperor’s personal guards and received the reply that a certain individual I’d asked for would be arriving at any moment.

Preparations are underway.

Then, that very evening...

“He has arrived.”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor came to report his arrival in person. Our advance halted for a moment, and the emperor cleared his men away from the area. There was an extra curtain set up to hide us from outside eyes, and I called Itsuki to the carriage where Sogou was staying.

“You don’t need to wear your fly swordsman mask,” I added.

After a time, Sogou poked her head out of the carriage, with Hijiri by her side, helping to hold her up. Sogou looked a little thinner than before and her face was pale. Nobody from Asagi’s group was present, but Seras and Munin were there.

Noticing me, Sogou started, and cast her eyes remorsefully to the ground. Just then, a smaller carriage drove into the curtained-off space and came to a halt.

“Hup.” A man slowly climbed down from the horse-drawn carriage.

“Ah!” Sogou’s eyes opened wider the more she took him in. Then tears began pouring down her cheeks. She could only barely squeeze out his name.

“...Bane-s-san?!”

“Yo, long time no see, little Sogou! What’s the deal? You look way worse than you did the last time I saw you. C’mon...don’t let that pretty face go to waste.”

The new arrival was a red-haired man, swathed in bandages. Sogou slowly walked toward him, her feet growing steadier with every step.

Banewolf—otherwise known as the Dragonslayer—was a warrior of Ulza. He had been an instructor to the Heroes from Another World and had turned himself into a dragonman at the Battle for the White Citadel to protect Sogou and her group.

I knew from the intel I’d received that Sogou Ayaka owed him a deep debt of gratitude. I had proposed to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor that he reach out to Banewolf in an attempt to heal Sogou, just as I was reaching out to Takao Hijiri for much the same reason. The emperor also wished to have the man as an ally, it seemed.

Banewolf had returned to Monroy following the grave injuries he suffered after the Great Invasion...but seeking a quieter place to receive treatment, he had quickly moved to a town west of the capital. Vicius had called on him once, but he politely refused to return to Alion until he had recovered a little more. After that, the Goddess had stopped trying. She forced his loyalty by controlling the medicine that he needed for his sick father...but while the medicine was rare, it *could* still be procured. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor ordered his servants to stockpile a supply of it, and Banewolf then left Monroy to receive treatment for his wounds while at his father’s side.

“Bane-san... H-how are your injuries?!” Sogou stopped and looked up at him.

“Can’t go turning into a dragonman or swing that great sword of mine... But

I'm well enough to walk."

"I-I'm so glad you're okay..." Sogou sounded like she had a lump in her throat, likely from the overwhelming sense of relief washing over her.

"I'm surprised I've been able to recover this fast myself, to be honest with you. Must'a been the dragon blood...I am the *Dragonslayer*, y'know, strongest warrior in Ulza! Ain't never been beat up that bad before..." Banewolf grinned triumphantly. "Y'sure you ain't stronger than the great Dragonslayer now, Sogou?"

"Ah—w-well... I..." Sogou turned and looked down, averting her eyes uncomfortably. "I...I wasn't able to defeat the Demon King. I couldn't be like you, Bane-san. I couldn't protect everyone. I got out of control and caused problems for so many people... I...?"

Banewolf softly placed a hand atop her head.

"You were tryin' your best. Wanted to protect the other heroes, right?"

"..."

"Look... Don't you think you've been shoulderin' a bit much? I told ya when we were on the way to that white citadel, yeah? You gotta learn to rely on other people—don't keep it all to yourself."

"...Yes."

"Wasn't just that...remember? Doesn't matter how things turn out, if you tried your hardest then you gotta get some praise for the effort."

"W-well... All I've done is cause problems for so many people. I raised my weapons against other humans."

"Ain't your fault. It's that Goddess who manipulated your devotion and hard work."

"B-but...this all happened because I was weak! Because I believed the Goddess..."

“Guess some people would think this is your fault for gettin’ tricked. But it’s the exact opposite, kid. The liars are wrong.” Banewolf stuck a toothpick in his mouth. “You gotta remember that...otherwise they’ll mess with your emotions, plain and simple.”

“...You’re too positive about all this, Bane-s-san...” Sogou replied in a nasal tone. Her voice seemed to be regaining some of its strength.

“We talked ’bout that too, didn’t we? Being positive’s a good thing.”

“...You’re right. Yes...*sob... Heh, heh heh...*”

“I’ve never been great at dealin’ with that Goddess. I’d sure like to have the biggest pain in the ass in the whole freakin’ world off my plate.” Banewolf’s eyes softened. “Heard about the other kiddos in your group too, Sogou. Nyantan Kikipat might just be able to get them out.”

“I...”

Banewolf mussed up her hair a little harder than usual, then gently smoothed it back into place.

“I figure believin’ and prayin’s important sometimes, see? You can’t go trying to solve all the world’s problems on your own. You’ve got your little comrade Suou, yeah? I’m sure they’ll be fine... Or at the very least, I trust ’em. Trust in Nyantan and the rest.”

Sogou looked surprised.

“I get that you’re worried about ’em—really I do. But sometimes it’s important to be able to trust people. Don’t y’think?”

There was a pause.

“...You may be right, Bane-san.”

“I told you there’d come a time for you to make your move, Sogou—and I hear you’re strong enough now that I couldn’t’ve held a candle to you even in my prime, eh?” Banewolf took his hand from Sogou’s head and stroked his beard. “Hmh... Feels good when a student surpasses their master.”

He's starting to look like a caring father. If only a little.

"Anyway, Sogou."

"Yes?"

"Didn't you promise to pour me a drink once the Battle for the White Citadel was done?"

Sogou appeared shocked, then got a faint teasing look in her eyes and smiled. Hijiri was watching the two of them from by my side.

"...Did he not lose all of his memories due to the transformation?" she mumbled.

"Course I'm only gonna remember the promises that benefit me," said Banewolf.

"Oh Bane-san... You...!"

"But hey, the drink can wait till this next battle's over. I'll help out however I can. That stunnin' emperor over there has invited me along for the ride."

Sogou and Banewolf both turned to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

"I needed his astounding abilities...particularly his dragonman transformation. Well, I also suppose you could inspire the soldiers of Ulza without actually participating in the fight. I expect having the Dragonslayer among our ranks will have a positive impact on overall morale."

Banewolf turned back to Sogou. "Apparently, anyway."

"Was this your doing?" Hijiri asked me as the two of them resumed their conversation.

"Kind of, yeah. I knew Sogou and the Dragonslayer were friends."

"It appears this reunion is being presented as the by-product of the emperor's plans."

Sharp as always, this one.

“If Sogou finds out this was my doing, she might think I’m trying to manipulate her,” I explained. “And hey, she can’t trust Mimori Touka, right? The way the Wildly Beautiful Emperor just worded it is the least risky, most natural way to present this situation.”

“You’re going to lose out if you keep putting yourself out for others like that.”

“It’s the opposite. I’m the one getting ahead.”

Being made to feel like you’re being set up doesn’t feel good, even if the person doing it does happen to be one of your allies. The truth isn’t everything. You also need sleight of hand—a bit of magic.

“It’s just like it was with Seras. These people get through to each other...”

“...”

“The words of good people get through to good people.”

Their emotions.

For once—Hijiri looked confused. *What is it?*

“Banewolf’s words reached me too, you know?” she said.

I sneered sarcastically as Hijiri turned to leave. “You don’t get it?”

“Hmm?”

“From my perspective—you’re still way over on the *good* side.”

Sogou and the Dragonslayer went to talk in her carriage, and the Takao Sisters went along so they could be introduced to Banewolf.

Sounds like Sogou wanted them there.

I could hear the sound of laughter from their carriage from time to time.

I sure hope this leads to Sogou getting better.

The temporary curtains parted, and we resumed our advance.

“You are often in conversation with Seras, it appears. Do you never run out of topics?” asked the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, riding up as Seras and I were talking.

“It is not that we are always talking, Your Majesty,” I replied. “It’s just that the times at which you happen to come to us are times when we happen to be speaking. Well...personally, I feel quite comfortable simply having Seras by my side, whether we are conversing or not.”

“I also feel, ahem... Y-yes.” Flustered, Seras looked down at her mount and nodded.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor gave the two of us a faint, elegant smile. “I am ever so envious of your relationship.”

The emperor’s expression then returned to its usual regal and dignified norm.

I expect he’s here because...

“Have there been some new reports, Your Majesty?” I asked.

“My compliments. I should have known you would catch on fast.”

“I hope that the news is good.”

“Unfortunately, it would be hard to deem it so. Vicius has finally made her move. The White Army, those False Eucharists...”

Seras held her breath.

The emperor explained that there had been a magical war pigeon from one of his spies in Eno, the capital of Alion. It carried reports of large numbers of eucharists appearing around the Royal Castle in recent days. It was still unclear where they were coming from.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor placed a hand to his chin. “It appears that Vicius intended on using Kiriara, Ayaka, and the rest to buy time to create more of these False Eucharists, after all. At least, that is what seems most likely. It may be that Vicius did not leave the capital because the spawning of those creatures must occur there,” he said.

“We should assume that their numbers will continue to grow with time—and that they may be more powerful than those the Banished Emperor produced.”

Apparently, this army of eucharists is surrounding the castle... It's possible their numbers might swell so much that they start pouring from the city.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor looked in the direction of the Country at the End of the World.

“With things as they stand, we will require numbers of our own. It seems that we were right to request reinforcements from the Country at the End of the World.”

Under the shadow of the great battle to come, the Miran army continued east to their destination—Alion.

Monroy, capital of Ulza, had fallen.

Most of the Ulzan soldiers either fled into the surrounding countryside or raised the white flag of surrender. The final decisive factor was that the Monster Slayer King had fled the city ahead of the enemy army's arrival. A king's job was to inspire his troops in times of danger—but this king took his ministers and servants, turned tail, and ran.

Of course the people of Ulza lost the will to fight.

Without much combat, the battle against the nation of Ulza ended in a complete victory. The combined forces continued their steady retreat. It might have looked as if they abandoned Monroy to its fate, but from a military perspective, the Miran army could not be confronted. The decision to ignore Monroy and focus on pulling back was logical.

I expect the Queen of Neah's doing a lot of talking on the ground.

“The Monster Slayer King has abandoned his people and fled.”

I asked the Wildly Beautiful Emperor to have the message of the Monster

Slayer King's flight spread far and wide, rippling through the nation of Ulza—with a number of malicious details added to the story for effect.

This should turn the people's emotions against their ruler.

Even without the embellishments, however, the citizens of Ulza who lived in the capital seemed happy to not be caught up in the crossfire. They had little hostility toward the Mirans. With their king gone, his castle was promptly handed over. The conquering of the fortresses within Ulzan territory was also proceeding as planned, using the legions that the Wildly Beautiful Emperor had spun off for the purpose.

The reinforcements from the Country at the End of the World were drawing near, having split themselves into two armies, one of which moved slower than the other. The idea was to have the faster group join up with the main army—or so the magical war pigeons of the Miran Messengers that were embedded with Lise and the others had conveyed.

The main Miran army left just enough of its forces in Monroy to retain their control of the city, setting out for Alion the next morning once they had rested and resupplied for the journey to come.

Seras Ashrain

BEFORE THE ARMY made it to Monroy, they were met with intense rains. The rain did not last long, but it buffeted the columns of Miran soldiers for some time as they made their way toward the city. Certainly, traveling in the rain was much more tiring than advancing in fair weather—but the road to Alion was long. Following the fall of Monroy, the Wildly Beautiful Emperor decided to allow his troops to rest until the following morning.

Seras Ashrain had been showered by the rain, just like all the other soldiers. She was soaked to the skin, her clothes heavy with rainwater. Be that as it may,

her time as a runaway and journey through the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters had made her quite used to the harsh realities of weather and outdoor living.

Too-ka was much the same and didn't seem particularly bothered by any of it. That aside, Seras wished to wash and keep the clothes that she usually wore clean. She would not have minded a bath, truth be told. She had always been fond of good hygiene, and the spirits loved cleanliness too. Certain other feelings, however, were the biggest driver...

When I am by Sir Too-ka's side, I wish to be as clean as possible...

Of course, Too-ka would never demand cleanliness from her during their journeys or while on the road with the troops. Instead, he would be considerate of what was most convenient for her. Whenever he had not taken a proper bath for several days, he would say *"If I stink or anything, feel free to stay away from me,"* or something similar.

I have no fondness for unclean things, of course, but if the scent is of Sir Too-ka...well, I would not particularly mind that aroma...

Seras's head sank, driven by a sense of self-reprimand.

Such thoughts... Oh, this will never do...

Once before, in a certain tavern in the city of Monroy, Seras had sniffed Too-ka's laundry and found herself possessed by some startling emotions. It was just as Seras was fretting over the bath idea that the Wildly Beautiful Emperor came to her—almost as if her thoughts had reached him telepathically—and suggested that she and her companions use the Monroy Castle baths for the evening. Seras felt bad for the other soldiers, who would all be unable to bathe, but the emperor had put her worries to rest.

"My soldiers appreciate their time here in the city. And, thanks to the citizens of Monroy, they are enjoying their rest. You and your compatriots will be playing a large role in the upcoming fight against the Goddess. As emperor, I must have your energy fully restored. Think of it as a reward for your battle

against Kiri-hara.”

With the highest authority in the land insisting, Seras thought it rude to refuse.

“*You’ve been through a heck of a lot. Might be a nice break, eh?*” Too-ka had suggested.

When the emperor mentioned others...he was not speaking of me alone.

“Whoa, the baths in this place are awesome—! What’cha think, Aneki?!”

“Yes, quite so.”

The Takao Sisters were in the castle baths with her.

“Hmm... I have been spending so much of my time riding in that carriage—I wonder if I truly have the right to relax in such spacious baths?” pondered Munin.

She had just finished washing herself. Now, she gingerly slipped a foot under the surface of the water, still feeling a little guilty for her presence there. Once she checked the water’s temperature, swirling it with her toes, she slowly lowered herself into the bath.

“Mmh~... Th-that feels so goood... Ah-aah... ♪”

Seras, Munin, and the Takao Sisters were the only ones in the bath.

“Huh? Aren’t Kashima and the others comin’ to join?” asked Itsuki, sinking into the water.

“Kashima-san and the rest will bathe later. His Majesty Zine appears to be being considerate toward us, as nobody would be able to properly relax...if these facilities became too crowded.” Hijiri crouched at the edge of the bath and checked the temperature with her hand.

“Huh...right! Sucks, though... Anyway, like, Aneki...”

“What is it?”

“Seras and Munin are, like, totally *wild*, aren’t they...?!”

“I have a vague idea of what it is about them that you consider *wild*... But I think it a little impolite to discuss the matter in front of them.”

“Uh... I’m sorry for, like, not being considerate.” Itsuki submerged the lower half of her face in water and began blowing bubbles. Seras tried to stifle a giggle with the back of her hand.

She’s kind of cute—it’s the same feeling I get from Piggymaru and Slei. Her presence brightens the mood of whatever place she finds herself in.

Itsuki was sliding through the water, making ripples, as she approached Munin. Perhaps due to Hijiri constantly tending to Ayaka Sogou, Itsuki had been visiting Munin’s carriage often of late. The two appeared to be growing closer as the days went on, and they had washed each other before getting in the bath. Munin had shrunk her wings and tucked them away, perhaps thinking they might get in the way should Kobato and the other girls join in.

“Whoa... Munin, d’ya mind if I touch them...?”

“Oh? Go right ahead.”

“Nh... Whooaa... Seriously... These are awesome!”

“Hah hah...”

Seras watched the two of them with a wry smile.

“She can be trouble, that one,” said Hijiri, sitting down next to Seras and bringing her shoulders under the water.

“Lady Hijiri.”

“Please let me know if my Itsuki ever causes you any trouble, Seras. Anything at all,” Hijiri reminded her, scooping up some of the water in her pale hands and then letting it slide through her fingers. She paused, then said, “I feel a little bad for Sogou-san.”



Ayaka was still in the carriage outside—the place where she felt most calm, it seemed.

“I am able to leave Sogou-san’s side temporarily for now, because of Banewolf. I feel comfortable leaving her in his hands.”

Being this close to Hijiri, Seras was reminded what a beautiful young woman she was. Ayaka was beautiful, of course, and Itsuki was pretty too...but in Seras’s eyes, Hijiri shone the brightest.

I think I know why that is.

“You really are quite amazing, Lady Hijiri.”

Hijiri looked at Seras and smiled faintly. “If I happen to be amazing in some respects, there must be many in which I am not.”

“No! You are so intelligent, and always in command of your emotions... I think you are amazing.”

I could tell from her conversation with Too-ka that Hijiri would be a fitting member of his inner circle—a tactician of sorts. She is always calm and has a quick mind.

Seras had recently found herself often reflecting on all the things that Hijiri had that she lacked.

“Ahem, Lady Hijiri.” Seras straightened her back.

“Hmm?”

“Please look after Sir Too-ka in the future,” said Seras, bowing as deeply as she could without dipping her head in the bath.

“O-of course.”

Hijiri was always calm and composed, but something in her tone suggested a rare sense of bewilderment.

“Ah—m-my apologies.” Seras blushed red, looked up, and shrunk back. “I’m sorry for being so formal. Asking you to care for Sir Too-ka like this... It’s a

bother to you, isn't it?"

Hijiri snickered and smiled. "You have quite a bit in common with Sogou-san, don't you?"

"With Lady Ayaka?"

"Well, of course...I mean you should take it as a compliment. I do *like* people like you, after all."

"...Lady Hijiri."

She really is a charming individual, thought Seras.

"Incidentally, what exactly is it about Mimori-kun you wish me to care for? ...If you don't mind my asking."

"Ah, well...I feel that you would be a much better adviser to him than I could ever be, Lady Hijiri, and so..." Once more—trying her best to avoid being overly formal this time—Seras bowed her head. "I would like you to support Sir Too-ka in all the ways in which I am unable to do so."

Seras could tell that Hijiri was smiling again for a third time.

"Seras."

"Y-yes?"

"Then...let us support Mimori-kun to the end of this battle together, you and I. There are some things, after all, of which only you are capable—and some which I in turn can do, I am sure."

"Y—yes... Thank you, Lady Hijiri..."

Once they were out of the bath, the four of them dried off in the changing room and dressed in clean clothes. Munin and Itsuki chatted happily as they got themselves buttoned up.

"Oh, and Seras?" Hijiri had put on a shirt and was just getting started on her pants.

"Ah, yes?"

“I should be clear with you... I will never be a substitute for you.”

“A substitute for me?”

“I can tell just by watching the two of you. You are special to Mimori-kun—*irreplaceable*.”

“I-irre... Ahem...”

Hijiri smiled at her faintly, as if wishing her the best. “You can tell truth from lies—and so you know that I am speaking from the heart. Nobody can serve as a substitute for you. You are an individual whom Mimori-kun cannot possibly afford to lose, and so...” Hijiri’s expression was so dignified in that moment that Seras couldn’t help but feel inspired. “I will protect you however I can.”

“Lady Hijiri...”

“Well—I do suppose that with your prime armor power, you are in fact a good deal stronger than I am. And I expect I cannot even come close to matching your skill with a sword... I would appreciate if you could teach me a little, should the opportunity present itself.”

“I would love to have you as my student. Leave it to me, Lady Hijiri.”

“There is one matter on my mind.”

“Yes?”

“I am interested in these spirits of yours. We have not had many opportunities to speak candidly, as we are doing now... Might I trouble you to teach me a little about them?”

“Yes, of course. Incidentally, Lady Hijiri...”

“What is it?”

“Perhaps you might, ahem...find the time to put on your pants, p-perhaps?”

Hijiri’s eyes opened wide for a moment—but her response was unfazed.

“My my—I apologize. Thank you for reminding me.”

I know that if I were in her position, I would certainly be flustered and embarrassed... Perhaps that is part of the reason why I find I look up to her so.

Mimori Touka

THE NEXT MORNING...

The Miran army was preparing to depart the walls of Monroy, rested and replenished now that control of the city had been established. I looked up at the walls of the city, bathed in the morning sun.

“Man... Never thought I’d ever come to Monroy at the head of an army.” I turned to look back over my shoulder. “Northeast from here, through the Holy Empire of Neah... We’ll finally reach Alion and that foul Goddess, huh?”

We’re slowly getting closer. Returning to the spot where this story began.

“Eh?”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor approached me.

I feel like he often comes over when I’m on my own.

“Might we talk for a moment?”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

As if used to this by now, the people around us scattered to give us some privacy.

“The strength of Ulza can now be almost entirely discounted.”

“A testament to your leadership, Your Majesty. I expected nothing less.”

The way he took over the city was brilliant.

“As the Wildly Beautiful Emperor of Mira, I must live up to my name. Have you received any new information from the familiars?” he asked.

“No, in fact...I have yet to receive any reports since the last.”

Erika’s familiars haven’t surfaced for some time. Prior to the last report, they’d been visiting almost every day. I suppose the exhaustion must have caught up with her. Even if she isn’t speaking directly through her familiars, the ability takes a toll on her.

...But what if that isn’t the reason her reports have stopped coming?

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor looked off in the direction of Alion, a concerned look in his eye.

“To be frank, I am no longer receiving intel from the spy I have employed in Eno. I hope all is well...” The emperor paused for a moment. “These familiars... could Vicius be using something like them, too?”

“I don’t think that is likely,” I replied.

According to Erika, Vicius doesn’t use familiars. To put it more accurately: she can’t. The Forbidden Witch confirmed that when she was in Alion. Besides, if Vicius could use familiars, she would definitely have done so by now. Since she hasn’t, it’s safe to say she’s unlikely to ever do so in the future.

Familiars are an ancient magic that lost long ago. Erika managed to revive the techniques in her house, deep in the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters. Back when we exchanged information in that state guest house in Mira, she did mention that there were some tricks that Vicius couldn’t use.

“We must remain cautious of Vicius’s, then. Several suspicious individuals have already been captured in the imperial capital—though none have yet been discovered within the army.”

So he sees danger on that front too. We must be careful about spies infiltrating our ranks. I’ve been having the Takao Sisters dress in their fly swordsman outfits while out and about as a precaution, and those same considerations are why I’m currently wearing my disguise and allowing others to call me Too-ka. It seems the emperor is also keeping a careful eye out to see if

any odd individuals make contact with Asagi.

“...”

“What is it, Too-ka?”

“It could be that...Vicius isn’t actually paying us that much attention. The idea just struck me. Sort of a gut reaction...”

Like the Wildly Beautiful Emperor said—she might have been trying to buy time to spawn more powerful eucharists. But if there’s anything in the world right now that Vicius wants to eliminate, it’s all of us, and the forces of Mira. And yet, she doesn’t seem to be bringing her full power to bear upon us...

“Your Majesty! I have an urgent report!”

A courier rushed toward us, their face drained of color.

“What is it?”

“The Fortress of Panuba, a little to the west of the War Citadel of Protection, has been attacked. A large number of golden-eyed monsters and h-humanoid types! I-in addition, before the attack began there was an unsettling, loud noise and a mysterious purple light near the fortress.”

The War Citadel of Protection? Ah, that’s right...the White Citadel of Protection is in the north, facing Magnar. And the one in the south facing Ulza is called the War Citadel of Protection.

More importantly...

“A purple light and a strange sound, you say...?”

I think I know what that might be. During the Battle for the White Citadel, the Demon King’s armies used a demonic device...

“The demonic device that the Demon King’s armies used to draw the monsters of the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters to the citadel...I believe it also emitted such a sound and a similar light.”

“But why would such a device be being used there?” asked the Wildly

Beautiful Emperor.

“Vicius might have retrieved it and deployed it there in secret—or it might have lain dormant there for a long time, meant to ensure mutual destruction in case she felt cornered.”

The other fortresses have fallen or been captured. And now a fortress that’s being besieged by the Miran army is using this tactic. If they knew what that demonic device does, they’d have to be insane to ever consider using it. Not to mention...

“The northern reaches of the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters...” I mumbled.

“The northern reaches? What of them?” asked the emperor.

Before my fight with Kiri-hara, he tried to bring a horde of humanoid-type monsters to invade Mira. Among them were some humanoid types that came from the northern reaches of the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters. Just in case, I had Erika’s familiars investigate where those monsters went after the battle.

Following our fight, the humanoid types were in the southwest of the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters. According to the familiars, they scattered after being freed from Kiri-hara’s control. Their territory is in the north, though, and they’re lost and wandering down here... Erika did mention that they don’t seem to be leaving the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters, which they consider their home. But with the use of that demonic device, everything changes. They’re coming.

I spoke to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, explaining my speculation.

“Humanoid types are sadistic and brutal. They hurt humans, kill them... And they enjoy it. Or at least, every humanoid type I’ve encountered has been like that.”

“You mean to say...”

“There’s a danger that they will sense the areas where humans congregate,

and attack. From the report that we just received, it sounds as if they are roaming around this fortress which is near to the War Citadel of Protection, but...”

If someone’s reporting to us on the Fortress of Panuba by magical war pigeon, then there’s a chance some of the Miran soldiers there are still alive. If they retreated, they might have been able to make it out. No...more importantly...

“The issue is where those humanoid monsters might wander next,” I said.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor seemed to have reached the same conclusion. “...I see.”

Given the route they’re on...

“There’s a chance they’ll collide with the army of the Country at the End of the World as they come to join forces with us.”

“Ah!”

These aren’t just any monsters, they’re humanoid types from the northern reaches—more dangerous than the rest. We still don’t know if this is happening on Vicius’s orders, but nonetheless...

“I apologize. I had not envisioned that possibility.”

“I do not think that this was an oversight on your part, Your Majesty. In any case, a demonic device slumbering in one of the fortresses of the other nations would have been all but impossible for you to predict.”

Whether the device was brought in recently or was there all along is irrelevant. There was almost no way the emperor could have known of its existence. There’s also no guarantee that this is the same kind of device that was used at the White Citadel of Protection in the north. It might be a homemade device that Vicius laid there ahead of time, or an unused demonic artifact collected from some past root of all evil. Who knows? It might even have been gathering dust in the basement of that fortress, and just been triggered by mistake. It would have been difficult for the emperor to predict this happening.

But unless we do something, there's a danger our reinforcements from the Country at the End of the World will come under attack.

"I will inform them of the danger by magical war pigeon," said the Emperor, "I will then ask them to head south for a time. Once they have avoided the danger, they might turn to head in our direction. It would slow their progress, but..."

"Ignoring these humanoid types concerns me. If they were to cut off our access to the main road, that would greatly affect our supply lines."

Back at the White Citadel, we killed all the golden-eyed monsters. That's why our current situation poses such an unknown variable.

"Hm-ph... When the Banished Emperor attacked the capital, large numbers of golden-eyed monsters were sighted pouring out of nearby ruins. I ordered them dispatched, but some remain, wandering within Mira's borders. My citizens have been victims of their attacks. I believe it possible that these humanoid types may pursue the army of the Country at the End of the World, even as they make their way south."

It's also not ideal for us to have golden-eyed monsters and humanoid types roaming around at our backs. In that case...

"I will deal with them."

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor opened his mouth to speak, but I raised a hand to stop him.

"Luckily, the fortress is not far from here and so I do not think it will be difficult for me to rejoin you once this is done, Your Majesty. There are two people in this army who have defeated humanoid types before—myself and Ayaka Sogou. Other than us, I believe that Hijiri Takao would be able to defeat a humanoid type, though she may never have done so before."

"What about Ayaka Sogou?"

"It might be possible to take her along...but to be honest I think, if done right,

this might be the perfect finishing touch.”

“Finishing touch...?” asked the emperor.

There’s something I want to do before the final battle—if the opportunity presented itself, that is. I never expected to get the chance like this.

“Would you leave this matter in my hands, Your Majesty? The Miran soldiers who took down the fortresses of Ulza were intended to join up with the reinforcements from the Country at the End of the World, were they not? Unless we can deal with the threat that these humanoid types pose, we may not have enough military strength left to face Vicius’s eucharists in the battle to come.”

“Yes. You’re quite right.”

I called for Seras. *I’m going to need her if the Goddess’s Dispel Bubble comes into play.*

“—I understand the situation,” said Seras once it had been explained to her. “Please make use of my strength as you require. I would be happy to be of service in saving the people of the Country at the End of the World.”

I also called for the Takao Sisters, leaving instructions for after my departure. They arrived in a carriage, and I quickly explained the situation to the two of them after they emerged in their fly swordsman outfits.

“—So Seras and I will be leaving for a time. We can’t take Munin with us, though.”

Riding triple would slow us down too much and given what I expect this battle is going to involve, I might not be able to properly protect Munin during the fight. Even if we brought her along, she’d have to operate independently from me and Seras.

“I want you to protect Munin. She’s the key to the final battle,” I said.

She’ll be safer with Takao Hijiri.

“Understood,” Hijiri replied.

“I want you to react to the situation you find yourself in. Make your own decisions. I’m sure you can serve as my replacement for the emperor.”

“I will do my utmost to live up to your expectations.”

“Sorry for the trouble. I know you’ve got Sogou to deal with too.”

Not to mention Asagi, I guess.

“If you have decided to entrust me with this, Mimori-kun, I am sure it is the correct decision.”

“I’m starting to feel pressured by how much you trust me, you know?”

“My opinions are based on objective facts. Do not fear.”

I turned to Itsuki. “I’m counting on you too.”

“Sure, like, but make sure you come home safe, ’kay? You, Slei and Piggymaru too, yeah?”

“Squee.”

“Pakyuh!”

“You too, Seras,” said Itsuki.

“I will. Thank you.”

“—Ahem!”

She’s here too, huh?

“Munin... Have you heard the situation?”

“Yes. Please...I wish you all to return safely.”

If we leave those monsters roaming, the army of the Country at the End of the World will be in danger. We’re up against humanoid types from the northern reaches, no less—I can hardly blame Munin for being more concerned about her compatriots than the rest.

“Don’t worry.” I began pouring mana into the crystal on Slei’s back. “That’s

why the Lord of the Flies is going to settle this personally.”

We left the main Miran army and rushed west toward the fortress. It was late at night when we encountered a group of Miran soldiers in our path. The closer we got, the more I noticed something was strange about them. Their footsteps were heavy, many walked with their heads hung low, and others appeared to be injured.

“Is that... The Lord of the Flies...?”

Seems like they recognize me.

A man immediately came to greet me—a count who claimed to be their leader.

“Lord of the Flies...and Lady Seras...my name is Rohm. I am the leader of this unit.”

“Were you by any chance...”

“Yes. We are a unit from the fourth legion, and we...”

As the man continued to answer my questions, I learned that he and the rest of his soldiers had been a part of the attack on the Fortress of Panuba.

“...But right as it seemed like we were about to take the fortress, there was an awful, deafening, ringing noise. Purple light exploded from within the fortress walls. After that came a silence, like the retreating of the tide before a tidal wave. And the horde of golden-eyed monsters came rushing straight toward the light.”

The fortress was due west of the War Citadel of Protection. It was a watchtower of sorts, meant to keep guard over the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters, and so it was comparatively close to its borders.

“There were even humanoid types gathering there. We scattered in a daze of self-preservation, somehow managing to get away and avoid complete annihilation. But we’re down to shy of 250 men now, less than half our original

number.”

The faces of the soldiers I saw in the torch light were drained and drenched with despair. I saw Ulzan soldiers mixed in with the group too, though their hands were bound. When I asked Rohm about them, he explained that the monsters had attacked Mirans and Ulzans alike.

“These humanoid types...I can see that they were fearsome foes,” I said.

“Yes, they were. I do not think that we humans can do anything to combat them. They were unsettling...cruel. I felt so insignificant as a human in their presence. We were powerless. Feeble. Easily annihilated...” Rohm cast his gaze down, regret in his eyes. His hands were balled into tight, trembling fists.

“Count.”

“...Yes?”

“You have done well to assemble your men here on the retreat.”

“Eh?”

“I saw the regret in your eyes just now. No one completely ruled by fear would be capable of such emotion. You could easily have broken, abandoned all discipline...but you did not. You did well in leading your men here. You have fulfilled your duty as commander.”

“I am of the same opinion.” Seras picked up where I had left off. “Your soldiers may be in dire straits, but you managed to keep command and of them as a unit. I believe it was the strength of your will that made this possible.”

Rohm was overcome with emotions. Tears welled up in his eyes. “Such kind words for a defeated commander... Thank you.”

He raised his head with a start.

“Th-then... Lord of the Flies, Lady Seras, you two are...?”

I went on to explain why the two of us had come.

“You mean to eliminate the humanoid types that have gathered at the

fortress?!”

The other soldiers reacted to Rohm’s voice, turning in our direction.

“They pose a risk to the reinforcements coming from the Country at the End of the World, given their position. They may only be roaming around the fortress for now, but the humanoid types might move further into Ulza,” I explained.

The humanoid types from the northern reaches don’t seem to want to return to their former homes. Now that they’ve been drawn out of the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters by that demonic device, we don’t know what they’ll do next—and we can’t afford to be optimistic.

...And, well, I do have objectives of my own out here.

“Th-then allow us to—”

“No. The Lord of the Flies Brigade will handle this alone.”

“Th-that cannot be... Those are *humanoid* types!”

“My companions and I fought several in the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters. We have defeated them before.”

“U-unbelievable!”

“It is specifically to do this task that we, the Lord of the Flies Brigade, have come here. We cannot fight at our full strength while also defending our allies from harm.”

“H-hmph... As you s-say. Understood. We would not wish to be a burden upon you, Lord of the Flies.”

“More importantly, you and your men need to join up with the army of the Country at the End of the World, and head east to the front where His Majesty is waiting.”

Rohm forgot his shame and raised his weary head, eager to be of assistance.

“There are few people in this world who have faced a humanoid-type

monster and lived to tell the tale. You safely led half of your unit from the battle, and kept your men disciplined through the retreat with your strength of heart, Sir Rohm. You and your soldiers have learned what it feels like to face death. I will be counting on you in the final battle to come.”

“Lord of the Flies...” Rohm’s eyes opened wide, as if he’d been struck by lightning. I had been speaking loud enough for the men nearby to overhear. I could see some color returning to their cheeks.

“Count Rohm, could you quickly tell me everything you know about the fortress and the landscape surrounding it?”

“Of course. At once.”

I’ve already sent out a magical war pigeon to the Country at the End of the World’s reinforcement army, asking them to halt for now. But unless I can eliminate these humanoid types, they’ll be waiting there forever. I’ve brought one of Erika’s familiars with me, and was hoping to use it as an aerial scout of the area, but she still hasn’t surfaced. I wonder what’s happened to her?

This familiar is valuable, and I might not be able to protect it in the fight ahead. I should leave it here, along with my other things, given it seems Erika won’t be contacting us.

After Rohm had given me all the information he could, we parted ways.

“We’re off to the fortress, then.”

“Lord of the Flies, Lady Seras, I pray for your safety. And...thank you.”

I nodded once, turned Slei on the spot, and sped away—once more toward the fortress.

“ ... ”

We raced up a slight incline and stopped at the ridge—giving us a clear view of the Fortress of Panuba. The Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters sprawled out to the north, and even from this distance, I could see them—three shapes that

looked like humanoid-type monsters.

One was roaming, moving like a kind of slug. The second walked on two legs, swinging its arms. The last was scurrying, insect-like, locked in what looked like a gymnast's bridge pose. Then there were the golden-eyed monsters—in huge numbers, scattered across the area.

“ ... ”

From what I can see...it doesn't look like they'll be heading back into that forest once they're done here at the fortress. It's more like they're out looking for further prey. That's what my gut tells me.

We came across several golden-eyed ones on our way here, but there are way more of them than I expected. Even more than the reports stated. And there must be even more lurking inside the fortress and in the forest that we can't see. I can't tell exactly how many humanoid types are present in the mix, either...and once this battle starts, I'm going to have to take on each and every one of them.

“Sir Too-ka...” said Seras from behind me. She sounded pained, as if she was speaking through clenched teeth.

“There is a forest to our left, just like the count said there'd be. It's not like we can go charging down this hill at them. Let's take a detour and wind our way through the trees,” I said.

We backed away from the top of the hill and entered the forest. There were golden-eyed monsters there—but none were humanoid types.

“Gyeeeeeh!”

“Paralyze.”

I paralyzed targets and Seras cut them down as we rode past, making our way toward the border of the forest. I caught glimpses of the humanoid types through the trees. It didn't seem as if they had noticed our presence yet.

“Those scumbags...”

I had seen outlines from atop the hill, but closer to the fortress, the corpses of

the slain soldiers strewn about the field were more distinct. I heard screams from time to time—some of them had survived, it seemed.

No. They're being kept alive—toyed with.

The scene became clearer and clearer as we approached. What met us there was appalling beyond description.

If there ever was a hell on earth—I think I'm there.

Malice.

Evil.

Sickening.

I saw flies swarming the corpses... I could smell the scent of death, pungent on the battlefield even from this far away. The flies gathering about the bodies gave voice to the resentment of the dead.

The pain in Seras's voice atop that hill... She knew what was happening down here. She knew the hell we were about to face.

"Hmph."

"Sir Too-ka?"

Yeah, that's me.

"This is it. This is who we face."

The Sword of Courage, the Thirteen Orders of Alion, Johndoe, Oyamada, Kiri-hara... I've had so many opportunities to see human evil. Maybe my sense for this stuff has dulled somewhat. It's all a blur for me.

The monsters of the Ruins of Disposal. That Soul Eater.

That dark black sadism of the humanoid types I encountered in the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters...

These monsters... These humanoid types...

"Now I remember. This is who they are."

They kill humans for fun.

“Seras.”

“Yes?” Her voice was ice cold—an inhospitable expanse of glacial rage.

“No holding back.”

“Understood.”

“Kill them all.”

This situation... It's just like when Eve, Lis, and I headed to Erika's place, fighting the creatures lured in by those mouth monsters. The enemies are stronger this time. But they're not the only ones who have changed. All I need to do is the same thing I did then.

“Annihilate them—each and every one...” As Seras equipped her prime armor, I declared, “They’re food for the flies.”

There was a humanoid type waiting for us as soon as we made it out of the forest.

It must have noticed the light from when Seras activated her prime armor. No—I let this thing notice. It's the one that was moving like a slug.

Now that I got a better look at the monster, I saw it had countless tiny legs on the bottom of its flat lower body. The several tail-like tentacles jutting out from the creature’s hips looked insectoid. The monster had several arms, all of them sprouting from its back up toward the sky. The fingers on each of its hands grasped at the air as if seeking invisible purchase...and in the palm of each hand sat a lifeless, headless human corpse.

“Ueeehghyaaah!”

The humanoid type in front of me spit something from its mouth—an organ made of intestines and blades. The bladed projectile vomit flew at me, and I got low, while Seras raised herself up on one knee behind me. She waited for the

right time to strike, then swung—the white gleam of her spirit sword a great mass of light slashing through the air. The massive sword of light annihilated the blades that had shot from the humanoid type’s mouth.

The creature was left wide open. It looked confused, taken aback by how easily its opening attack had been thwarted. The arms sprouting from its back then launched into the sky like missiles, glowing as they darted upwards.

Deciding to try a different tack, eh? Haven’t seen a humanoid type use that kind of attack before. Too late now, though.

Keeping half an eye on the other humanoid types and monsters that were approaching, I quickly used my paralyze and berserk combo to finish off the monster that was dead ahead.

Level up!

I leveled up for the first time in a long while.

“...Good.”

Blue blood fell like rain. The light of the creature’s arms faded now that its body was dead, and they flopped to the ground.

I kept Sleil galloping onward toward the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters.

We’re more at risk now that we’re on this flat plain, with no cover around us. Cunning tricks will work better when I’m back in the trees and using the terrain to my advantage. It’s ironic. A place so dangerous, where others fear to tread—but to me it’s just a hunting ground.

The bipedal humanoid type strode toward us at a swift pace. The monster was about five meters tall, with human faces on each of its shoulders. The space where the creature’s head should have been was occupied by a rounded mass that looked like a pickled plum. The monster accelerated as it drew closer,

swinging its arms in wider and wider arcs.

“Peh-peh-peh-peh-peh-peeheh!”

The faces on the monster’s shoulders spewed spit, shooting globs of matter mingled with torn human arms and legs into the air.

Their cheeks were stuffed full, like squirrels storing up nuts. So this damn thing’s mouth was filled with human corpses, then.

“Eeyahhooooh!” the monster screamed in excitement. It grabbed some of the corpses it had just spit into the air and tossed them toward us.

“That thing’s just gross. What’s it so happy about?”

It saw Seras’s sword—it’s being wary of her. Careful to stay just out of range of her attacks. But it’s within range of my status effect skills.

I was reminded just how important it was to have Seras on my side, with her prime armor.

I’ve had to come up with so many insane strategies to compensate for my lack of strength in combat...but with Seras fighting as she is now, I won’t have need for them most of the time.

“Berserk.” I killed the humanoid type with my certain death combo—and leveled up again.

This lot are humanoid types from the northern reaches. I see. I guess they taste good, then.

I paid a flying visit to all the golden-eyed monsters swarming around us.

“Poison.”

I used Berserk on the bigger monsters, and they began to attack the other golden-eyed ones around them.

Splat!

“Uhyohohohohyohn! Hyohn!”

The humanoid type that was in the gymnastics bridge pose crushed an attacking golden-eyed monster to death, then charged for us with the creature's lifeless body still in hand.

I don't think that thing ever had a head. The base of its neck is a face... When the monster's bent over backward, its face is pointed forward. But what strikes me most is that crude smile it's wearing.

The monster was breathing hard through its nose, which dripped green snot.

Or is it more like a nosebleed, maybe?

Blood poured from the monster's eyes too, like crimson tears. It looked almost lost. Entranced. Blushing with embarrassment, even. Its eyes were fixed upon a single spot.

...Seras?

That thing's staring at her. Has it looked at anything else since this fight began?

The monster was paying almost no attention to me.

I see.

"Sir Too-ka."

"Eh?"

"It appears that that humanoid type is only looking in my direction," said Seras.

"You noticed that too, huh?"

"Yes. And I believe that drawing attention to me in order to win victory is one of the fighting tactics at which we are most adept."

I snorted at her.

"You know me too well."

Seras shifted in the saddle, getting on one knee on Sleif's back and readying

her spirit sword. Slei could use her special ability to make sure her riders weren't thrown off, altering her shape to support Seras's lower body and providing suspension. We could now take intense action on horseback without being thrown to the ground.

"Seras."

"Yes?"

"I was right."

Back then, when we dived into the Mils Ruins and I chose to save her from the Black Dragon Knights.

"I wasn't wrong when I decided to save you, Seras Ashrain."

There was a pause. Then Seras thanked me—whispering the words right next to my ear, so I could just barely hear them. She faced off against the humanoid type that was closing in, just forty meters from us.

"I am glad, too. Glad that you chose me. I truly am..."

Almost thirty meters until that humanoid type hits...

"...So glad to have met you."

With the third humanoid type defeated, we entered the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters.

I've leveled up again—but this is only the beginning.

A horde of golden-eyed monsters were in pursuit, drawn by the battle. It seemed they were summoning other monsters to them—I felt the avalanche of bodies rushing into the forest a few seconds behind us. I felt presences straight ahead, too: golden-eyed monsters coming through the trees. We chose our route and forged ahead.

If this fortress is near the War Citadel of Protection, then I have some idea of the geography of this area. I fought my way through here once before, facing

Ashint and Baron Zuan's men. I don't need to go all the way there—any area with similar terrain would make it much easier to fight these monsters.

As Sleil galloped on I scanned the area for features that might help us, like hills or ruined buildings in the forest, all the while driving away the golden-eyed monsters that approached us from the front.

“Piggymaru, your time to shine is going to be later. We’re not going to link up together until we break away from Seras—but stay on guard as always, okay?”

“Squee!”

“Seras, when you feel like your prime armor is reaching its limit, take Sleil and leave—make absolutely sure you stay safe.”

“Understood...” There was no longer a hint of doubt in her voice. “...Sir Too-ka.”

“I’m counting on you.”

Seras cut down a mid-sized golden-eyed monster that sprung at us.

“There’s a risk they might learn too much about how my skills work. I’ll be leaving the smaller and medium-sized ones to you from here on out,” I said.

“Understood, Sir Too-ka. You wish to use this opportunity to level up?” asked Seras.

“Yeah.”

This isn't like the time that we all headed into this place to try and reach the domain of the Forbidden Witch. I'm not fighting here to restore my MP to full by leveling up.

These humanoid types, Civit, Einglanz...

...The Sword of Courage, Johndoe, The Sabre-toothed Tigers, Kiri-hara...

I've fought so many battles by now, and come out on top because of my stat modifiers. Speed in particular. I have bonuses to my reflexes and my ability to detect opponents coming at me. Without those, I might not have made it

through all the times I gambled on being able to thread the needle. I really felt the importance of my stats during the fight against Kiriara in particular.

I'm not keeping up with Seras when she fights wearing her prime armor. I'm only holding her back. She's adjusting her movements to make it easy for me to get around—but if I could move faster, Seras could too. I felt the same way when we first came here to the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters. There's a real benefit to raising my other stats too.

“According to Hijiri, even as an S-class, her leveling slowed once she got over 100.”

Even Sogou, who defeated that inner circle demon, isn't over level 500, from what I hear.

“But I'm already up to level 2500.”

And after defeating those three humanoid types from the northern reaches, I can feel a real difference. It's not quite as much as I gained from Einglanz, but I've got a lot of EXP inside of me right now. I guess those guys were a group of humanoid-type bosses.

“Status Open.”

Lv. 3121

I've leveled up a lot. Grown so much more. I don't know the details of how my leveling curve works, but I don't feel like it's slowed down as much as Hijiri's has. It doesn't feel like I'm hitting a ceiling, like the S-class heroes. My stats are steadily continuing to increase. So if I keep taking in more and more EXP—I can just keep going.

Of course, I don't know if my numbers will ever match the S-class heroes...but if I keep growing, I might be able to get close. My growth rate is already abnormal—so far beyond the normal frame of reference for how the other

heroes have leveled up—and I'm still going.

“We’re up against that foul Goddess. I want to see how far up I can push my level before our showdown. I thought about diving into some ruins to try and find humanoid types, but...we just don’t seem to have that kind of time, do we?”

“You believe this to be your opportunity, then?”

“Yeah. I figure there’s gonna come a time when this leveling will come in useful. I need to do this.”

I need to prepare for the worst by doing everything I can now. These stat modifiers have saved my life before. These humanoid types are going to feed me. I guess at the end of the day, I’ve gotta thank Kirihara for bringing them all here.

“Then, as planned, I will ensure you can gain EXP from these monsters by allowing you to strike the finishing blow.”

“Hey, Seras. You remember that time we fought Civit?”

“Yes. Civit... He asked me to bring you back to him when *you were finished.*”

Civit’s words.

“Ah. She weakens the monsters, and you deal the final blow, I take it.”

It seemed Seras was remembering the same thing.

“I-I was to accompany you into the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters and assist you in your leveling. Then return you to Civit once you were *complete.* And now...”

Strangely enough...

“Sure seems like you’re doing just that, doesn’t it?”

“Heh...” Seras laughed. “It does indeed.”

“I’m going to be counting on your strength to complete me—vice-captain.”

The noise of trees being struck down grew closer and closer.

“Gyoooohhhh—!”

“Leave it to me,” said Seras Ashrain, increasing the power of her spirit sword. “My sword, heart, and soul are yours this day. I will fight with everything I have.”

The golden-eyed monsters charged, and the humanoid types came with them. We killed and killed and killed...

The fight isn't hard just yet—but that's largely due to Seras and her prime armor. There have been situations that really haven't required much strategy at all, and that's purely due to Seras's overwhelming superiority in combat. It makes things easier for her to hand monsters over to me for killing blows. There haven't been any enemies against which Seras would struggle on her own, yet. Everything's being properly taken care of by Seras's mid-to close-combat prowess and my status effect skills. The enemies can't even get close with their attacks.

From time to time, I made use of the terrain and buildings around us.

If these monsters have come from the northern reaches, they should be unfamiliar with this area. This isn't their home turf—and that should work to our advantage.

We dived into buildings or valleys, drew the monsters in—and killed them.

My experience with fighting large crowds is showing. Throwing them off, then nailing them...I feel like it's easier now than it once was for me, even though I'm facing the toughest, most EXP-filled humanoid types of the northern reaches of the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters. I'm sure my understanding of these creatures is playing a part, too. All of the evil that I've seen.

I know.

I know what it's like to be evil—how they think.

I feel like I'm seeing the pattern.

I've fought against bastards caked in the black, bubbling dirt of evil. Humans, demons, humanoid types... They're all different—but they're all the same. The way they think, the way they torture their prey. There are patterns to their behavior. I feel like I can track what they're doing, in a way—like I've gained a sense for their movements after fighting so many of them. Seras hasn't been able to understand the heinous evil that she's encountered in her life...

But I'm not like her.

I get it.

I understand.

That's why I dwell on these evil thoughts—use them to my advantage.

We've gotten stronger, I know it.

We've grown.

But that's exactly why we need to stay on our toes, always anticipating that the enemy might surpass our expectations. We should always stay focused on the worst-case scenarios. Never underestimate our enemies.

Back when I fought the Soul Eater, I carved those words into my memory. The moment when I believe that I'm stronger than the enemies I face...the moment I'm certain my victory is assured...

That's when my true enemy appears. Carelessness.

If we're going to be the strongest of them all, if we're going to make it all the way to the top, then I won't be directing those words at my arrogant enemies. I must direct them inwards—as a warning to myself.

If I never forget them, then...

"Seras."

"Yes?"

“I know we can be the strongest.”



Chapter 4:

The White Goddess and the Traitor

MIMORI TOUKA had departed their company, while the main force of the Miran army headed east out of Monroy. Takao Hijiri served as Touka's replacement, but the army was not executing any particularly significant maneuvers. Most of her work involved receiving reports and giving advice to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

He came to her while they were resting—Hijiri wearing her fly swordsman outfit.

"It appears that *he* is not in possession of enough information to determine Vicius's location," said the emperor.

"So it would appear."

Their army had captured several Alionese spies in Monroy, and Hijiri had been present at their interrogations. The spies had been misleading in their answers, but Hijiri's lie-detecting abilities prevented anything they said from throwing the Mirans off. It had been easy to check their answers and discern the lies.

"We are fortunate to have your ability to see through lies with us, especially in Seras's absence," said the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

The spies had sent a magical war pigeon to Vicius just after the Miran army had arrived in Monroy.

"Vicius is aware that the Lord of the Flies Brigade has entered Monroy. The information that we expected to reach her ears has done so. Now we must ensure that what is hidden from her remains that way. Everything has gone as the Lord of the Flies planned, so far," said Hijiri.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor smiled faintly.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

“You are a fine substitute for the Lord of the Flies—and a thought just crossed my mind. I understand why Too-ka left you here to handle his position.”

“I am honored to receive such a compliment,” Hijiri replied indifferently.

“What of her?” asked the emperor, his gaze turning to the carriage of Sogou Ayaka.

She was asleep. Her sleep remained irregular, lasting for long and indeterminate periods of time. She was, however, clearly improving.

“Her recovery may be largely the Dragonslayer’s doing. As for whether she will be able to return to the field of battle—I personally would not like to give her any part in the fighting,” said Hijiri.

“You worry for her?”

“She is still damaged.”

Ayaka’s worried sick about her classmates—the ones left behind in Alion. She hasn’t said anything, but I can see it in her eyes.

She was calm during the day but often grew agitated at night. When she did, Hijiri slept beside her whenever possible, helping her drift off to sleep.

“It seems to be best that I am with her at night, in particular. We cannot have the Dragonslayer share her bed, of course.”

“Even if Ayaka accepted, I imagine Banewolf would refuse,” said the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

“Heh,” Hijiri smiled thinly. “I expect you’re right.”

He’s a fine, upstanding man. I have no concerns leaving Ayaka in his care. The Dragonslayer does appear to be recovering faster than expected, but whether he’d be of any use in combat remains up in the air. He might die if he attempts to participate in the final showdown.

“In addition, I have elected to assign specially selected members of the Band of the Sun to accompany Asagi and her group.”

The members of Asagi's group had met with Ayaka the previous day. First, Kobato had entered alone. Ayaka seemed worried and suspicious, so Kobato watched her for a while—then apologized. She said she was sorry for all the burdens Ayaka had had to bear that Kobato was unable to understand.

Asagi apologized too, of course. Hijiri had observed it all from a hiding place—but nothing out of the ordinary happened during their exchange. The members of Asagi's group accepted her cheerfully. Apparently, Asagi had spoken with them all ahead of time, just as she did when they met Touka.

"Sogou Ayaka just went a little crazy, and it was the Goddess's fault," was clearly the message that she had conveyed. With Asagi's charisma backing up her words, the girls of her group accepted the explanation.

"Can't be helped, I guess."

"Not like it was the class rep's fault or anything."

I can imagine their responses easily enough. They are the masses, I suppose, floating on the wind, changing their thoughts to whatever the latest social media influencer tells them to think. I suppose that's an easy way to live—and a happy one, after a fashion. Such people require a certain degree of simplicity.

I almost feel like everything was just a little too complicated in our old world. Simplicity is not always a bad thing.

"..."

I allowed them to meet because I thought it would be safe to do so—and I do believe that Ayaka's thinking has cleared a little as a result.

Hijiri sighed in relief.

Though I cannot be absolutely sure that she will be okay.

"Asagi's group—her *unit*—they will be under your command, but moving independently of myself, Itsuki, and the Lord of the Flies Brigade. Is that correct?"

They will be treated as a special division, in other words.

The idea had been Touka's at first, but it had all depended on the Wildly Beautiful Emperor's approval.

"I was the one who originally brought Asagi and the rest to our side. Before my alliance with the Lord of the Flies Brigade, I intended to set a trap for Vicius, using Asagi's group and a squad of elite Miran soldiers. I always intended for them to operate independently," said the emperor.

He explained that the Lord of the Flies had also approached him with a similar suggestion—that the Lord of the Flies Brigade would operate freely, as a kind of guerrilla force.

"Understood. I will leave them to you—but if anything should happen, please do not hesitate to come to me for advice."

"Hmph. I am counting on you."

"Too-ka Mimori is also very much reliant upon you and your strength in arms, Your Majesty. In my estimation, at least."

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor is a truly talented commander and tactician.

There was a brief pause.

"Does it appear that way to you?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Hmph...I see. Then I *suppose* I will have to live up to his expectations."

"..."

I see... This is what Touka was talking about when he mentioned the emperor acting his age, then.

Hijiri looked up at the sky—before Touka left, he had told her that a familiar might arrive with a new report. None had come.

All contact from Erika Anaorbael's familiars has ceased. We will only be able to rely on spies in the capital of Alion to inform us of Vicius's movements now.

“Your Majesty, with regards to the situation in Eno, where Vicius is presently located... Have there been any...?”

“Apologies, but could you wait a moment?” he interrupted her.

Hijiri fell silent.

The emperor’s personal guard had been standing some distance from them, watching as they spoke. An individual strode through their midst and was recognized by the guards before quickly approaching them. It was Yoyo Ord.

“If you are here, then there has been contact from Eno?” asked the emperor, sensing the tension in the air.

“It is as you say. My spy in the capital of Alion has sent a magical war pigeon.”

Just as with the familiars, it had been some time since contact had last been made—and the emperor worried for the safety of his agents. He breathed a short sigh of relief.

“They are safe, then. What is their report?”

Yoyo looked at Hijiri, still dressed in her fly swordsman outfit. The only others nearby were in Ayaka and Munin’s carriages. Itsuki was in Munin’s carriage, and since Ayaka was sleeping, Banewolf was off eating for the time being.

Then we can talk, the emperor seemed to conclude, nodding for Yoyo to continue. “Please, go on.”

“Report,” said Yoyo once, lowering her voice somewhat. “A familiar operated by an ally of the Lord of the Flies has made contact with Nyantan Kikipat.”

“Oh!” The Wildly Beautiful Emperor reacted with a sharp glance in Hijiri’s direction.

“At present, she has left Eno and is on the road with horses and three carriages furnished by the spies of Mira.”

Then she has escaped the capital. That only leaves...

“Some heroes remain in the royal castle of Alion, in addition to Tamotsu

Zakurogi and Nyantan Kikipat's younger sisters, who were taken prisoner by Vicius. It appears that *all* are on board the carriages, accompanying her from the city."

"Nyantan! She did it!" Hijiri exclaimed, letting some emotion show for once.

I see...

She had been told that depending on how familiars were operated, the toll it took on the user could be intense, even causing them to lose consciousness for several days at a time.

The reason Erika's reports trailed off must have been because she spoke to Nyantan directly through the mouth of one of her familiars.

Yoyo had an odd look on her face, as if there was something distinctly unreal about what she was going to say next.

"What else?" asked the emperor.

"Ahem... It's just that from here, the report... I find these next words somewhat confusing. You see..." Yoyo went on to convey the information in her report.

"What did you just say?" The Wildly Beautiful Emperor raised one eyebrow, and Hijiri could understand his reaction.

The contents of the report that Yoyo delivered were, simply put, beyond the limits of their imaginations.

Nyantan Kikipat

LET US RETURN *to the moment it happened...*

“Sitting on a throne can be quite pleasant at times, can’t it? ♪”

In the throne room of the royal castle of Alion, the Goddess Vicius sat upon the throne in high spirits. There was a table beside her inlaid with gold and silver detailing, upon which a number of reports were placed—though most had scarcely been touched. The table was meant for the official business of the king—but the Wise King of Alion was nowhere to be seen.

I expect he is in his personal chambers, being lulled to sleep.

There were only a few others present in the king’s chambers, all disciples serving as a light guard. The queen’s seat had long been removed from the throne room.

“According to the reports, the golden-eyed monsters that the Demon King spawned have lost control of themselves. I suppose this means that Kirihara has been defeated. His defeat means that they are capable of using the Forbidden Magic of disabling, then. Well, not that I care one bit about that. ♪”

Nyantan Kikipat stood beside the throne, on the opposite side of the table. The throne room was spacious and occupied only by Vicius and Nyantan. The whole space felt empty. The curtains were closed, and the only light came from the lit candles around them.

“It is finally time, Nyantan.”

“Finally...? What is it you mean, Goddess?”

Vicius laughed and placed both arms upon the armrests of the throne. “I am finally going to become a real God.”

“...You have *always* been a divine, haven’t you?” asked Nyantan.

“But I am not a *chief* deity.”

Chief deity...

It was the first time that Nyantan had heard the term.

“Eh...to put it simply, the world *up there* is complete trash, Nyantan.”

“You are not satisfied with the world above, then, Goddess Vicius?”

“*Hoh hoh hoh...* You are to become my right hand, so I think you should be aware of this. The preparations for your transformation into a demi-god have been completed, so you may look forward to that. I expect great things.”

“I do not know if I will be able to serve you well as your right hand...but I intend to try my best. I will do all that I am able.”

“What wonderful dedication! Oh...I’m sure your little sisters will be so pleased. They have such a marvelous older sister, after all. It’s so touching... *Aah...* The tears—*haah*—they won’t stop coming.”

Vicius’s words were interrupted by a yawn. She propped up her head with a fist to her cheek.

“You wished to know what I *want*, didn’t you?” asked the Goddess, after a brief pause.

Nyantan slowly, without a sound, swallowed—careful to keep her tone calm and even. “Yes.”

“For starters, that world *above* is a terrible pain in my neck. I would like to thoroughly *crush* the world of the divines.”

“The world of the divines? Hmm... Is that realm some kind of a threat to the humans of this world?”

“Nh? What is this nonsense you are speaking of?” asked Vicius.

I have to find out her true intentions.

“Th-then...*why*?”

“Oh? They interfere with my killing humans for my own enjoyment. Must I have some other reason for destroying them?”

Nyantan was almost at a loss for words, but she somehow managed to force out another question. “Why...would you do such a thing?”

“Excuse me? Because that is what I *want* to do. The chief deities and the

other divines won't approve, and that's why they're such a pain. There is nothing else to it. That is why I have spent all this time working myself to the bone under these accursed bonds, fighting the roots of all evil."

Vicius drove her fist a little harder into her cheek. "Still...I expected this process would take another four or five cycles. Luckily, the Demon King—the root of all evil this time around—was so exceptional that my plans have been considerably accelerated. He shared his abilities with his Inner Circle demons—quite divine of him indeed!—and the number of golden-eyed monsters he was capable of spawning was clearly far beyond the norm. He was an unusual one, compared to past incarnations. The heroes this time around were abnormal, too...though I believe most of those infuriating brats have been taken care of by now, so let us forget them. If the main objective of my plan is achieved, I don't particularly *care* what happens to this world, for now. ♪ If I can gain control over the heavens, I can crush the humans below whenever I *feel* like it, you understand?"

Nyantan looked over at Vicius. The Goddess's *smile* had completely lost its ability to express happiness.

"All this talk of balance between the dimensions is *truly* idiotic. Something about the need to preserve it so that the worlds do not distort... And that's the reason we divines are restrained in our actions here, working so hard to obtain the precious Source Essence to fix distortions... Don't you think it's *stupid* that I'm a god, but I'm so bound and limited? A *god*, you understand? I couldn't understand a single word of what those other divines were saying. Most of all, I cannot comprehend what is *wrong* with making humans suffer, when they are *our* creations... What could possibly be the issue with toying with them? I was told that doing so would increase my interference rate with their world...but why should I care about that? It's such a drag. Why should I have to concern myself with dimensions and worlds? Is that really any fun?"

"You... Do you *hate* humans, Goddess?"

"Of course not! How awful of you to say! I do not *hate* them...I merely see

them as playthings! I want to *toy* with them as I kill them! I am fuming at your insult, you know!”

Vicius gazed off at the closed curtains of one of the throne room windows.

“There are times when I just get so angry, you know? Nhh~... Seeing those short-lived types living in peace just *pisses me off*. I mean, they’ll all be dead in a hundred years. Why do you think they want to spend all that time living happily in peace? I want to see them hating each other. *Suffering*. Otherwise, it’s just so boring here. It’s terrible. I really wish they would understand their place.” Vicius clapped her hands together. “I’ve been so unfortunate—I really would like to take a nice long break and spend some time torturing my creations. I’ve been thinking about it for so long, you see!”

With an “*Ah!*” as if she had just remembered something, Vicius clapped her hands together once more.

“Now of course, there are exceptions—like *you*, Nyantan. Please don’t worry about that. Those humans I have deemed worthy of living will be plucked out and allowed to *live*! Once those in the heavens have been taken care of, I’m sure we will need those Heroes from Another World, too! Still, I fear that humanity might have gotten a little too big for its boots. ♪ Having too many around ruins the neighborhood, like a dreadful swarm of insects!”

What are these divines?

Who are these gods?

Nyantan did not let any of it show on her face, but the thoughts were dizzying.

“If I am able to successfully execute my plans, I believe I will make a start by returning to this world and reducing the humans on the continent to *one tenth* of their present number.”

“Ah!”

“I mean, they did *rebel* against me, you know? Every human and demi-human,

traitor or not, must take collective responsibility for that crime! Your deeply compassionate Goddess is in quite a huff about this affair!”

“...Urk!”

“Ahh! I *promise* you, Nyantan, you and your little sisters will be absolutely fine. ♪ Do let me know if there is anybody else you would like to save, won’t you? I’ll be sure to consider your requests,” Vicius added before continuing. “We will take it ten percent at a time, I think. Ninety, eighty, seventy... Decide on specific times and make them suffer as much as possible as we kill them. Oh, and *then*...let’s leave the last ten percent on their own for a while! Let’s *abandon* them! They’ll be left in fear of their coming death and will have to live with that fear for the rest of their days! Oh, I wonder how their minds will be affected by it and what actions they will be driven to in their masses—I am so very looking forward to all of this! But, well, with the world of the divines still above us, we cannot oversee my games on such a scale. Hmm—I think that to truly be alive in any real sense, humans must be suffering. Those that wish to succumb to a peaceful death from natural causes are so *stupid*. These short-lived creatures must suffer long and hard until their final moments if they are to have any value at all...”

Nyantan felt the urge to argue, despite herself. She wanted to speak out.

It’s too much... Just too cruel.

“Hmm—I see that this isn’t really landing with you, is it, Nyantan? I really enjoyed discussing these matters with Johndoe. Ah, yes—he enjoyed forcing them to kill themselves at the very end, but I have no idea what he saw in that... Don’t you think it’s awful?”

“I—I also think that idea is awful, Goddess...” replied Nyantan.

“Isn’t it?!” Humans should go down fighting to the bitter end. They should grow to *detest* each other. One should come out on top, annihilating the rest!”

“...”

“Oh? Not the answer you were expecting? *Oho hoh...* But don’t you think that ending in suicide is just such a *boring* conclusion? I mean, I just think... Come on! Dance until your last breath for me! *Hoh hoh hoh!* Suicide... Suicide is...*pf-pfft...* What do they think they’re playing at, trying to escape the gods like that?! Oh, it will never do. ♪ I really do think that humans have a duty to shoulder eternal suffering. I just want to play with them and destroy them. Is that really asking too much? No, no. Most short-lived creatures with any degree of intelligence have no path open to them but to be toyed with by the gods. It’s only common sense. It’s just those stubborn fools up above that prevent me from doing as I like... Oh...don’t you think it’s unfair? I mean it! I truly do! This world is so, *sooo boring!* I can’t take it any longer! I’m done holding myself back! I think I’ll *die* if I have to endure any more of this!”

Vicius looked truly happy. It was as if Nyantan was seeing the emotion in her for the first time.

“Oh, those late S-class heroes... Um, what was her name again? The one with the absolutely ridiculous name... Ah, that’s right! Hijiri Takao! She talked to me about true intentions, goodness, all these disgusting things. I really thought it was *amazing!* I didn’t know it was physically possible for a person to be so stupid! She played it so cool, but—*woof!* I expect she died horribly, suffering from that poison! The whole thing is just too hilarious! Do you suppose that the younger sister was so sad that she killed herself and followed the older one into the grave?! Ah, I feel so refreshed! Hmm, hmm. ♪ Oh...and Sogou, was it? I ended up breaking her. That felt *wonderful—snicker snicker!* She was such a quintessential idiot! Oh well, I was happy to see her break! It really did feel divine! ♪ I had to try so hard not to laugh while I was tormenting her! I’d just love to put Too-ka Mimori and the Wildly Beautiful Emperor through that same wringer! Yes, yes indeed! I’m sure the world would be much more fun if more of those jumped-up creations of mine were to miserably break apart! Yes...! Let’s get started... Let’s *begin.*”

Vicius stood up from the throne.

“Everything starts *now*.”

This is what is under the castle?

Nyantán walked with Vicius, who led her into the lower floors of the castle—which turned out to be no ordinary basement. Through a hidden door, they descended a long spiral staircase and walked for quite some time after they had reached the bottom. Eventually they came to a room—or rather an empty space, enveloped in darkness. Nyantán directed the lantern in her hand toward the blackness, but it seemed to go on deeper and deeper, as if to the very bottom of the earth. Her light never reached all the way through the darkness, but Nyantán could tell...

This space is wide. Massive.

She felt the chill on her skin and heard a bubbling sound from somewhere. There was a presence—an odd kind of overwhelming pressure.

There’s something...in this place. Some kind of creatures that are crammed in together down here.

Vicius strode on through the darkness as comfortably as if she were in her own home.

Can she see—or does she simply know the layout of this place by heart?

Then there was a light. Vicius had touched some flat stone in the wall and sent lines of illumination shooting up across the ceiling and walls. The lines were brighter than any lantern, banishing the dark with stronger and stronger rays as they spread until the whole area was lit.

“Those are...” Nyantán just gazed at them, rooted to the spot.

White giants.

The giants were just standing there, their eyes closed, arms crossed over their chests like they were prepared for burial. They were all lined up, rows and rows of them.

So, this is why the space felt so huge—the ceiling is this high so that these giants can fit in here. Just how many are there?

Some, but not many, were shaped differently from the others. Nyantan could see white humanoids of different sizes standing in the back of the chamber. They were packed in tight—all in the exact same pose, completely unmoving.

These monsters...they must be the False Eucharists that Vicius spoke of. That Banished Emperor the Goddess sent to Mira was capable of spawning inhuman white disciples from the bodies of golden-eyed monsters. Vicius must have been managing all her underground ruins in order to farm materials for the creation of her eucharists.

“The reason you have been disappearing from time to time is...”

“Yes. I was spending my time down here!”

The people of the castle above had come to Nyantan several times asking about Vicius’s whereabouts—and on Vicius’s instructions, Nyantan had dealt with their business in her stead.

“You are the first to set foot in this place aside from myself, Nyantan. Congratulations!”

“What in the world is this place...?”

“It was originally a kind of underground ruin, the same as the others scattered around this world! This huge sprawling underground complex was left over from ancient times, you see. In terms of location, I believe we’re just about at the mid-point between the castle and the Temple of the Order of Vicius.” Vicius pointed up. “One of the heroes’ training grounds is above us at the moment—the one with the forest. Ah, right this way, please.”

Vicius skipped onward, and Nyantan followed in a daze. The Goddess stopped in front of a large door. There were several crystals embedded within, and Vicius began pouring mana into each one in turn. The door opened, and the Goddess walked inside, illuminating the new space with a switch in the same

way she had the last. The room was large but sized much more sensibly compared to the previous one—rectangular, with a tall ceiling.

There was a balcony with a railing surrounding the room, at about the height at which the second floor would have been. The balcony extended across all the walls with the exception of the one with the door, forming a horseshoe around the room. Beyond the railing, there appeared to be a place to stand that was quite spacious.

There are similar looking rooms to this one in the castle.

The walls were smooth and looked hard. There was a device placed prominently at the far side of the room, covered in intricate pipes of some kind.

A huge, ancient magical device... That was the only way that Nyantan could describe it.

“The device is of my own creation. It truly was difficult to make. Patience pays off in the end, you know~?”

It is some kind of device, then...

Vicius stood before it and began pressing the buttons and the indentations in the device’s crystals as Nyantan waited behind her.

She seems to be operating it...

“In any case,” continued Vicius, pulling a little bag from her pocket.

One of the pipes had a funnel attached to the end. Vicius proceeded to empty the contents of the bag into it. Nyantan caught a brief glimpse of something dark, purple, and round before the goddess then reached around to the side of the device, pointing to a diamond-shaped crystal on a pedestal that was floating in mid-air.

“This device, the eucharists... Creating them in such a way as to avoid *their* detection was so very difficult. This underground space has always been here, so that was no issue. But this divine device and the eucharists—it took so very long to find a way of avoiding triggering their detection. I managed to find a

method of converting soul power to create the eucharists. And, well, I ended up killing *three* birds with one stone, so to speak.”

Soul power... Also known as the experience points that the heroes gain in order to level themselves.

“As for this device, I realized that its manufacture had much less impact on *their* detection while the root of all evil remained alive. Hmph... He was my natural enemy, of course, but defeating him too early would have delayed the creation of this device. The balance of such factors proved ever so *trying*. I hid and I worked, secretly scurrying about down here.”

“...Ah. Goddess Vicius,” said Nyantan.

“Yes, yes? Whatever is the matter? I can answer any and all questions that you might have, of course.”

“Why... Why is it that you brought me here...?”

“Well...it would be quite boring for me to stand here talking to *myself* now, don’t you think? There’s no exhilarating thrill in revealing a secret to yourself, is there? You *are* having fun, aren’t you? Oh, and it’s much more enjoyable to explain things to someone who has *no idea* what’s going on than to someone who already has a fair grasp! *Hoh hoh*... Your reaction to this news has not disappointed, you know? Perhaps I was better off with you than with Johndoe all along.”

There was a single click, and the device began making a strange noise from within. It sounded almost like the tone of a dull, muted bell that was trying to ring.

“Oh my~! No problems at showtime, I see. Everything is in order~! ♪ Right now I am running power through the device... Oh, I’m so looking forward to this. ♪ Right, first I’ll make a powerful one perfectly suited to destroying divines, open up a gate, then it’s off to the heavens at last! Hm?”

“Ah?”

Vicius froze, suddenly falling silent. Nyantan was confused.

“Ohoh, my my...” said Vicius, without turning around.

There was no ecstasy in her voice now—her tone was suddenly icy cold. She turned, and Nyantan saw a cold smile plastered upon her face. She wasn’t looking at Nyantan—but at something behind her.

Nyantan turned around too.

“Hullo, Vicius.”

There was a woman standing behind them—one that Nyantan hadn’t noticed at all.

Where did she come from?

“...”

“Hmm? Vicius, you aren’t *ignoring* me, are you?”

“Lokiella... Long time no see.”

Lokiella’s silver hair was tied back, hanging down in one big braid. She was clad in white and looked the very image of virtue. The way she spoke was shockingly casual and quite dry.

Golden eyes... It can’t be...

“Of course, having a second divine enter this dimension while another is present wouldn’t normally be the best idea in terms of *dimensional balance*... But, well, that can’t be helped *now*, can it—?”

A frank smile appeared on Lokiella’s face.



Those three large people behind her—just what are they? Golden eyes, white bodies... That one seems to be wearing armor. Or is that a kind of shell? They appear like some fusion of man and monster. And that...is that a humanoid wolf?

“Hmmm...” began Vicius, sounding as if she were feigning ignorance. “I *thought* I sensed some strange presence growing near.”

“Playing dumb, now? You must have known ahead of time, right?” asked Lokiella.

“I just don’t know. In any case...what do you mean that it can’t be helped? What are you here for? I truly, *deeply* have no concept of what is occurring...”

“*Hah hah hah*—you never change, Vicius.”

“Again...what exactly can I do for you? You barging in here with no warning is quite scary! Not to mention you’ve brought along Vanargadia and his disciple... Turmk, was it? Oh, and even the disciple Torohn. Wh-what is the meaning of this? I grow more terrified with each passing second.”

Lokiella was aloof—but there was a chill tension in the air that almost hurt Nyantan’s skin just standing there.

Lokiella lightly scratched at the end of her nose.

“Uh, well, Vicius... I wonder? I noticed your interference rate rise a little after the root of all evil disappeared...but that was low enough that it could be ignored. The problem comes after. Your rate spiked so high, there was just no way that we could let it slide.” Lokiella removed her finger from the bridge of her nose, still smiling. “Can you explain *exactly* why this has happened?”

“I...I don’t want to,” replied Vicius.

“Eh? You *must* explain it, you know.”

“Hm? I really don’t understand. Exactly who will be affected by my lack of explanation?”

“Well...*me*, for one. And our *Chief* Deities!”

“Hmph. If the Chief Deities are so put out by this, why not come in person?”

“It would cost a ton of Source Essence to fix the distortions after a translocation from them, and I think you *know* that. There’s also a bit of trouble up there at the minute, and they’re busy with that.”

“Oh *my*, is that so? But you and Vanargadia had nothing better to do?”

“Well with a spike in interference this high, we *had* to pull some strings to get two divines to come all this way. All this way to see you, *Vicius*.”

“Thank you very much,” Vicius replied.

“...Anyway. Do you intend to *protect* the people of this world?”

“*Hoh hoh hoh*, I think that should be obvious.”

“As divines, we fight against the roots of all evil and protect our creations. I mean, they’re like our children, right? But I’ve never seen that sentiment from you—never seen your *love* for the humans. It’s why I’ve always *hated* you, Vicius.”

“Eh? Why should I need to love them? I really can’t stand to have those emotions imposed upon me.”

“Then what are they to you, then?”

“Ahem... I’m sorry, but the question you’re asking is a little difficult for me to answer...”

“I said that divines are like parents to their creations, yeah? So, like, Vicius...To me this looks a lot like child abuse.”

“Wh-what a terrible accusation! Please don’t step into our family’s affairs! I beg of you! We have our rules, and you have yours!”

“...You really haven’t changed.” Lokiella shrugged in resignation, then narrowed her eyes like a fox. “In any case—we’re going to destroy that ominous-looking divine device behind you. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Huh? Stop it at once.”

“What if I don’t?”

“...Lokiella.”

“Yeah?”

“I have always hated you~.”

“I know!” said Lokiella.

“Lokiella...this is too much chatter,” said the white and silver werewolf standing by her side. Vicius smiled at him.

“Oh my, I never expected the mute Vanargadia to butt into our conversation. Were you that bored?”

“Vicius, I take it you have no explanation for the sudden rise in your interference rate? Regardless—from the number of eucharists we saw in the other room...”

Vicius looked at him with softly reproving eyes.

“Well now... Let’s not get angry, Vanargadia. You defeated Wormgandr; I know I could never *beat* you... Uhhh, I find wolf gods terribly hard to deal with, especially that Skoalbanger. Oh, woe is me...I understand. I-I will explain...”

That werewolf Vanargadia is a divine too, then. And based on my observations and the way he is speaking, quite powerful at that. No human could tangle with him—they could never defeat him.

Nyantán could not imagine any human being capable of producing such imposing pressure—*not even the Strongest Man in the World could have touched him.*

She felt cold sweat forming all over her body.

“Enough of that, Vicius,” said Lokiella, with a false smile on her face.

“We don’t need your excuses. It’s enforcement time. Vanar and I will take Vicius—that human can stay on the sidelines for now. Turmk, Torohn—destroy

that device.”

“S-s-stop it, please!” Vicius turned her back to them, moving to protect the machine with her hands. “If you destroy this now...m-my long years of hard work... This crystallization of all my efforts will be *ruined*! Stop!”

“Hm?” Lokiella raised her jaw, looking upwards.

“Vicius, those people up there on the balcony... Are they your...*disciples*?”

“Ohh...! Someone, save me!”

It was only once Lokiella had pointed the two men out that Nyantan noticed them, too. Standing on the left was a man who looked like a knight, fully clad from head to toe in white armor. There was a cross-shaped cutout in the front of his helmet, allowing him to see. Golden eyes peered from within.

To the right was a huge man, his face covered by a helmet. He was armored as well, but Nyantan had never seen anything like what he was wearing—it was stranger than the gear of his companion. His helmet’s face shield was shaped like an enraged face, and around the mouth was a kind of white beard. There was a crescent-moon-like decoration on the forehead of the man’s helmet.

For a moment, Nyantan saw the black abyss inside his eye sockets flash gold—but in the next moment the color was gone, thick and dark as night once more.

“Hmm... So you were ready for us? I suppose that makes sense. This is *Vicius* we’re dealing with, after all.”

“Ars, Yomibito... Oh! Please save me! They are trying to smash my precious device!”

“Leave it to me! I will save you!” The armored knight with the cross helm gave a cheerful and excited reply—but there was something odd about his tone of voice. It *was* a voice, and there was emotion in it—but at the same time, it wasn’t. It sounded inorganic. Unsettling in its internal contradictions.

“Danger. Vicius. Assistance. Fight— ... —Fight. Assistance. Vicius. Danger.”

Those were the words of the man on the right, with the decorated helm. His voice was low, husky, and twisted. He spoke quietly but with ferocity, and his voice reverberated through Nyantan's body.

"Torohn, take care of that one before you break the divine device. Don't let your guard down, okay?" said Lokiella.

"Understood."

The knight she called Torohn leapt forward, clad in heavy white armor with his warhammer in hand. He landed on the balcony, cape fluttering furiously despite the lack of wind. Sparks flew around him, crackling like fireworks as a set of semi-transparent axe blades slowly emerged from either side of his hammer.

Facing him down was the man in the crossed helm—*Ars, Vicius called him.*

"Turmk, take the one on the other side. Don't let your guard down," said Lokiella.

The man in white, Turmk, leapt too. Nyantan saw that his right arm had transformed into a blade a little way past his elbow. He landed gently on the opposite balcony. Still on one knee, he reached out with his left hand and a white holy greatsword appeared. He gripped the hilt of the sword tightly and faced off against the horn-helmed man—Yomibito.

"I will settle up with Vicius, then. You don't mind, Lokiella?"

"No, go right ahead. Ah...but I do think the sudden spike in her interference rate has something to do with these disciples of hers. Creating disciples outside of the heavens does kind of have that effect! And two of them, to boot! I didn't know Vicius had learned how to make disciples, anyway!"

"Don't let your guard down, Lokiella. I'm sure you know Vicius is not one of the divines most suited to combat, but...nevertheless."

"You think I'm going to lose to *her*? Of course not—I mean, *hah!* It almost sounds like you're trying to jinx me. Hey Vicius...cut out the lame act, 'kay? You

can drop it.”

Vanargadia stood behind Lokiella, her long, beautiful silver hair swaying. She was so quiet—nothing in her stance had changed a bit.

And yet...the weight of her presence is so very heavy.

Nyantán could feel it. Even if she wanted to run, it pressed down on her so tightly she couldn’t move.

She’s...just too far beyond my level. In a whole different realm.

“Ohh, this is so cruel! Two against one. A-at least let me fight you one at a time. This is so very unfair!”

“Vici—” Just as Vanargadia began to speak her name, the right-hand wall burst open behind the wolf god.

“Another disciple, then?”

Vanargadia turned to see a huge white man who looked as if he was covered from head to toe in wax burst from the wall toward him. There were many horn-like protuberances all over the man’s body, and Nyantán could see black cracks in his skin.

*No—those are real fissures, like the cracks in the bottom of a saltpan.
Cracked... Broken.*

The man was not much different in build than Vanargadia, despite being a little shorter. He was clearly broad shouldered with thick arms—*incredibly thick* arms.

It was no trick of perspective. The man’s arms, up to and including his fists, were huge compared to the rest of his body, making him look pudgy. His eyes were sunken, like the faintest light in the dark among the frozen icicles of the coldest cave in the world. In those sunken pits flashed bulging golden eyes.

“Yo...Vanargadia...”

“Hm?”

There was something overly familiar about the voice—as if the speaker were addressing an old friend.

“Ah, you’ve come! Thank you so much!” said Vicius.

“*Hyuck Hyuck*... Good one, Vicius. You’re as evil as you ever was, Goddess. Y’always planned on throwin’ me at Vanargadia, didn’t ya?”

“Th-there’s nothing else for it. Ohh, I am so *weak*. A divine so ill-suited to combat, you see. I am ever so fragile. Ohh...”

Vanargadia turned to face the man who looked to be crafted of wax.

“You appear to be a disciple... Yet it sounds as if you know me. Who are you?” he asked.

“Y’already beat me once. Ain’t got no interest in the vanquished, eh?”

“The vanquished? No, those arms...you can’t be...” Vanargadia let no surprise show on his face as he indifferently spoke the man’s name. “You were not annihilated then, Wormgandr.”

“Thanks for finally rememberin’ me, Vanargadia. Y’know, after that time you almost killed me, Vicius came and saved my life. Turned me into one of her disciples, just as y’see before you. I was s’posed to die that day, but...this ain’t too bad.”

“Hmm... You’re not dead then, Worm?”

“Yo, Lokiella. Beautiful as ever, ain’tcha? You’re the whole damn reason I’m like this, *hyuck hyuck*. Ain’t so bad once you get used to it.” Wormgandr scratched at his forehead with one thick finger. The two pairs of fighters up on the balcony were still glaring at each other, as if waiting for the signal to begin.

“Hey, Vicius,” said Lokiella. “Why didn’t you plan an ambush or something with these disciples of yours? What was the point in setting the stage like this, having them introduce themselves?”

“W-well...they’ll have no difficulty defeating you. That’s why.”

“Hmm. Confident then, eh?”

Vicius ground her teeth and jabbed her finger at Lokiella. “L-Lokiella...! You shall be fighting me!”

“Sure. To be honest, I think it’s about time I took out the trash... You’ve only ever done harm, Vicius.”

Crack.

Lokiella cracked her knuckles. “Let’s begin.”

Torohn and Ars; Turmk and Yomibito; Vanargadia and Wormgandr...all moved at almost exactly the same time.

“ ... ”

The cross-helmed Ars’ blood coated the white floor of the room, dripping from the rail of the balcony above. His whole body was gushing blood, his armor blackened by Torohn’s white lightning.

No—it seems as if that isn’t his armor at all. Based on the way it’s bleeding, the armor appears to be a part of his body. That armor is his true form—a full suit of flesh. Which means the helmet...is his actual head, not something he can take off.

“I’m not... Losing this battle... I’ll... N-never... Never give up...”

Ars slumped toward Torohn, falling to his knees, as if he no longer had the strength to rise again. He clutched at Torohn to keep himself from going fully prone, embracing him with every last ounce of his strength.

“This is the end, Disciple of Vicius,” said Torohn. His tone was one of respect and honor for a well-fought battle.

“I-I... I cannot lose... I cannot b-be... Defeated...”

Yomibito, on the other side of the room, had been pressed to the wall, the two blades he had created still in his hands. He had been fighting with Turmk

but had just lost this close-fought battle. He was driven back into the wall, completely overpowered—cornered with no escape route.

“...”

Turmk did not let his guard down for a single moment, nor did his stance falter. Behind Vicius and Lokiella, Wormgandr had landed his first attack on Vanargadia, sending him flying through the wall. The rumble of the two of them fighting could be heard on the other side. Lokiella and Vicius just glared at each other, neither moving a muscle.

“Did you really think you could beat us, Vicius?”

“What is despair?” asked Vicius.

“Eh?”

“Despair is when, in the very moment you think you have claimed victory...”

Slash!

Nyantan reflexively turned in the direction of the sound—to see countless white blades piercing Torohn’s body. The blades seemed to have sprung from Ars as he clutched at his foe.

That was his plan... To rip Torohn apart from the inside.

The awful sound filled the room.

“Gah... Nh... Gh...”

“I will...win! Won’t give up... I will never give up! I—I’m going to protect everyoneeeeeeee!”

“Gahh...?!”

Torohn began to writhe in agony where he stood, like his insides were being devoured by a swarm of evil insects.

...What is that?

What Nyantan saw happening was strange. It looked as if Ars’ blood was

flowing backward, returning to his body. The red liquid filled his wounds until they steadily formed into burn-like patches on his skin, then disappeared completely as the wounds closed.

Then Torohn melted into viscous slime.

“Haah... Haah... I thought I told you... I’m going to protect everyone... I can’t be defeated here... I just can’t...” It looked as if Ars had emerged victorious—and completely uninjured.

Claaaang!

There was a noise, like two hard chunks of metal colliding, that caused Nyantan’s gaze to shoot instinctively in the other direction.

There was a great white pillar floating in space.

On the other side of the pillar Nyantan saw Turmk, who looked to have just jumped backward to avoid it. Yomibito was still stuck in the wall—but he no longer held a katana in his raised right hand. He moved the thumb and index finger of his now-empty hand apart, then squeezed them together.

As if they had been waiting for Turmk to leap backward, two new white pillars appeared in the air on either side of him. With incredible speed, as if drawn together by magnets, the pillars snapped closed...

Splat!

Turmk was crushed between the pillars. He did not flee, trying instead to angle his greatsword to fend off the attack from either side.

He must have been confident in the strength of his weapon.

But the moment the greatsword’s tip and handle made contact with the rounded edges along the bottoms of the white pillars, the weapon crumbled to dust. Turmk was crushed to death. It had looked to Nyantan as if he tried to escape at the last possible moment, but didn’t make it in time.

“...”

The pillars were gone.

Vicius looked down, spreading her arms wide.

“Despair... It visits in its supreme form when one’s absolute certainty of victory is annihilated.”

Yomibito made his way out of the wall and turned to look at Vicius. She waved over at him, smiling.

“Wonderful work, Yomibito—!”

All the injuries that Yomibito’s armor had sustained during his battle with Turmk were suddenly gone. Lokiella looked on, almost expressionless. It was hard to read her face.

“...Vicius.”

“Ahhh... Oh, what a relief—ohoh?”

Vicius saw someone emerge from the great hole in the wall. They were carrying a torn right leg and Vanargadia’s head. The leg belonged to Wormgandr, who held it in both hands. The head, which he clutched by the hair, had its eyes gouged out. Vanargadia still appeared to be alive, somehow.

“Loki... Ella... Th-the...y’re...” Vanargadia’s head spoke.

Lokiella turned around. “Vanar.”

From where Nyantan was standing, she couldn’t see the expression on Lokiella’s face. Wormgandr dropped Vanargadia’s head, and in the next moment...

Splat!

Wormgandr stomped on the fallen head, crushing it.

“*Hyuck hyuck*. Stampin’ on heads ain’t enough to kill a divine, though, is it? Gotta wear away at your very existence or you’ll never die. Kill you over and over and over again—kill you until you *die*. If there’s even a little bit of you left... it takes a while, but you can regenerate yourselves from little chunks o’ flesh,

can't you? Most of you divines would just fade away, though, I s'pose. Only good luck that saved me, 'fter all. Gotta make sure to wear 'em down properly so they ain't never comin' back, right Vicius?"

"Yes, yes. Let us wear him down. ♪"

Lokiella turned to look back at Vicius.

"..."

"*Oho ho hoh...* You didn't predict *this*, did you? Of course I knew that my interference rate shooting up would result in divines being sent here. But how do you like my secret weapon? My Last Resort—the anti-divine enhanced Children of Vicius! As you can see, these three are no typical disciples! Incidentally..." Vicius held up the palm of her hand, indicating toward the door. "Most of those eucharists that are outside are anti-divine enhanced, too."

"Anti-divine enhanced? I've never even heard the term before."

"Well *of course* you haven't—I'm the one who invented it!"

"Vicius...you haven't sent the other worlders back, have you? You haven't let them return?"

"Hmm, maybe I have, maybe I haven't. But don't you think this is your fault for relying on that crystal for everything? Letting centuries pass without coming to visit? One does reap what one sows. ♪"

"For a plan like this, the tests and trials... You would have needed a huge amount of Source Essence. Then you haven't been sending any of them home, have you? You've been storing it all this time. All to spawn that army of anti-divine enhanced monsters."

"I discovered that my interference rate spiked if I *kept* the heroes in this world, but that *disposing* of them didn't affect my rate at all, you see! Well, it took quite a long time to find a method of getting rid of them, though, as I couldn't kill anyone *directly* with my own hands. Oh, this has been ever so tiring."

“Then you’ve got enough Source Essence to open a gate. You...aren’t going to try and destroy the heavens, are you?” asked Lokiella.

“Hm? What if I am? What then? Come on now, spit it out. Aren’t you going to say it? Come now, are you quite well? Are you okay, Lokiella?”

“ ...”

“Get down on your knees.”

“...Huh?”

“Ahem... Down on your knees. You’re supposed to put both knees on the floor... Hands, too. Then you enthusiastically and sincerely rub your head against the ground—all while apologizing and expressing how sorry you are for ever defying the great Vicius despite your own diminutive stature. *On. Your. Knees.* Don’t you understand? Oh, please tell me you’re capable of comprehending this.”

Wormgandr guffawed.



“You’re as mean as you ever was, Vicius. C’mon. Give it a rest, Lokiella. You ain’t ever gonna beat her and her three anti-divine enhanced disciples—not a shot in hell. You might be stronger than Vicius without her buffs... But you ain’t up to the task right now. Anyway, Vicius is...”

“Ah, would you *shut up* for me, Worm? We are negotiating,” said Vicius, cutting him off.

Wormgandr raised his hand in casual apology and fell silent.

“Now then, on your knees if you would. ♪”

“...”

“Oh? You don’t want to? Come now, *kneel*.”

“...”

“On your knees.”

“...”

“Lokiella! On your knees~ ♪”

“Vicius.”

“On your knees.”

“You don’t love people—you don’t love your *creations*.”

“On your knees.”

“Me, though...I *like* people, in spite of everything. I told you, didn’t I? They’re like children to us. It’s only natural for parents to shower their kids with love, isn’t it? A parent who can’t love their kids—who only thinks of them as tools or toys for their own satisfaction—I think that’s just about the saddest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“I don’t know what you’re saying, and I would very much like you on your knees. Kneel, kneel~! Hurry up and get on your knees. On your knees, on your knees, on your knees. Are you *still* not on your knees? I don’t have all day, you

know? Oh, I am sooo busy! All you're good for is getting on your knees, so you can at least do that right! Come on now, quickly!"

"I already told you."

"Hurry now, on your knees. Get on your knees."

"I hate you—Vicius."

"I'm quite sure I've told you that I hate you too—Lokiella."

Lokiella disappeared—moving so fast that Nyantan couldn't follow her movements with her eyes.

An attack?

At the same time, she felt a presence beside her.

Vicius has moved!

"..."

"Yeesh... I already told you, didn't I? You really trying to beat me?"

The two divines closed in on each other, exchanging blows in a flash. Before Nyantan could see what was happening, a headless body appeared before her. In the next instant, it was torn apart into shreds. Through the gore, Nyantan saw a figure.

"Oho ho hoh, I tried doing a little impression of you. ♪ How did it sound? Did you really intend on beating me, *Lokiella?*"

In Vicius's right hand, she held the severed head of Lokiella. She turned, and Nyantan felt a shiver run down her spine. Vicius's eyes were dyed jet black.

"She was far too weak—and I am far too strong." Vicius grinned, an unsettling smile. "With such a spike in my interference rate, I had expected more significant divines to be dispatched. It might be a blessing that someone on your level was sent, Lokiella. I wanted to test if my anti-divine enhancements would be effective against those scumbags at the top. But this was so easy, I'm honestly a little surprised."

“V-Vicius...”

“Eh, that beautiful face of yours, Lokiella... I really don’t think it suits you.”

Lokiella’s face began to shrivel as Vicius held it in her hands—rapidly aging.

“Oho hoh... Can you feel your very existence being chipped away? Oh, you’re ever so pathetic, aren’t you? I feel just awful for you, truly I do.”

“Vih... Sh...”

“Oh my! You’re like a shriveled-up bit of dead wood. Bone dry! What *is* that face?! Are you really okay?! *Ahah hah hah*, this is just too funny! Are you *really* Lokiella?! Is that still you?! *Ahah hah hah*, this is incredible! Oh, my stomach is starting to hurt... Y-you divines *can* be interesting then, can’t you?! You last much longer than those humans do, so you’ve got them beat in that respect! Ah, but I suppose humans still have strength in numbers! It really is a grand sight to see them suffering in their masses!”

“Hoooh... Oooohh...”

Lokiella’s eyes were cavernous and deep, her mouth like the hollow of a dying tree.

“*Ahah hah hah*, what are you saying? All I hear is the howling of a pathetic little wind cave! *Ahah hah*... Oh, this is so funny I think I might die! Ah! Hilarious! I’m crying!”

Vicius seemed to genuinely be enjoying herself. Nyantan had never seen her so happy.

“I will eliminate Vanargadia now...*Ohoh hoh hoh*, but you can remain, Lokiella. ♪ I have to allow you time to understand the position you are in! I will show you the surrender of the heavens! I will slaughter countless numbers of those humans that you were about shrieking of your love for! You will watch those you love driven to the depths of suffering, turning their hate against each other, murdering each other in cold blood... There’s so much I will show you! Oh, you’re just *pathetic*.”

Vicius tossed Lokiella's head up into the air, then lightly kicked it back up again when it fell.

"Hup, hup," she chanted as she kept the head in the air with her feet...

She's playing with it.

"Hyah!" Vicius then kicked Lokiella's head hard, sending it smashing into the wall, from where it rolled to the floor.

"Ooh...Ooohh..."

"Nhh? What was that? I can't hear you...?" Vicius put a hand to her ear as if she was straining to listen, then burst out laughing again. "I'm telling you I just have no idea what you're saying! Speak properly, won't you? *Pffft, hee hee!* Pathetic! A disgrace to the divines indeed!"

Wormgandr shrugged, as if he couldn't watch any more of what was happening. Ars and Yomibito were silently watching from the balcony, indifferent to Vicius's actions.

"Right then...I'm going to have to prepare to activate the eucharists and open the gate. There are those unsightly, vexing insects in the west still buzzing about, the Lord of the Flies and the Wildly Beautiful Emperor—but I'm quite certain they won't make it here in time. ♪ I will already have entered the heavens with my eucharists by the time they arrive. ♪ *Oho ho hoh*, how unfortunate. Just when they had prepared their Forbidden Magic for me, too. All that effort wasted. I could just cry! Goodbye!"

Vicius waved her hand. Her eyes had returned to normal.

"Yet...it will take far too long to mobilize all of my eucharists and to open a gate. Hmm... Perhaps I should have the ones that are not anti-divine enhanced sent out to stir up fear in the enemy ranks and buy time. I should also like to check if my creations function properly." Vicius stamped down hard on Lokiella's head with a *crack*. "I will bring the greatest suffering upon every dimension and every world. Hatred. Meaningless death.. All existence belongs

to me...*Vicius*,” said the White Goddess. “Surrender all unto me—I will give you no feasts of pleasure.”

With a smile, Vicius clapped her hands together.

“Oh, this is so much fun. ♪ I’m simply having the grandest time!”

From that day onward, Vicius holed herself up in the basement rooms under the castle. It seemed that it would take precious time to activate the rows of eucharists lurking there and to establish a gate to the heavens.

“Ah, and don’t worry, Nyantan, I haven’t forgotten about your demi-godification. I’ll get to that later!” Nyantan remembered her words.

It had sounded to Nyantan like the Goddess was always on the verge of changing her mind. There had been something tired and disinterested in Vicius’s smile as she spoke.

Perhaps dangling that promise in front of me has already given Vicius enough satisfaction. Now she’s growing bored.

The Goddess trusted Nyantan to be her proxy while she was down beneath the castle.

If there is a chance, then... It is now.

Luckily the Goddess’s three disciples were also down beneath the castle at that moment—meaning Nyantan was relatively free to move around.

Defeating those divines means that her plan is proceeding as intended. She’s clearly no longer being as careful of me as she once was. Activating the eucharists and opening this gate...I feel as if she’s ignoring everything except those two things.

Vicius had even told Nyantan that she no longer required her single daily report to be brought down into the basement.

Does she really care about nothing else, so long as the eucharists and her gate

are activated?

“ ... ”

The heroes in the capital had been ordered to stay on standby in their lodgings—and Nyantan was aware of where Tamotsu Zakurogi was being kept. She also knew where her little sisters were—located to the southwest of Eno, half a day’s ride by carriage. Nyantan sat on the edge of her bed, folding her hands together in prayer then pressing them to her forehead.

I have Vicius’s words recorded on the phone that I was given. But I can’t stop her. I need to give this information to people who can. If Vicius returns to this world someday, she will bring suffering to my sisters and everyone else who lives here. But...

What do I do?

This Lord of the Flies Brigade that rides with the Miran army in the west, who claim to have Forbidden Magic. I’ve been receiving reports on their advance—they won’t make it to the capital in the next couple of days. Vicius said that at their current speed, they’ll be too late. Oh no... Perhaps if Vicius opens the gate and takes her eucharists to the heavens, would that allow us to buy more time? She might never return to this world. The heaven she’s trying to attack might end up killing her instead, if only...

“...Uuugh,” Nyantan sighed.

This is all just wishful thinking. Things don’t just work out like that. Clinging to hope alone will change nothing. I’ve learned that...learned it so well I’m sick of the lesson.

Suddenly there was a small knock at the door—a strange signal from a visitor. From where the noise came from, it sounded as if someone had tapped Nyantan’s door with the tip of their shoe. There was something soft about the knock, too. It was sharp, like a kick to the door...but also muted.

Most people would use the back of their hand. How strange.

“What can I do for you?” answered Nyantan, unsure of who was there.

“I’d appreciate if you’d let me in first so that we can talk.”

“Eh?”

That voice...? She jumped to the door, and carefully but quickly opened it.

“Ah... I knew you’d open up. Yep, I can trust you. I mean...you *don’t* like Vicius. I can tell.”

Nyantan’s visitor looked like an infant. In her current form, she could have fit in the palm of Nyantan’s hand.

“...Lokiella?”

“I want you to tell me about the Lord of the Flies and the Wildly Beautiful Emperor. The ones Vicius spoke of...and their Forbidden Magic.” Lokiella looked up at her, dead serious. “I want to save my children—to save the humans.”

Nyantan was confused.

“You claim that I have no love for the Goddess Vicius... What led you to believe that?”

“I suppose gut instinct has a lot to do with it...”

“Ah.” The tiny Lokiella walked into her room without asking for permission. Nyantan closed the door, then turned to look back at her.

“Why have you come to me?”

“I needed to try *something*, and it was a process of elimination,” said Lokiella, turning around on the rug to face Nyantan. “You were the only person I could think of in this castle that I might be able to depend upon. Well...I’ve only just gotten here, anyway. Has my gamble paid off?”

Is this a trick? Some ploy by Vicius to test my loyalty?

“My head is still down in the basement, shriveled and weak. Vicius doesn’t think I’m mobile, so she’s pretty lax about my guard. She’s completely focused on activating and strengthening her anti-divine eucharists and opening her gate

to the heavens. I can cut off parts of myself like this and move around—that's how I managed to get a bit of myself up here. Vicius doesn't know I can do that." Lokiella sat cross-legged on the rug. "Look, I know you aren't suddenly going to be able to trust me, and I can't trust you completely, either. I *want* to believe in you, though...and I *want* your help contacting the Lord of the Flies and the Wildly Beautiful Emperor."

"Why them...?"

"Because she *hates* them."

"Eh?"

"When Vicius spoke their names, especially that of the Lord of the Flies—she sounded like she hated doing it. She tried to pretend she was defeating them by marching off to assault the heavens before they get here... But to me it just sounds like she's running away from them."

She's right. Vicius does seem to be rushing this process.

"But...what hope could humans have of beating Vicius, when you divines weren't able to defeat her?"

"That's *exactly* it. They have a chance of victory precisely *because* they're human."

"Because they are human...?"

"Those three disciples of hers, Wormgandr among them...I think a good amount of their Source Essence has been allocated to anti-divine enhancement so they can fight *us*. Also—the divines have a growth ceiling, you see...just like the blessings given to the Heroes from Another World." Lokiella raised her index finger. "To put it simply, we can't become incredibly powerful all on our own, one divine ruling over the rest. That's why Vicius is dividing her Source Essence between her disciples and using it on her eucharists. That's the reason why we make disciples too."

"You mean that since humans aren't affected by this anti-divine

enhancement, they may have more chance than a divine against her?”

“You’re a quick study. Yes.”

“...”

“It’s the same way the heroes can fight without being affected by the Demon King Essence. Anyway—what do you think? I figure as a divine, I’ll be able to offer you all kinds of advice about fighting Vicius. What I want to do by explaining all this to you is convince you there’s a chance. I’m only telling you these things because I want you to trust me.” Lokiella’s expression changed—there was a shade of something maternal in her eyes. “I know it’s futile...but Vicius only thinks of humans as toys for her to smash together in her own little playroom, and I just can’t let that stand. I didn’t think things were this bad. The heavens have been fighting and the crystal’s measurements haven’t recorded a problem for so long, I thought that meant that Vicius was doing her duty... All of us did. If her interference rate hadn’t spiked so high, we wouldn’t have been allowed to send more than one divine down here.”

Lokiella looked over at the closed curtains.

“Just sounds like excuses, huh? Look... I just want to trust in humans. I love them. I love you. That’s my whole thing.” The maternal shine was still in her eyes, but there was more than that.

It was something that Nyantan recognized.

Love. The same love that I bear for my little sisters.

“If what you just told me is true, then—”

“It was.”

“I wish that *you* had been the divine that was dispatched to this continent. It should have been you...not Vicius.”

Lokiella gave Nyantan a bitter smile, looking a little remorseful. “I’m sorry.”

Lokiella had the kind of smile that made whoever was on the receiving end feel remorse as well.

“ ...”

If she is betting on me...then perhaps I should bet on her.

Nyantán made up her mind. “...Understood. I will help you.”

“I thought you would.”

Nyantán had one doubt remaining.

“But based on Vicius’s words, the Lord of the Flies and the emperor aren’t going to make it here in time, are they?”

Lokiella grinned, as if she had something up her sleeve.

“I rushed to get to this world...but I confirmed one thing before I entered that basement. Do you know what it was?”

“Hm?”

“Vicius is overlooking one very important thing,” said Lokiella.

“Something important? What do you mean?”

Just then, Nyantán’s ears pricked up on high alert. Lokiella had noticed it too—a presence. There was something outside the window.

Not new...whatever is out there has been there all along. I just didn’t think it was worth paying any mind to.

Suddenly something about the presence shifted. Nyantán peeked through a gap in the curtains.

Was that...an owl, outside?

“Sorry, but I really can’t speak for long. Will you please let me in so that we can talk? I have come from the Lord of the Flies...though perhaps, in your case, I could describe myself as a messenger of Hijiri?”

The voice coming from the other side of the windowpane was human.

...What did it just say?

“Hijiri...?”

“I am a familiar, sent to you by Hijiri.”

“A familiar?!” Lokiella exclaimed in shock. “I didn’t know such techniques still survived in this world...”

Nyantán made a quick decision to let the owl in, though Lokiella seemed against it. The bird landed on the desk beside them.

“I have been waiting for the opportunity to make contact with you for a very long time. Based on what I overheard from the people of this castle, Vicius has not been seen in some time. I think this may be our only chance—no, none of this needs to be said. Do you understand? Listen well. I will give you only the most important points—”

Several things that the owl conveyed to Nyantán left her stunned—but one in particular made her cover her mouth with both hands the moment she heard it.

“Nyaki!”

Overcome with emotion, Nyantán was in tears as she said that name. The owl had said several things that only Nyaki would know. Nyantán had no doubt that the familiar was telling the truth.

“The child, Nyaki, has also been worried for your safety—worried about her Nee-nya.”

“The Lord of the Flies—he was the one who saved her?”

“It appears so. But I haven’t finished yet. Allow me to continue.”

The owl just kept on going, bombarding the two of them with information. They were told that Miran spies were waiting just outside the capital and that preparations for their escape were complete.

“I’ll go and...talk to the spies... I’ll tell them that you’re going to...to escape... Get the heroes out of here...”

“Excuse me, but are you okay? You’re trailing off...”

“Ridiculous—or rather, I wish that were the case... But communicating in this way...takes quite a terrible toll on me. Soon, I will lose consciousness... I won’t be able to support you any longer. The Miran spies...I will contact them...I promise. I’ll make it easier...for you to escape... Okay? Did you hear me? You need to...make it out. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“All right... Good.”

The owl then took flight, shooting from the window out into the air. Nyantan went over the next steps that she would need to take.

First, I’m going to the heroes’ lodgings to gather them together. I’ve already been in contact with Kayako Suou several times, and she insisted that I bring anything involving the heroes to her first. She was the one left in charge by Ayaka Sogou. Kayako can organize the heroes for the escape—and she should be able to do something about Tamotsu Zakurogi, too. He’s absolutely terrified of Vicius, so there’s a chance that he might act unpredictably... We may need to knock him unconscious to bring him along. Next, I’ll need to rescue my three little sisters from where it is they’re being held.

The information and the orders the owl had just given her echoed in the back of Nyantan’s mind.

I think what I must do now is to escape here—head west and join the Lord of the Flies’ forces.

Nyantan was Vicius’s second-in-command around the castle and had relative freedom of movement. She quickly prepared to leave, then took the phone she had been given out of her pocket and checked the voice recording.

“If I am able to bring my plans off successfully, I believe I will make a start by returning to this world and reducing the humans on the continent to one tenth of their present number.”

All right. It’s still there, loud and clear.

“What’s that?” asked Lokiella.

“This is our secret weapon—or one of the humans’ secret weapons.”

“Hmph...quite an interesting item. Do let me know how it works later if we have the time.”

“Okay,” replied Nyantan, opening the catch of a leather pouch at her waist. “I’d like to carry you in here. Would that be all right?”

“Sure, works for me.” Lokiella climbed into the pouch. It was a snug fit, and there was room enough that the top could be closed if she crouched, hiding her completely.

“Thank you, Nyantan.”

“It’s too soon for that, Lady Lokiella.”

“Cut the *Lady*. You wouldn’t call your mother that, would you?”

“Well then...Lokiella.”

“Very good. Yes, it feels like we’re *friends* this way. Incidentally... Nyantan...”

“Are you okay? Is something wrong...?”

“Well, like that familiar, I...I’m sorry, but...might I...rest a while? It was so much t-trouble just getting here... I barely have any energy left. It takes a long time for me to recover...in my present form. I want...to...sleep...”

“Understood. I swear that I will protect you with my life—until we have joined forces with the Lord of the Flies and the others.”

“I-I...I’m s-sorry... Ah...a-also...the Ho...” It sounded as if Lokiella tried to say something—but she had reached her limit. She closed her eyes softly and fell asleep.

Nyantan’s expression tensed with determination.

“Let’s go.”

She closed the leather pouch in which Lokiella was sleeping and looked

toward the door.

“Let us save your children.”

Takao Hijiri

“**A**_{NOTHER...DIVINE?}”

Yoyo’s report had included some startling new information.

“Nyantan is traveling with a divine—who is not Vicius.”

The report had stated that the divine’s name was Lokiella. She had been defeated by Vicius in battle and left terribly weakened by her loss. She also had information that would aid them in their fight against the Goddess, it seemed.

“Since this message is from one of my agents, I think we can trust it,” said the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

“In addition—if this is some kind of trap, then this talk of the divine would be completely unnecessary. I cannot think of any reason that Vicius or her allies would choose to reveal a divine whose presence in this world would inconvenience them,” said Hijiri.

“Yes...now that you mention it, that may be correct. And yet, to think that Vicius’s true goal was this rebellion against the heavens.”

“Her desire to make humans suffer as playthings... That part sounds like the Goddess.”

“In any case—she is nothing but evil to humans, through and through.”

“The proof has been recorded using the phone, just as planned,” the message read.

Nyantan truly did marvelous work. But as for the information that Lokiella might have to help us in our fight against Vicius...

“According to the report, the divine Lokiella has used up much of her strength and is currently unconscious. It appears there was no time to write down what information that she possesses that will be of use in our fight against Vicius.”

“Then we should send someone out to meet them. There’s a good chance they may be pursued, and we cannot allow them to be caught before their vital information is collected.”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor then took a map out of his pocket and spread it out on a table that Yoyo had prepared while he was speaking. The emperor pointed to a particular spot.

“Those traveling to Alion’s capital typically take this main road—and this will be the path for our large troop movements. However...” He slid his finger south. “There is a route south of this one, passing through Bakoss territory to reach Alion. It would not be suitable for an army but is a tactical option.”

“Nyantan has communicated that she and her carriages will be taking one of these southern routes, then.”

Nyantan had already conveyed her route to them—likely to help in sending aid.

They may not be capable of fighting off any pursuers, with their present strength.

Hijiri thought for a moment.

Then we must send help after all...

“I will dispatch military aid at once from my army,” said the emperor.

“...”

“What is it?”

“If Vicius becomes aware that this divine—Lokiella—is traveling with Nyantan, she may send powerful trackers to hunt them down. This is just my own speculation, but I believe that Vicius finds the divine accompanying Nyantan to be particularly irritating.”

“You believe any aid we send must be sufficiently powerful, in turn?” asked the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

“I would like to go myself,” said Hijiri, before looking toward the carriage where Munin sat. “I must protect Munin and ensure her safety. He gave me that responsibility, and so my place is here. Yet...”

Perhaps out of guilt after sensing the situation unfolding at the table, she was peeking over toward them with a look of remorse, half hidden by the carriage’s curtain wall.

What do I do? I feel as if Lokiella may be the key to our battle to come... Nyantan’s phone recording will be important too. I must also ensure that my classmates arrive at their destination safely, for Ayaka’s sake. This is a big opportunity—and yet...I am here serving as a substitute for Mimori Touka. Can I really leave the main force? Can I truly leave Sogou Ayaka on her own? There is also the matter of Ikusaba Asagi to consider. There is not much time. I must make this decision quickly.

“A—neki!” Itsuki poked her head out of a carriage, wearing her fly swordsman outfit.

“...You were listening?”

“Leave it to me, I’ll go and get ‘em. Nyantan’s our teacher, after all!”

She stood at the edge of the carriage’s footrest, then jumped down with a *hup*. Munin looked a little surprised as she watched Itsuki disembark. Hijiri folded her arms.

“I’m sorry about this... Do you mind?” she asked.

“Course not. Like, what do you think twins are for?”

Hijiri could clearly picture Itsuki cheerfully grinning at her underneath the mask she was wearing.

“I’m s’posed to take charge of the stuff you can’t do, Aneki! But, like, at a certain point...I just started relying on you for everything. How should I put

this..." Itsuki made a peace sign with two of her fingers. "As your twin little sister, I'm super stoked you can rely on me at times like these!"

Hijiri drew Itsuki in close and embraced her, wrapping Itsuki's head in her arms.

"I owe you one."

"Heh heh... Ah, anyway..."

Hijiri opened her arms, and Itsuki looked up at her.

"You reckon I should use my skill to get there? I can ride a horse now too, I s'pose..."

It takes a toll on her, but Itsuki can use her unique skill for rapid movement—the same method we used as we passed through the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor, who had been listening to their conversation, had already ordered Yoyo to prepare a horse. Hijiri scanned the map on the table before them.

They have three carriages with them. The weight of all those people will inevitably slow them down. If pursuers are sent after them, they will likely be caught at some point. If only they had the strength to fight whoever it is that comes for them... No. The problem is whether we can reach them in time.

Itsuki's high-speed skill was an option. However, the two sisters had not made use of it constantly during their trip through the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters, since it was not a skill suited to marathon running...and Hijiri's Wind skill had also played some role in powering it up.

Even so... We have no choice but to pray she makes it in time.

"Might I be allowed to accompany you?"

Everyone turned in the direction of this new voice, which came from behind the carriage Munin and Itsuki had been riding in. A young girl in the mask of a fly swordsman stepped forth.

Sogou-san... I thought she was asleep. But she's been in there listening to us.

Ayaka placed a hand over the left side of her chest.

“On my unique silver steed, I believe I will be able to arrive faster than any other to aid them.”

Ayaka had rushed to the site of Touka and Kirihara's battle once Kobato failed to win her over, charging west on her silver steed. Hijiri remembered what Touka had told her as they pored over their map.

“After she left Kashima, she just rode and rode on that silver steed her unique skill created. From here to here on the map. Considering how she arrived right before I could finish the fight against Kirihara—the speed of her movement across such a great distance is completely astonishing.”

Her speed is absurd. If we are to quickly cross such a wide swath of land, her unique silver steed is the best option available to us. Never mind her strength, which had Touka and the others on the ropes upon her arrival.

“If you hadn't come, Sogou might have just put us down.”

Hijiri remembered how even Mimori Touka had acknowledged Sogou's fighting prowess.

That, alone, puts her far beyond all normal standards. She is best suited to handle this situation—the strongest card in our deck. Sogou Ayaka really is special. We are incredibly fortunate to have her. If she will agree to go, that is...

“—Are you okay?”

“Yes. I think so... Personally, at least.” It seemed as if she was avoiding saying Hijiri's name out loud, wary of those who were around them.

That means she's thinking clearly. There's energy in her voice again now, too.

“I'm sure that this is because of Bane-san...and you most of all. I'm sorry... Sorry that I...I've caused you nothing but trouble.”

“That's not true.”

“So please—allow me to repay you. To make amends.” Her tone was clear.

The core of her being, which was so shaken... It's recovered. It might even be stronger now than it was before.

“You aren't fully healed yet... Are you?”

“...I am not.”

Hijiri could sense the wry smile under Ayaka's mask.

“But I think that this is something that I must do. I will leave the final decision in your hands, however. If you feel this won't be possible...I will return to my standby and focus on my recovery.”

Her precious classmates might be waiting for her to rescue them. A short while ago, Ayaka would have insisted upon going and not listened to any attempts to stop her. Even now, I bet she wants to ride off right away to save them. But she's saying that she'll stop, hold herself back, if I tell her to. That's a good indication that she's reasonable.

Or is this all an act to convince me to trust her?

No, Hijiri dismissed the possibility immediately. She smiled faintly under her mask in self-reproach.

She isn't as skilled as he is—that's why I can trust her. I am still going to activate my lie-detecting abilities, though—that is the meanness within me, perhaps. People like Sogou-san are the truly good after all... But not me, Mimori-kun.

“If...” Ayaka began. “If I had ignored you all and gone straight for the capital city of Alion alone, I might have taken the main road and completely missed Nyantan and those who ride with her. I could have arrived there in the city to find nothing. I'm glad I didn't run out there... Glad that I believed you all. Trusted in Nyantan-san and the spies of Mira. That's why I...I wanted to thank you. Thank you...”

Sogou-san... There's no better hand we can play in this situation. Nobody but

her.

Hijiri made her decision.

“Are you sure? Sure that you don’t mind us relying on you for this?”

Ayaka tucked in her arms and clenched her fists tight. “Leave it to me.”

Hijiri took both of Ayaka’s hands in hers and squeezed them softly.

“Please keep them safe.” Then Hijiri stepped in closer, drawing her face to Ayaka’s ear and speaking almost in a whisper. “And I should say the same to you. Thank you—Sogou-san.”

Nyantan Kikipat

NYANTAN KIKIPAT looked back, leaning around in the saddle. She saw dust rising behind her.

“They have sent their hunters after us, then.”

The land around them was withered—just wide-open space, lacking any strategic positions. The area was desolate and absent of vegetation. There had once been several large rivers winding through the landscape, but they had long since dried up. The route had served as a shortcut from Bakoss to Ulza until an increasing number of facilities and improvements were added to the main road, and the southern route had been abandoned. Nyantan had heard it was now only used by shady individuals.

It was on that road, forgotten by the world, that Nyantan and the heroes had plotted their course to Ulza.

“ ... ”

Their three carriages traveled in a line. Nyantan slowed her mount and drew it close to the driver’s seat of the middle carriage. The coaches were being

driven by the spies of Mira and their acquaintances.

“They’re coming,” she said.

The driver turned to look back over his shoulder and grimaced tightly.

“They’ll catch us at this rate. Gah... Just when we’d almost made it into Ulzan territory.”

The spies had informed Nyantan that the main army of Mira was moving through Ulzan lands.

We’ve already made it through Alion, but we are still in Bakoss, progressing toward their border with Ulza. We aren’t exactly close to being able to regroup with the main Miran army.

“Should we stop the carriages and fight them?” asked the driver.

Nyantán was torn.

Should I stay behind to fight them alone?

She looked to Kayako Suou, riding at the head of their cavalry party in front of the caravan.

They have been trained to fight and have real experience in combat. It’s not that I can’t make use of them—but there may be casualties if I do. Can I really protect them? Can I handle all of this alone?

Nyantán’s mind was racing.

“Hm?”

Their carriages were flanked by canyon walls—Nyantan saw the dust rising above them coming from either side. The carriage driver saw it too.

“Ugh.”

We can’t go any faster than this...

The clouds of dust overtook the carriages and their enemy found a slope before them that was easy to descend, rushing in from either side to block their

path.

We've been surrounded...

"They've cut us off..."

The carriages came to a halt. They had no other choice.

"Avoiding wide open spaces where we might be spotted has come back to bite us, eh..." The carriage driver ground his teeth.

I expect they sent their fastest unit ahead to stop our advance. And now the rest of them are catching up from the rear. There was always a danger we might be caught in the road, sealed off on either side and trapped in this ravine—but to avoid detection this was the right path. We had no choice.

Those things in front of us are...

"Lady Nyantan, I believe those are..."

"Yes."

Eucharists.

Their upper bodies were human and their lower bodies horse-like, making them appear similar to the demi-human race of centaurs. But they were clearly eucharists, evidenced by their unnaturally white skin and golden eyes. They were also armed.

There are fifty of them in total...

It would be hard to cut a path through them, then shake them off—especially given that we don't know how strong they are.

There were four centaur eucharists that were much bigger than the others. They each held a massive sword in one hand, intimidating to behold.

"Nee-tama? What'sap'nin?" An innocent little girl poked her head out of the cloth window in the carriage's wall, peeking out.

"Silse..."

The girl was one of Nyantan's little sisters—one of those the Goddess had taken hostage. Nyantan had rescued them all on the way to Ulza from a village in the southwest of Alion.

There was an orphanage in the village, apparently run by the Order of Vicius. That was where she had found them. As was customary in the village, the children always wore masks whenever they left the house. The practice was no invention of Vicius's but had its roots in the region's culture. Luckily, the children had not been treated poorly. Nyantan remembered a speech Vicius had once given her.

“Are you listening? Hostages only have value because they are safe, you see. It is only because an individual's loved ones are demonstrated to be living in peace that they put any effort into their work. It is my work that keeps smiles on the faces of those that I care for, and they realize this. Yes...that is how I give them a true sense of fulfillment. In the long run, such emotions are much easier to control than those of defeat or resignation. Ho ho hoh... Well...of course, there are times when I like to do something nasty to a hostage just to see that wonderful plunge from happiness into despair upon a person's face. ♪ Making the miserable even more miserable is quite boring, but turning joy into misery really is fun, heh heh. Whenever people betray me or demonstrate their incompetence, these things can happen! Oh, how unfortunate for them! This poor hostage has to suffer for your ineptitude! Ahh—oh, what misfortune! But you did bring this upon yourself. Personal responsibility, yes. ♪ Cry and apologize all you like; I shall not be forgiving you. ♪ This is ever so much fun. Ah, you're starting to look a little put-upon, Nyantan! Please, be happy now, won't you?”

Things were close for a while, but then Vicius found that she could still make use of me. While I remained efficient, the hostages she took from me would not be treated poorly.

Her tendency to act in this way toward her hostages was an aspect of Vicius that brought Nyantan relief. Hijiri's letter had told her the location of the orphanage and provided a route that looked safe to get her little sisters out of

the country. Hijiri had even tracked the movements of the people at the orphanage and knew where they would be at certain times—her information made their rescue much easier and put Nyantan’s training as a Disciple of Vicius and a spy to good use.

When she met her three sisters, Nyantan asked them to keep quiet. The three of them had broken down crying, but managed to keep their voices in check.

They really are good girls, Nyantan remembered thinking to herself. She took them through the secret passage that Hijiri had told her led out of the orphanage, and into the carriages driven by the waiting Miran spies.

“Nee-san!”

“Nee-taaaan...!”

“Nee-tamaaaa—!”

“I’m going away on an important mission, so we won’t be able to see each other for a while. But once that mission is over, I’ll come for you. I promise.”

Those were the words that Nyantan had left her little sisters with—and the ones that they had held on to as they waited in the orphanage for her return.

Hijiri had thought about rescuing them herself, but knew that Vicius would realize something was afoot if she noticed their absence—not to mention that she might suspect Nyantan was responsible for their disappearance.

She was right.

Nyantan smiled softly at her innocent little sister, who was still peeking out at her from the window of the carriage.

“I’m sorry, Silse... Things might get a little scary out here, so could you be a good girl and stay in there with everyone else?”

“Okay!” The window closed—but then immediately opened again.

“Nee-tan.” This time it was Nyono, another of Nyantan’s sisters. Nyantan smiled at her in the same reassuring way.

“Leave it to me, Nyono.”

“Yes. I’m sure everything will be okay if we let nee-san handle it. Come on, Nyono, this way.”

“Laiya, that hurts! Okay, okay!”

The oldest of Nyantan’s little sisters, Laiya, pulled Nyono back into the carriage.

Nyantan’s little sisters all called each other by their names, except Nyantan. The eldest, Laiya, had such a firm head on her shoulders that she reminded Nyantan of a certain hero—a hero whom Vicius said she had *broken*. She felt a pricking sensation in her chest.

“Come on, everyone. Let’s go.”

The heroes emerged from their carriages, called out by Erii Murota. It seemed as if they all understood the situation. Kayako and her group had already come out of their carriage and were gathered around her in battle positions. The last carriage in the line had been filled with the heroes of Nihei’s group, former members of Yasu’s group.

“Nyantan... We can fight too.”

“But...”

“Ain’t no other choice, given what we’re up against. If whining would make them go away, I’d kinda prefer to take that option, though.”

“Murota-san’s right. We’re fighting,” said Kayako firmly from horseback, not turning to look back.

“Let’s do this, everyone,” said Moe Minamino.

She used to seem like such a timid hero, even when compared with her peers. She still does, but...

Moe’s voice was strained to keep from trembling—but in it, Nyantan heard something that this world had given her.

Courage.

“Ayaka-chan... She always f-fought to keep us safe. You said it too, right, Nyantan? Said that surviving and meeting Ayaka-chan again...that would be our way of protecting her, right? That’s why we have to...” Moe drew her sword with tears in her eyes and prepared to do battle. “We have to survive—to fight.”

The spies who had been driving their carriages had descended from their seats with weapons in their hands—the two of them who were using bows headed to the back of the caravan.

I don’t feel like charging head on at the eucharists in front of us. Firstly, it’s too much of a risk when we aren’t sure how powerful they are. Charging them all at once might lead to meaningless death. Joining together into a single close formation and attacking them as a group will give everyone the best odds of survival. We should watch the enemy closely, then form the best plan to deal with them.

Nyantán touched her pocket. The phone that she kept there was so valuable, she did not want to risk having a magical war pigeon lose it. Sometimes when a message was incredibly valuable, several magical war pigeons might be sent out at once to make sure certain information made it through. But Nyantan only had one phone...

The evidence of Vicius’s evil only exists on this device. Even so...should I have risked losing everything to try and deliver it?

Lokiella had been asleep since the day that she came to Nyantan’s room—she was still sleeping in one of the carriages.

No matter what... I have to get this phone and Lokiella through to them.

“Everyone,” said Nyantan, preparing herself. She fitted her magic sword to the back of her waist. It glowed with light, then extended itself, twisting like a tail. She took up her two short swords and readied them. “Lend me your strength.”

She quickly gave orders and gathered the heroes up into formation just in time for—

Crunch!

The enemy from behind caught up with them. Some of the centaur eucharists at the front of the pack had humans riding on their backs. Nyantan knew their faces.

“You’re from the Knights of Alion...” she began.

The old man stroked his long white beard.

“In fact, I am the *Captain* of the Knights of Alion, Hinki Kulkaim... Nyantan, the most honorable Vicius has expressed her great displeasure and disappointment in you. What a terrible shame. She viewed you as being *special*.”

“Vicius thinks of humans as toys for her to torture for eternity. She won’t save you.”

“Then I shall simply be one of the chosen ones.”

“Ha!”

“The Goddess Vicius said that she will select humans who will be allowed to live. She intends on leaving some.”

So, she talked to him about her plans.

“Heh heh... It is quite fortunate that one of my knights spotted you and was able to report to me on your whereabouts. Vicius was wandering the castle searching for you when I delivered my report. Ah, yes, yes—Vicius has made certain demands for your manner of death. First your little sisters will be chopped to pieces before you, then their flesh will be stuffed into your throat until you asphyxiate.”

Hinki leered at Nyantan as if he was imagining himself running his tongue over her.

“*Heh heh...* I never expected the day would come when I would be allowed to

annihilate *the* Nyantan Kikipat to my heart's content. I expect my vice-captain is sobbing and cursing his fate, left in the capital to serve as my deputy."

He sounded like he thought he had earned this. A fitting reward.

"We Knights of Alion, powerful private soldiers, have always been put upon by that incompetent, *Wise* King of Alion. The Thirteen Orders were always such an eyesore, forming up into the New Orders of Alion even after their disappearance. How they wriggle like maggots from an open wound... But finally, the perfect chance has blessed us. If I prove my worth here, I will become one of the chosen. And so..." Hinki directed a treacherous smile at her. "I do thank you for vacating your position, Nyantan Kikipat."

"Seems like you're misunderstanding the situation, Hinki."

"Ohh? The howling of a defeated dog—or should I say, the mewling of a cat? Hmph. Deplorable..."

"Vicius cares nothing for humans. You can see that in how she hasn't even summoned her Disciples of Vicius from across the continent. She plans on taking those that she considers her inner circle to the heavens. That is the only thing on her mind. Once she's finished up there...we humans will be playthings for her to kill in her games, nothing more."

"Whatever," said Hinki, looking off into the distance and feigning ignorance. "I am not long for this world... But the Goddess Vicius said that if I prove my worth to her, she will turn me and my men into demi-gods. If I do well enough, I would no longer be a mere human once she made me a god now, would I? My lifespan would be extended... Wonderful, no?"

"I'll save you... I'll let you, and you alone, live if you show me your worth." ... That's one of the tactics that Vicius uses to manipulate minds. It's what she's best at.

"And so, I will not let you sweet-talk me. *Heh heh*... It does seem worth hurting a few of those heroes she's got with her, too...doesn't it?" Hinki asked the knight who rode beside him.

“Yes. But perhaps I should be the one to take Lady Nyantan...”

“*Heh heh heh... You playboy.*”

“*Hahah... You’ve got me there. These centaur eucharists really are amazing. Wonderful creatures, tireless mounts! They also follow our orders completely. Never complain for a second.*”

“Quite so. The Goddess Vicius humbly claimed these eucharists to be failures...but they will greatly change the way in which we wage our wars. Most importantly...” Hinki raised his right arm, preparing to give the order. “They are simply far too powerful as soldiers.”

There were more than a hundred centaur eucharists lined up behind the old knight captain—and over twenty of them were especially large and looked particularly strong.

“Well let me see, Nyantan. If you drop to your knees, surrender, do everything that we order you to...we might be willing to secretly save your little sisters. How about it?” Hinki had a vulgar smile on his face. Nyantan didn’t respond, remaining in her battle stance as she placed a little distance between herself and the knight.

The eucharists... If I remember correctly, they cannot function as soldiers if there is nobody left to order them. That’s what the familiar said. I must move faster than the two huge ones protecting Hinki on the right and left, and kill him and his other three knights as soon as possible, or...

But there’s no opening. The problem isn’t Hinki—it’s those huge eucharists.

Of course they aren’t nearly as strong as those disciples were, but... Should I start a skirmish with them, then throw them off balance to create an opportunity to strike? I’m going to have to be prepared for a certain degree of danger.

It’s no use. Those huge eucharists have no weak points at all. It’s much worse than I imagined. I don’t even know if they’ll allow me to really engage them.

They're already fearsome enough and we haven't even started fighting yet. Could I hold my own against one of them in single combat? Could I ever win that battle?

"...Gah."

"Heh heh...You understand, don't you? The fearsome aura emanating from the eucharists at my side protects me. They have the same dangerous aura that I felt from the Sixth Order. You see, I...I've always lived with men like these, never rebelling against them... Surviving, waiting for my time to come. *Heh heh*...does it make you sad now that you get it? Perhaps it is a curse that you are so skilled, so able to recognize the gulf in strength between you and your enemies. *Heh heh heh*—kneel, Nyantan! I, Hinki, will tear your young'uns to shre—"

Thonk!

"...H-urk!"

There was a dull thunk and a husky croak from Hinki. His eyes rolled back in his head as he fell from his saddle.

"Wha—?"

The giant eucharists by Hinki's side didn't react to that attack in time?!

Hinki had been struck in the jaw by the tail end of a spear. It appeared the eucharists had been too slow to stop the projectile.

How did that attack make it through?

Nyantan turned to look in the direction the spear had come from, beyond the eucharists that blocked the road.

Floating in the air above them was a silver sphere.

The sphere exploded, but the scattered silver liquid hung in the air in an unsettling manner. The silver then began to transform—turning into weapons.

The eucharists that blocked their path were swept away in an instant. But

before Nyantan could even register what had happened—

Skidddd—!

With a sudden deceleration that would have been unthinkable on any normal mount, *they* appeared—silver sword in hand. Floating weapons were deployed all around the fly swordsman.

“—Haaah.” The rider let out a breath that it seemed they had been holding forever. The masked fly swordsman controlled their breathing, then ducked in just a little closer to their mount and looked straight ahead at the eucharists.

“What were you *planning* on doing to these people?”

Nyantan felt as if her whole body had been saddled with some unseen weight. The voice was calm but intimidating, wrapping itself around her very core. One of the knights beside Hinki turned pale.

“I-impossible... It’s y-you...”

The silver steed’s rider, the fly swordsman, took off their mask—revealing a face drenched in sweat underneath. She was not exhausted, but rather brimming with energy.

“Thank you, Nyantan-san,” said the fly swordsman—Ayaka. She turned to Kayako and the others. It looked as if the heroes had finally been woken from their collective daze.

“A...Ayaka-chan?!”

“Sogou-san!”

“Class reeeeeeeep!”

“Seriously?! Sogou-san?!”

“S-Sogou?! Is that really you?!”

“Ayakaaa...”

The heroes let their emotions burst free.

An expression of relief and affection flashed upon her face, and Ayaka turned to Nyantan.

“Thank you so much... Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for bringing everyone out of the city. And...” She glared over at the knights and their eucharists, “Leave them to me. I entrust you with the protection of everyone here in the meantime, Nyantan-san.”

“But alone against such numbers...” Nyantan protested.

“I do not have the MP to create my silver knights, but I am capable of deploying my floating weapons in battle.” A vein pulsed on Ayaka’s forehead. “With their strength in numbers—I believe I will be capable of taking them alone.”

It sounds like she’s sized them up already. She has an idea of how strong our enemy is.

“Kh... Our captain may be unconscious, but I-I will give orders in his stead! G-go, eucharists! Wh-who cares if she is an S-class hero?! Crush her with your numbers—with your numbers, I say! E-especially...yes! Aim for the other heroes! Using them as human shields will make it harder for Ayaka Sogou to fi—aaah?!”

A single wordless glare from Ayaka was enough to silence the knight.

He began to tremble. Ayaka’s eyes were so sharp—one look from her was enough to make an enemy feel they might be shot to death on the spot. For a brief moment, a chill ran down Nyantan’s spine too.

“W-wawawawah... Waaah?! D-do it! Do it, you damned eucharists... Now! Hurry up and take that woman out! Do it, now!”

It was like the sight of her alone had the man shaking in his boots. Pierced by Ayaka’s icy glare, he was completely panicked. The eucharists did as they were ordered, taking up their weapons—and *moving*.

Wh—?

From Nyantan’s perspective, it all happened in the blink of an eye. The two huge eucharists closed in on Ayaka, reaching the perfect striking distance with just a single step.

Their movements were perfectly matched and synchronized—so were their movements when they were ripped apart.

...*Eh?*

Before Nyantan knew what was happening, the two eucharists had been divided into chunks of flesh. Ayaka stood there, the sound of her swing still ringing in the air.

She had cut them down—both of them—so fast that Nyantan had not even seen it happen.

“I’m only here because of everyone who has forgiven and supported me...” Ayaka turned her silver swords toward the eucharists racing toward her. “...That is why I am here now—here to protect you all.”

As one, her floating silver weapons flew toward the eucharists.

Mimori Touka

C_{RACK!}

A branch snapped against my shoulder as I made my way out of the forest with heavy footsteps. There was a flat plain stretching out past the treeline. A little further west was the Fortress of Panuba.

I saw Seras and Slei waiting in the place that I had asked them to. My orders had been for them to leave the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters during the battle—*I need them to get some rest for what’s to come.*

Slei was sleeping, just as I’d asked. Seras was resting too, but not asleep.

Because of her contract with the spirits.

She noticed that I was there. I trudged toward her, each step feeling like my knees might buckle underneath me. Seras walked over to help, but I waved her away with my hand. Eventually, though...I gave in and my knees went. I tried to fall forward, but at that moment I heard a sound like leaves being ripped apart. I felt something shoot toward, as if launched by an explosion.

“Sir Too-ka—!”

The monster stealthily lunged at me as I stumbled. I turned to look over my shoulder—a humanoid type, mid-sized, around six meters tall. I quickly turned my right hand toward it.

“Paralyze.”

I landed my status effect skill on the monster before it hit me. Seras had put on her prime armor and was running toward me. I dodged the paralyzed humanoid type as it barreled in my direction, losing none of its momentum. The monster fell to the ground, rigid, and I finished it off with Berserk.

“It was an act. Of course it was. You idiots never learn, do you?” I said, looking down at it. I wasn’t actually that weak on my feet—I had just been acting that way to draw out the monster.

There was one time, back when we were traveling to Erika’s house with Eve through this place... A monster waited for me to be at my weakest before it attacked. I felt the presence of it lurking somewhere nearby. It was being so cautious, almost like it had no intention of attacking me at all—that’s why I gave that little act a try.

That humanoid type must have been waiting until the moment when I found my companions, seeing that opportunity as the perfect chance to strike. I can understand—it’s easy to leave openings for the enemy when you feel safe. I imagine that monster also saw that Seras hasn’t exactly recovered fully either.

“But it turns out you couldn’t see that I’m not that much worse for wear.”

Seras activating her prime armor also served as a good distraction. Now I feel kind of bad for making her use it, actually.

Seras sighed with relief upon realizing that my fall had been an act.

“Oh, and I’ve got eyes in the back of my head. You ain’t going to surprise me with an ambush from behind.”

“Squee.”

“Hey Piggymaru, do you mind if I ask you to do your thing?”

I took out my voice-amplifying crystal once more and used it to pump up the volume of one of Piggymaru’s cries. We waited for a few moments, but there was no sign of any more golden-eyed monsters coming for us.

Well, even if there are any left...they might just be too terrified to come out now. That works, too. Stay in the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters and keep quiet.

“Sir Too-ka.” Seras walked toward me slowly.

“Sorry about that. I made you use your spirits for no reason because I didn’t explain what I was doing.”

“No... I am simply happy that you are safe. I think I might have drawn the humanoid type’s attention in my direction for a moment... though I am sure you could have defeated it even without that, of course...ah.”

I placed a hand on her shoulder as I passed her by. “Thanks, Seras.”

“Ah, yes.”

All the commotion had woken Sleil.

“Pumpee. ♪”

Welcome back to you too, Sleil.

“Did you get a bit of rest?”

“Pakyuh. ♪”

Slei turned her back to me, showing me the crystal in the back of her neck.

Seems like she knows we're about to get moving, so she wants me to hurry up with the mana, eh?

"Sorry...I'm counting on you, Slei."

We stopped by the fortress where the demonic device had been activated... mostly to see if there were any humanoid types inside, but also to search for survivors just in case. The fortress was just as awful inside as it was outside. The stench of death was thick from the corpses buzzing with flies and bursting with maggots.

The devastation inside this fortress is too terrifying to put into words.

There were no golden-eyed monsters inside, no humanoid types—and no survivors.

We left the fortress and made our way back to Rohm and the others. I looked over my Lord of the Flies mask as we rode on Slei's back.

"This might be done for..."

I killed a lot of humanoid types and golden-eyed monsters in that battle. It wasn't easy...though I wouldn't go so far as to say I was struggling, either. They did live up to their reputation—the strongest humanoid types from the depths of the northern reaches of the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters. After Seras left me, there were a few spots where I really saw how fearsome they could be. There were times at which I had to sever my connection to Piggymaru and let the little guy rest. Those times, when I was alone, were when my nerves were most on edge...but the leveling up I managed to do really paid off. I wouldn't say I was in danger...but it was no easy victory, either.

My Lord of the Flies mask and robes were left beaten up after the fighting. Seras turned to look at me and gave me a wry smile.

"I've repaired your robes and mask several times during our journey, but I believe we might be coming to the end of the road with them..." she said.

“You’ve got that right...”

It’s about time for some new Lord of the Flies robes then, eh?

We returned to the camp where Rohm and the other Miran soldiers were waiting, and they ran to our side the moment we arrived. They were all surprised when I told them of the fortress and of our battle there.

They also seem to have perked up a little, though. We’re basically being treated like heroes now, huh?

But hey, learning that you’ve got someone on your side who can defeat your enemies when you once thought the fight was hopeless... I can see how that would give them hope. That said, we weren’t able to bring back any survivors. That’s a reality they’ll have to accept.

I gave the men my condolences for their fallen comrades but, being soldiers, it seemed they’d had time to calm their nerves and organize their thoughts in our absence. They didn’t deny or dwell on the deaths. They seemed sad, but also resigned and prepared to move onward.

You can really tell these men are soldiers at times like these.

I had them send a magical war pigeon to Lise and the army of the Country at the End of the World, ordering them to resume their march.

“Make sure that they send out harpy soldiers to scout the area around them just in case there are still humanoid types or golden-eyed monsters that have ambushes set up along their path.”

“Understood.”

“Then I will leave the matter of notifying the Country at the End of the World in your hands.”

“Leave it to me. Ahem, Lord of the Flies... Our camp is quite simple and was quickly improvised, but would you like to rest here a while? We may be able to rejoin the army of the Country at the End of the World while you are sleeping.”

“No, I will be returning on my black steed at once.”

“I see... Understood. I am sure that His Majesty will be relieved to have you back at his side as soon as possible, Lord of the Flies. I pray that we fight together on the eastern front. Please take care of yourself.”

I thanked him, then set Sleil galloping due east. Seras was in front and I was riding in back.

This is the reason I had Sleil leave the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters during the previous battle. She needed some rest to be ready to get us back to Hijiri and the others quickly.

“Seras, I think I’m going to try and get some sleep. Do you mind? I want to restore my MP. And I’m also just a bit tired, to be honest...”

“Not at all. Please, lean against my back for support. Sleil, please ensure that Sir Too-ka does not fall during the ride.”

Sleil brayed at me in response.

“...Sorry, you two.”

I wrapped my hands around Seras’s waist like I was embracing her and leaned forward. I sank my face into her back.

I don’t know how to describe it. Riding like this makes me feel at peace. Back when we’d just left Monroy, Seras was so timid and embarrassed. I bet she’s used to all this now.

Hm? Seras? You are used to all this, aren’t you...?

“...”

But before I had a chance to ask, I suddenly felt the drowsiness wash over me. The rhythm of Sleil beneath me began to lull me to sleep.

Lost in that deep comfort, I was just about to lose consciousness when...

“I love you, Sir Too-ka.”

Suddenly her words drifted to my ears.

“You don’t need to say it—I feel the same way.”

I think those were the words that I said in reply.

Too-ka Mimori

Level 5999

HP: +17997 MP: +197967

Attack: +17997 Defense: +17997

Vitality: +17997 Speed: +17997

Intelligence: +17997

Title: E-Class Hero



Chapter 5: Connections

MY MIND resurfaced to consciousness.

“Eh...”

“Squee?”

“Are you awake, Sir Too-ka?”

Piggymaru...and Seras.

I opened my eyes and sat up in the saddle.

“You may have awoken at just the right time. The main army of Mira is about to come into view.”

I squinted to focus my vision, still blurry from sleep. I could see an army off in the distance.

Looks like we caught them while they’re resting at camp.

“I believe we have left Ulza and are presently in Neahan territory,” said Seras, explaining our position.

“Should we join up with them now? I said a few words to the Miran scouts who approached us some time ago, so I believe the emperor has been informed of our arrival.”

“Keep going,” I said. I leaned down to stroke Sleï’s flank. “You must be tired too. Good work, Sleï.”

She brayed back at me happily.

As we rode in, the Wildly Beautiful Emperor came out to greet us. He had cleared away his regular guard and set up the usual curtain wall—only a select few individuals stood before us.

“You’ve done well to return. It appears that the battle was fierce... Are you well?” he asked.

“Yes. The humanoid types and other monsters have been destroyed—at least the ones surrounding that fortress,” I answered.

“Hmph... You make it sound easy, but you have done incredible things. Not to mention...” The emperor looked up at me as I sat in the saddle. “I feel as if...you have gotten *bigger*, somehow.”

He’s not talking about my height or my muscle mass. He must be able to sense how my stat modifiers have increased after all that leveling up.

“You have done well to deliver the Lord of the Flies home safely, Seras,” added the emperor.

Seras bowed her head, and we dismounted from Sleif’s back.

...Should we have been talking to an emperor from horseback in the first place? Feels kind of rude to be looking down on him—though it didn’t look like the Wildly Beautiful Emperor minded.

“You’re all back safe and sound!”

“Lady Munin.”

Munin ran over to us.

“Pumpee. ♪”

“You too, Sleif... Well done,” Munin said as she embraced Sleif, now in her first stage of transformation.

“Please worry no longer, Lady Munin. As Sir Too-ka just stated, I believe we have removed the threat to the people of the Country at the End of the World.”

Munin raised her head to look at Seras. “Seras... Thank you... And you, Too-ka.”

“Sure,” I replied.

Seems like Munin’s been safe here with the army, then.

“Heh heh, I would even reward you with a kiss if Seras wasn’t here. ♪”

“I’ll take it on the back of the hand, then.”

“Oh, is that because I am a fly swordsman approaching her lord? *Heh heh*—would you like that?”

“I was kidding.”

“Hmm, then I suppose...” Munin stood up from where she had been stroking Sleii, and... “—*Mwah*.”

“Eh?!”

Munin kissed Seras on the cheek.

“You don’t mind that now, do you?” she asked me.

“L-Lady Munin...!” Seras exclaimed.

“Seras, get some rest with my Sleep skill. I slept on the way, but you’re almost at your limit, right?”

Seras gave me a wry smile, looking a little happy that I’d noticed.

“You spend a lot of time looking at me, I see... I will. Thank you for the kind offer.”

I cast Sleep on Seras.

“Munin, look after her for me. Let Sleii and Piggymaru rest by her side.”

“*Heh heh*, understood...*Your Majesty, Lord of the Flies*.”

Sleii helped Munin carry Seras into the carriage where she slept and spent most of her time.

“Welcome back. Good work.” Hijiri chose that moment to step forward. With the curtain all around us, she wasn’t wearing her fly swordsman mask.

“You too. I left you with a lot on your plate. How did everything work out here?”

Hijiri explained everything that had happened in my absence.

Seems like there have been quite a few developments while I was away.

“—I see.”

Nyantan managed to escape from the capital of Alion and rescued her little sisters, who were being kept hostage by Vicius. She also got the rest of 2-C out, along with our homeroom teacher Zakurogi. We’ve got solid proof in hand now that Vicius is evil.

As for why Erika’s familiars went silent... It sounds like she invested all her strength into choosing a moment to get in contact with Nyantan. And not with the usual letterboard, but by speaking through one of her animals. The toll of doing so has probably left her unconscious. She might not be able to move for days, depending on how long she spoke for. She really pushed herself hard for us, huh...

“There is a divine traveling with Nyantan...and it’s one that’s opposed to Vicius? That’s a surprise.” I mused over the most notable piece of information I’d received. I had been unsure whether the other divines even existed.

“Might be that this divine evaluating system we talked about really does exist and Vicius did something to trigger it.”

Once the other divines came to audit her, she struck them down the moment they arrived.

“She’s supposed to have some information that’ll be useful in our fight against Vicius, right?” I asked.

“She’s been asleep ever since Nyantan and her party left the capital. I am sure if she had woken, we would have received magical war pigeons with further information.”

“Have you gotten any more messages from Nyantan?”

“None as yet.”

“Sogou went after them, huh?”

“I sent Itsuki after her, just in case. But Sogou was the one best positioned to

make it to Nyantan's carriages quickly. If she made it in time, I am sure she has done her utmost to save them."

"Sure, yeah."

She's recovered mentally then, too. Feels like I've gained the strongest ally I could possibly hope for on the battlefield.

"You've done good work, Hijiri... I wouldn't have been able to do anything about Sogou without you."

"You're quite welcome—or so I would like to say—but there are plenty more instances in which you have been of assistance to me, Mimori-kun."

"Kinda makes me blush when you put it like that."

"Liar."

Should've expected that from lie-detector number two.

"What about Asagi's group?"

"They're staying quiet. They poke their heads up on occasion, but on the Wildly Beautiful Emperor's orders, they're spending most of their time with the emperor's personally chosen elite troops, coordinating their actions. They are going to be operating as a separate force from our main army."

So Asagi's group is like a street gang under the command of the emperor's personal troops, with a few specially selected Miran elite soldiers within their ranks. According to Hijiri, those are the soldiers the Wildly Beautiful Emperor intended to use to challenge Vicius.

"I see. Come to think of it, the emperor teamed up with Asagi's group before he had alliances with the Country at the End of the World or the Lord of the Flies Brigade..."

This is exactly what he had planned for Asagi's group all along. I should go and see Kashima a bit later.

"At present, it seems like everything is going well. As for why the main force

of the Miran army has made camp here..." Hijiri looked toward the Wildly Beautiful Emperor with a questioning gaze, and he nodded back at her.

A signal for her to explain, I suppose.

"We have almost caught up with the combined forces. They have been steadily retreating and have caused us almost no harm thus far."

We're gaining strength—even reincorporating some of the generals and soldiers who were captured during the enemy's advance across Ulza. It really paid off that Sogou did everything in her power not to kill anyone, but to take them captive instead.

"Given how little of a counter-offensive they're putting up, the Queen of Neah must really have talked them around to this retreat," I noted.

"The further we draw the Miran army from their own lands, the more of a logistical disadvantage we place them at."

"Vice versa, the closer our forces are to Alion, Neah, and Bakoss, the more of an advantage we shall have in supplying our army."

I bet that's how the queen's convincing them.

"At present we are resting before discussing how we should go about the combined forces—or that is the story, at least."

"Then this isn't a permanent base, eh?"

"If all goes according to plan, the army of Neah will switch sides tomorrow. A message arrived from them, encoded with the letter-fetching method—I had Seras teach me the way in which such messages could be read before she left with you."

...Takao Hijiri's a fast learner, huh. She already understands how that code system works?

"The part about our army taking a rest is real. We can't just march endlessly without rest—and if the eucharist army is waiting for us, we will need to be in good condition to fight them. I'm sure that the Lord of the Flies Brigade will also

need time to rest, after your trip through that intense battlefield at the fortress.”

“Well, yeah.” I looked off in the direction of the combined forces. “So the Neahan army is coming over to our side, then. It’s finally happening. Tomorrow.”

On the morning of the next day, the advance army from the Country at the End of the World arrived in camp. Their numbers were around a quarter that of their main army, made up of their fastest soldiers.

There are only so many monsters suited to moving at high speeds, like that giant wolf, after all.

“I’m here! I have come!” It was the arachne prime minister, Liselotte Onik, folding her arms haughtily.

Long time no see, huh?

“Yo, Lise.”

Lise almost fell forward in shock. “That was far less of a reaction than I was expecting! This *is* an emotional reunion, isn’t it?!” she exclaimed.

“What...you’re getting emotional at seeing me again?”

“Gah—s-so what if I am?! I’ve been looking forward to this!”

A black leopardman popped up by Lise’s side.

“I knew you’d been waitin’ for this moment, prime minister.”

“Shut up, Geo!”

“You’re the one who’s talkin’ so loud...”

“Hey, Geo,” I said.

“Yo, Lord of the Flies.”

“I’m glad you made it.”

“Future of our country depends on this fight too, y’know?”

I heard another voice from a few paces away. “Oh hey, Seras, how’s it going?! Munin too! Huh~? You all been doing okay~?!”

It was the energetic, blue-skinned centaur Kil Mail, seeking high-fives from Seras and Munin.

“Thanks for coming too, Gratrah.”

“...It has been too long,” said the harpy, captain of King Zect’s personal guard.

“Comes off more natural when you speak that way. It’s less weird than you being friendly.”

“Harsh.”

She’s as expressionless and stern as she’s ever been.

“Were you attacked by any humanoid types on the road?” I asked.

“We faced no issues.”

“Good.”

“I was informed of your actions by magical war pigeon. It seems that you pushed yourself quite hard on our behalf.”

“Worked out in my favor, too. I don’t need you worrying about me.”

“That was not my meaning. I have no right to stop you, but I would like you to refrain from such actions.” Gratrah’s usual cool expression was pouting—even a little reproachful. “There are many in my nation who would be sad if you died, Lord of the Flies Belzegea.”

...She’s a weird one.

“Hey, Gratrah!”

“What is it, Lise?”

“I’m the one who’s supposed to say the considerate things! What are you playing at?!”

“I apologize for my lack of consideration.”

“You never seem genuine when you apologize! I am your *prime minister*, you understand?! Prime minister!”

You’re getting dangerously close to looking like Baron Zuan when he lost control of his men, Lise...

“Oh.”

Rohm entered the curtained space and bowed to me once. I raised a hand and nodded back at him.

So they did make it back to join up with Lise and the others, then.

Rohm then went to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor to give him a report.

From what Lise just said, it sounds like the next group that is going to arrive here are the slower ones—Amia and the monster soldiers.

“Eh?” I suddenly got a glimpse of a little girl peeking in through the curtain wall. “Nyaki.”

“Master!” She ran at me, little legs pumping, and I took off my mask and got to my knees.

“You’re here.”

“Nyaki’s here, *meow!*” Nyaki stopped herself with a start, and looked at me uncertainly with upturned eyes, touching the tips of her index fingers together. “Nya-Nyaki thought that she could be of use to master... S-so...was Nyaki right to come?”

“I left that up to you, right? If you decided to come, I figure that’s fine.”

Nyaki’s face lit up. “Nyaki really is happy to see you again, master!”

As she hugged me, two shadows approached her from her left.

“Squee—!”

“Pakyu—hn!”

“Meow?”

She turned to face the shadows.

“Meow-ow—Piggymaru! Sleii!” Sleii leaped at Nyaki, and Piggymaru bounced off of Sleii’s back toward her too. “Nyah hah hah! We finally meet again! Nyaki’s so happy! Nyaki’s so glad she came!”

She fell backward, and Piggymaru cushioned her landing by protecting her back and head.

“Squee~ee. ♪”

“Pumpee. ♪”

Piggymaru and Sleii sure do like Nyaki.

“Lady Nyaki.”

“And Miss Seras!” Nyaki got up from the ground and hugged Seras. “Miss Seras... It’s been so long, *meow!* Nyaki is so happy to see you!”

“Yes, Nyaki... I am happy to see you again also.”

Kinda looks like there are tears in Seras’s eyes there. I know how she feels.

...You too, Lise. Are you really crying just watching this?

“Nyaki.”

“Miss Munin! Nyaki brought the mask that Munin made her, the fly swordsman mask. Nyaki brought it along!”

“*Heh heh heh.* We’ll have matching outfits then, I suppose.”

“Yes, *myeow!*”

“You’re an important member of the Lord of the Flies Brigade too, Nyaki.”

“Meow!”

“I’d like a fly swordsman mask,” said Lise, looking on enviously from the sidelines.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor's got loads of them prepped. I guess I'll give Lise one as a present later. She's gotten kinda childish, huh? She's not forgetting her position as Prime Minister of the Country at the End of the World, is she?

"Your Majesty!"

"Hm?"

Yoyo Ord briskly swept the curtain aside as she rushed into the tented space.

"The combined forces have made their move?" asked the emperor.

"No."

More individuals followed Yoyo into the tent—she turned to face them.

"They have returned."

"Ah."

Nyaki had been reminiscing with the members of the Lord of the Flies Brigade—but at that moment she stopped and ran.

"Nee-nya, Nee-nya," she cried, mumbling it to herself unconsciously as she ran at full tilt toward her.

The one who had just entered also ran, heading straight for Nyaki. The two of them grew closer. The newcomer opened her arms, ready to receive Nyaki, and they embraced.

"Nee-nyaaaa—! *Waaaahn!*"

"Nyaki... Nyaki—I'm sorry... I'm sorry it took me so long to find you...! I'm sorry... I'm so sorry!"

Ah, right. That's Nyaki's Nee-nya, then—Nyantan Kikipat.

She's here...safely.

Nyaki buried herself in Nyantan's chest and sobbed, wailing as if all the emotions she'd been keeping in had just burst out all at once. Seras covered her mouth with both hands and wept too, unable to speak.

We know, after all. We know how much Nyaki wanted to see her Nee-nya.

“Eh? Nyaki? Nyaki’s here! Nyono, Silse! It’s Nyaki! *Sob...* It’s Nyaki!”

“Is it really her~?! *Waaah...* Nyak-hi...!”

“Nyaki! Nyaki, Nyaki, Nyaki...!”

After Nyantan came three little children who looked just like her, running into the curtain tent.

“*Sob...* Eh? Meow...? Ah, Laiya, Nyono... Silse... Is that you? Really?! *Waaahhh!* Laiya! Nyono! Silseeee—!”

So those are Nyantan’s little sisters.

The five of them embraced and sobbed as they were reunited, Nyantan above them all, holding them tight. She squeezed her little sisters as they broke down in tears, cradling them in her arms.

“...Good for you, Nyaki.” I looked up into the clear morning air. “I really am happy for you.”

Really...

I’m glad we saved you.

Someone else stepped through the curtain wall.

“We have returned. Everybody is safe.”

Sogou Ayaka.

“We’re totes good to take off our masks in here, yeah?”

Takao Itsuki.

“Huh... Mimori-kun?”

My classmates—the other heroes—were there too. Banewolf stood with his back to the curtain wall, giving us a light round of applause.

“You really are a hero, Sogou! And hey, glad you lot are all right... Suou... Nihei... Rest of you.”

“Ah?! It’s Bane!” The heroes erupted at the sight of Banewolf.

I watched as Sogou walked toward me. *Based on her expression and the mood...it feels like she’s about to apologize to me again.*

Before she reached me, I pointed her in another direction with my chin. She looked over, then after a brief moment’s hesitation, went in the direction I had indicated instead.

“Hijiri-san, I...”

“You did fantastic work. Allow me to say that first,” said Takao Hijiri, removing her mask. Underneath the mask, her faint smile was one of admiration.

“I suppose—I now have to thank you once again, don’t I, Sogou-san?”

The Goddess Vicius

IT WAS ON the morning of that day that preparations were completed. Vicius left the royal castle and looked up into the sky. Spread out before her were the grounds on which the heroes had trained...and beneath that, the underground space where she had created her eucharists. The training grounds had been structured like a kind of roof that could be opened up to access the area beneath.

I wonder what the ancients used this space for?

Not even a divine like Vicius knew the answer to that.

Opening and closing the ceiling of the underground space required large amounts of mana. *Better than consuming Source Essence, though, I suppose.*

Vicius gripped her gate device in one hand—the very device that would allow her to open a passage to the heavens. At her feet was a crystal, hidden from plain view, that would open the ceiling to the underground space if fed enough mana. Vicius poured mana into the crystal and the ground opened before her

eyes, rumbling as the very earth split down the middle and drew apart to either side.

She laid a hand on the cone-shaped crystal by her side—the device that controlled her eucharists.

The trouble with this device is the range of the signal it sends out, I suppose. But it's only a concern at great distances. At this range, we should have no issue.

Vicius placed her hand on the crystal and summoned up the emotions she wished to channel into it. A white hand reached out to grasp the edge of the open space that had once been the training grounds and a giant eucharist's head emerged. More followed after it.

They were *giants*—there was no question about it.

The giant eucharists looked up and sprouted white wings from their backs.

Beautiful...

Vicius was so impressed by the sight that it drove the thought of Nyantan's betrayal from her mind.

"Humans really are awful, aren't they?"

Scum. Just too awful, truly.

"It's all Nyantan's fault that humans will have to endure an eternity of suffering now."

Once I have taken care of the heavens and become more powerful, I suppose I will return to this world to play with and murder everyone here.

"And so...firstly...to the heavens. ♪ Goodbye to this world. For now. ♪"

I sent a few pursuers after Nyantan, but who cares about that now?

Vicius had stopped caring about her once she was done telling her about her plans.

"Hmm—perhaps I just desired for an ignorant person to stand by my side and be shocked by it all? Well, they are stupid, but I do have *them*, I suppose."

She turned to look over her shoulder at her three disciples, standing quietly at her back.

The fallen god—Wormgandr.

The first hero—Ars.

The hollow man—Yomibito.

Wormgandr had always been rather impertinent, but he served as a barely acceptable conversation partner to pass the time.

“Almost time, eh? Not been that long since ya used that Source Essence stuff to wake me up, so I ain’t all that familiar with this world. No time to relax, neither. But heck... Gotta be grateful you’re lettin’ me take me revenge against the heavens.”

Wormgandr’s mouth was always open, always painting a half-smile on his face.

“You do think that humans should be killed, don’t you, Worm?” asked Vicius.

“I’d go further ’n that. Ain’t no good comes from having too many humans around, so I always thought the divines should keep their damn numbers in check. Disposin’ of the ones that are gonna spoil the rest, yeah? That’s what got them damn chief deities all unhappy with me. They’re so soft on their creations, just like Lokiella. I figure things are only gonna get worse for them humans ’less someone culls ’em from time to time.”

Lokiella’s head had been placed in a special box which Vicius made Ars carry with him. She was to be brought along so she could bear full witness to the agonized cries of the heavens as they fell.

“Oh, but that would be so boring. They’re only fun as playthings because they’re constantly multiplying! These somewhat intelligent, short-lived creatures with their weaknesses and desires... They are the perfect toys!”

“But y’know...”

“Ah, I’m going to be opening the gate now, so I don’t need to hear your

objections.”

“Right, right.”

Vicius opened her hands wide, using her right to activate the device.

*This might be the most pleasant morning breeze I have ever experienced.
Freedom. Being bound by nothing and no one. This is what true freedom is.*

I am the only God of this world.

All other beings are but offerings for my games.

Only those who are chosen will be elevated to become my servants.

So it will be with those heroes.

Those who are inferior must be the servants of those on high.

They should dance for their superiors’ delight.

All shall entertain their God.

Several beams of white light struck the sky like lightning. A flat ring opened up in the firmament above—a gate.

The inside of the ring was filled with white light.

“Ohoh, so that’s the path to the ’eavens, eh?”

The giant white eucharists began to fly up to it.

The problem with using the flying eucharists was always the Holy Eye of Yonato. The Holy Eye could shoot down any golden-eyed monster that flew above a certain height, using its powerful beam of light. It could fire on targets located anywhere across the continent.

I could not destroy it, of course... That would have increased my interference rate by too much.

Instead, she had spent maddening weeks and months devising a method to avoid her creatures being struck down. Finally, she had succeeded in altering the nature of their soul power.

She had already secretly tested the process with a smaller flying eucharist which had been converted to her new variety of soul power. It had been a weak creature—as weak as she could make it—in order to avoid exceeding her interference limits. That test eucharist had flown...and had not been struck down, even after it surpassed the altitude at which the Holy Eye of Yonato should have activated. And thanks to this new variety of soul power, the eucharists she created no longer gave any experience points when killed by the heroes.

The Banished Emperor should have also yielded no experience points for whoever killed him. Yes...with these new eucharists, I can prevent the leveling up and stat restoration of the heroes during my battle against them. If I have one issue with these eucharists, though, it is their lack of intelligence. They cannot engage in complex independent actions but must be pointed in the direction of their enemies. That is the true gulf between the divines and the eucharists, I suppose.

Demi-gods are also capable of creating disciple-like creatures—but demi-gods are not bound by my control, as they do not contain a part of me.

That's the catch, I suppose. Divines are not capable of taking clear rebellious action against those who share an element of their composition. That is the danger in creating demi-gods. They might betray me, as Nyantan did. Oh, I am so glad I did not turn her into a demi-god. It irritates me so. I hope that knight captain, whatever his name was, captures her and tortures her to a brutal end.

“Well, not that I care about that anyway! Nyantan and that scumbag Lord of the Flies... Who gives a damn what becomes of them! Go now, my children!”

The giant eucharists took flight.

A single beam of light shot across the sky.

A direct hit.

“Huh?!”

The gate crumbled—collapsed.

“Oh me oh my...” said Wormgandr, shielding his eyes from the light as he looked up at the disintegrating gate like he was on a sightseeing trip.

“Aaaah!”

The Holy Eye... It didn't target the eucharists—but the gate itself.

“This is rotten... Awful, truly...”

I tested the eucharists, but not the gate. It would have consumed too much Source Essence for a trial to be feasible.

Vicius had never even considered that the Holy Eye of Yonato might attack the gate itself.

Golden-eyed monsters...soul power... Was I wrong about what the eye considers to be a target?

“Ah... Ah... Ah, this irritates me. How should I put it? It vexes me so.” Vicius turned her back on the falling debris of the disintegrating gate and looked to her disciples.

“Lah~lahlah~lahlah~lah~lah~. ♪”

“What is it, Vicius? Try’na run away from reality? Everythin’ gotten a bit much for ya?”

“No, no. I can open another gate whenever I would like to.”

I still have more than enough Source Essence.

Vicius narrowed her eyes.

“I shall have all the eucharists who are poorly suited to anti-divine combat deployed around the capital on the ground. Let us go the northern route to Yonato’s capital and destroy their Holy Eye. Hmm, let us send a magical war pigeon to the Queen of Yonato requesting that she turn off its functioning, just in case. She does rather identify with the eye, after all...but as for whether she

will agree to such a demand, well... *Hmm-hmm-hmm~*. ♪”

There was no hint of a smile in Vicius’s eyes, but she *was* grinning.

“Ah. Also...let us halt those unsightly pieces of trash, the Lord of the Flies and the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, in their tracks until the Holy Eye can be destroyed, shall we? *La-la-lah~*. ♪ Split up the eucharist army and stop them, stop them! ♪ I simply won’t allow them to interfere! *Hmm-hmm-hmm*. ♪ Well, actually—I suppose it might be better to crush those buzzing flies first. ♪ It would feel wonderful, wouldn’t it?”

Vicius, her eyes empty and vacant, looked into the box that contained Lokiella’s head.

“But too bad.” With a clap, Vicius brought her hands together in the way she always did and smiled broadly. “No matter what—I will always emerge the victor. ♪”

Mimori Touka

“WHAT WAS THAT?”

It happened just as Nyaki and her sisters had calmed down somewhat, settling into a lively conversation. A thick beam of light pierced the air above.

That beam... Isn’t that the direction of Alion?

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor and I had been discussing our next move for the day when it struck.

“The Holy Eye has activated...” said the emperor, looking off in the direction it had come from.

The Holy Eye was a great, ancient magical device in the shape of an eye that was installed atop the royal castle of Yonato in their capital city. I had heard the story of the founding of Yonato from Seras.

The state of Yonato was once ruled by the Grand Duke Yonato, who was previously a duke of Magnar. One day this duke broke off from his former nation and created the state of Yonato in the west of Magnar. The state somehow managed to maintain its independence—and one day, one of the ancestors of the present Queen of Yonato activated the Holy Eye.

The Holy Eye destroyed all flying-type golden-eyed monsters that roamed the sky during those days. It destroyed all monsters that flew above a certain altitude. It was capable of attacking targets anywhere on the continent.

It was the presence of the Holy Eye that prevented any new, powerful flying golden-eyed monsters from being spawned. The army of the root of all evil from that moment forth ceased to create them, focusing instead on a powerful ground invasion...or so it was theorized.

The Holy Eye greatly elevated the importance of Yonato as a state and added to the prestige of the family that had activated it within the population. The queen's ancestor expanded their support base and political power, and before long the people began to believe in the power of the Holy Eye. The people's faith extended even to the family that had first activated it, and it was said that the Holy Eye's power would fade should their line die out. The queen's ancestor had also surrounded themselves with cunning old men, who decided to take over Yonato from the grand duke.

The Grand Duke of Yonato had never been that popular to begin with, and so his position was weakened. Eventually he and his whole family were removed from their office and forced into an idle retirement. The grand duke's family had but one request:

"We will give you the throne. But please, allow this nation to keep the name of Yonato."

The grand duke's wish was granted, and he and his family disappeared from public life. The capital city of Yonato was declared to be the royal capital with

the ascension of their queen.

The descendants of those who first activated the Holy Eye still rule Yonato to this day, and they still keep their promise to the old grand duke to retain his name.

“I think the Holy Eye has activated because Vicius opened the gate,” said a voice I didn’t recognize. The voice came from a leather pouch at Sogou’s waist. The flap of the pouch opened, and a tiny girl pushed her way up to peek out.

A little girl—really little. She’s even smaller than Piggymaru.

Nyantan’s sisters, who had been sitting together hugging her, stood up.

“Are you awake, Lokiella?” asked Sogou.

“Yeah, been up for a while actually, y’know? But Nyantan was doing her emotional reunion stuff, so...I didn’t wanna interrupt or anything.”

“She is the divine that was dispatched by the heavens to punish Vicius. Her name is Lokiella,” Sogou explained.

“Yo,” said the little girl, raising her hand in greeting. “Vicius has my main body, though. I had to bud off this little copy of myself to escape with Nyantan. You hear about that? Go on, you can call me Lil’ella.”

She’s kinda straightforward, huh? I guess Vicius is that way, too. Not like all divines have to be dignified and uptight.

“I’d have liked to send you a bunch of intel ahead of time by magical war pigeon...but I was so weak, just makin’ this bud and getting in touch with Nyantan was all I could manage. Seems like sleeping a while’s given me enough energy to speak now, at least.”

“There are countless questions I wish to ask you...” said the Wildly Beautiful Emperor. “Would you tell us about the Holy Eye’s attack and this gate you speak of? I am Falkendotzine Mira Dias Ordseat, Emperor of Mira. Call me Zine, please. Many also know me as the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.”

“Ah, Vicius talked about you... Explanations first, I s’pose. Nyantan, you remember I said there’s something important that I think Vicius has failed to see, right?”

“Yes,” Nyantan replied.

“I also said there was something I was sure of...that’s that there’s an active Holy Eye within firing distance of the capital of Alion. I checked on that ahead of time with the divine device I brought along with me.”

Everyone listened to Lokiella speak in silence.

“Y’see, gates are like special passageways that connect the surface world to the heavens... But these gates need to be opened from the heavens themselves. Now that we divines have been dispatched here, we can’t just go opening a gate and hopping back. I’d need to send a message to the heavens and have them open a gate for me on their end.”

“But Vicius managed to open a gate on her own?” asked the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

Lokiella nodded, looking impressed with him. “Yeah... A gate that hasn’t gone through the proper process. How do I put this... It’s like only the gates opened by the heavens are proper gates. *Approved* gates. What do you think would happen if you opened an unapproved gate? Ah, you! You in the front, it looks like you’ve got the answer.”

Lokiella pointed to me like a teacher looking for a volunteer.

“The Holy Eye doesn’t fire on *proper* gates that are opened by the heavens. But the one that Vicius opened was unapproved—and that’s why it was destroyed. I think the act of opening a gate consumed a lot of Source Essence... but once it’s open, there’s a good chance it’ll trip some kind of surveillance system that the heavens have in place. That’s gotta be why Vicius didn’t test it ahead of time. She had no idea that the Holy Eye would destroy her gate?”

“Ohh, you’re a sharp one to figure all of that out. Yep, that’s right. This is

Vicius we're talking about—I expect she made some changes to the eucharists she wanted to fly through that gate to make sure the Holy Eye wouldn't shoot them down. She probably found some method to avoid our detection system. But I bet she never thought that the *gate* might get blown up," said Lokiella.

"Then that's why you said..." began Nyantan.

"Yup. I figured that so long as that Holy Eye was still active, Vicius wasn't going to get to the heavens any time soon. That's why I said we'd make it in time."

"Right before you fell asleep, you were trying to tell me about the '*Holy Eye*,' then?" asked Nyantan.

"Yeah. I wanted to tell you that the Holy Eye would buy us enough time right before I passed out. Sorry for making you all worry."

The initial oddness of Lokiella's appearance had worn off, little by little.

Guess everyone's gotten used to it already. Been kind of an endless series of weirdness for us heroes since coming to this other world, really.

"Well, to be honest, the Holy Eye is kind of a mystery to us divines, too. Like, we know that it'll attack golden-eyed monsters that fly too high and that it'll destroy any unapproved gates...but as for who made it, we've still got no idea. Wasn't us divines. If anything, we're the ones studying it." Lokiella looked around her. "So anyway, I get that you're the Wildly Beautiful Emperor—where's this Lord of the Flies character?"

The gazes of those present turned in my direction.

"Oh, the smart one! What's your name?"

"Too-ka."

"It's you, Too-ka." Lokiella nodded in agreement with herself.

"Hm?"

"Vicius should move to stop the Holy Eye next. Either that or destroy it. We've

got some leeway now, but this doesn't solve our problems. Puttin' it simply, we need to defeat Vicius before she can stop that Holy Eye. Her gate was destroyed, but not the divine device that she used to create it, I reckon. If she's got stores of Source Essence, she'll be able to create another one."

A hard look passed over Lokiella's face. "What I'm sayin' is...we've gotta get out there and crush Vicius before she can destroy the Holy Eye."

I see. Vicius has just been buying time. That's the reason it hasn't felt like she's been seriously trying to destroy us. Her heart wasn't in it. She planned on leaving this world for the heavens.

This has been a close call, then. She almost got to quit while she was ahead. Either way, it turns out that Vicius can't make it to the heavens so long as that Holy Eye is active.

"Nyantan, I'm going to explain a few more things to everyone here, but maybe you should start by getting your proof to them...?"

Nyantan took out a phone from one of her pockets and handed it to Hijiri.

"This contains the proof that Vicius is a threat to all humanity," she said.

"Thank you," Hijiri replied. "So many of our plans have succeeded because of your actions. Allow me also to apologize—I am sorry for the burden I have forced you to bear."

Nyantan shook her head, a faint smile on her face.

"Not at all. In fact, you are the one who guided me in the right direction. Not just you. Everyone here."

Nyantan glanced in my direction.

"It is only thanks to your efforts that I have found Nyaki again. This burden has been worth the wait...more than worth it, in fact."

Hijiri smiled at her. "I should have expected as much," she said.

"Hm?"

“You are our teacher, after all.”

Hijiri exchanged a few more words with Nyantan.

“Itsuki, bring me that item from our bags.”

“Gotcha.”

Itsuki went back to their carriage.

“Have you all brought yours as well?” Hijiri asked the rest of 2-C.

Everyone nodded as they answered her. The students had all been busily looking around before Hijiri called on them...looking at Seras and the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, mostly.

I guess some of the guys have been giving Munin some glances too. They also seem interested in Lise and the other demi-humans, wondering what they are. Then there's me...

“Is that Mimori-kun...?”

“M-Mimori-kun's the Lord of the Flies...”

“Seriously? Him? Lord of the Flies?”

“Then, like...back at the White Citadel of Protection, he's the one who saved us.”

“Wait! So, everything we've heard the Lord of the Flies has done... All of that was Mimori-kun?!”

“Has he always been like this? Huh? He's, like...kinda hot, huh?”

“Whoa... I was one of the ones who taunted him before he got disposed of... Crap, what do I do...?”

I heard a few of my classmates whispering to each other—and some speaking louder than whispers. They took out the items that Hijiri had asked them for and placed them on a table in the center of the space.

“But Takao-san, we aren't gonna be able to get online in this world...and

we're all out of battery," said one of the girls.

The members of 2-C had scattered their phones on the table's surface.

"That's no problem."

Itsuki returned and placed her hand on one of the phones.

"Lightning Shifter—Unlock Two."

Itsuki's fingers seemed to light up.

Ah, so she can use that skill of hers to charge them, huh? Apparently, the two of them used to think Itsuki's skill was meant for combat. They even used it in that way. But then Hijiri realized it has the ability to interfere with targets using electrical energy.

It's just like my status effect skills. I figure Itsuki's skill is labeled as an electric shock-type ability in game terms...but that's just a description. It doesn't cover all of what it can actually do. It's not like my Freeze ability creates actual ice, either.

"No way?! You can charge our phones?!"

The members of 2-C rushed in to look at the smartphone as it activated.

"I see—"

I know what she's doing now.

Itsuki had brought a phone cable from the carriage, which Hijiri took to connect the phone Nyantan had given her to the newly powered one.

"The process is old school, but the transfer won't take long," Hijiri explained.

She's copying the evidence. Then she'll take all the phones that contain the copied files and...

"You're going to send those to countries all across the continent?" I asked.

Hijiri didn't look up from the phone as she answered me.

"I am."

Apparently, there were a few magical war pigeons capable of carrying objects of some weight. They were known as express magical war pigeons, and the Wildly Beautiful Emperor had brought most of the ones he owned with him at Hijiri's instruction.

Turns out Mira is the major breeding hub for magical war pigeons, so the emperor has higher-quality birds than the other nations.

"I have written these messages to explain the phone's function as clearly as I possibly can...but whether they are properly followed is an unavoidable risk, I suppose."

It was decided that swift horses would also be sent across land, just in case.

"I just hope that Yonato will react as we hope the holders of the Holy Eye should."

Luheit and Cattlea won't be a problem.

"There's a video in there which should make our case easier to believe—or so I'd like to hope."

"This a gamble we have to take, huh?"

"It is, yes. All right—my preparations are complete."

One by one, the express magical war pigeons carrying their letters and smartphones were released up into the sky.

Seeds of hope in their claws.

I looked up as they drifted higher into the air above.

"The seeds are sown—all that's left is to pray that they sprout."

Kaize Mira

THERE WERE SEVERAL heads on display atop the execution platform in the imperial capital of Mira, Luva. The severed heads, battered by the wind and rain, had once belonged to the members of the Sabre-toothed Tigers. The mercenaries had been executed the previous day. A crow pecked at one of their cheeks as flies swarmed the rest.

On the first day, a man who appeared to be an acquaintance of the executed had run onto the platform to protect the heads, mourning their loss. The Sabre-toothed Tigers were held responsible for controlling the white army that had caused so much death across Miran lands. Their deaths had been effective in satisfying the Miran people.

Chancellor Kaize Mira stood in the castle dungeons.

“...Sacrificing the White Wolf Riders was inevitable. The loss of Sogude does sting, given our present personnel shortages. But, well, I’m sure we will work something out. ♪ This was all necessary to acquire the heart of the Demon King in the end. I suppose I was the one who gave him permission... But this was Kiri-hara-san’s will, you understand?”

The man sat atop a rug, his great back facing Kaize. He was staring intently at the smartphone in his hands, pressing the “repeat” button over and over to listen to the words of the recording.

“I’d like it if you could bring yourself to trust us now, White Wolf King.”

During the Great Invasion, the Demon King’s army had descended upon the capital of Magnar. The forces of Mira and Magnar had fought side by side and barely managed to claim a hard-won victory after the battle was done. It was said that the White Wolf King of Magnar vanished in the attack—but in truth, he had merely fallen unconscious after sustaining injuries in combat.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor, upon hearing reports of the White Wolf King’s fate, had had him brought home to the capital of Mira in secret. He knew that

Magnar was on the side of the Goddess and intended to use the disappearance of its leader to weaken the nation.

The White Wolf King had been kept in the dungeons as he was treated for his injuries. He was treated with hospitality but always kept under strict guard. He never showed the slightest hint of panic throughout his captivity, remaining calm and composed at all times.

“You may have captured me, but my younger brother Sogude remains with Magnar. My nation will never be threatened with him on the throne as its new king.”

Those had been his words—at first.

But now the situation has changed. Vicius is the enemy of all mankind, and she has sacrificed the Captain of the White Wolf Riders—Sogude Sigmus—to achieve her goals.

The recording finished once again, and a long silence hung in the damp air of the dungeon cell.

“Kaize Mira,” said the White Wolf King, not turning to look at him. “You said that the Lord of the Flies took down Kirihara?”

“That is what I am told, yes,” replied Kaize. “As proof, the preserved *corpse* of Takuto Kirihara is currently being transported to this city.”

“I will never forgive her for this.”

“...”

Kaize could sense his burning hatred, the heat emanating from his massive back.

“As a king—as a brother—I will never forgive Vicius for what she’s done!”

Kaize left the inner room and spoke a few words to the soldiers who were on standby outside. They were orders for the King’s belongings to be returned.

I have to believe that he has had a change of heart. There is only so long we

can wait...

Kaize glanced back at the door to the room he had just left.

Sometimes, I must rely on my instincts. Take bold action. Move forward.

Kaize made his way back to the stairs to return to the castle above—but stopped before he climbed them.

“Are you ready?”

“Yeah.”

The one who answered him was the Captain of the Sabre-toothed Tigers, Lily Adamantine. The other members of her group stood behind her, packed and set.

“Never thought you’d call on us. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor’s a pretty scary guy, huh?”

“That ain’t it, Lily,” said a well-built swordsman named Foss, a scolding tone in his voice. “After everything we did to these people, they still haven’t killed us. They’ve made it look like our whole group has been executed so there’s little chance of danger to everyone back at base who Vicius has held hostage. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor has seen all of this coming.”

“That’s right,” said Big, the old warrior. “There’s no point in keeping our family members hostage if we’re dead. Putting on that show of executing us was a fine idea.”

The severed heads displayed on the execution platform had been fakes—they belonged to criminals who had already been sentenced to death. Their hair had been dyed with make-up and other tricks to disguise them as Sabre-toothed Tiger mercenaries, and their faces had been so badly burned that it was hard to tell their true identities. The man they had sent up to the platform to embrace the heads had also been a plant, an actor disguised as an acquaintance of the group. He was a man who had been convicted to die for his troubling sexual perversions—the same proclivities that meant he had no aversion to embracing

severed heads.

“To be honest we’re happier fighting under the Wildly Beautiful Emperor than as mercs for that Goddess. Never figured you’d treat your captives so nice.”

“You’ve gotten too lazy, Nacht. Are you sure you’re not too stiff to hold a sword?”

“That’s quite cruel of you... You’re still mean even when you’re a captive, little Snow.”

The other two individuals were Nacht Jaeger, Captain of the Ninth Order of Alion, and Snow, his vice-captain. When the Thirteen Orders of Alion invaded the Country at the End of the World, their order had faced Asagi Ikusaba and the Wildly Beautiful Emperor on the battlefield. His ninth order had put up a little bit of a fight—then promptly surrendered.

“Ahh—it’s no use. We aren’t winning this one. No point in throwing our lives away; let’s give up.”

As the Ninth Order’s captain had waved the white flag in such short order, only around a tenth of their number had died in the fighting—the rest were sent as prisoners to the dungeons of Mira.

“I’m counting on all of you as well, you know?” said Kaize.

“Mira ain’t treated us too bad. You took us off the labor lines ‘cause you didn’t want to wear us down, right? That emperor of yours sure is something...”

“Will we be going to Yonato?” Snow asked Kaize.

“Yes. All the peoples of this world will be forced into an eternity of suffering unless we can defend the Holy Eye.”

“Still...” began Lily, looking a little uncomfortable with the situation. “Your emperor’s kind of soft, saving our lives like he did. Or, like, lenient, I guess? I mean, I know he was counting on our strength in battle someday, but...he didn’t have all of this in mind when he put us in these prison cells, right? Not even the Lord of the Flies could...”

All the information that the Sabre-toothed Tigers had about the false eucharists they had fought against had already been conveyed to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

“What are you trying to say?” asked Kaize.

Lily scratched the back of her head, trying to find the words.

“Well, er... I’m still not really sure why the Lord of the Flies didn’t kill us back then. Like, not even a single one of us. Doing all that without any casualties must’ve been real hard, right? I don’t figure that back then he actually thought a day like this might come. But then what was the point in not killing us, when the eucharist army we brought to Mira was such a threat...? It doesn’t make sense to me, is all.”

“The Mils Ruins, floor fourteen.”

“The Mils Ruins? Huh? Ulza... There was that time the Baron found a new floor and gathered a bunch of mercenaries to clear it. What about it? Uhm... What is it about floor fourteen?”

“I don’t know much about it either, but the Lord of the Flies gave me a message for you. *‘There was a man who approached me once, when the Mils Ruins were overflowing with monster corpses that had died under strange circumstances. He cared for me enough to ask if I wanted to return to the surface with his group. He cared, pure and simple. And he was kind. I could never kill him.’*”

Lily was stunned, her eyes wide. The other members of the Sabre-toothed Tigers looked completely shocked as well.

“Huh?” Lily began. “You’re kidding, right? The kid back then... He was th—the Lord of the Flies?!”

Then she lost it.

“You’ve gotta be kidding meee!”

“I do not know,” said Kaize, striding forward. “I was asked to convey that information to you, nothing more. The plan to hold a false execution for your group was also the Lord of the Flies’ doing. Ah, and he had one more thing he wished me to convey.” Kaize stopped, turned, and spoke the Lord of the Flies’ message verbatim. *“Back then... I was kinda happy you reached out to me.”*

Epilogue

THE FIRST SMARTPHONE containing the audio and video evidence of Vicius's betrayal to arrive was the one sent to the nearby combined forces. It was said that the evidence caused severe panic among the soldiers. Cattlea led all of the officer-class individuals from each nation out to meet with those in the Miran camp at once. As a result, the forces of Neah, Bakoss, and the army of Alion led by Baron Pollary were added to our forces. It seemed that the Monster Slayer Knights and the army of Ulza would also be joining us in our fight against the Goddess.

The Monster Slayer King had been captured by the combined forces after fleeing Monroy. He had made his excuses, of course...but Cattlea had exposed him for the coward he was, and the king remained her prisoner.

That's what finally demoralized the Monster Slayer Knights and the army of Ulza. Cattlea rendered them powerless.

"Hmph... Scary stuff from the Queen of Neah."

Cattlea and Seras were reunited once more.

"Princess."

"Seras."

Cattlea held her in an embrace.

"Thank you... Thank you for trusting me," said Seras.

"Not at all. I apologize for taking so long to make it clear where I stand."

"Princess—no, *Queen*."

"You truly are hopeless."

"Hopeless... Wh-what is it you mean?"

"Regardless of my station, you are henceforth to refer to me as *princess*."

"Heh heh... Understood. Then when it is just the two of us—"

“At all times.”

“U-understood—princess.”

“Good.”

Those two are pretty firm friends, huh?

I looked over at Sogou, who was greeting Baron Pollary and Gus of Bakoss. Banewolf was with them too.

Looks like they're catching up with each other.

“...”

Earlier, I'd had a talk with Sogou—just the two of us.

I recalled our conversation.

She apologized to me—said sorry for the trouble she had caused, and for saying that she wasn't able to trust me.

“You don't need to apologize, Sogou.”

“No... Please, let me. Now I...I can see how many people you have saved, Mimori-kun.”

Sogou didn't know the truth about Oyamada Shogo. He hadn't been among the heroes rescued from the capital of Alion. Apparently, Hijiri had been the one to explain his absence to Sogou.

“Nyantan told us that Oyamada-kun and Yasu-kun have both been sent away somewhere on Vicius's orders. Unfortunately, we don't know where either of them are...so they weren't able to leave the capital with everybody else. Let's search for them once the fighting against Vicius has ended.”

I remembered clicking my tongue when I heard how Hijiri had explained it all to her.

...Tch. Takao Hijiri's lying—like she's trying to make herself the bad guy in this situation. She could have been vague. She could have left me culpable. She's too kind.

“When I saw Nyantan-san reunited with her little sisters...that’s when I made up my mind,” Sogou had said after she was done apologizing. *“That’s when I decided I would trust you, Mimori-kun. It made me think, looking at Nyantan-san... Think about all of the people like her that you’ve saved on your journey. All to prepare for this battle to come.”*



"Sogou."

"Yes?"

"Back...when the Goddess disposed of me."

"...Yes."

"I was happy that you stuck up for me."

The words I spoke to her were my true feelings, but...I really am a scumbag, through and through. I'm hiding crucial information to gain Sogou's trust. Even so, I have no intention of talking to her about Oyamada right now.

It's just like I told Hijiri. I'm not taking any actions that might reduce our chance of victory against Vicius. Sogou said that I've saved people on my journey across this continent. But that doesn't change the fact that this has been a journey of revenge I'm on for my personal satisfaction.

"..."

So...I'm sorry, Sogou.

Asagi's group joined us. Kashima and Sogou began a friendly conversation, and Asagi started discussing something with the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

I sure hope Asagi turns out to be a good ally for us.

Our forces were on the brink of battle with the eucharist army and preparing for the fight. The only army that had yet to arrive were the slower reinforcements from the Country at the End of the World. The nations of Neah and Bakoss also stated that they might be able to draw some additional troops from their respective homelands.

So, this is about what we've got to face down the Goddess, then. We'll be using these forces to fight the eucharist army that's heading our way. The problem is Yonato and their Holy Eye. We just have to pray that Magnar and Yonato will flip over to our side when they come to see Vicius for what she really is.

“—So, I do actually have a question,” I began.

“What is it?”

I was speaking with Lokiella, who sat on my shoulder. Piggymaru had formed into a little sofa for her to rest upon.

“It was back when you first woke up, you said ‘It’s you, Too-ka’—but then changed the subject to speak about Vicius instead. I don’t believe I ever asked what you meant by that,” I noted.

“Firstly, you don’t need to be so formal with me. Nobody does. I’m like a parent to you all, see. It makes me sad when you put all that distance between us.”

“All right, then... Lokiella.”

“Good. Better. Well—yes, yes, I was just stating the obvious.” Lokiella’s eyes turned keen. “I think it’s important to this battle that you make it through.”

“That I make it through?”

“Yes.”

“Well... What do you mean?”

It doesn’t sound like she’s talking about everyone here... She’s restricting what she’s saying to me.

“It looks to me like Vicius really wants to run off to the heavens, y’see?”

“You just don’t think that was her top priority?”

“I think that Vicius really is terrified of you, Lord of the Flies. Like she’s unconsciously trying to avoid fighting you.”

“...”

“When she was talking about the ones rebelling against her, yours was the first name she mentioned. Before she talked about the Wildly Beautiful Emperor—even before she mentioned that Forbidden Magic. She called you an unsightly insect. I figure those words only came to her because of how much

you're on her mind." Lokiella went on, "I've heard of all the things you've done to spoil her plans, Lord of the Flies. Everything you've done has been to get in her way... I figure that's how she feels right now. This is Vicius we're talking about, so she must have an idea in her head of how she'll claim victory. And if there's one potential flaw in her plans..."

Lokiella turned to look directly at me.

"I think it's you, y'know?"

So Lokiella thinks Vicius wants to run off to the heavens, eh?

She looked at me. There was a slightly sadistic air to her next words, as if she was enjoying herself. "Vicius hates you."

"Nothing could make me happier to hear."

And for that matter...it serves her damn right.

Lokiella smiled, like a little devil on my shoulder.

"Heh heh... Maybe Vicius's greatest mistake was you, Too-ka. Making you mad."

She's right. Vicius went too far. In this journey I've taken, I've seen just how foul that Goddess really is.

She's been feeding the fires of my revenge this whole time.

It's strange. I haven't met her once, not since the time she disposed of me...but she's just become more and more of a villain in my mind as time has gone on.

But to be honest...she and I ain't all that different.

Isn't that right, Vicius? You foul Goddess.

I stood alone in the tent, called there by the Wildly Beautiful Emperor. There was a set of black robes hanging on a stand in the middle of the space—a little bigger than the ones that I usually wore, they were robes of the Great Sage.

Those almost looked regal—the robes of a king, perhaps.

Atop the stand was a mask. The mask of the Lord of the Flies...the *real* Lord of the Flies of legend, Belzegea. The mask had been designed with the end of his story in mind. I could almost feel the countless battles he had fought when I looked at the mask. Could almost see the scars.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor explained to me that the robes and mask had both been designed with the same concept in mind—the last days of the Lord of the Flies.

My old mask had been hanging on by a thread, given how much I'd put it through. After the fight at the fortress, it was done for. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor indicated the mask and robes on the stand as he stood before it.

"The fly swordsman outfits you requested were a simple matter of order—but these special Lord of the Flies robes took some time. They were only finished this morning."

I later learned that it was the creator's particular commitment to quality that caused them to take such a long time with the robes.

"Please, change into them at once."

I slipped the new Lord of the Flies robes on over my Great Sage robes.

These are lighter than they look...airy too, and easy to move around in. Seems like little Piggymaru should be able to poke its head up just like normal.

I placed the mask I'd used through all my battles aside and put on the new one. I shot a glance toward the nearby mirror and saw the new form of the Lord of the Flies standing there.

The *final* form of my Lord of the Flies outfit, you might say.

"Let us go then, Lord of the Flies," said the emperor, walking from the tent. I followed a few steps behind.

The sky had been overcast—but as I emerged, the sun came shining out from behind the clouds. The breeze was gentle and cool. A fine day for an outing.

Standing outside was everyone who was about to go to battle. They all looked to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, then to me.

“Whoa, awesome!” I heard Takao Itsuki say, just as Yoyo Ord approached the emperor with a report.

“Your Majesty, our scouts have located the eucharist army.”

“Understood.” The emperor stopped and turned on the spot to look toward me.

I stopped too.

“Lord of the Flies... Could I ask you to say some words before we deploy?”

“Understood,” I answered, nodding once. I then turned to look at the army assembled before me. I left a suitable pause, then made my declaration.

“Well then, let us begin.”

Let’s get going.

“Begin our battle to save this world.”

My battle—my fight to put an end to this journey of revenge.



Afterword

WE'RE FINALLY at the beginning of our final arc (though I suppose there are times when final arcs can get really long). The story is proceeding mostly as planned, but there's one major element I'm having trouble bringing to a close. For a number of reasons, some of the storylines in this world can't come to quite the right conclusion just yet. One of those reasons is the difficulty of wrapping up certain threads. The more sprawling a story becomes, the harder and harder it is to weave everything together in the end.

Thankfully, I've managed to check off several vital boxes in this volume, and so I think I'll be able to give you all an ending (though we're talking about the future, of course, and there are still unknown variables to factor in). I would be very happy if you'd see this story through to the end.

Next, I'd like to move on to acknowledgements. Thank you to my editor O-sama for all your various assistance during my work process. KWKM-sama, thank you once again for bringing out the charm of the heroines of this series in your illustrations. The final Lord of the Flies outfit design was especially impressive—it was exactly as I'd pictured it. Keyaki Uchiuchi-sama, Sho Uyoshi-sama, thank you so much for your brilliant work in bringing this difficult-to-visualize novel into manga form. I'd also like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has assisted in bringing this eleventh volume into print.

Thank you to my readers of the online version of this novel—it is thanks to you that we have reached this final chapter. I was only able to check the boxes I mentioned earlier thanks to your support and your continued purchase of the print versions of this novel. Thank you.

Right then—before we get to volume 12, I'll be writing an original spin-off-style volume for release. This print version of the story has been Too-ka and

Seras's story and I felt like it might be a good idea to fill in some of the gaps—and, well, since the print version is going to have illustrations, I'd like to have a bunch of scenes that will look good... That's part of the plan, at least.

And so I hope we can meet again in the next volume, which really does look to be a proper "Seras book" this time.

—Kaoru Shinozaki



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