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FAILURE FRAME

I BECAME THE STRONGEST AND **ANNIHILATED EVERYTHING**

WITH LOW-LEVEL SPELLS

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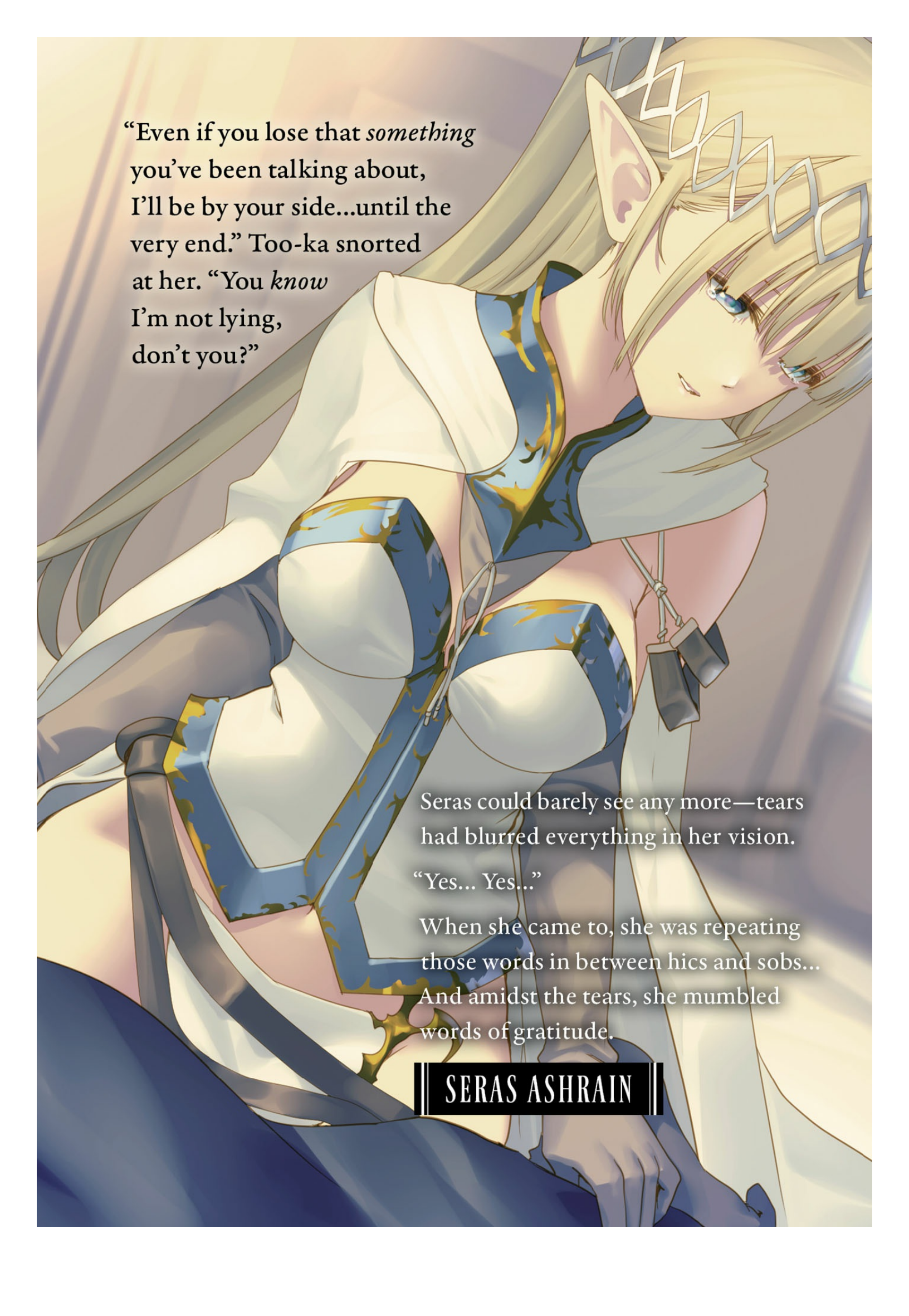
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“Even if you lose that *something* you’ve been talking about, I’ll be by your side...until the very end.” Too-ka snorted at her. “You *know* I’m not lying, don’t you?”

Seras could barely see any more—tears had blurred everything in her vision.

“Yes... Yes...”

When she came to, she was repeating those words in between hics and sobs... And amidst the tears, she mumbled words of gratitude.

|| SERAS ASHRAIN ||

An anime-style illustration of a character named Munin, a young woman with long, straight white hair and blue eyes. She is shown from the waist up, wearing a dark green, long-sleeved garment that is pulled down to her elbows, revealing her bare chest. She has a small, dark mark on her forehead. To her right, a blonde character with a crown-like headpiece and a small red gem on their forehead is looking at her. The background features a red wall and two framed paintings. One painting shows a winged figure, and the other shows a woman in a white dress. The scene is lit with warm, golden light.

MUNIN

“Really?
Hurray♪!
Let me
change
clothes
first—”

my
“WH—!
CH-CHIEF
M-MUNIN?!”



|| MIMORI TOUKA ||

A character with long, straight black hair and blue eyes, wearing a dark grey coat with gold-colored armor on the shoulders and chest. He is holding a black gauntlet with silver claws in his left hand.

“Bingo...
Mimori Touka’s
alive, Oyamada
Shougo.”



A character with short, wavy blonde hair and yellow eyes, wearing a white shirt with a red tie and a grey jacket. He has a small blue earring and is looking up with a surprised expression, with sweat drops on his face.

|| OYAMADA SHOUGO ||

“Wh-what... Where...
Where have you been all
this t-time...?!”

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KAORU SHINOZAKI

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Seven Seas Entertainment

HAZURE WAKU NO [JOUTAI IJOU SUKIRU] DE SAIKYOU NI NATTA ORE
GA SUBETE WO JUURIN SURU MADE VOL. 9

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Illustrations by KWKM

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Prologue

“Is SHE gonna make it?” asked Eve Speed.

Erika Anaorbael looked up at the ceiling. “Yes. We made it in time...just barely.”

The two of them were in the underground floors of the witch’s house, a place others could enter only when accompanied by Erika herself. Lisbeth was off in an adjacent storeroom. Above them, in the same room Touka and Seras had slept in once before, Hijiri Takao lay at rest while her younger sister Itsuki Takao sat tirelessly by her side. When Eve and Erika had checked on them last, Itsuki had been asleep as well—finally giving in to a relieved slumber after seeing her sister in stable condition.

Now, they were in the basement where there was no worry of their conversation being overhead...and no risk that information about *him* might leak.

“I think it’ll take some time for her to recover,” Erika said.

Eve asked, “What about her sight? Itsuki was worried about that.”

“Too soon to tell. It may return. It may not.”

“Hmph...so it was poison, then.” Eve growled.

“Poisonous substances have been tightly regulated across the continent for a long time. Their study has been forbidden.” Erika folded her legs in dissatisfaction. “As generations passed, knowledge of their antidotes faded too. I’m sure such rules were only put in place so that wretched Goddess could monopolize the research and use of poisons herself.”

Eve remembered Seras’s tale of her battle against the band of cursed-magic users known as Ashint, spiritual successors to a past guild of assassins. The “cursed-magics” they used had actually utilized poison they had inherited from that assassin’s guild.

“According to Muaji, the assassin’s guild was wiped out by the Heroes from Another World. The heroes roamed the continent, destroying every branch of the guild. They rooted out and erased anyone who had any connection to them. Eventually people forgot about them. When Muaji spoke of it, he made it sound almost like the heroes had gone rogue after they defeated the Demon King...”

“But you think Vicius was behind it?” Eve asked.

“Hmph... If her aim was to keep the poisons all to herself, the assassin’s guild would’ve been nothing but trouble to her.”

“The people of the *dark places* might be descended from that assassin’s guild, perhaps...”

Seras said the people of the “dark places”—a secret organization that deals in information—are very protective about their identities. Hmph. There might be reasons for them to worry then, given the situation...

Eve felt ideas begin to form in the back of her mind.

“But even so, Vicius has dusted off a *really* old bottle of poison this time.” Erika propped her head up with her hand. “Even back in its day, ingredients for the antidote were rare. I wonder if the same remedies still work? The stuff I’ve got is no substitute for the real elixir.”

“But you do have an antidote?”

“Well, yes. I’ve been carefully researching poisons for a while now too, you know. I used to be quite the influencer back in my day, so there was always the danger that some human could try to poison me... There was a time when many came to me for advice, asking for poisons to help them with their battles at court.”

Assassination with poison... That scares me more than weapons or violence.

“That’s why I’ve got a well-stocked room full of ingredients to combat every poison under the sun. We’re lucky this wasn’t something new—I doubt I would have been able to mix something up for that so quickly.”

When Eve brought Hijiri in, Erika had moved swiftly by ordering her golems into action as she began working to determine the nature of the poison. Eve had had her doubts about whether such a thing was possible—but it seemed that Erika had come through with an antidote.

“But *his* poison—you couldn’t do anything about that, could you?”

“Correct. There’s no antidote for that,” she said, lightly raising her arms in surrender. “That *poison* of Too-ka’s is a poison in name only—in reality, it’s something quite different. I’m sure his paralysis and sleeping skills are derived from the status effect and incantation spells, but his success rate is unlike anything that has ever been seen before in this world... That’s what makes those status effect skills of his so unusual. Like he says himself, they’re completely out of the ordinary.”

“Those Heroes from Another World...they truly are powerful. I can understand now why they were useful as warriors in the past.” Eve folded her arms and looked up at the ceiling. “Those sisters up there have special powers, just like Too-ka.”

After all, she had experienced Itsuki’s ability firsthand.

When Eve came across the sisters, she’d been out looking for something Erika had dropped in the forest. The witch had said it was a magical device and that she’d lost it as she ran to take refuge in her domain for the first time.

Hearing of the lost item, Eve offered to help. Erika refused at first, but when Eve promised to take every precaution she could, the witch relented.

I’m scared my instincts for combat will grow dull in these long days of peace. I’m getting too accustomed to living here. Lis deserves a peaceful life, and I may have to defend this place from attackers someday. If I’m going to protect her, I need to stay in shape. Taking it easy feels good, but I shouldn’t forget to keep my fangs sharpened—that’s one thing traveling with Too-ka taught me.

With that on her mind, Eve set out in search of Erika’s lost item.

At first, she felt a sense of unease...that then turned to anxiety. The air grew thick with the scent of death. Somewhere nearby, a large number of golden-eyed monsters had died.

For a moment, she thought Too-ka and Seras might have returned.

No... This might be a threat. If it is, then I should approach carefully. Maybe even retreat to discuss this with the witch. Whoever this is, it's possible they're here for her.

Eve cautiously scouted the area—and soon encountered the sisters.

“It seemed to me that they were coming to see you... Even without a map, they had managed to get close on their own. But when I found them, they were both completely exhausted,” Eve said.

Erika looked up at the ceiling too. “They’re strong enough to shrug off the golden-eyed monsters around here, at the very least.”

“I hear the older sister is the highest class of hero. Too-ka said she wasn’t to be underestimated... What do you think of them?”

“If the older sister makes a full recovery and tries to take control of this place...she might be able to pull it off. If she were an assassin sent by the Goddess Vicius... Well, I suppose *that* isn’t likely. If this is a plot, it’s far too haphazard to work.”

If Hijiri had been holding an antidote, it would have been a different story—but without it, the odds were high that she would die before being discovered. Erika knew it was also a complete coincidence that Eve had found them in the forest in the first place.

“Itsuki said they fought against the Goddess and were struck down... What do you think?” asked Eve.

“It didn’t *appear* that she was lying,” she answered.

Eve sighed. “If only we had Seras with us at a time like this.”

“Quite. Her ability to tell truth from lies is so convenient. I would love to

contract with a Silfigzea if there happened to be a spare one lying around... For now, let's assume that they are allies. To be frank, I wouldn't have approved of you bringing those sisters here in the first place, if not for your previous meeting with them."

Eve had met the Takao sisters in the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters once before and knew that it had made her less cautious this time. "I asked Too-ka to tell me about them after that first meeting. He didn't speak ill of them, so..."

"So it was Too-ka who indirectly saved those two girls."

"Ahem, Miss Erika... I-I'm finished." Lis emerged from another room, holding a silver tray. Erika stood to greet her.

"Oho? Thank you."

Lis walked over to a table in the center of the room and placed the tray. Atop it were samples of powders of various colors, small bottles of liquid, and all kinds of assorted potion ingredients.

"Excuse me... Do you mind if I give them a look?"

"Of course."

Erika bent forward to look over the contents, then held bottles up to the light to check the color and opacity of the liquids inside. After some time, she looked at Lis while still leaning over the desk.

"Lis."

"Y-yes?"

"Almost perfect."

Lis's face lit up.

"Th-thank you so much! I'm so g-glad to hear that!"

Erika had been teaching Lis how to mix medicines. Eve, who could tell the girl really enjoyed it, left her to it most of the time. Liz had offered to decoct something for Hijiri, who was still sleeping upstairs, today.

“Still, this stuff...”

Erika took one of the small bottles in hand and squinted at it. “You’ve got a real talent, Lis.”

“D-do you really think so...?”

“Your attention to detail is fantastic... I mean, you may even be better than me, given how distracted I can get.”

“M-maybe it’s similar to measuring spices and herbs. I-I always liked cooking...”

Erika squinted at her even harder. “I’m not much for cooking. Perhaps I should have you teach me a thing or too, Lis. Perhaps...”

Eve cleared her throat, feeling a tinge of pride. “Heh heh. Too-ka and Seras loved your cooking as well, Lis. I’ll never get tired of it, either.”

The ingredients we have here are limited, but Lis always comes up with new things for us to enjoy.

“Mr. Too-ka, Miss Seras... Piggymaru and Slei... I wish I could see them again.” For a moment, Lis looked lost in nostalgia. Then her hands tightened into little fists of determination. “Th-that’s why I want to get much better at cooking in the meantime!”

“Oh, you’re such a good little girl. You’re going to make Erika cry,” said the witch.

It looked as if Lis wanted to say something but couldn’t bring herself to say the words. She tried to swallow them, but Eve gently encouraged her to go on.

“If you want to ask something, just go ahead, okay? There’s nobody in this house who’s going to shut down your worries or curiosity for no reason.”

“Eve’s right, you know? We’re like family now, so no holding back. We’re both dark elves, aren’t we?”

“Then... Miss Hijiri and Miss Itsuki, who came here the other day... Are they...”

So, she's interested in them too. Before we all came down here, Lis said she didn't think Itsuki was a bad person. I don't think she's scared of them.

"Hmph. They're Heroes from Another World, yes. Just like Too-ka."

"Just. Like. Too-ka... Heroes from Another World... Another world..." Erika murmured to herself. "They're from a different world. Completely separate from the one that we live in...with different cultures and civilizations. I'm sure the plants and minerals over there are unique over there too, and they have plenty of things that we don't. There are so many things I want to ask those sisters about the world they've come from—so much I want to learn..."

Erika shrugged her shoulders. "But we've got the *calamity* to think about, don't we?"

There was a whispered understanding between all who lived in the world that Seras, Eve, and Erika inhabited:

"One must not attempt to learn too much about the world from which the Heroes from Another World are summoned. A calamity always comes for those who know too much."

The message had been passed down from generation to generation.

In the past, there had been those who tried to learn everything they could about the other world. It was a completely new society and culture after all—they couldn't help but be curious. Yet, all who tried met with tragic and terrible ends as if they had been fated to do so. Too many had faced the same consequences for it to be written off as mere coincidence.

Eve looked down at her own face, reflected in the silver tray.

"Those teachings and warnings... Every detail about those who tried to learn too much has been recorded so we never forget."

"I only realized the calamity taboo was real when I learned that Vicius herself doesn't want to know anything about the other world. I thought maybe that greedy goddess was just trying to keep all the information to herself and had

made up the calamity story to keep things hidden... But when even *she* refuses to touch something..."

"It does prove the danger is real."

"I suppose some people still don't believe it... And it seems knowing *too much* is the real danger. The names, words, culture, and foods that have made their way into this world haven't been a problem. It seems there's a dividing line, somewhere, between what we can know and others we can't."

"Knowing about their food and drink is safe, isn't it?" asked Eve, knowing full well she had eaten Touka's snacks from another world.

The cooking techniques that the Heroes from Another World brought over are used here as well.

"So, Erika. Those sisters... We are going to tell Too-ka about them, aren't we?"

"No reason to hide them from him. But the problem is my lack of available familiars in the area that can contact him," Erika sighed.

Eve knew little of the positions of Erika's familiars across the continent.

"I had placed a familiar of mine near the door to the Country at the End of the World to have them wait for Too-ka's arrival, but they were hunted down by a wild animal. I had a spare placed relatively close by, so I directed that one to the area. Keeping a backup was the right idea, but... Unfortunately, *that* familiar was shot down by the Knights of Alion. From what I heard them say just before it was killed, I believe they mostly hunted it for sport. They weren't aware that the animal was a tool of the Forbidden Witch."

So that's why Erika's familiars weren't in the area during Too-ka's battle.

"I have another of my servants on the way..." Erika added. "Though given the distance, they will take several days to arrive. Too-ka and Seras might be gone by the time of their arrival."

"Hmph... So the familiar might miss them. And if the door is closed when the familiar gets there, you won't even be able to contact the people inside to find

out where he's gone."

It's hard to know where Too-ka and Seras actually are right now.

Erika's expression became even more grave. "But there's something else that worries me—something more concerning than simply getting in contact with them..."

Eve nodded. "You mean the Alionese knights that were on their way to the Country at the End of the World, right?"

"Yes. If the Goddess has acquired one of the divine beasts..." The beasts whose existence she had once doubted. "It's likely she has sent her forces in to attack."

"If Too-ka and Seras made it inside the Country at the End of the World, they might just ally themselves with the people there and launch a strike against those Alion knights..."

Lis looked up uneasily from her place by Eve's side.

"Big Sis... Mr. Too-ka and Miss Seras are going to be okay, aren't they?"

Eve shot her back a broad, fearless smile. "*Heh heh...* I know this might be a really dangerous time for the citizens of the Country at the End of the World... But with Too-ka there, I know he'll be able to do something about it. It's weird, but it's just a feeling I have."

"H-he will help them, won't he?"

"Well, yes." Erika nodded. "I think Too-ka can likely handle whatever they throw at him, no matter the circumstances. He's reliable...even trustworthy you might say. By the same token, I would absolutely hate to face him as an enemy. I shudder at just the mere thought of doing so."

Eve was trying to put Lis's mind to rest in part, but it wasn't just a brave face. It had been a short but intense time that she spent traveling with Too-ka as her comrade in battle. And she couldn't discount the noble and elegant high elf Seras, either. Then there was a dexterous slime atop a fierce and monstrous

steed...

Eve's chest filled with nostalgic pride as she thought back on their time together.

Yes—the Lord of the Flies Brigade are strong.

“Those two sisters upstairs... I know once we get to talk to Too-ka about them, he'll know the best thing to do.”

Erika threw her arms forward, slumping down onto the table with a sigh.

“What good am I if I can't even get in contact with Too-ka~!” she cried.

“Heh heh... No need to fret. We all have our parts to play.”

“Well, when it comes to deciding what to do about these heroes, it's a bit tough for us to make the call. Let's hope this next familiar finds him sooner rather than later. In any case, I'm ever so tired from moving my familiars around all day. Ugh. I'll handle the familiars... Can I leave the two upstairs to you and Lis?”

“Hmph, sure.”

“Yes! I-I'll try my best!”

Erika stood up from the table, trying to steel her resolve.

“Too-ka and Seras aren't here right now...” she said, defiantly placing both hands to her slim hips. “So we must do whatever we can in their absence.”

Chapter 1:

Reunion and Negotiation

REPRESENTATIVES FROM both nations sat facing each other on separate sides of the long table. On one side, the prime minister of the Country at the End of the World—Liselotte Onik. On the other, the Wildly Beautiful Emperor—Falkendotzine.

To Lise’s right sat Mimori Touka—and behind them both, Seras Ashrain. To the arachne prime minister’s left were Cocoroniko Doran and Geo Shadowblade.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor for his part, sat alone. There was a tall blond man standing behind him who had identified himself as Luheit Mira, Commander General of the armies of Mira. A young man wearing round glasses stood beside him and appeared to be some kind of aide.

Once the greetings were out of the way, the Wildly Beautiful Emperor himself was the first to speak.

“You did very well to align your movements with ours in the battle. Your tactics were far more advanced than I imagined. Allow me to grant you that compliment before we begin in earnest.”

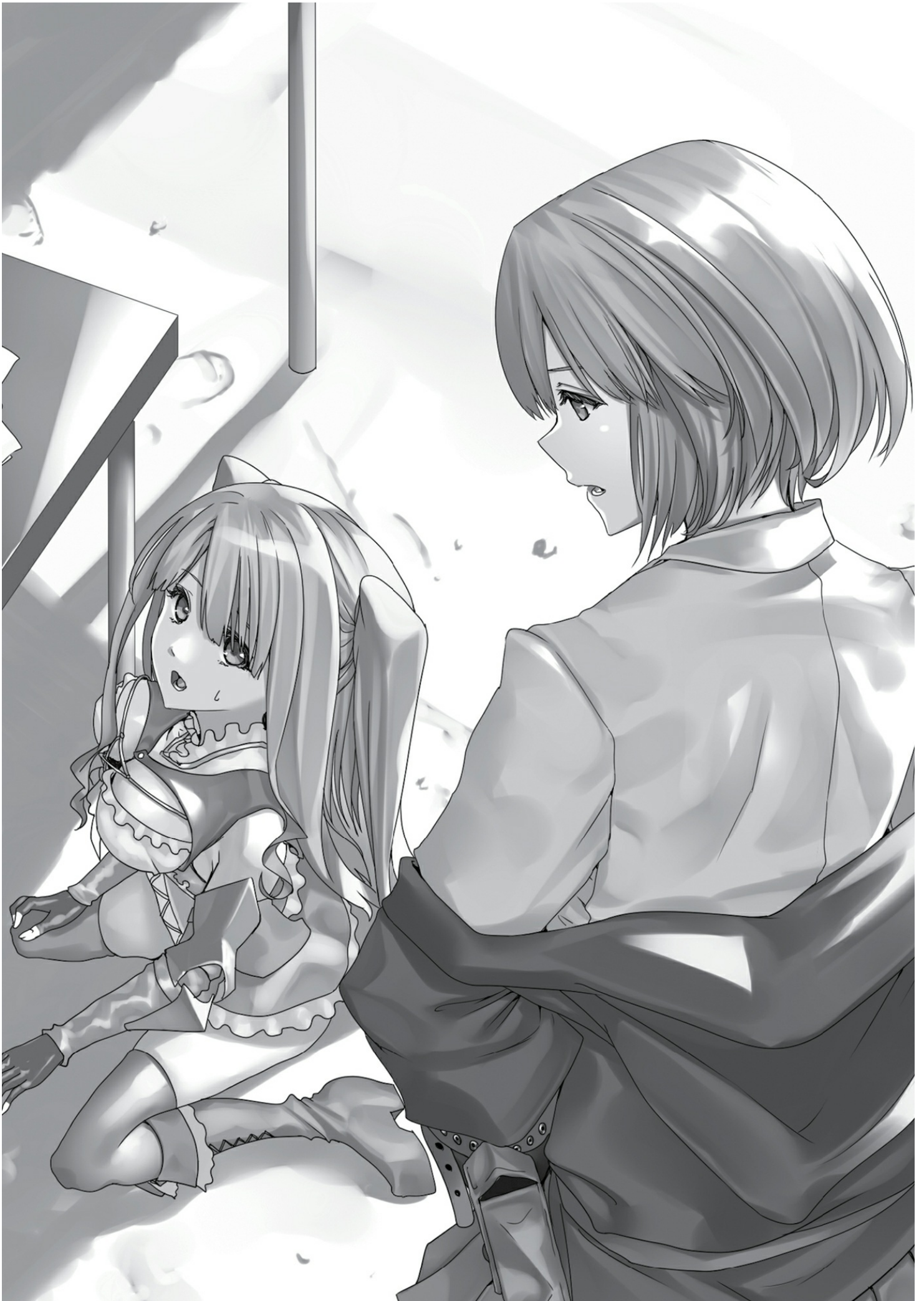
“Thank you, and we must return the compliment... I formally thank you once more for the support your nation offered us during the battle,” said Lise respectfully. There was a somewhat nervous pitch to her voice.

She’s a bit in awe of the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, isn’t she. Can’t say I blame her. His voice feels like there are pointed fingernails stroking the back of my neck whenever he speaks. Then there’s that mysterious and intense beauty... He might even give Seras a run for her money. He’s young and short, but he’s got the full grandeur of an emperor—I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone like him before.

Suddenly, a young girl near one of the camp curtains fell to her knees. It looked as if her legs had given out from under her, and she crumpled on the spot—it was Kashima Kobato.

“Hm? What’s up, Pidgey-chan?”

“Ah... I-I’m sorry...” Kashima looked up at Ikusaba Asagi and tried to brush it off with a forced laugh as Asagi peered down at her. “I think it’s partly the whole atmosphere here... I just got a little overwhelmed.”



“Huh, that’s it? Well, that does sound like you, Pidgey-chan.” Asagi gave Kashima her hand and pulled her up from the ground.

“Th-thanks...”

“You all good?”

“...Sorry. Actually, I... I don’t think I can do this...” Kashima tottered a little, her face was clearly turning pale and was already drained of most of its color.

“Not feeling good, huh?”

“N-not really... I’m a little out of sorts. I-I’m sorry. I think it’s just like it was in Yonato, back when I...”

“Ah, you mean back when we were fightin’ the Demon King’s armies in Yonato’s capital, yeah? I remember. The whole force of the Holy Order of the Purge lined up in front of us, and you got overwhelmed and anemic on me. Hmm... You can stand all the blood splatter and the flyin’ severed arms and legs, but these kinds of tense situations are the ones that make you nervous, huh Pidgey-chan? Better ’n having you get all dizzy and tired in battle I guess.”

“No, I... I’m scared of blood and severed limbs too, and that battlefield shocked me. But, how do I say this... Being able to move freely on the battlefield is easier for me to deal with. I-I’ve always been that way. I’m terrible with these kinds of things...”

“Didn’t really seem up for it when I invited you here either.”

“Y-yeah...”

“Pretty weak stuff, but... Guess I should have left you behind, huh? ’Scuse me! This girl’s not feeling very well, do you mind taking her to go and get some rest?!” Asagi called out to one of the Miran soldiers. “I’m here ’cause Mr. Emperor asked me, so I’ve gotta stay! But, like, Mr. Miran soldier, d’ya mind taking care of Kobbachan for me?”

“I-I’m really sorry...t-to everyone. I’m sorry for causing a fuss... S-sorry...”

Kashima walked off with one of the Miran soldiers as Asagi called out to the others around her. “Uh, our Pidgey-chan’s feelin’ a bit weak in the knees right now, so don’t you all be playing any naughty tricks on her, got that?!”

A group of men that looked to be Miran officials glared daggers at Asagi. How dare she be so rude during the emperor’s negotiations?

Well, not reading the room is just like Ikusaba Asagi... But what was wrong with Kashima I wonder? It looked like she was covering something up by quickly trying to regain her composure? No, she was probably telling the truth, and was just overwhelmed by the situation. It didn’t look like she was lying...but her face was so deathly pale.

What’s going on here? Before she collapsed to her knees, she looked over in my direction. The look on her face—it was one of surprise.

I know this Lord of the Flies getup of mine can look terrifying, but it wasn’t that... It looked more like terrible shock. Like she’d just suddenly learned the truth of something.

...It can’t be.

That’s not possible.

I removed every trace of what makes me “me” from my current appearance.

What are those two doing here in the first place?

The question had been on my mind since I first laid eyes on them.

Are they on the Wildly Beautiful Emperor’s side? Or were they sent to him as spies of that Foul Goddess? Are they double agents?

...To be honest, the spy theory makes more sense to me, but I don’t have enough information. Maybe I should find an opportunity to talk with them, find out the truth—as long as it doesn’t lead them to suspect my true identity.

As my mind raced, the Wildly Beautiful Emperor and Lise continued their discussion.

“I see, so the Princess Knight Seras Ashrain was responsible for the amazing skill of your command,” mused the emperor.

“Y-yes. As I’m sure you’re aware, the Country at the End of the World maintains some military forces... But the strategy and ultimate success of our armies in the recent battle was largely due to Lady Seras’s capable military command.”

“The Lord of the Flies had little to do with it, then?”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor looked to me—as did Lise, prompting me to answer, “I am just the leader of a single mercenary band. Unlike Seras, I do not possess the ability to command large formations of troops on the battlefield. I participated in the recent battle as a mere soldier, if truth be told.”

“That strange tone...the way you’re changing your voice...”

Seems like he’s interested in the voice-change crystal. I always intended on disguising my voice during these negotiations, but now that Kashima and Asagi are here, it’s an absolute necessity.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor gestured to his own face with his long, slender fingers.

“The Lord of the Flies mask too—do you have a need to conceal your identity?”

I placed a hand to my mask.

“Being famous is not always an advantage. If my appearance under this disguise were to be revealed, I could never hope to gather information in any city on the continent ever again. Nor could I enjoy my everyday life in the same way. I wear this mask in public so that the face beneath it can be truly *free*.”

I took my hand from my mask and continued. “Unlike my true face, I can change this mask whenever I want...or discard it entirely. Being popular can be quite troublesome... As an emperor, I’m sure you understand.”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor placed a hand to his mouth and let slip a faint

laugh. “I see... Indeed. I understand, yes. I’m sorry for the interruption. Well then, shall we begin by discussing our respective demands, Lady Liselotte?”

“Ah, yes.”

The emperor folded his arms atop the table, as if setting the stage once more for further discussion.

“I know not if you are aware of this, but in recent days my Empire of Mira declared war against the Kingdom of Alion. The very same nation whose armies came to attack you. Yes, Alion and Mira are presently at war and in due course I would like to explain my reasons for opening hostilities against them. Is my rationale behind this conflict important to these proceedings?”

Seems like he wants to set that issue aside. There’s something he’d rather talk about first, I suppose. I want to know why he rebelled, but we should go along with this for now.

Lise made no attempt to interrupt the emperor either, so he took his cue to continue.

“As my messengers conveyed, my nation wishes to form an alliance with yours.”

“W-we too would like to further discuss this alliance.”

“I understand that your country has a king—does he approve of these alliance discussions?”

“Yes, th-the king also wishes us to proceed.”

“Your king is not present—is this a matter of caution, as he remains wary of us?” asked Luheit Mira, his voice sounding softer than that of the emperor’s.

But this one’s a fox too, I bet. They have to appear friendly at first, don’t they?

“W-well...”

Lise glanced at me, looking for help. I answered in her stead.

“It has been a long time since the people of the Country at the End of the

World have negotiated terms with a human army, and well... They suffered a surprise ambush by the forces of the Thirteen Orders of Alion during their attempts to make peace with them. After such an experience I hope you can sympathize with their fear of sending their king out to the front lines.”

Luheit grinned. “It’s as if you’re the prime minister, and not Lady Lise here, Lord of the Flies.”

“That remark was out of line. Especially in the presence of the prime minister herself, Luheit,” scolded the emperor.

Luheit bowed his head to us both. “My apologies. I meant no offense by my remark... But my emperor is correct. I beg your pardon.”

“I apologize as well for Luheit’s thoughtless way of speaking. I’m sorry, Lady Liselotte.”

“No, no. I-it’s quite all right.”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor tilted his head a little to the side—his expression was sincere.

“To clarify... I’m sure what Luheit wished to confirm was that you have the authority to engage in these negotiations with our nation. I would prefer that our relationship be decided here, rather than spend days traveling back and forth in order to present our terms to your king.”

“I-I have... I have the right to negotiate with you.”

“Understood. Then to put it plainly—do you wish to form an alliance between our two countries?”

“Yes... Well—that is our objective, at least...” Lise hurriedly made to continue. “W-we have no negative opinion of the idea of forming an alliance between our country and yours.”

There was a sigh from one of the officials behind the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

That was clearly directed at Lise’s wishy-washy answer... This isn’t good. Lise

isn't at her best right now, and she has a tendency to be too hesitant when things are tense. Now the trauma of the encounter with Alion is causing her to get caught up on every detail and second-guess herself. The unique sort of intimidating aura the Wildly Beautiful Emperor has around him has her off her game as well.

We had agreed ahead of time that Lise would signal to me if she wanted me to take over the negotiations—but she hadn't done so yet.

I guess she still wants to see this through.

"Luheit."

"Yes?"

"The petty individuals behind me—send them outside."

Luheit narrowed his eyes—but kept smiling all the while.

"Understood."

He led away the officials who had sighed at Lise. Geo was bristling, but swallowed an outburst thanks to the emperor's swift removal of the men.

That might have been a cheap trick, planned ahead of time by the emperor to get in our good graces. Well, I suppose that might be a stretch.

"I understand. There is no helping a certain degree of inexperience you may have when negotiating with humans, as the Lord of the Flies just said. Not to mention, well... What is truly important is whether we are able to come to an understanding, not the manner or formalities of the process. Do not despair, Lady Prime Minister."

"Th-thank you for your consideration... Ahem, Falkendot...Zine... M-Miradias?"

"My apologies," the emperor interrupted. "I understand you know little of the internal politics of the nation of Mira, but there is no need to use my formal title. Please simply address me as Zine."

"Ah, very well... Emperor Zine... A-ahem, th-then next..." Lise's voice was

deflated, and she struggled to make herself clear. I could sense that Seras behind me was worried as well.

Given her current state, I wonder if Lise has just forgotten about the signal entirely.

“Lady Lise,” I said quietly.

“Eh? Y-yes...? Wh-what is it, Sir Belzegea?”

“I do have to thank you for your great contributions to the recent battle, but you have been working tirelessly and forgoing all sleep and rest for so long. It appears you might be a little tired at present...”

I turned to look at her. “When it comes to decision making, I will of course defer to your judgment... But might it be better if I handled the negotiations for a while? You would of course have the final say. I slept well last night and awoke this morning fully refreshed...”

For a moment, Lise looked completely taken aback. But after that came relief.

“Y-yes... Then I will entrust these negotiations to you for now. My thanks, Sir Belzegea.”

“Understood. Well then...” I folded my arms, just as the Wildly Beautiful Emperor had done, and turned to face him anew. “Please allow me to serve as negotiator for the prime minister Liselotte Onik. Is that acceptable, Your Majesty?”

The emperor’s mouth curled into a cunning—almost hungry—yet at the same time charming smile.

“—Very well.”

“I thank you, Your Majesty.”

“Then, to continue... I take it that your nation has the intent of forming an alliance with the Empire of Mira?”

“We are open to considering the matter.”

“You mean to say it depends on the terms?”

“Yes.”

“Allow me to hear them.”

I went on to set out the terms that we had decided on ahead of time. First, that while we would send military forces to aid Mira in battle, command of troops from the Country at the End of the World would not be relinquished to Miran commanders. I had Seras brief me on what she knew of diplomacy on matters like the treatment of prisoners, negotiating the trade routes for critical food supplies, and so on before our negotiations as well.

It would’ve been hard for me to play this role without her help.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor sat back and relaxed in his chair, listening silently as I spoke. His aide kept glancing over at him, seemingly interested in every little reaction the emperor might give. Luheit also stood thoughtfully considering my words, listening carefully—though his expressions were easier to read than the emperor’s. It looked as if he was quickly tallying up profits and losses in his head.

“...I see,” said the emperor after I paused, playing with the fringe of his golden hair. “Your demands don’t seem too far-fetched. These food supplies you require—is it an urgent matter?”

“A long delay might be an issue, but the problem is not so pressing as to require immediate resolution. Seras Ashrain has other connections that we might turn to instead.”

The issue of our food shortages...

Speaking with the Holy Empire of Neah could be a lifeline to solve the food crisis... But with the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters and Ulza between their nation and ours, it would be difficult. Especially considering the relations between Alion and Neah. All I can really say to the emperor is that we have other connections—a way to keep from seeming too desperate, that’s all. If

Mira knew we had no choice but to rely on them, they could easily take advantage of that fact.

“That said, we believe that an alliance between our two countries involving trade routes to bolster the food supply would be the best solution.”

“You don’t wish for territory? You must have heard from the knight of Neah behind you of the large swathes of fertile land that Mira possesses?”

This is probably a test—he wants to see how I’ll respond.

“I’m sure that our nation has not entirely gained your confidence. We may have won the trust of those gathered here today, but I’m certain that sudden concessions of territory to a foreign nation would be quite unsatisfactory to the people of Mira.”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor was silent, urging me to continue.

“I’m sure you do not wish to cause needless dissatisfaction among your own allies. Excuse my being forward, but that was merely my summation of the situation.”

“...Hmph.”

The emperor laid his elbow on the table and propped his chin up with his fist below it. “How modest of you,” he said, in a lightly teasing tone of voice.

“I’m merely trying to be realistic.”

“And yet strangely—that rational streak of yours does not come at the expense of your empathy.”

“The emotions of others are always a part of my rational calculations,” I responded. “For my own benefit, of course.”

It seemed the Wildly Beautiful Emperor approved of my response, and his calculated smile eased into a somewhat more natural expression.

“Lord of the Flies... I acknowledge the discourtesy of this question, but I must ask it nonetheless.”

I nodded in silence, and a unique sort of tension settled over the meeting.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor's next question broke the silence. "Are you a good person?"

I placed a hand upon my chest and bowed to him.

"It is as you say."

The emperor opened his eyes wide and froze for just a few seconds. He quickly regained his calm and placed a hand to his cheek. The slight smile returned to his lips as well. "*Oho... Belzegea. Lord of the Flies, is it? It seems that cursed magic isn't the only incredible talent you have at your disposal. I'm beginning to like you.*"

He closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair. It was rather strange that these were the only kinds of gestures through which he acted his age.

"Very well."

Perhaps because of the change in the tone of his voice, Luheit straightened his back, and the aide beside him raised the frame of his glasses a little. Everything about their movements communicated that the matter was settled.

"Mira accepts the conditions which your country has set forth."

Lise and Niko exchanged excited glances.

"...Of course, these conditions... Is what you have set forth thus far all you have to ask of us?" I asked the emperor.

Lise and Niko gave a start, but Geo was silent and expressionless as he had been the whole meeting, his arms folded, mouth shut.

Looks like he senses it too—Mira has something to ask of us.

"We of the Empire of Mira—to put it plainly—have concerns about this Goddess of Alion."

Concerns. He's going to explain his rebellion against her, then.

"There are seven nations on this continent of ours...but in reality, Alion

controls them all. And who should hold the true reins of power in Alion but the divine Goddess Vicius herself?" The Wildly Beautiful Emperor sighed dramatically and shrugged his shoulders. Even the smallest gesture of his was imbued with elegance. "There are Disciples of Vicius placed as observers in each nation, forcing all to run their affairs under the watchful eyes of the Goddess. We do as we are told, you might say. Wouldn't you agree that this is an unsatisfactory state of affairs?"

Seras tapped her foot on the back of my chair.

He's telling the truth. Or at least this is what he truly believes... But I also get the feeling he's holding something back. Maybe I should try and shake him a little.

"I hear that Mira is a rich nation. Are your people not satisfied with the status quo?" I asked.

"I'm sure you're not aware of this, but many have been secretly killed or met miserable ends on the whims of the Goddess. She robs us of *freedom* by disposing of those who don't agree with her in the shadows. We are all being controlled."

Here's where I have a question...something that's been on my mind for a while now. That foul Goddess has been running this world like she owns the place for so long, but the whole continent isn't under Alion's control—even though the other nations sometimes get in her way.

Take those Ruins of Disposal of hers, for example. She could send anyone she liked in there and have them "go missing," without even leaving a corpse behind. If so, why doesn't the Goddess Vicius solve all her problems herself? It's almost like she's going around killing people in an unnecessarily roundabout way.

My theory is there might be some reason she can't do these things in person. She moves behind the scenes to crush those who stand in her way all across the continent but very rarely takes direct action herself.

Maybe she can't?

There must be some reason—something to do with her mysterious nature as a “divine” perhaps.

“Your aim is to be free of the Goddess’s control then, Your Majesty?”

“This world has been twisted,” the emperor replied, glancing off to the east, in the direction of Alion. “The story of this continent should be told by those who were born to it—those who will live and die here. The history being told by this *divine*—this foreign entity—is not the truth. We are writing false tales, living false lives under her rule. I... I believe only those that were born here should live out their true lives to the very end in this world.”

“You mean to say that these true lives you seek—the Goddess Vicius robs you of them...?”

The emperor smiled, and his eyes softened.

“Indeed.”

Some of the people behind him flinched. But the smile the emperor gave me was young and cheerful, reflecting his true age—boyish, even. There was an innocence hidden in there, and it was clear that several of those around us had been taken by it. My heart was unmoved, however—for the smiles I saw from Seras each and every day were far more captivating.

There was another signal from Seras—*he’s not lying*.

But something still feels wrong. I’m sure he believes the things he just said, but they aren’t his true feelings... He was speaking about the world at large just now, but I think his true emotions are much more personal. I can’t shake that feeling.

...But hey, that doesn’t really matter. It’s enough that I now know his understanding of the Goddess’s position is real. I have what I need to make my decision.

I brought my hands together before me.

“I apologize for going over this again... But to summarize, Your Majesty, I take it you do not hate Alion nor the other nations of the Sacred Alliance *per se*... Rather, your main objective is to eliminate the Goddess Vicius?”

“And that is why I require the Forbidden Magic,” the Wildly Beautiful Emperor said.

I waited in silence for him to continue.

I shouldn't offer any information about the Forbidden Magic yet... Shouldn't even let on that I know what he's talking about.

“Forbidden Magic is said to even be capable of bringing a divine down from their throne... That is what I seek.”

“And what do you know about this Forbidden Magic?” I asked.

“It is said to be capable of altering the ways of the world,” the emperor answered.

Disabling that Goddess's Dispel Bubble is powerful for sure... But is that enough to call it world altering? And there are multiple Scrolls of Forbidden Magic...meaning the one the emperor has likely isn't the one that's capable of getting rid of the Goddess's Dispel Bubble.

“...It can't be...” I whispered so low that nobody around me could hear.

Capable of altering the ways of the world... The reason Asagi and some of the other heroes are here... But if he has that power, then it follows that...

Then the Wildly Beautiful Emperor answered the question that was in my head. “It is the power to summon Heroes from Another World without the Goddess's assistance—and the power to send them home.”

Well...that makes sense. That seems like a power that the Goddess would be frantic to forbid and eradicate. I mean, it challenges her position as the Goddess of this world.

The power to bring down the divines...

“My apologies, Your Majesty, but how much of this magic’s power can we truly believe?”

“Unfortunately, it has never been proven. An outlawed scroll in my possession tells that the Forbidden Magic has such power, nothing more.”

“Then to determine the truth of the matter...”

“I seek the Country at the End of the World and the Forbidden Words Clan.”

The emperor knew that Vicius was desperately searching for the Forbidden Words Clan. Her pursuit of them backfired in the end, only serving as proof of their power to stop her. But the emperor had detected a means of going against the Goddess—and he was so certain of it that he launched a rebellion against her.

But this rebellion seems a little rushed. I don’t think he has all the information he needs about the Forbidden Magic. He doesn’t even seem to know whether the Forbidden Words Clan are still alive today, yet he still chose this moment to declare war against Alion. I think that likely has something to do with the Demon King’s recent invasion. The Heroes from Another World put up a much better fight than the Wildly Beautiful Emperor was expecting.

They drove the Demon King back in the east and defeated the Third of the Sworn in the west. And the Demon King’s armies faced their worst losses in their southern offensive against the White Citadel of Protection, as both the First and Second of the Sworn were killed in battle.

Even the other forces on the southern front that were unable to link up with Sogou won hard-fought battles against their enemies in the field. It would be hard to find anything that could be called defeat for the humans. Not to mention all the S-class heroes are still alive and well. The whole continent seems to believe the battle against the Root of All Evil is over for now—there’s no question of that.

But it must be hard for him to be happy about that. If the Demon King were to be defeated, it would take a weight from the Goddess’s shoulders. Any rebellion

against her would bring all the countries of the Sacred Alliance to arms against him. But if the Demon King's armies remain intact, the Goddess and her other nations have to be wary of the monster threat at their back. This makes it easier for Mira to wage war against them. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor wanted to make his move while the Demon King was still alive. Does he not consider the Demon King himself to be a threat?

It's possible he plans on defeating the Goddess first, then convincing the S-class heroes to kill the Demon King before sending them all home. No... The emperor might even be able to get some of the S-class heroes on side before he defeats the Goddess. He could use Ikusaba Asagi and the other heroes he already has to draw them in. This was probably the proposal he made to Ikusaba Asagi in the first place.

I glanced over at her.

She doesn't look shocked by any of the things the emperor's saying—she knows it all already. I suppose that adds up. So long as there's a way for them to get back to the old world without the Goddess, it's not a big surprise that they might turn against her.

But there's still the possibility she's here spying on behalf of the Goddess... I should keep both possibilities in mind until I've got definite proof it's one or the other.

I think I'm starting to get an idea of the emperor's thinking. This wasn't some unplanned revolt based on empty ideals on his part. He believes he has a path to victory... Even if it might be walking a tightrope to get there. But he's prepared for the risks and made the decision.

It's now or never.

I tapped twice on the table with my index finger, and heard a crow caw. It was Munin, who had transformed into a crow and sat on the shoulder of a leopardman soldier behind me.

I had already discussed with her that I expected our meeting to turn to the

topic of the Forbidden Words Clan and asked her to attend the negotiations. As she was a little worried of the risk of attending in person, I suggested she come in *disguise*.

The signal I gave was simple—two knocks on the table to ask Munin one question:

“Can I reveal that the Forbidden Words Clan are still alive?”

She answered me with a single caw—yes.

“The Forbidden Words Clan survived. They are in the Country at the End of the World,” I told the emperor.

He had no visible reaction to the news. Luheit’s smile grew a little broader. But the aide behind him had the clearest reaction to my statement—he placed a hand over his chest and gave a long sigh of relief.

I had a feeling the Country at the End of the World’s military strength was just a bonus to them. What Mira was really here for are the Forbidden Words Clan.

“As a result, I’m able to forward any requests you may have to them. Though of course I cannot know how they will respond ahead of time...”

“Let me say this first. The previous conditions we’ve discussed aside, we are willing to pay a suitable price for their aid.” The Wildly Beautiful Emperor snapped his fingers. “Give it over.”

Luheit took a bundle of parchment papers from his bag and held them out toward me. The edges had been punched with holes, and a piece of string passed through to turn them into a makeshift book of pages.

“What is this—?” I asked the emperor, as I took it in my hands.

“That is an inventory of the items stored in the Great Vault of Mira. Though many of the names and effects of the items are unknown, so it is hardly comprehensive. Unidentified objects have been depicted in illustrations, to the best of our artists’ abilities.”

“...May I look inside?”

The emperor nodded. I looked down at the pages, written in a neat, precise hand. As I flipped through, I saw there had been a clear effort to categorize the different items to make it easier to find what one was looking for.

...Whoever created this thing went to some serious effort.

The sketches of the items were particularly detailed, I shuddered to think of how long they must have taken to draw.

It's practically an encyclopedia. I think I know why he's showing me this, but I might as well check.

I stopped flipping through the pages.

"Might I inquire why you are showing me this?" I asked without looking up.

"If the Forbidden Words Clan aid us in defeating the Goddess, you may choose any items from that list in exchange."

It was on the next page I turned to that I saw it—a teleportation crystal. There was only a drawing of the crystal, with no explanation of its effects. Mira likely didn't know what the item did, but it was certainly a teleportation crystal.

Erika said these things are super, super rare... And I know how convenient they are from personal experience.

What I saw on the next page, however, made my hands freeze up entirely...

"..."

"Preserved remains of purple beetle"—the last piece of the puzzle... The final ingredient I need for Piggymaru's Monster Enhancement Solution. What do I do? Before my battle with that Foul Goddess... I really should have this.

"I have one more thing to discuss," said the emperor as I was flipping through the pages.

I stopped and looked up at him.

"Another request, perhaps?"

“I would like the Forbidden Words Clan to come to Mira, at least once.”

...I can't sense his intentions.

“May I ask why?”

“There is a sealed door, you see, in the lower levels of my castle. It has been there since ages past—on the same level as the Great Vault, in fact. No matter what I try, it will not open. I tried breaking through the walls of the room itself, but it was no use. I believe what is beyond the door can only be accessed by specific means.”

A sealed door, huh?

“It's said that the room contains some great secret concerning the Forbidden Magic. If possible, I would like to see the secrets this room holds before confronting the Goddess.”

“You mean that you believe the Forbidden Words Clan would be capable of opening this door?”

“So it is written. *‘The door will only answer to those that bear the mark.’* If none yet live that bear this mark of which the legends speak, we will have no choice but to give up on the contents of that sealed room.”

“Even without this sealed room—you still believe you have a chance at defeating the Goddess in battle, do you not?”

“I believe so.”

Guess it's better safe than sorry, though.

The mark the emperor mentioned sounds like the one on Munin's back—the proof that she's capable of using Forbidden Magic. Only Munin and one other member of the Forbidden Words Clan have the mark. Without them, we'll never obtain the secrets that might be in this sealed room.

Forbidden Magic is a powerful weapon we can use against the Goddess. If this room contains new Scrolls of Forbidden Magic...

I know that one of my scrolls is capable of removing the protection of the divines, but I don't know what the other two do yet. Munin can read the incantations that are on the other two scrolls to attune them, of course, but the incantations are written in a kind of poetic style, like an ancient ballad. She has no idea what they might do, and I'm hesitant to attune them without knowing their effects. The risks are too high.

Right now, we have the ability to remove Vicius's Dispel Bubble. That should be enough to defeat her. It would make the most sense if the other two scrolls were the "summoning" and "returning home" spells. But it's dangerous to make assumptions when it comes to these things... If we used an incantation without knowing what it did, I could end up mistakenly sending myself back to the old world. That would be real bad.

This sealed room might hold the secret to the other two scrolls and whatever Forbidden Magic they turn out to contain. Can't exactly hurt to have more cards at my disposal. I'm going to use them to get revenge on that evil Goddess.

I put a pause on the mental calculations for a moment.

"...What specifically is it that makes you think victory against the Goddess is possible, Your Majesty? I hear her power is absolute. I don't mean to be rude... but will the power to summon and return Heroes from Another World truly be so useful in the pursuit of victory?"

"My hope is that the sealed room holds a Forbidden Magic capable of defeating the Goddess."

"But, Your Majesty, you claimed that you would give up on the sealed room if none of the Forbidden Words Clan mark bearers still lived. I take it you have *other* means by which you believe it possible to claim victory?"

"With the Forbidden Magic capable of returning the heroes to their old world, we hope to convince the S-class heroes to turn on the Goddess and fight alongside us as allies. Alternatively, we could work in the shadows to arrange for the Demon King to defeat the Goddess. That is another possibility—though

it would be enough of a gamble that it may prove unrealistic in practice.”

“I apologize for being blunt—but I don’t quite believe you have enough to convince anyone,” I said, a little argumentatively.

I understood that what I said was somewhat rude considering I was addressing an emperor, but he responded with a happy smile. Luheit and the aide looked at the Wildly Beautiful Emperor with trepidation, as if preparing themselves for something big.

“Well now—you there, in the back.” Ignoring the concerns of the two at his side, the emperor revealed his prospect of victory—pointing squarely at Ikusaba Asagi.

“Hmm? Me? Hey!” She bowed in greeting.

“Who is she?” I asked, pretending not to know.

“Asagi Ikusaba... Hero from Another World.”

A wave of murmuring spread through the camp, and I feigned a sort of shock in reply as well.

“A H-Hero from Another World...? Sh-she has betrayed the Goddess, you mean to say?”

“This is not unprecedented. Heroes have rebelled against the Goddess before,” the emperor responded. “I believe her special ability may be the secret weapon I need to defeat the Goddess. She may have power equal to that Forbidden Magic—magic capable of bringing down the divines, you could say. Magic that might even be more reliable than the contents of the sealed room within my castle. That is my hope, at least.”

If I remember right, Asagi’s a B-class... She must have a unique skill.

Only A-class heroes and above are capable of learning them—or so the Goddess told us. But even an E-class like me managed to develop incredible status effect skills. Maybe the B in Asagi’s B-class isn’t quite what it seems. If so, it would make more sense that she might have been able to develop a unique

skill.

Doesn't look like the emperor is going to elaborate on what her skill does, though. I can see that in his eyes.

There was another signal from Seras behind me—everything the Wildly Beautiful Emperor had just told me was the truth.

Seras's ability isn't foolproof though—people can still say things that aren't quite the truth, so long as they aren't directly lying. I should keep that in mind. But for now, I think I can trust him.

The emperor gave me a hard stare.

“One more thing that is relevant to our current discussion—I wish to conduct an official signing ceremony in Mira, to establish our alliance with the Country at the End of the World. This is the will of the powerful three princeps elector houses of my nation. Of course, I intend on treating my alliance with your people as settled fact with or without this public ceremony. Yet when it comes to the issue of food aid...”

“The three princeps elector houses are the ones who hold the fertile land of Mira and control the food supply, I take it?”

“...You're very perceptive. I rather enjoy conversing with you.”

So for now the emperor is giving us a verbal promise of this alliance, but we're going to need to visit Mira to get food aid from his nation.

Figures I suppose... He sounded a little defeated earlier when he was talking about the sealed room in his castle, but of course it's only natural for him to want to improve his chances in the upcoming fight against the Goddess. He wants what's in there. And so he doesn't just want me to visit Mira, but for a member of the Forbidden Words Clan to be there as well.

I looked to Lise.

“A formal signing ceremony... I can't imagine the three princeps elector houses would accept me as a representative. I'm not even officially a citizen of

the Country at the End of the World, after all.”

Lise’s back was straight and tense as she answered.

“Y-yes, you’re right.”

“I’m sure they would be satisfied by the presence of the prime minister, Lady Liselotte. There is no need for the king to attend. I know your nation was closed to the world for a long time. It may be a good opportunity for you to see what is *outside* your nation’s borders. At least, that is what I think. What is your opinion on the matter, Lady Liselotte?”

“I—yes. As prime minister I will visit your country for this official signing ceremony. I need to see the outside world, considering the path on which we are about to embark.”

There was no hesitancy in Lise’s voice now—it was faint, but I sensed some of her fight had returned.

It could be that she’s gotten a bit more used to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor’s presence.

“But I believe that very few members of your race—the arachne, have ever ventured into the outside world, Lady Liselotte. At present, many consider arachne to be creatures of legend, much as the dwarves of old... I’m afraid that you may have to endure stares of disbelief once you step outside.”

Lise was unshaken. “Even so... I cannot live in fear forever. We can do nothing but grow used to them and have the citizens of your nation grow accustomed to our presence in turn—or nothing can be accomplished. Those are my thoughts.”

“And you have no qualms about spearheading that effort?”

“I am prepared for that, yes—Your Majesty.”

The emperor sighed and gave Lise a faint smile of admiration. “It is somewhat of a relief to hear you say so.”

“Eh?” Lise looked confused. The emperor placed a hand to his cheek, and his

expression softened once more.

“I thought perhaps at first it was the unfamiliar environment or atmosphere of this meeting that caused you such unease and difficulty. But now I see you are quite the capable negotiator, Lady Liselotte. That is why I sent away those behind me and scolded Luheit. It appears my judgment of you was clouded—and that is a source of relief for me.”

Lise looked down timidly at her lap, blushing at his words. “Th-thank you...”

Seems like her happiness won out over the embarrassment. Probably a tactic by the emperor, trying to win her over for the days to come. In any case, I'm glad that Lise is taking the initiative in these negotiations again.

“Then can we consider the broad strokes of this agreement settled?” asked the emperor, a faint smile still on his lips.

“Yes. I believe we have come to an understanding. However...” Lise looked in my direction.

There's still one last thing we need to settle.

“The Forbidden Words Clan—we must confer with the Kurosaga themselves to determine whether they are willing to take the journey to Mira. I could speak with them personally, Lady Lise...” I offered.

“I will leave the matter to you, Sir Belzegea.”

“Your Majesty, might we have some time to confer?”

Behind me, Munin took flight. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor glanced up at the crow as it flew away.

“Very well... Let us retire for the time being.”

I left the meeting, explaining that I would return beyond the silver door to ask the opinion of the Forbidden Words Clan.

They can handle the details for now. Lise seemed like she was back on her

feet, and they've still got Seras there too. Geo's around as well if anything happens...even if he can be a hothead at times. The rough outlines of the negotiations are already settled, so it should be fine.

Lise and the others weren't going to be sitting quietly waiting for my return—I'd asked them to go over the list of the Great Vault of Mira and mark anything that stood out to them. Seras's knowledge of the *Forbidden Arts: Complete Works* was almost on the same level as mine, so she was more than capable of determining which items had true value.

Lise and the others from the Country at the End of the World might find items they want for themselves as well. The emperor did offer, so we should take whatever we can get that looks useful.

"So, you're up for going to Mira?"

I met with Munin, a little way down the path we had taken on our way to the negotiations.

"Yes, I am." She smiled at me. "If there is any possibility that my presence could improve our chances of defeating the Goddess, even by a little, then I should go. You'll be accompanying me too, after all."

"...Can't have you going out there alone, eh. But don't you need to ask the other Kurosaga about this first?"

"I *am* the chief, you know? ♪"

"You sure this is fine...?"

"*Heh heh*. I'm sure. I've already discussed the situation and my opinions with them, I'm sure they'll accept my decision. They know the history of the Kurosaga and are as ready for this as they can be. There's no need to worry. This is simply what it means to be a Kurosaga."

"...It doesn't seem like we can ask the other mark bearer to join us either, does it."

The other mark bearer is a young girl called Fugi—still only thirteen years old.

“No. I would like to be the one to settle things with the Goddess in person... though she’s ready for this as well,” said Munin. “If my sword should fail to reach the Goddess, and I should fall... I know that Fugi will survive to take up the fight.”

She continued smiling as she looked down at the ground, but there was a sadness in her eyes. “I don’t want her to have to push herself to do any of that... But it’s just who she is. At first, she demanded to come with me when I left. She was so insistent... It was so hard to convince her to stay, you know?”

Munin’s faint smile turned bitter.

Personally, Fugi’s fighting spirit is something I have to be grateful for. The same goes for all of the members of the Kurosaga Clan. If they’d tried to stop Munin from leaving or accused me of ruining the peace that the Kurosaga had enjoyed in the Country at the End of the World, then that would’ve been a whole series of tough arguments to overcome. It’s only thanks to Munin’s efforts that all this has gone so smoothly.

“It must’ve been difficult for you,” I said.

“Heh heh, it rather was. ♪ But, well... That’s exactly why I want to be the only one that goes with you. If we can defeat Vicius now, then maybe we won’t even need Forbidden Magic in the future. It will finally relieve that burden on Fugi and the rest of the Kurosaga Clan.”

“All right. Let’s take a trip to Mira, shall we?”

It’s settled, then. Munin’s tough... She has a strong heart.

Those teleportation crystals are inside the Great Vault of Mira. And the final ingredient I need for Piggymaru’s Monster Enhancement Solution—the purple beetle...

The secrets of Forbidden Magic that sleep within that sealed room...

With those in hand, I’ll finally be ready...

...To go to battle and settle things with that Foul Goddess once and for all!

I returned to the negotiations with Munin in tow, still in her human form—her black wings remained on full display. All the Miran soldiers' eyes turned to her.

"Who is this?" asked Luheit.

"I am Munin—Village Chief of Kurosaga, the Forbidden Words Clan," she said, bowing.

I then explained to the emperor that she was willing to go to Mira with us. Munin spoke of her clan and their wish to defeat the Goddess. The story she told was practically the same one she had told me, except for the few matters we had agreed should be left a bit vague.

She's a good speaker... The Miran camp seem to really be on board with her motivations for fighting.

Once she had finished, Munin and the emperor exchanged a few words. Then she took a single step back.

The signal for me to take over.

"Your Majesty, there's a matter I wish to discuss with Lady Lise in private."

"Very well."

"Prime Minister, do you mind?"

"Eh? N-not at all."

Lise and I walked to a place where the Miran soldiers could still see us but couldn't hear. A short while later, we both returned to our seats.

"Are you finished with your discussion?" asked the emperor.

"Yes. We were speaking of Lise's attendance at the signing ceremony as representative of the Country at the End of the World..."

I looked over at Munin, who stood beside me.

"Would Munin, Village Chief of the Kurosaga Clan, be a suitable

representative of the country in her stead?”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor looked down for a moment in thought. After a short time, he looked back up at us.

“If Lady Munin is in a position to do so, then I have no objection. Would that be acceptable to you, Prime Minister Lise?”

“Yes. She is a village chief...and unlike Sir Belzegea, she is a citizen of our nation,” said Lise, then gestured to Niko and Geo who were sitting beside her.

“The Four Shining Warriors present here are also chiefs of their respective clans. Our nation’s rules and laws are decided primarily by the chiefs. Her status is quite sufficient to allow Chief Munin to speak on my behalf.”

The emperor nodded in understanding.

“Then I should consider Lady Munin, Chief of the Kurosaga Clan—the Forbidden Words Clan, to be of equal standing as you yourself then? Luheit, what do you think of this?”

“Well... I think given the recent history of their nation, it is only natural for them to be cautious when dealing with an unknown party. This explains the king’s reluctance to leave his own borders. More importantly, the princeps’s elector houses know nothing of the Country at the End of the World’s domestic political hierarchy—*nor can we* determine the true import of any of the individuals in attendance here today for that matter. If they name her as their ambassador, then she is their ambassador.”

“*Hmph*, you’re right. Whoever is chosen as the official representative of the prime minister or king of your nation, we can do nought but accept them as qualified to do so.” The Wildly Beautiful Emperor’s eyes softened as he looked at me. “That settles that.”

“ ... ”

I knew it.

The signing ceremony in Mira to establish this alliance... It could be a king, a

prime minister, or basically anyone in attendance—they aren't going to be picky about who is doing the signing. I might even be able to represent the Country at the End of the World. The military reinforcements this alliance will bring are a secondary concern to them—first and foremost, they need Forbidden Words Clan to get access to that sealed room.

They might even be willing to rethink the whole alliance just so long as they can get the Forbidden Words Clan to Mira and get at the secrets in that room.

That works out well for us.

“As per Lady Munin's request, the Lord of the Flies Brigade will accompany her to my nation of Mira as a diplomatic escort, then. Does this sound acceptable?” the emperor asked.

“Of course. I have no issue with that.”

“Then let us set forth at once.”

“...If possible, we wish for some time to prepare for the journey. We will follow close behind and arrive in Mira shortly after yourself.”

“Hmph.”

“We still have some cleanup to manage after the recent battle. Lady Munin and I also have some business to attend to beyond the silver door...”

Yasu's still asleep—I want to do something about him before we leave for Mira. There are a lot of orders I want to leave for the people of the Country at the End of the World as well.

Most of all—I don't fully trust this emperor or the people of Mira. It's going to take longer than a day to get there.

If something does happen to go wrong on the road, I don't want a great army of soldiers attacking me all at once. I want to travel to Mira separately from the Wildly Beautiful Emperor and his army.

“Very well, as you wish.”

There was a kind of satisfaction in the emperor's face as he approved my request.

From that reaction alone... I can't tell if he knows what I'm thinking.

"Well then, allow me to grant you a special writ of passage. It would trouble me to see you harassed on the road." The emperor went on to explain. "This will certify to all within the realm of Mira that you are my personal guests and will allow you free movement. It will also speak to your position—you should find no trouble in my Empire with it in your possession."

Meaning we can expect a warm welcome, eh?

"Thank you for your hospitality, Your Majesty."

"...Lord of the Flies. From the interactions I have observed you having with the prime minister beside you, I take it you have only recently come to the Country at the End of the World?"

"It is as you say, yes."

"Why did you ally yourself with them?"

"Simply put, one of my companions calls this country home."

"I see..."

"I could not stand to see their nation ravaged by invasion... And so I resolved to support them as best I can. The Goddess of Alion also sent soldiers to this place—men cruel beyond description. We have driven them away for now, but there is no guarantee that she will not send more. Therefore I wish to destroy the root of this issue completely—the Goddess Vicius herself. If any stand in the way of my objective, they shall fall as well."

"Even if... Mira were to stand in your way?"

"If Mira chose to become an obstacle to that goal, then yes."

"No grand ideals, then? A mere personal grudge... Those are the ones that scare me most of all." The Wildly Beautiful Emperor rose from his seat and

changed the subject. “Then I will return to the capital of Mira ahead of you. The front lines have formed in this war, and I can hardly leave matters of strategy to my ministers forever, regardless of their talents. I have much to do.”

The emperor pointed at his own face. In his clear blue eyes, I saw Seras’s reflection.

“Long ago, I met a traveling conjurer who taught me to read emotions and thoughts. A way of observing the movements of a person’s eyes, the slight shifts in their tone of voice...the faintest movements of their limbs and their breathing patterns. He claimed that by these methods, I could determine whether what a person is saying is true or false. I was unable to master the art... but I believe that Seras Ashrain has. The signals she has been giving you throughout our negotiations, they were to indicate the truth or falsehood of my statements, was it not?”

He’s wrong about her methods... But he’s seen through our charade.

I sensed Seras growing flustered behind me.

“Th-that wasn’t what I was...” her sudden reaction gave the game away.

“Hmph, never mind that. I should simply speak on the assumption that you will see through any lies I might tell. That mask, and the way your voice has been altered, does also make it quite hard to read you...” The emperor narrowed his eyes and let an index finger run slowly over his white cheek.

“Nonetheless, I’m happy neither of us needed to use our reinforcements.”

He noticed we’d gathered troops in hiding nearby.

“I apologize, Your Majesty. We know very little of each other... And after our experience with the First Order of Alion, we felt it necessary to take precautions against unforeseen developments.”

“Come now, there’s no need to apologize. When I learned of your troop deployments, I was relieved to see I was dealing with a shrewd individual. Those are the kind I wish to gather at my side.”

“Presumptive as it is of me to say—you are a good person, Your Majesty.”

“How so?”

“Having noticed our deployment, I imagine a man of your standing would be more than capable of taking advantage of the situation.”

“Perhaps I was simply playing the fool to throw my opponents off guard?” The Wildly Beautiful Emperor placed a finger to his lips, as if to silence me. “The conjurer told me this as well: the more a speaker reveals, confesses in conversation, the more their listener is likely to trust them.”

Baring one’s chest—that can get you further with someone than playing the fool. He’s right. This young emperor is more complicated than I first thought. I’m reassured to think of him as an ally, but I can’t sense his true feelings yet.

The emperor turned away, his golden hair gleaming as it waved in the evening light.

“Fly King... I wish to speak with you alone someday. Somewhere we can truly take our time.” He glanced toward me, and his face looked beautiful in profile.

“Then I look forward to our reunion in the capital of Mira,” I said.

The emperor then gave a few quick orders to Luheit and his aide. The aide was to remain in order to go over some of the details, it appeared—discussing the matter of the prisoners of war, and methods of future contact between Mira and the Country at the End of the World.

I think I can leave all this to Lise.

As the forces of Mira prepared to withdraw with their emperor—I thought of Kashima Kobato.

Her reaction... The look on her face... Something about it still bothers me. Did she realize it’s me under this mask? But what about my appearance could connect me to Mimori Touka?

I was so careful, I did everything I could.

...Does Kashima have some kind of unique skill that allowed her to see through my disguise? It would make sense if it was a unique skill that found me out. None of my acting would've mattered anyway.

Kashima had left with one of the Miran soldiers partway through the discussions. Now Asagi was talking about something with the emperor.

...Am I sure Kashima realized that it was me under this mask? Confirming that for certain now would be difficult.

If the "Lord of the Flies" were to request to meet Kashima—that would raise too many questions. Contacting Asagi, who seems to be the emperor's trump card, might be an option though. To get a meeting with Kashima I'm going to need a more natural way in. In that case... It might be easier to find a chance to do so once we all get to Mira. It's probably a good idea to assume she knows my identity from now on, anyway. It seems like they're on our side at least; it's going to be easier than dealing with the enemy.

What still concerns me is whether Asagi's here as a spy for the Goddess... What happens if she betrays us to her? I need to keep that in mind until I'm sure she's on our side.

...My thoughts are about to start going in circles, aren't they... But right now I just don't have the information I need to make a decision.

"I'm sorry, my master."

"If you're apologizing for the emperor noticing our signal, then don't. That wasn't your fault, Seras."

It seemed as if I'd hit the nail on the head—she looked down sheepishly, and her body seemed to grow smaller.

"Th-that is what I was saying sorry for..."

"You're way too serious, as always."

"I-I'm ashamed of how I acted."

“But the way you handled yourself in the negotiations just now... I don’t think you have anything to be ashamed about there,” I said, watching as the emperor’s forces withdrew.

They went west—marching away like the close of the day. I looked up and saw the evening sun fading ever so slightly against the clouds above us. It hung like a great orange circle just above the horizon, drawing a line between the ground and the sky above.

We began our journey back to the Country at the End of the World. On the road, the forces I’d left on standby as reinforcements filed in behind us as we made our way home. A detachment of the Miran army was to remain in the forest until the following day, and we were instructed to contact them if any problems arose.

“Everything came together in the end, eh?” I called out to Lise. She rode Loa, who had been among the reinforcements.

“Yes—though I imagine the difficult work is yet to come. Sending Munin to Mira in my place to serve as a representative of our nation... I know she made the decision herself, yet...” Lise looked conflicted. “In terms, well... Of *looks*... Would a winged creature be a more suitable envoy than an arachne?”

“Eh? Ah... That’s not why I chose her. I like the way you look, and I figure the people in Mira should hurry up and get used to seeing demi-humans of all stripes.”

“Y-you I-like the way I look...?”

So that’s what she’s hung up on—no surprises there.

“I shouldn’t have said *like*, then?”

“Y-you really are a terrible man! W-well, not that bad I suppose... B-but come on! Wh-what in the world were you thinking?!”

I moved Slei in closer to Lise and Loa and lowered my voice so those around

us couldn't hear.

"I still don't trust Mira completely," I said to change the subject.

"...Well, of course. Neither do I."

"You were blushing when the emperor complimented you."

"O-of course I was! Anyone would?!"

"He's handsome, I suppose. Nobody's going to object to getting flattered by him."

"Argh! I've had quite enough of good-looking humans! That Michaela taught me as much... I can't trust in manners and appearances! What's wrong with these humans, anyway?!"

"I'm a human too, you know."

"Y-you're different! Stop changing the subject!"

I returned to the topic at hand. "Right from the start, they've wanted the Forbidden Words Clan. The Forbidden Words Clan might even be enough to force Vicius herself to a negotiation table. They might attack us and try to capture Munin..."

Lise listened in silence.

"Seras and I could easily escape on Sleir's third form, if it's just the two of us."

"But Munin is... Ah, I see. In her crow transformation, she weighs almost nothing."

"Now you're getting it..."

"But if I were to accompany you...then Sleir couldn't carry the three of us, could she?"

"I'm sure she could, in a pinch, but it'd slow us down and make it hard to escape."

"I suppose I'm essentially a civilian. If arrows or offensive magic were fired at

us from a distance, I would be incapable of defending myself. I'd just be a burden."

"Unfortunately, you're correct. There are limits to what I'm able to protect."

"There's...nothing to be done about that. I understand your decision now. It makes logical sense."

"And you've got a lot of domestic stuff to deal with in the coming days. I'm sure they'll handle all of it better with you in charge, Lise."

She chewed on her knuckle absently and nodded. "Yes... You might be right..."

Looks like she's running simulations on the next couple of days in her head.

"But sooner or later, I do think you should start to leave some of the work in other people's hands," I said.

"Yes... I'll delegate my authority to others a bit at a time. I've been trying to do far too much on my own."

"Yep."

"Yes." After a short pause, she looked away. "...Thanks."

She seemed embarrassed as she thanked me. Lise glanced over at Seras, who was riding on my right.

"Thank you too, Seras. I was glad to have you with me."

Seras wasn't wearing her Fly Swordsman mask right now. "You're welcome. In truth, I was somewhat taken aback by the Wildly Beautiful Emperor's presence myself, though my mask may have hidden it from those around me. In the end, I believe most of the assistance you received came from my master."

"No. This was a team effort," said Lise, shaking her head. "It was because of everyone, you included. It's thanks to all of you that I was able to hold on until the end."

Seras laughed kindly and smiled at her. "Then... You're welcome, I suppose."

"Y-yes... I am." Lise blushed.

“You’ve really mellowed out, prime minister,” I said, without taking my eyes off the road.

“Q-quiet you!”

“Well... I guess you are at your best when you’re excitedly shouting people down. You should turn that quirk into a strength you know? You didn’t need to freeze during the negotiations.”

She did perk up after the emperor left though.

“Argh...! I know already! Thanks for the advice...I’ll remember it, okay?!”

“You’re pretty cute when you’re being honest with yourself, aren’t you?”

“What...?! Y-y-you...you mean I’m n-not cute all of the time?!”

“Like I said, that’s what’s good about you.”

“—! Nhh... D-do you really think so?”

“Yeah. Think about how to use that to your advantage, okay?”

“...Okay.”

“And if you were just honest all the time, you’d always be cu—”

“Knock that off! I’ve heard it already!”

Geo and Niko turned to look back at us.

“Our prime minister’s havin’ a tough time of it, ain’t she?”

“She can’t beat that man with words alone.”

Munin, who had dispelled her transformation, rode by Geo’s side atop a great wolf.

“I’ve...” Munin laughed. “I’ve never seen her so happy before.”

There was a meeting once we arrived back at the castle, to share information with those of the Seven Lights who couldn’t attend the negotiations. It ended

without incident, and after a quick summary of the group's tasks for the coming days, we dispersed.

Seems like this alliance is going to go smoother than I expected.

I returned to my room to find Seras and Nyaki eating dinner. After we'd finished and Nyaki, Slei and Piggymaru had gone back to their shared room, there was a knock at the door.

Seras stood up to answer it.

"Who's there?"

"Ahem... I've got a report...!" The courier's voice was rushed—panicked, even. "The Hero from Another World has woken up."

Chapter 2:

A Black Awakening

YASU TOMOHIRO was sitting up in bed.

Seras and I were the only other ones in the room, as I'd asked the centaurs who had been caring for Yasu to leave. I was dressed as the Lord of the Flies, but Seras was wearing her usual clothes, her face revealed and her sword by her side.

"I'd like to talk with you for a little while," I said politely, my voice warped by the crystal fitted into my mask. "But we're unable to do so while you bear that restraint. We'll take it off—but only on the condition that you promise not to harm us."

Once Yasu's arms and legs are unbound, he'll be able to use his skills the moment that thing's taken off his face.

"I'm sorry, but we've no choice but to be cautious. In a recent battle, we were betrayed by enemies who first approached us as friends. We were almost defeated. Perhaps that experience has made us cowardly... Please nod once if you agree to our condition."

Yasu nodded, showing no signs of hesitation.

Seras can't hear his words to tell if he's lying or not—but I don't think he wants to harm us.

"Thank you. We'll take it off you now."

Seras removed the restraint and placed it on the bedside table—I remained ready to use my status effect skills if necessary.

Yasu was calm and quiet.

...It's almost like he's a different person.

“I know roughly what happened to you out there, and how it came to be. The Sixth Order of Knights told me the story themselves.”

Yasu’s shoulders twitched at the mention of their name.

“Don’t worry. We destroyed them.”

Yasu’s eyes opened wide, completely taken aback at my words. He looked up at me.

“Eh? Th-that Sixth Order... Even Johndoe...?” His voice was terribly weak and hoarse from lack of use.

He must not have spoken for a long time.

“He was a powerful foe...but he is dead. The rest of the Sixth Order, too. We finished off everyone present on that battlefield.”

Yasu looked down at the bed, his voice feeble.

“...I see.”

The Sixth Order are the ones who did this to him... I’d expect him to have something to say about that, but he sounds almost indifferent.

There was no relief in his voice—not a trace of relish or joy in their deaths. It sounded simply that he was accepting the facts for what they were.

“Did you despise them?”

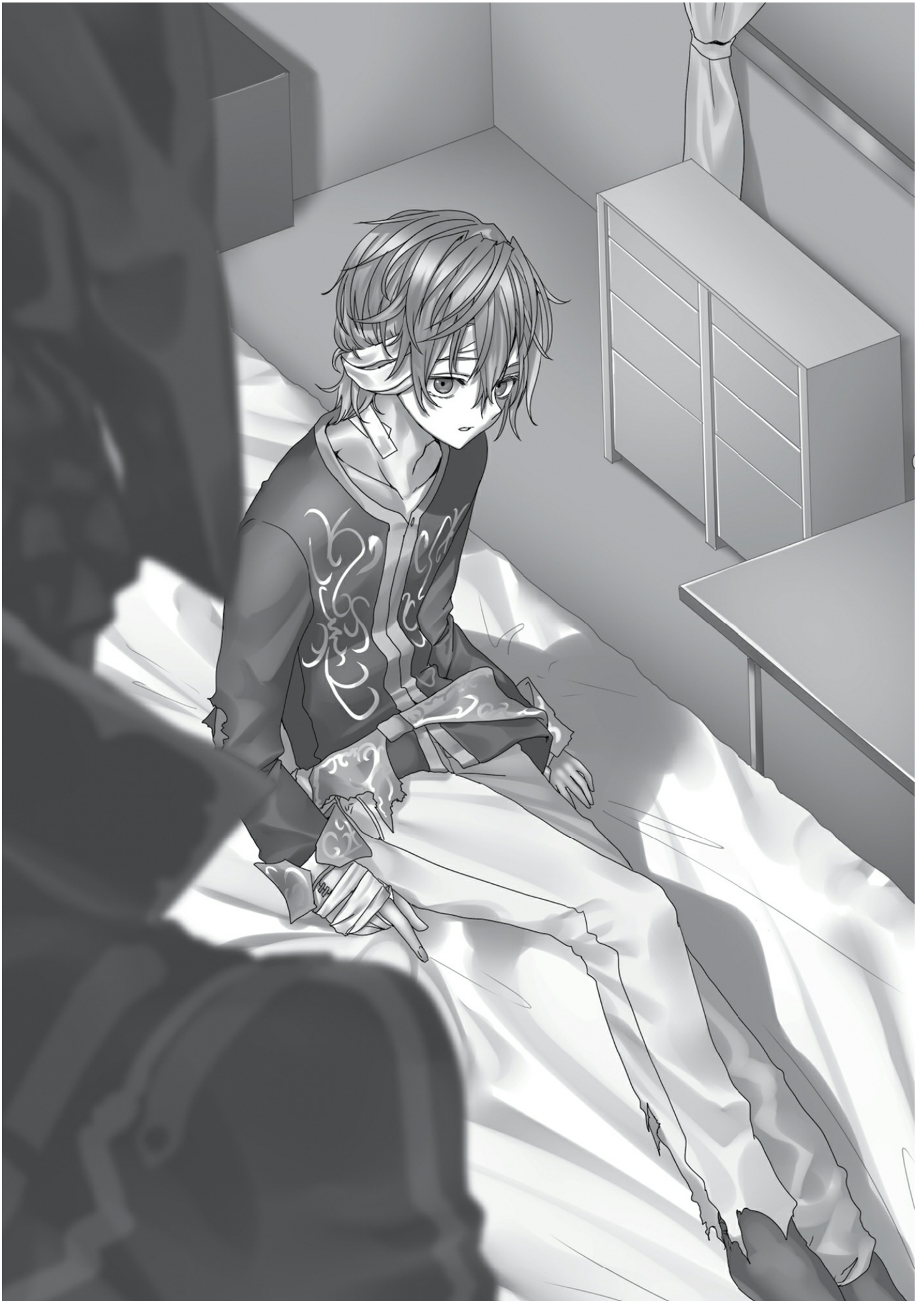
“...After they betrayed me, I think I did for a time,” said Yasu, as if questioning himself. “But...I’ve had so much time to think. Embarrassing as it is to admit, at about the time we arrived on that battlefield...I...I started to think this was my own fault. I brought all of this upon myself.”

His voice was heavy with reflection and self-reproach.

“Before I was restrained by the Sixth Order, I...I was such an arrogant person. These powers of mine are only borrowed from the Goddess, but at the time, I thought they made me invincible. I was such a fool. I felt like I could do whatever I wanted. Before I knew what was happening, I was blinded by my

own arrogance. I think I even lost sight of myself—no.”

His face gaunt and emaciated, Yasu looked down at his maimed hands. “I think I was blind even before I came to this world. When I arrived here, these powers made me arrogant and proud... But I was just a kid. Coming here wasn’t what made me like this. It just made it worse.”



...He's changed.

I almost couldn't recognize him. Just as he said—he's had a lot of time on his own to think things over.

"Of course, I'm surprised that Johndoe has been defeated...that the Sixth Order could ever be defeated at all. I don't feel anything more than surprise about what happened to them."

Yasu looked to me. "What's going to become of me now? Is there going to be a trial or something...? Will I be executed, do you think?"

"Would you accept that verdict?"

"...I would have to... Yes. But..."

I waited patiently for Yasu to finish.

"If... If I could, then a part of me would...perhaps like to live just a little longer..."

So he does want to live, then.

"Why is that?"

"...There are people I'd like to apologize to."

"..."

"The other Heroes from Another World... My classmates... Especially Aya—no, Sogou-san. She... She..." Yasu pressed his broken hands together as if in prayer and held them to his forehead. "I was so awful! But she was worried about me...! I... All my classmates relied upon me and I was only thinking about myself..." He sobbed for a moment. "...B-but...Sogou-san, she always... No matter what, she cared for other people... Even me."

Yasu wept openly as his feelings of regret poured out. Seras and I waited silently for him to continue, and after some time, he calmed himself down enough to suddenly start up again.

"...Sakuma-kun and Hirooka-kun died because I wasn't looking after them. I

could have saved them. I'm the reason they're dead—I *killed* them..." He sobbed again. "I can't apologize to either of them anymore..."

Sakuma and Hirooka are dead, huh? When I talked to Sogou after she defeated Einglanz, she told me about Kariya and Ikumi's deaths... Not that Sogou would've had any reason to tell the Lord of the Flies, but I didn't know about those other two.... I wonder if there are others that've died as well.

"Mimori..." Yasu whispered.

I made sure not to show any reaction to *that name*—and had instructed Seras to do the same.

"Mimori-kun, I... I can't apologize to him either." Yasu hung his head in silence for a few moments. "Mimori-kun was a classmate of mine, in the old world... He reached out to me there once when I was hurt. But all I had was my stupid pride... I... When he reached out, I-I... I..."

He remembers me too, eh?

Yasu screwed both his eyes shut. He looked like he was working up the courage to say something.

"I wanted to be the one to help other people! Not the one that needed saving. I always, always... Ever since coming here... But somewhere along the way things got so messed up, then just got worse and worse. I was so drunk on the feeling of god-like power, growing more and more arrogant... I could never have imagined having such power in my old world."

I see—so that experience with the Sixth Order is what sobered him up?

"You said you wanted to apologize, didn't you?"

"...Y-yes."

"You mean to say that if your crimes are forgiven and these people release you, you'll return to the other heroes—to Alion?"

"I-I don't know." Yasu looked away, as if to say he knew his situation wasn't that simple. "It seems the Goddess wanted to get rid of me... So if I returned to

her alive... I don't think much good would come of that."

"But the other heroes—classmates, as you call them. You wish to be with them, do you not?"

"...Yes. But, well... To be honest, my emotions are all over the place right now."

There's more to this, then. I waited for his next words, then spoke.

"Meaning?" I asked.

"I don't know how I could even begin to approach them... They still know me from back when I'd lost sight of who I was... A-and, well..."

Yasu looked at the sheets below—he was calming down a little. "I think I... I'd like to see a little of this world, perhaps. It's just a thought..."

"See the world?" I asked.

Some time passed before Yasu responded. "Ashamed as I am to admit it, in the past...I considered the people of this world to be nothing but NPCs. I thought them insignificant. I expected them to worship me, to approve of all of my actions... I was the chosen hero, after all. I don't think I even truly considered them to be *alive*..."

He thought he was the main character—that this world was made for him, and him alone. That he was the only one who could save them.

"So I... I want to see the faces of the people who live in this world with my own eyes... To understand what they feel about their lives... I want to know more about others, just about as strongly as I want to know myself. I'm sure this all sounds a little strange to you."

I see... One of those journey-of-self-discovery things, huh? Before he goes back to see Sogou and the other heroes. The idea of going on a journey to find yourself had a bit of a surge in popularity at one point, but I think it's fallen out of favor recently. I remember seeing people post about it on the internet.

"Search all you want, it's not like the real you is gonna be out there

somewhere.”

“Man, I cringe whenever I see one of these journey-of-self-discovery dweebs.”

“They’re just running from reality ’cause they can’t take it.”

“Go to school or get a job. Pick one.”

It was a mocking phrase, only ever really used as a joke. But this is another world... If a trip is what it takes for Yasu to organize his thoughts and move on, it might be good for him.

“I... Once I’ve apologized to everyone, I want to make it up to them. I’ve been so selfish for so long... But for Mimori-kun, Sakuma-kun, and Hirooka-kun... I don’t think it’s going to be easy to make amends to them.”

“This Mimori you speak of—you feel responsible for this individual’s death?”

“Anyone would feel terrible, being told a thing like that...having him go to certain death with those words of despair. Ah, but...” It was faint, but I saw Yasu’s mouth form a smile. “Before he was sent to the Ruins of Disposal, Mimori-kun raised his middle finger to the Goddess. Said she should remember him... Said she *better be ready*. In that desperate situation, he was so cool... Almost as cool as Sogou-san.”

Yasu looked down again. His shoulders sank. “The truth was, I felt envious of Mimori-kun and Sogou-san. Maybe I just had some kind of inferiority complex about...well, no. It wasn’t just them. I’m shorter than everyone else, and I didn’t want to admit it. That was why I tried to be strong, tried to make everyone see how amazing I could be... I wanted them to see that in me. Even now, I...”

Yasu stared intently at his hands again.

“I’m pouring out all my feelings...trying to get people to forgive me. I hate that about myself. I really, truly do. But that’s why I... I want to... And I know this is selfish of me, but...” He looked up—looked right at me. “I want to learn to like myself, if I can. Even just a little. Then I want to apologize to everyone. And go out and find those who need my help.”

“...”

Who the heck is this? This isn't the Yasu Tomohiro I know. But at the same time...this all checks out. I feel like it's him. This must be what Yasu Tomohiro's really thinking, on the inside.

...This seems so cliché. If he wants to apologize so bad... I'm standing right here. I'm still alive.

But all the poisonous armor that Yasu had built around himself—it's been stripped away. That encounter with the Sixth Order really did a number on him. He's been scared straight.

In any case, I've heard him out now, and I think I understand his thoughts.

“I see. I understand how you feel.” I gestured thoughtfully. “Allow me to speak to the people of the Country at the End of the World on your behalf. I'll do my best to set you on the path you wish to take.”

“B-but... Wh-what about my trial...?”

“Some might wish for one, but luckily for you, we are the ones most responsible for guiding this nation to victory in the recent battle. I'm sure we can work something out.”

Actually, there's been no mention of trials or execution for any of our prisoners—Yasu's fate has been left entirely up to me. No need for him to know that right now, though.

“We can hardly accuse you of participating in the battle itself...but I must ask: Do you wish this nation any harm?”

“N-no...! I couldn't possibly...”

Seras gave me a silent signal—Yasu was telling the truth.

“I believe you.”

Yasu seemed to hesitate for a moment. Then a look of grim determination quickly appeared on his face. “A-ahem... A-actually I... I was sent here to kill you,

Belzegea-san. Th-then I heard from the people of this country... They said you were looking for me..."

"I began my search when I learned you were a Hero from Another World," I said. "I have a few things I'd like to ask you. Your gratitude, however, should be directed toward the demi-humans who found you, brought you here, and cared for you."

"Even so... I know I'm still alive because of you. I would have died had I not been found. Thank you, truly. And...I'm sorry. I might have completely lost sight of who I was, but to try to kill you was unacceptable..."

"But you were told to kill me only if I refused your invitation to join the Goddess, no? I have yet to receive that invitation."

"B-but... I-I... Well... I never intended to recruit you. I planned to kill you as soon as you were located... Thinking back, it was so foolish..." Yasu sat in silence for a few moments, then said without looking up, "You had everything I wanted... It was pure envy."

He's not trying to hide the truth—he's finding the courage to say it all...

"I'm pathetic. I ran from that battlefield when the situation looked hopeless, but you... The Lord of the Flies rushed in and defeated that Inner Circle demon like it was nothing. Not to mention..."

He looked up and gave a start of realization as he saw Seras standing there next to me. Strangely, it was as if he were seeing her for the first time—and only now realizing just how beautiful she was. Plus the fact that she'd been here all along.

"...You have Seras-san by your side, the most beautiful woman on the whole continent... You have power, fame, an enviable partner... And I just...from the bottom of my heart, I think...y-you're so cool." He closed his eyes and smiled faintly. "Of all the people in this other world, I think—I wanted to be like you."

His smile was empty of malice...but soon turned to a wry, self-accusatory

smirk. “That’s why I wanted to finish you with my own two hands... I wanted to take everything you had, even though I knew I didn’t deserve it.”

“I have everything, do I?” I asked him.

“...That is how it looked to me. And to be honest, it still appears that way.”

“It’s surprisingly hard to see the bad from the outside. There’s always much that remains unknown to us, even regarding friends and neighbors we see quite often. You may envy me, for instance, but there is much that is unpleasant and unfortunate in my life—and in my past. Too much attention isn’t a good thing. It can weigh on me, and Seras has problems of her own that she is dealing with. People attach such expectations to their baseless fantasies about other people’s lives. Get too close to your heroes and you’ll realize that most of them are mere illusions. It’s very rare for one’s preconceptions to ever be matched or exceeded. Sooner or later, reality gets in the way.”

“...You’re a real adult, aren’t you, Belzegea-san.”

“I’m only standing on my tiptoes and pretending.”

Yasu gave a bitter laugh. “That’s what we call being an adult, no? I think it is.”

I paused for a moment. “You wanted other people to appreciate you.”

“...I think so.”

“But nobody ever appreciated you.”

“...No.”

“What about you, then—did you appreciate anybody else?”

“...I don’t think I really did.”

“Well, if you want others to appreciate you, then maybe appreciating those around you is a good place to start. That might make them start to naturally appreciate you in turn.”

“ ... ”

“If you don’t want to give anyone else their due, but still want praise and

accolades for yourself...you're going to need a great deal of strength and willpower to make it through. It will be a lonely and difficult path, I'm sure...but perhaps it will take you where you seek." I paused a moment longer for effect. "Which path you choose is up to you."

"...Yes. You're right." Yasu nodded.

"...Ahem."

Yasu looked up at me as I held out my hand toward him.

"The name's Belzegea—captain of the Lord of the Flies Brigade." I introduced myself. He seemed to understand.

"...Tomohiro Yasu—f-former hero." Yasu took my hand—his grip was still weak.

Talking to people who've strayed from the path—lectures like these can really make an impact. This handshake, too—this is the proof that I trust him. Once that trust exists, the real conversation can begin.

I don't believe he's going to attack us. I sense no hostility from him at all. All I can sense is the trust of someone who finally knows themselves.

Now, it's time we got down to business—information.

"—Would you look at the time," I said deliberately, taking out my pocket watch. "I wanted to ask so much, but we got lost in conversation... I have a number of questions for you, in fact. Would you mind if I asked them now?"

"Ah, of course... Ask me anything you like."

I went on to ask Yasu several questions, each of which he answered with the truth. I couldn't get a lot of new information out of him—but I did get a refresher on the movements of class 2-C.

Sounds like they're getting ready to fight the Demon King, eh? No big moves yet from what Yasu says—but I feel like the decisive battle's closing in.

"Thank you very much, Tomohiro. As someone currently at war with Alion, I

wished to know as much as possible of their movements, you see.”

Yasu gave me a weak smile. “I’m afraid I don’t know if what I told you will be of much use.”

“It was enough.”

Right, then... What are we going to do with him next...

Leaving Yasu alone, Seras and I walked side by side down the hallway to leave.

“Do you have something you want to say, Seras?”

“Ah... Y-yes.”

She looked over her shoulder, checking for anyone who might be listening in.

“That man, well...”

“I didn’t reveal my identity to him, even though he’s an acquaintance I know from the old world—is that what’s on your mind?”

Seras didn’t respond immediately, but her expression told me I was right. I stopped walking.

“...If he found out who I am now, I think it’d only muddle his emotions even more. I get the feeling he was only able to be so open with me because he thinks the Lord of the Flies doesn’t know anything of the way he used to be. It’s best that I be a stranger, I think.”

It’s best that it be the Lord of the Flies that saved Yasu—not Mimori Touka.

He said he wanted to apologize if he could... But for now, I think it’s best that Mimori Touka stays in his past—stays dead.

“So that’s why—I see.”

“It depends on the person, and the situation... But it was the decision I made. How do I put this... I figure there are all kinds of small and subtle emotions with the connection I had with him. I’m sure that only the two of us really understand any of that though.”

“I see...”

“I’m not saying this isn’t true for women—but men are way more delicate creatures than you think, Seras.”

That’s why we lash out aggressively trying to protect ourselves... We hit rock bottom worrying about our place in the world, then end up fighting the demons of own endless, inescapable self-doubt.

“Right now, Yasu...is trying to change. Trying to take himself in the right direction. That’s good enough. Of course...there are also benefits to me accepting his plans for the future.”

I’m going to give Yasu Tomohiro his freedom—let him loose. I haven’t told Yasu yet, but that’s my decision. There’d be too much risk in taking him with us anywhere, and I can’t ever discount the possibility that he’ll discover my true identity. Having a former classmate fighting by my side as a companion would also increase the danger others might find me out. I’m going to let him go without telling him I’m Mimori Touka.

That’s the best move I can make here.

I’m not going to kill him. He’s not even on the Goddess’s side any longer, though I suppose there’s still a chance he could go ally with Sogou...

“He might go back and meet up with Sogou and the other heroes and reconcile with them after he’s apologized... Then Sogou might learn that it was the Lord of the Flies who helped him get back on his feet.”

A flash of realization appeared on Seras’s face.

“That’s right. If we do have to fight Sogou someday, that will make it harder for her to go all out against us. I think it’s likely my helping Yasu will shackle her, in that case.”

“Considering what I have heard of Lady Sogou’s character—that does sound possible...” Seras mused.

“Vicius tried to use the Sixth Order to kill Yasu. She ordered her pawns to

murder one of Sogou's classmates. And if Sogou learns that truth from Yasu himself, she's going to turn on that Foul Goddess way faster than if I were the one who went and told her."

Seras once again looked as if she'd suddenly just realized something. "I see. In that case, the Wildly Beautiful Emperor's plan to gather the S-class heroes to his side is beginning to sound a little more realistic."

"You're right."

That said, it would be an unexpected windfall if things went that way. Relying entirely on Yasu to bring the S-class heroes over to our side is too risky—ideally, Asagi's group should be the ones to convince them.

Though when it finally comes time—I might have to reveal my true identity in the end, anyway.

"Yasu still seems a bit mentally unstable, and there are too many unknown factors when it comes to his situation. That's another reason I'm letting him go."

I don't have the time or spare brain power to spend thinking about Yasu Tomohiro right now.

"I don't feel confident I could properly manage him. And if we traveled as companions, it'd take a huge amount of effort and conscious acting and lying to hide the fact of who I am."

Yasu's an A-class hero, I'm sure he's a good fighter...but I haven't gotten the full measure of him as a person yet. It might seem he's heading in the right direction, but nothing's for certain. It's too risky to reveal my true identity to him, and there are too many variables at play for me to fight alongside him while keeping up the deception.

"Yasu himself said he wants to go back and see Sogou and the other heroes—and as you heard, he wants to see more of this world. But we have other matters to attend to."

“—meaning that releasing him is the best move. I see,” said Seras.

“I think it’s the right decision, yeah.” I turned my head to look back at her. “I know it might sound like I’m pushing him away... But he’s got to go out and find his own path. I’ve done all I can for him.”

Plus, since that Foul Goddess almost murdered him, I doubt he’ll turn on me when I go up against her. Even if the Goddess does capture him, he doesn’t know who I really am.

“I can’t imagine the Goddess is going to be that concerned about Yasu’s survival... But I’ll be sure to remind him later to conceal his true identity when he’s out there on the road.”

“But... From the description you gave me of his character, I can scarcely believe the person we’ve captured is the same Yasu. I can’t even imagine him doing some of the things you described. Every word he spoke from the bed was true and from the heart. He had no hostility toward us whatsoever, and even asked if he could continue to use his mouth restraint to avoid causing unnecessary stress and worry to the people of this country. He was extremely objective in his decision making and showed a great amount of consideration with his words.”

“Maybe... That’s who he always was, on the inside.”

Who remembers when they took a wrong turn? Misled by the endless stream of articles and comments constantly washing over him... Before he realized it, he was swallowed by the flood of disinformation. The internet, filled with oceans of dubious facts, overwhelmed and bewildered him, tossed him this way and that until he was left dazed and confused.

Maybe Yasu Tomohiro is just reclaiming who he used to be.

“It’s almost like...” I placed a hand on the knob of the door to our room. “You could say he’s been affected by a status effect the whole time I’ve known him, eh?”

...What, are you trying to sound cool? Nice try, idiot. Jeez. At least Seras looks impressed with that insight...

In any case—I know what I’m doing with Yasu Tomohiro now.

He’s going to walk his own path—and I’m going to walk mine.

We started to prepare for our own journey, to Mira. There were meetings to pop into every so often, and decisions to be made about future plans. Munin made herself a fly knight mask in the meantime—and had apparently gotten one ready for Nyaki as well.

They both put on their masks and came to show Seras and me when they were done—Nyaki meowing that “Nyaki’s going to get strong too!” when she was showing off hers. She went to see the Four Shining Warriors for advice a few times, and I accompanied her whenever she did. I also took baths with Seras in the evenings sometimes. We talked about our next moves as we bathed...and sometimes Amia and Kil burst in on us partway through a meeting there.

I also visited the Kurosaga Village and had dinners with the Seven Lights, where we discussed all kinds of topics—including the divine beast Radice. He was a loud prisoner, but could hardly be turned over to Mira with the rest. The Country at the End of the World had informed the emperor that they wished to keep him for themselves, and he had accepted.

“With the establishment of diplomatic relations between our two nations, we no longer have need of the divine beast,” came his response.

I found some time to relax and chat with Gratrah after one of my dinners with the Seven Lights, and was invited to Lise’s room to sample more of her cooking that same night.

As the days of preparation ticked slowly by, our departure from the Country at the End of the World grew ever closer.

SERAS ASHRAIN

SERAS ASHRAIN deftly passed her needle through Too-ka's Lord of the Flies robes. The fabric was thick, but there were patches that became worn and frayed no matter what—she took it upon herself to sew them back up.

Too-ka sat in a chair next to her, watching her work with the needle. The chair was turned with its back toward her, and both Too-ka's arms were placed atop its backrest. Seras pulled the thread through and snipped it with her teeth.

"...I'm glad I can take off my disguise in front of someone who can actually fix those robes up."

"*Heh heh.* It makes me glad I learned needlework as well. Speaking of making things... Lady Munin and Miss Nyaki's masks are very well put together, aren't they?"

"Seems like Munin's real good at making those kinds of things, yeah."

"She's become such friends with Nyaki so quickly... She's so easy to get along with; I wish I could be more like her in that respect."

Munin and Nyaki had recently visited to show off their new masks, and Seras had greatly enjoyed their little fashion show. She was happy to see Nyaki joyous and having fun.

It's just as Sir Too-ka said... This is all to keep Nyaki smiling.

"Speaking of Miss Nyaki, how is her intensive training going?"

"Surprisingly, all four of the Shining Warriors seem to be helping her out—they're taking turns to make the free time to teach her."

"Perhaps that's because it's a favor for the one and only Sir Too-ka?"

"Well... I can't deny I did twist their arms a little when I asked."

But that wasn't for him, it was for Nyaki—I know that.

"That can hardly be helped, when you're here in the Country at the End of the

World you're treated like a celebrity wherever you go."

Perhaps that's why we've been spending less time alone together of late.

Seras had dared to ask him if they might share a bath a few days ago, and he'd agreed without a hint of reluctance.

I was happy we got to be together for more than the moments before we go to bed and after we wake up... But then Amia and Kil stumbled in on us.

At the time, Seras had suggested that Too-ka should hide his face—he never walked about in public without his mask. She stood up and tried to block him from view with her own body, eventually using the power of the light spirit to cover his escape from Amia and Kil.

"But hey...I don't think I really mind if the people of this country know my true face," Too-ka said.

"M-my apologies. I simply wanted to preserve your identity... I'm sorry you had to see such an unsightly spectacle..."

Seras blushed when she thought back on the whole ordeal. She had been so focused on concealing Too-ka's face and getting him out that she'd had no time to worry about how shamelessly exposed she was.

"Nah, I appreciate it. You were only trying to do whatever you could to help, right? Thanks."

Seras gave me a wry laugh. "Thank you for saying that. It does save me from my own brain..."

Why does he always do that? He always forgives me. Why is he always so kind to me, I wonder?

Unable to stand the embarrassing memory, Seras changed the subject.

"S-so how did things go at the Kurosaga Village?"

"Ah, Munin formally introduced me to the other Kurosaga again. They all seem like good people. The first time we met the people were a bit distant, but

they all trust Munin. They really love her there.”

“I’d like to go and meet with them myself, I think.”

“I wasn’t sure how accepting they’d be of outsiders, which is why I went alone the first time. But given their reaction to me, I think it’d be fine if you came along too, Seras.”

Too-ka had become very popular after the negotiations with Mira—everyone was asking his opinion, and he was once called to eat with the Seven Lights. Seras accompanied him for the dinner and was happy to see him so trusted and relied upon by those around him.

“You did mention that after the dinner, Lady Gratrah invited you to a private talk, did you not...?”

“Yeah, I had a chat with her. It seemed like she wanted to apologize... I couldn’t think what for, but she mentioned that after the battle she realized she’d been cold toward me, apparently. She said she felt bad about it.”

“I see. She was requesting an opportunity to apologize in private, then.”

It was true that Gratrah’s attitude toward Too-ka had clearly softened in recent days.

“Speaking of changes... You remarked that Prime Minister Lise has changed considerably as well?”

It seems Lise invited Too-ka to her room last night and made him something to eat. I feel like recently...a lot more people are realizing how wonderful Too-ka is.

This made Seras as happy as if *she’d* been the one being praised.

Too-ka returned a heavy sigh. “I don’t mind that she’s changed, but Lise keeps calling out my name at the strangest times. Then when I ask what she wants, ‘*I-it’s not like I want anything!*’ is all I get in reply...”

“I’m sure she just wishes for the chance to speak with you, Sir Too-ka.”

“Well, she *is* a good cook. I’d be more than happy to go eat her home cooking

again.”

“...” Her sewing needle stopped.

Then...what about me? Too-ka has revealed his true face to Lise, but not to the others... Sometimes I think they aren't attracted to him for his appearance but for what's on the inside.

Then in my case... Does he like what's on the inside? Am I a good person?

Seras thought about this to herself—she might even have spoken about it to Too-ka at one point. Back when she lived in Neah, there were those that praised her character. Seras could tell lies from truth, and therefore she knew that they were sincere.

But even so—don't they only see what's on the inside because of my outward appearance?

Seras had thought about it many times—questioning herself over and over.

Would they still think those things about me, absent the way I look? I think Cattleya would... She accepted me for what I am on the inside. But what of my acceptance by the Empire of Neah? Holy Emperor Ortola only ever cared about my looks.

In Too-ka's fight against the Black Dragon Knights, Seras learned of the holy emperor's true intentions. She realized now that he had not taken her in because of her status as a former noble of a high elf nation.

It was only because I look like this...

Seras had always been told she was a rare beauty.

Without this beauty, perhaps I would never have met Cattlea in the first place. What would I be worth without it?

Seras worried about that from time to time—the thought scared her.

...If someday I lose something—something that makes me who I am—I'll lose everything that's of value in me. What that something is that I have to lose, I

don't know. I feel it might be my appearance, but it could be something else.
The thought scares me.

A sudden, indescribable wave of anxiety flooded over her, and—

“What is it you’re so worried about?”

Seras jumped back to attention.

Her sewing needle was still frozen in midair—she’d been sitting in silence for some time.

“Ah, no I... Well...”

“If there’s something on your mind, I’m willing to listen—if you’re okay with that.”

Seras thought for a moment, her hand still stuck there in place. “Sir Too-ka.”

“Yeah?”

“Even these fine Lord of the Flies robes of yours can fray and tear. Of course, I can repair them for you, but...they’ll never return to being the way they once were.”

“I guess not.”

“I can make them look the same... But at the end of the day, they will have become something *different* once I am done. They’ll never be the same again. They will have lost something.”

“Well, yeah.”

Seras looked down at her lap.

“If there were something close to you that lost an aspect of itself, in a similar fashion...would you be able to treat it the same?” She could sense the faint trembling in her own voice as she continued. “Would you be able to look at it the same way after it was damaged...?”

“Those are my robes, no matter what happens to them.”

Seras paused, then looked up.

“...Even if these robes are covered with stitches and seams from where they’ve been ripped apart,” Too-ka said. “These robes have been with me through so many battles now—no matter the damage, they’re still mine.” He was resolute, unhesitating. “Being by someone’s side doesn’t only mean losing something, you know?”

Seras started at his words.

“There are things you can gain... Things that can be so much more important than whatever you’ve lost along the way. Memories, I guess you could say.”

“Yes, I... I agree with you.” Her gaze went back to her lap, but she was smiling now, her eyes brimming with tears. For a moment, she caught a glimpse of Too-ka smiling at her.

“What’s wrong? You’re approaching this in a really roundabout way... If it’s tough for you to talk about, you don’t have to. We can drop the subject if you want.”

“No, I... I was just speaking h-hypothetically. For example, if something we’ve gained through our journey together were to somehow be lost... I wondered if you would still treat me the same. I’m sorry for troubling you with such nonsense.” Seras set the needle and thread aside, and lowered her head, robes still draped over her lap. “I’m so sorry... The way I asked, it must sound like I don’t trust you...”

“We haven’t been together for years, but we *have* been close for a while now, so I think I get it. What makes you *you*—it’s not your outward appearance, Seras.”

“—Ah!”

“It doesn’t matter if you lose a limb or your face is burned... You’ll always be Seras to me. Seras Ashrain.”

“Sir Too-ka...”

“Though I don’t think anything can be done about our different life spans...”

The corners of Too-ka’s mouth curled into a grin.

“If that’s what you want, then once this journey of revenge is over... I wouldn’t mind staying here, in this world. If it’s with you.”

Under normal circumstances, Too-ka’s smile would have looked anything but sincere...but for some reason in that moment, it was as heartfelt as it could have been.

“Even if you lose that *something* you’ve been talking about, I’ll be by your side...until the very end.” Too-ka snorted at her. “You *know* I’m not lying, don’t you?”

Seras could barely see any more—tears had blurred everything in her vision.

“Yes... Yes...”

When she came to, she was repeating those words in between hiccups and sobs. And amidst the tears, she mumbled words of gratitude.

Losing something you have is terrifying.

But stronger than that terror, is the wonderful joy of gaining something new.

I’m sure—those things we’ve gained along the way will stay with us until the end.

I just know it.

MIMORI TOUKA

YASU TOMOHIRO was a step ahead of us in his departure. We all went to the great silver door to see him off.

He was capable of walking at last, and some color had returned to his cheeks. Yasu was wearing earmuffs to hide his lost ears, and bandages and gloves to

protect his fingertips now that his nails had been peeled off and he had lost all grip strength in one of his hands. Looking closer, I still saw the marks of painful scratches all over his body... But he had recovered enough that he was able to move around normally, at least.

Might be his hero stat modifiers helping him with that recovery.

Yasu wore a backpack with all the camping gear he would need to spend the night wherever he found himself. I gave him money for travel expenses as well—more than enough to get to Alion.

In terms of danger on the road—I don't imagine there'll be any problems there. Yasu was beaten up by the Sixth Order, but he's still an A-class hero with his own unique skills. He should be able to drive away any bandits or golden-eyed monsters that come his way, so long as he doesn't let his guard down.

Many of the other demi-humans who had cared for Yasu also came to see him off, including the dragonkin and centaurs that found him, and Nyaki who was there to open the door and let him out.

Yasu neatly drew himself up to face them and bowed. “Thank you so much for everything you’ve done for me.”

“Here.” I walked over and handed Yasu a pendant with a crest emblazoned upon it, hanging on a piece of thin thread. He took it in his hands and looked up at me.

“What is this...?”

“It signifies that the holder of this pendant is a guest of the Country at the End of the World, and we wish for him to be granted free passage. With this in hand, you should face no unnecessary impediments to your movement across the territory of Mira. If you plan on avoiding the war in Ulza, I believe you will need this pendant to head west.”

“Thank you. I don’t know how I could ever repay you...”

“Don’t worry about that now, please. Incidentally, where are you planning on

traveling first?”

“Well, I... I don’t quite know yet... But as you mentioned, attempting to take a route south to Alion might involve me in the fighting. I’m sure the forces of Mira and Alion are already engaging each other there. I think I will head north, through the nations of Mira, Yonato, and Magnar—to see the people of this world with my own two eyes...”

“What you do now is completely up to you. I hope you have a safe journey... And I truly wish that when you rejoin the other heroes, a bright future awaits you all.”

“Thank you... I hope your future is bright as well, Belzegea-san.”

Yasu then thanked Seras and Nyaki before finally turning to the demi-humans who had cared for his injuries, the dragonkin and centaurs standing by the door, and bowed deeply as he thanked them most of all.

“I’m happy to see you well, Mr. Tomohiro. Please be careful on the road.”

“Thank you, and I wish you well in return. I will never forget what you all have done for me. And I... It may be too late for me, but I... I’ll try my best to be the kind of person others will wish to give gratitude to in turn.”

“Yes... We hope very much for that also.”

Yasu looked at me one last time, then turned to Nyaki. “If you would.”

Nyaki looked to me, and I nodded—the door to the outside world opened before us.

“Well then, everyone... Thank you again for everything. Someday when I hope I am more proud of the person I am...I’d like to thank you again. But for now, thank you. Thank you so much.”

With that, Yasu Tomohiro departed the Country at the End of the World.

That same day, Munin attuned herself to the Forbidden Magic meant to dispel the Goddess’s powers. The attunement process was successful. As we stood in one corner of the castle, I handed her a single blue dragonstone to

consume for a test fire, and the trial run went off without a hitch as well.

All that's left...is getting in close enough. How will we get close to the Goddess? How do I deceive her?

"..."

Just a little further. Just a little closer and I'll be able to reach...

...For her throat.

Several days after Yasu Tomohiro had left—the time came for the Lord of the Flies Brigade to depart as well.

"Ny-Nyaki... Nyaki's w-waiting for the day you all come back safe... Meow! And... And when all of Master's journey is over, then..."

Nyaki's going to remain here—in the Country at the End of the World.

"Yeah," I said, taking a knee. "When that day comes, I'll take you to see Lis too."

"Yes me-ow!"

"Oh, and we've got to tell your Nee-nya and little sisters that you're safe and sound as well, don't we?"

"Yes me-ow!"

Nyantán Kikipat.

I've already told Mira what she looks like—that she's a relative of one of my companions, and that they absolutely shouldn't kill her if they happen to fight her in combat. But there are no absolutes in war—just as there was no absolute way to hide the Lord of the Flies Brigades's presence in the battle we just fought. I'm just doing whatever I can... But since Nyantan's a Disciple of Vicius—there are no guarantees this will end well for her.

"If we come across her on our travels, I'll let her know myself."

“Thank you, meow! Ah, but...”

“Eh?”

Nyaki was smiling, but in the corners of her screwed up eyes, I saw little drops of tears forming. “Nyaki knows. Nee-nya’s an ally of the Goddess, so there’s no guarantee she can come home safe... Nyaki wants her to be safe, but...Master has my permission to kill her if leaving her alive would cause trouble for you.”

I sighed inwardly.

It’s because she says stuff like this that I can be so objective in the end. She’s always prioritizing other people over herself. It makes me want to ensure everything works out for Nyaki—make sure that she gets what she wants.

“You’re right. There are no guarantees. But we’ll do our best. You’re one of us now, after all.”

“Master... When you say that to Nyaki, then... Nyaki... Nyaki...”

Lis and Nyaki have both been through so much. They’re the past “me”—the way I used to be. I have to save them—I couldn’t stand not to.

Who’s going to benefit from that most of all? Me.

A bright future where those two can smile and live in peace would bring me some relief... It would be a small bit of payback—a middle finger—to my real parents.

“Don’t worry about it. Anything that’s good for you is good for me in the end, Nyaki.”

“Meow?”

Seras leaned over to Nyaki’s side and smiled at her. “My master wants you to be happy, Miss Nyaki. Everything he just said is the truth—I’d know if he was lying, you see.”

“Miss Seras...”

“And I think you’re misunderstanding something, Nyaki... I’m not saying we

can't see each other again until this journey's over, you know."

"Myaw?"

Vicius's main base is in Alion, in the east of the continent. If we're heading west to Mira now, we can easily stop here on our way back east.

"We might come back to see you once we're done in Mira."

"R-really meow?"

"Well, it kind of depends, but hopefully, yeah."

"U-understood!"

"These two won't like being apart from you either, Nyaki."

"Squee~! Boing—!"

"Pakyuuh~!"

Piggymaru bounced out of my robes, and Sleil galloped over to Nyaki—both of them immediately glued themselves to her side.

"Squee~..."

"Pakyuuh~..."

I stood up and looked at the three of them.

They've grown quite close during all the time they spent together... Maybe I should let them all meet again before the final battle.

"Piggymaru, Sleil... Nyaki can't wait to see her friends again!"

"Squee-ee-ee! ♪"

"Pakyuh! ♪"

Seras sneaked over to me and whispered in my ear.

"Let's do everything we can to make sure they can all see each other again, Sir Too-ka."

I snorted. "You read my mind."

“...Well then, good luck,” said Lise, who stood at the front of the crowd at the silver door—the entrance to the Country at the End of the World.

We only just saw Yasu off a few days ago—and now we’re the ones leaving. There are more people here than I expected...

The Seven Lights were all there, Loa the hound of hell and soldiers from all the armies... There were plenty of monsters that I recognized who had fought alongside us in the recent battle—kobolds (who’d been cautious when we first encountered them) and great wolves. Looking out at them now, there were still so many I hadn’t met.

King Zect took both my hands in his.

“It was my weakness that put this burden on you... I’m sorry. And thank you, from the bottom of my heart.”

“I wish to thank you as well,” said Gratrah, taking a step forward and bowing. “I trust you now—truly I do. I wish you safe passage on the roads.”

I nodded to her. Next, the Four Shining Warriors stepped forward—Niko first.

“I believe in your strength. Don’t let us down, Lord of the Flies. I... After what happened, I want to be smarter, stronger. I will devote myself even more fully to my training.”

“All right. Do your best.”

“Hmh! I’m going to give it everything I’ve got! And I pray for your safe return.”

Next came Kil.

“I ended up as a tactician, huh? I’ve gotta learn more about strategy and how to make moves in battle. Wish Sir Seras could hang around and keep teaching me!”

“I’m sorry, Lady Kil.” Seras gave her a wry smile, and Kil shrugged and smiled back.

“You’re a real serious one, ain’tcha~! But sure, teach me more when you get back, okay?”

“Of course.”

“*Heh heh...* In exchange, your big sister here’ll teach you all kinds of *other* stuff. ♪ Gotta keep the Lord of the Flies happy, y’know?”

“*Hah...*”

“Come on! I knew you’d make that face, Seras-kun! You’re way too predictable!”

There was laughter at Kil’s words, and the atmosphere around us relaxed. Amia walked up to me, coming in so close enough that only I could hear.

“Seems like those two get along well with each other, yeah.”

“Hey, I think we get along well too, right?” I asked.

“Yeah. I think so.”

This lamia’s got a surprisingly objective view on things.

She looked over at Seras, who was bowing repeatedly as Kil and the others surrounded her.

“I want to thank you for taking Chief Munin with you. I appreciate it. But well... We’ve gotta do what we can here too. We pushed a lot of responsibility on you in the battle, but we can’t rely on you and Seras forever. We have to make decisions for ourselves in this country and manage our own affairs, yeah. You didn’t expect to have to deal with this detour on your journey, right?”

I watched from afar as Seras, Munin, and Sleil said their goodbyes.

“This journey of ours is for personal reasons, and we stopped by on our way... But to be honest, yeah. I realize more and more every day what a kind and good person I am.”

“*Heh heh...* Maybe what people like about you is that they can’t figure out whether you’re good or bad, yeah?”

“Might be best if you or Geo support Lise with the diplomatic stuff for a while yet. You’ve got a talent for it, I think. You’ve all just gotta play to your own strengths. You’ve got the numbers here, so that does give you an advantage in war.”

“Forget about me... And Chief Geo’s way too much of a hothead for diplomacy, yeah.”

“I heard that, Amia.”

Geo Shadowblade appeared out of nowhere, stepping to Amia’s side. His wife, Yerma, was waiting behind him.

“Ohh, if it isn’t Geo! What’s that? You heard what now?!”

“...You’re bein’ too obvious, snake girl.”

“Amia only told the truth, there’s no sense in getting angry at that!” Yerma gestured to restrain him. Geo clicked his tongue, scratched the back of his head in frustration, and then looked to me.

“Sorry. It was more than enough that you fought with us in the battle... But now we’re pushing this diplomatic trip to Mira onto you too.”

“Well, technically Munin’s your representative.”

“I don’t figure that pretty boy emperor’s thinking about it like that.”

I knew it—he’s got good sense with those black panther eyes of his.

“Like I said. I’m so full of goodwill, I just don’t know what to do with myself.”

“...We’re going to sharpen our fangs here, best we can. You make sure and tell us if you ever need us again.”

“Sure, if that day ever comes—I won’t hesitate.”

I do feel like I can really rely on Geo’s strength, and the power of his Band of the Shining Leopard.

The time for our departure finally came. I called out to Munin, who had just finished saying her goodbyes.

“Already done saying farewell to the other Kurosaga?” I asked.

“Yes. We had time to prepare, so there’s nothing I feel I’m leaving undone here.”

“All right.”

“Munin.” A silver-haired girl was standing by Munin’s side, tugging on her sleeve. She was slim, with her hair cut short—her eyes looked almost catlike. She was beautiful, that was clear—though there was little expression on her face.

“Oh, Fugi.”

“Be careful,” said Fugi plainly. Munin hugged her tight.

“It’s okay. I’ve got the super strong Lord of the Flies with me for protection.”

“I’ll be waiting,” said Fugi, before looking over at me. “Take care of her.”

“Sure. I will.”

I had met Fugi the other day on my visit to the Kurosaga Village. She was the only other member of the clan capable of using Forbidden Magic.

Munin softly placed a hand to Fugi’s cheek.

“You be good while I’m gone, okay?”

“I’ll try my hardest.”

“*Heh heh*, I’m so proud of you, Fugi.”

“I’m proud of you too.”

At a glance, they looked almost like mother and daughter, though they had no blood relation to each other.

Munin’s like a parent to Fugi, since she was orphaned as a child when her birth parents died of illness. So Munin’s taken it upon herself to raise little Fugi all these years. Family is more than blood.

I know that from personal experience.

Seeing them together made me remember, and for just a moment I wanted to see my foster parents again.

“...Belzegea.”

Lise called to me hesitantly.

“Oh, Lise, it’s you. Don’t worry, I’ll be sure to wrap up this business with Mira.”

“And the vault...”

“I know.”

Lise and the others had items they wanted from the Great Vault of Mira.

“We’ll do our best to lay the groundwork for this nation’s future... So you come back safe when you’re done, okay? And...I’m sorry for leaving most of the negotiations to you.”

“I already told you, I’m going to Mira for my own reasons. If there are negotiations and a signing ceremony to be done there, it just makes sense for me to handle those too, right?”

Lise gave me a wry smile, admitting defeat. “Yes. I think you’re right.”

“...Man, you sure have gotten more honest with yourself.”

“Nh?! Wh-what’s wrong with that?!”

“Nothing at all.”

“W-well, thank you, then! Oh, Belzegea! Why do you always do this?!”

I watched Lise fluster, as even her ears started turning red.

“—What then, eh?! I mean I’m trying my best you know?! I-I’ve admitted it in part, and...”

“It’d be fun to take a trip with you someday too though.”

“Nh? Did you just say something?”

“Nah, nothing important.”

Setting aside Munin, who's coming with us as a member of the Lord of the Flies... Lise and Nyaki wouldn't suit a journey of revenge.

I looked up at the great silver door. Nyaki was already in place, ready and waiting to open it for us.

"I guess we should get going..."

...For someone like me, seeking revenge—this place was just a little too cozy.

SOGOU AYAKA

AFTER HER BATTLE against the Demon King, Ayaka Sogou regrouped with the other heroes and learned for the first time that Takao Itsuki had separated from them during their fight.

"I have to go and be with my sister," she reportedly said before apologizing to Kayako and the others and leaving. They had already defeated a good number of the golden-eyed monsters that had infiltrated the castle. When Itsuki left them, they were having trouble finding more of them to fight—and nearly all the monsters they'd found had been soloed by Itsuki. After she left, the group of remaining heroes only encountered two further golden-eyed monsters, and that was after the effects of the Demon King Essence had vanished from the castle.

Kayako and the others had been able to rely on the strength of the knights and locals who had recovered enough to help and overwhelmed the monsters with their numbers. They had to admit Itsuki had played a massive role. Given how much Itsuki had contributed to their victory, nobody complained about her sudden disappearance.

Ayaka, for her part, went on to explain everything she had seen. It was hard to tell them, but she had no choice. The surprise on her classmates' faces was evident, and Ayaka herself could scarcely believe what had happened.

I never thought Kirihara Takuto would turn to ally with the Demon King...

“B-but maybe... Maybe he’s just pretending...? To get the Demon King’s guard down and then beat him? Y-you don’t think there’s a chance...?” Minamino Moe suggested, hesitant and shrinking.

In my heart, I don’t know the answer to that myself. He may be one of my classmates, a boy I spent time in the same room with, learning the same lessons—but I have no idea what Kirihara Takuto is thinking.

Moe was waiting for an answer.

She wants reassurance—wants me to tell her she’s right. I’m sure that’s what she’s waiting for.

“...Yes. I’m sure that’s the case. Let’s believe in him.”

“Y-yeah...!” Moe’s eyes brightened, just as Ayaka felt a pang of pain in her chest.

She’s pure, innocent—and I’m lying to her. It’s exactly at times like these that I want to hear Hijiri-san’s thoughts.

She’d know what to do—could point us in the right direction. She sees everything much better than we do—she really understands. But no... I have to think about this on my own. If I’m always relying on her, we’ll never be equals. What did Hijiri-san leave to do, anyway? Where did she...

“Sogou-san! ♪”

Her thoughts were interrupted as all the assembled heroes turned their heads. It was the Goddess Vicius—smiling, her head tilted to the side.

“Could it be... Have you defeated the Demon King, perchance?”

“—Whaaat?!” After hearing her explanation, the Goddess furrowed her brow at Ayaka so thoroughly, it looked as if Vicius thought she had finally gone completely insane. “Kirihara-san... Went over to the Demon King’s side?”

“Yes... He disappeared with the Demon King...”

Ayaka explained how the two of them had vanished together.

“I knew it...” the Goddess mumbled under her breath.

“He’s gone and found himself a teleportation crystal, hasn’t he?” She groaned to herself worriedly. “But...which is it, I wonder? Is this an attempt to gain the enemy’s confidence...or could it be that Kiriara and the Demon King truly are working together? Could he really—be *that* foolish...?”



She lightly clicked her tongue over and over again.

“Ahem, Goddess...”

“Past incarnations of the Root of All Evil have used humans as pawns, of course... But never one of the heroes themselves. Takuto Kirihara will be killed by the Demon King—it only stands to reason. The Root of All Evil will never fight alongside a hero... Hm? But this means... I’ve lost two S-class heroes now? Oh~! I’m in such terrible trouble! You’ve *got to be kidding me!* ♪”

She spread her arms wide, and a bright smile appeared on her face. “*Nhoh hoh. ~♪* What in the world is happening I wonder, Sogou-san~?”

“I-I don’t quite know how to answer that... Ehm...” Ayaka was a little overwhelmed.

It seemed the other heroes had yet to notice anything, but...

The pressure the Goddess is giving off right now is so intense. And it’s not just that... It’s almost as if she’s hostile toward us... Blaming us for this, even implicitly cursing our impudence for standing here before her. And those marks on her skin look like injuries... Are those from an encounter with a golden-eyed monster?

That was when Ayaka remembered that the Goddess had been weakened by the Demon King Essence.

Ah, that must be it. Hijiri-san left my side to go and check on the Goddess... We need her to return to the old world, after all. If she happened to die, we may never be able to return home.

Ayaka looked around. “By the way, Goddess... Where is Hijiri-san?”

“I *know* right—?”

“Eh?”

“I mean, you must be so worried about her?”

“Y-yes. Ahem, d-did something happen?”

The Goddess stopped—she looked surprised. “Oh, my?”

“Eh?”

What is she so surprised about?

“My, my? My, my, my, my, my? That reaction... You *truly* don’t know, do you...? She... Hijiri came to me, hiding her true intentions at first, but...”

She stopped, reflecting on what she was about to convey—it seemed as if the words had slipped out, before she even realized what she was saying.

There was a strange feeling of mismatch at work here—like Ayaka and the Goddess were talking at cross purposes. Vicius observed her for a few more moments before continuing.

“Sogou-san... There’s something I have to tell you.”

And then she said that the Takao sisters had betrayed her.

“Hijiri-san, and... Itsuki-san...? Th-that can’t be! What do you mean?!”

The Goddess’s shoulders sank—she looked deeply disappointed. “There’s nothing more to tell, I’m afraid. Her paranoia was running wild, I believe she thought I had some kind of plot against her! I very much doubt she was thinking clearly and making rational decisions...”

“N-no...”

The other students were deeply shocked as well.

The last words that Hijiri spoke echoed in the back of Ayaka’s mind.

Ah... I see. She wasn’t going to protect the Goddess...

She was going to defeat her...

But why?

Ayaka’s restless pulse began beating even faster. “Wh-where is Hijiri-san?! What happened to the two of them?! D-did they...”

“I beat them away, and they ran.”

“They r-ran...?”

“No... Perhaps it would be more accurate to say I let them escape.”

Ayaka unconsciously grabbed at the Goddess’s arms as if to shake the answers from her.

“Are they a-alive?!”

“They were injured... But worry not. While I may raise my fists to defend myself, you heroes are my hope. Nay...the hope of this whole world. I will not kill you with such abandon. As I’m sure you’re aware, I am a compassionate Goddess.”

Feeling some of the pressure loosen in her body, and the relief rushing in— Ayaka dropped to her knees.

“I-it’s good to hear that...”

“Nevertheless, we cannot afford complacency. With the Demon King’s continued survival, there is the danger that he will take this as an opportunity to dispense with Hijiri and her sister while we are separated.”

“!”

She’s right—there’s a good chance he will.

“I will send some of my people out after the two of them and take full responsibility for the search. Yet I fear I cannot overlook her attempt to kill me, you understand...?”

“She must have a reason...”

“Excuse me?”

“She m-must’ve had some reason... I mean, this is... It’s Hijiri-san we’re talking about...” Now, Ayaka could finally accept it. She understood the meaning behind Hijiri’s last words to her.

“Fear not.” The Goddess bent her knees a little, placed her hand on Ayaka’s

head, and then brought her eyes level with hers. “This has been known to happen, albeit rarely. You knew her, of course... She was ever so prone to misunderstandings, you recall? I believe she is under the impression that I have no intention of returning you all to your old world.”

Ayaka had already gleaned that from the way that Hijiri spoke before her disappearance.

“Goddess... The heart of the Demon King...”

“A source of immense power, yes, yes. I believe she thought I simply wanted it for myself, rather than to send you heroes home safely.” The Goddess shook her head in exasperation.

“!”

“The heart does contain immense power, that much is true. There was a hero in the past who suffered similar bouts of paranoia, you know. I do understand the appeal of such thoughts...”

“Your view is that Hijiri came to those same misunderstandings...?”

“The heroes are placed under such intense pressure, day in and day out... And human minds can be so brittle, you see? Constantly surrendering to their own desires, yet so unable to admit to their weaknesses... In the end, they search for external causes to foist their problems upon. The paranoia spreads...and they become fixated—completely convinced that someone else is responsible for everything that is wrong with their lives. I understand, I do. I’ve been observing human weakness for so long now.”

“H-Hijiri-san isn’t that kind of person! She’s strong! Not just in battle, her mind is even tougher than her body...!”

The Goddess placed a hand on Ayaka’s shoulder. Her eyes were filled with compassion. “I know. She’s just as you say... Intelligent, too. But I’m sure that intelligence of hers contributed in some part to the breakdown...”

“No.”

“?”

Ayaka got up from the ground and took a single step backward, away from Vicius.

“I’m sorry, Goddess... But I trust Hijiri-san more than I trust you. She... She would never have raised arms against you without proof!” She stood between the Goddess and the other students, shielding them from harm. “If you’re hiding something, then...say it, please. If not, I... I cannot continue to be so cooperative...”

Vicius swayed as she rose to her feet.

“*Ho ho...* Quite the trusted individual, isn’t she? My, my, and she’s done such a wonderful job of ensnaring you with her tricks.”

“I want to...I want to trust you too, Goddess! I want to go back to the old world! But...”

“You’re right.”

“Eh?”

“As for Hijiri-san having her reasons for doubting me—she did, in a fashion. It appears the Wildly Beautiful Emperor had been reaching out to her in secret for some time, deceiving her.”

“The Emperor of Mira...?”

“It seems that behind the scenes, Mira has been plotting to poach heroes from Alion... Likely they’re promising some method of sending you all home without my assistance. They could also be putting forth the idea that defeating me would somehow allow a new and more trustworthy divine to come into this world.”

Ayaka remembered Hijiri’s words—that there might be a way to return to the old world, without the Goddess’s assistance.

If the anti-Goddess Mirans are the ones who put that idea in her head... The theory might make sense. The power of the heroes has to be a threat to Mira—I

can imagine them trying to get us on their side.

The Goddess sighed again—she sounded as if she was on the verge of giving up.

“But in reality, I am the only individual capable of performing a reverse summoning ceremony, and there are no other divines to take my place. I am the only one capable of safeguarding this world. I am its one and only protector.”

But I can't trust her completely...

“Let us stop this, Sogou-san.”

“Eh?”

“You’re not a child any longer. You can think for yourself... Enough now. No more of this emotional and impulsive doubt—grow up a little, why don’t you? I understand it’s easier to simply let your feelings take control, I do... But only children can be forgiven for such selfishness. Prioritizing your own emotions will only end up with somebody getting hurt. I’m saying this for your own good, truly I am. I cannot afford to lose you.”

The Goddess’s voice was firm—parental. There was something different about her...she wasn’t her usual smiling self. It was as if that part of her usual act was missing.

“Perhaps in my past actions I may have given you some reason to doubt me—some fuel for these misunderstandings. I will admit that. But... If I might be honest for a moment. I’m exhausted with this group of heroes. I am truly at my wits’ end with all of you.” She sighed again. “I’ve never summoned heroes quite so strong...or so impossible to control. You’re going to drive me to madness at this rate... I want you to defeat the Demon King so I can send you back to your old world as soon as possible. That is the truth of it”

The Goddess sounded annoyed.

There really is something different about her—this isn't the surface-level

Goddess we're normally exposed to... It makes what she's saying sound more believable—she's not just trying to win us over with words. Even if some of the things she's saying are harsh.

"Very well. I will overlook their transgressions."

"Eh?"

"If you, Ayaka Sogou, defeat the Demon King, I will overlook all the treacherous actions of Hijiri Takao and Itsuki Takao, and the betrayal of Takuto Kiriwara."

"Overlook...?"

"I will search for them of course—but I will not prosecute them."

"!"

"Of course, I'm not sure if they will believe such a promise coming from me. Depending on the circumstances, I may have to send you out to retrieve them, Sogou-san. No, I think you are perfectly suited to the task. Your job will be to bring them back—that's what a class representative is for, is it not?"

"Y-yes..."

"If it will be too hard on you to fight Kiriwara-san—then I shall be the one to capture him."

"Y-you, Goddess...?"

"I'm incredibly weakened by the presence of Demon King essence—but so long as that is no obstacle, I possess power surpassing any of you heroes. Even in my weakened state, I was capable of driving away those two Takao sisters—that is the reason I am still standing here before you today."

She's right. She was under the influence of the Demon King Essence, but she still beat away Hijiri and Itsuki.

"Do not worry, I will do my utmost to capture Kiriwara-san without harming him too much. I might also attempt to entice him away from the Demon King's

clutches... You are to convince the Takao sisters to come back to us once they are found—and to defeat the Demon King himself. Let me repeat myself—with the other two S-class heroes deceived by our enemies and missing in action... You are the last hope of this world, Sogou-san.”

“Goddess...”

Vicius’s expression was the very picture of sincerity. “You wish for all of your classmates to return to the old world without exception, do you not?”

“I-I do...”

“I expect Asagi and the rest of her group to return eventually.”

“I was informed that after their battle against the Demon King’s armies in Yonato that contact with them was lost...”

“We have received word from them.”

“Ah!”

“They were stopped by Miran forces on their way back to Alion and are presently in hiding.”

“N-no! I have to go and save them!”

“They wrote in a letter to me that they require no aid—explaining only that this encounter is likely to delay their journey back to us. Of course, I have no intention of waiting for their return. I have dispatched my servants to attempt further contact. Focus your attention on the Demon King and this matter of the Takao sisters for now, if you could.”

“Y-yes... Ahem, and...”

“What now?”

“—No word yet of Yasu-kun?”

He was sent west on a special mission... I wish the Goddess had asked me about that first. Though given our relationship, that might have been difficult.

“I will do my best to ensure he can join up with Asagi and the others.”

“Thank you...”

“Once that is accomplished—let us begin preparations for the final battle.”

The final battle... If I can just defeat the Demon King, we can wrap all this up, and finally... Everyone can get home safely—to the old world.

I have to do this. Me.

The only worry she had remaining was—Kirihara Takuto.

He’s in enemy territory right now—there’s no guarantee he’ll make it out alive.

“Ayaka-chan... A-are you okay?” Minamino Moe sounded terrified.

“Eh?”

“Y-you... You had a kind of scary look on your face...”

Ayaka jumped back to reality and looked around. Her classmates had all taken a few steps away from her.

“Ah... I-I’m sorry. So many strange things have happened in such a short time that it’s hard to believe. Hijiri-san, Kirihara-kun... I haven’t organized my feelings about all of this yet... Perhaps I’m a little too fired up.” Ayaka tried to force a smile, and Suou Kayako stepped forward and took her hand. “Ah—!”

“Don’t try and shoulder this burden all on your own.” She squeezed Ayaka’s hand tightly.

“I’m not strong, but I can help you... Maybe not as much as Hijiri-san could, but...”

“Suou-san...”

“You aren’t alone, Sogou-san. I just want you to know that.”

“Y-yeah!” Nihei Yukitaka chimed in.

“Yeah! S-Suou-san’s right!” Murota Erii added.

“L-like, what happened to the Takao sisters was a shock, sure...! But, like, they

just got the wrong idea 'bout the Goddess, didn't they? That's why, like...the Goddess coulda killed them, but she didn't. She's even sayin' that Kiri-hara can come back! Asagi and Yasu and all the rest are coming back too, yeah? I-it's okay! I mean, like, things looked real bad for a while...but we're still here! We're still alive!"

"Y-yes... We're still here... Still alive..."

They're right—this isn't over yet. And I'm not alone.

"Thank you... Suou-san... All of you..."

I'm going to protect you—everyone that's here to support me. I have to protect my classmates—no matter what.

It was then that Ayaka suddenly remembered the note that Hijiri had given her...

I wonder what it says? I'll read it...later...when I'm alone.

The Goddess brought her hands together, and a familiar smile appeared on her face. "What a wonderful spirit of help and cooperation you all possess. Truly, how beautiful it is! ♪"

Ayaka looked at the Goddess.

I knew it. Something's off. There's something different about her.

THE GODDESS VICIUS

"WELCOME, VICIUS-SAMA. Thank you for coming."

"Heh heh, thank you."

The Temple of the Order of Vicius was located in the west quarter of the capital of Alion. The Order of Vicius itself was made up of only the Goddess's most ardent and devoted believers.

"Did you suffer any losses in the recent ambush by the Demon King?"

“Some were greatly sickened by his presence—but that is all.”

“*Oh oh ho*, I’d expect nothing less of my beloved followers.”

“Oh... Th-thank you, thank you...”

“I’m going to the basement. I’m sure you haven’t admitted anyone else to the lower levels, as I’ve commanded.”

“Yes, Goddess. Not even a mouse has been down there in your absence.”

“What wonderful faith you have shown me. After your death, I will guide you to the gates of heaven myself.”

The latch opened with a harsh click.

Vicius descended the stairs alone. The further she descended, the stronger the feeling of absolute silence grew around her. Once the stairs leveled off, she walked down a hallway and stopped before a single door. Touching a crystal in the wall, she was approved for entry. Twice more she repeated the process at the next two doors she passed through on her way.

The minimally decorated room she came to at last was made of a rare crystal, said to be the strongest substance in the world. In the center of the room on a pedestal, was a faintly glowing, rhombus-shaped crystal. Its origin was not of this continent. Vicius walked over and examined the crystal’s color.

“No problems, it appears.”

Shutting out the vexing emotions flooding her mind, she left the room and resealed the doors behind her. She returned to the hallway and took a different door this time.

“You’ve been reborn then...” said the Goddess, leaning a little against the door frame. “*Oh ho ho*, how do you feel?”

“Mother?”

“I may have need of you soon. Though I do wish I’d had a little longer to

prepare you fully.”

“Mother...”

“But I’m sure you’ll be just marvelous out there—Oyamada-san.”

“Mother.”

Oyamada Shougo was officially “undergoing treatment”—but that was somewhat different from the truth.

“Soon, I will awaken the others. That ungrateful, jumped-up pair of foolish sisters have interfered with my plans. I’ve had to accelerate things a bit...”

“Mother...”

The thought of the crystal floated back into Vicius’s head.

No... For now, this should be enough.

“Oh oh ho... This might even turn out to be a splendid opportunity.”

“Mother!”

After checking on his progress, Vicius climbed the temple stairs, rising step by step to the surface.

The reports on the Country at the End of the World’s conquest should be arriving soon. Once the Forbidden Words Clan have been rooted out, it will be Mira’s turn. Their rebellion is built on such fragile foundations... The death of the Wildly Beautiful Emperor would take all the wind from its sails—that is simply the kind of nation they are. Johndoe should have no problem handling the assassination, his skills suited as they are for such endeavors.

“Tomohiro Yasu meanwhile... Knowing the Sixth Order, I imagine he’s already dead. I suppose I’ll blame that on Miran agents as well.”

I’m sure Ayaka Sogou will detest the Empire of Mira for that. There have been plenty of unexpected twists and turns with these heroes, but some of them do remain quite easy to manipulate.

The Goddess reached the head of the stairs and came out onto the ground

floor once more to find the head of the temple scurrying toward her, unable to hide the panic on his face.

“Mistress Vicius...”

“My, my, my? Whatever is the matter? I’ve rarely seen you so flustered.”

“Th-the... Mistress, the Thirteen Orders of Alion... They—”

The hour was late in the Temple of the Order of Vicius—several shadows loomed in the basement room.

“Thank you all for gathering here to hear this most top-secret mission.”

A man in an eye patch politely bowed at Vicius’s words.

“My sibling and I are delighted that you have selected us for this endeavor.”

His speech was refined and noble, but there was something unpleasant about the man. His long golden hair was tied back, and his beard was finely trimmed and combed. His clothes suggested the elegance and sophistication of a noble, but an unpleasant dirtiness about him remained. It was as if the blood he shed had left indelible stains.

“The Fafnier Siblings—*The Dark Walkers*—thank you ever so much for answering my summons.”

The older Fafnier sister bowed. “Th...thank you! I-I... I’m confident we’re stronger than those White Walkers were, but...w-we’re just shy! They used to love marching about getting famous b-but...we really don’t like the attention! That’s why we’ve turned down so many of your requests... We’re so, so, sorry! But when we heard the White Walkers were dead... I just knew it served them right! Ah! Sorry! I’m sorry!”

She was a tall woman, wearing glasses and a katana hung at her waist. Each time she bowed, her braids bobbed behind her like a tail. She was wearing a deep red outfit, shaded and spattered with darker and lighter patches—random splotches which spoke of the battles she had fought.

“Calm down, sister.”

“B-but...we’ve been refusing Vicius’s requests for so long because we’re shy... And, like, I know we’re way, way stronger than anyone else...b-but we’ve been so shy...”

“I’m sure it will be fine, sister. This mission will not require us to take the public stage.”

“R-really? Th-then I suppose I could manage it...”

Kaijin Fafnier and her younger brother Lancer Fafnier were the sole members of the Dark Walkers. They were not well known, and they never accepted missions that might lead them into the public eye. They had been hiding in the shadow of the White Walkers for years, and very few knew their names. Vicius had been saving them for a special occasion—deliberately preventing any word of their strength from getting out, while agonizing over how she might use them as pawns.

They’re so mentally unstable, these two are even more difficult to deploy than that Sword of Courage outfit.

Nevertheless, the Goddess had little choice.

They aren’t as strong as Lewin Seale or Johndoe, of course—but these two will be powerful tools.

Another of the shadows in the basement spoke.

“Even supposing the Heroes from Another World have their hands full against the Demon King... You’ve got the Sword of Courage and the Thirteen Orders of Alion under your sway, don’tcha Goddess? If you’ve taken the trouble to call us... Could it be that somethin’s happened to ‘em?” asked a red-haired girl. She was the leader of the mercenary band called the Saber-toothed Tigers—Riri Adamantine.

“They were dealt a serious blow in a recent battle against the forces of Mira.”

“So they got beat?”

The Goddess's shoulders sank despondently. "Much as I don't care to admit it, yes..."

"The Sword of Courage and the Sixth Order both? Wait a minute. You're sayin' *the* Lewin Seale and *the* Johndoe both got taken out?"

"I can't blame you for being surprised. You were quite aware of their strength of course... It's not for certain that both of them are dead, but...it is likely, yes."

Given no more reports have come in from them regarding the Country at the End of the World incident... I should assume they have been defeated. Given how much Lewin Seale believed in me and the dependence he felt, and the rights and freedoms I afforded to Johndoe—not to mention the matter of his reward—it's very difficult to imagine they could have betrayed me.

Who could even make use of Lewin's talents, even supposing they turned traitor. As for Johndoe, I doubt he'd be willing to forfeit the reward I promised him.

"It was such a shock to me as well. I almost jumped out of my skin, you know..."

Riri looked doubtful. "Mira's strength in the field is surprisin'..."

"They were hiding their claws. It does rather support the rumor that they were holding back in the Demon King's invasion... Mira lost almost none of their forces in that battle for the Magnari capital."

"In other words... You believe they were preparin' for the rebellion when they abandoned Magnar to their fate? If that's how they were playin' it... Can't say I like their tactics."

"Indeed. Just as everybody else was banding together to fight the Demon King's armies, Mira was plotting to rebel against us. How terribly selfish of them. Oh, it disappoints me so."



“So...” Riri glanced back at the core members of the Saber-toothed Tigers who were drawn up behind her. “We ain’t no match for Lewin Seale or Johndoe if they’ve failed you. What do you want us to do?”

“First... Might I make a couple more introductions? First, Emperor Zera.”

“Emperor Zera?” Riri looked to be searching her memory. “Wasn’t there once an emperor of Mira with a name like that...?”

“*Ho ho ho...*” With a husky, hoarse laugh, a white-haired old man stepped out of the shadows—his face was long and thin, and he wore loose fitting clothes that seemed to suggest something of a higher station in life. The man’s long white beard hung down almost to his belt, as did the pure-white hair behind his head.

His eyes were set deep into his skull and glowed with a dull golden light. Twisting his face into an aloof expression, well worn by countless deep wrinkles, he stroked his beard.

“The very same. I am the 26th Emperor of Mira—*The Banished Emperor*, as I am known, Falkendotzera Mira DiAsordseat... *Ho ho ho...* My formal names are so long, please address me as Zera.”

“Huh? W-wait just one second... Hmm?” Riri looked down in confusion and placed a hand to her forehead. “I know about the banished emperor... He went missin’ after he was cast out of Mira. There’ve been all kinds of rumors over the years, but his remains were never found. I think, right? But...he must’a been 70 when he was banished and disappeared...”

“...But that was over *a hundred years ago*, yeah?” Riri almost didn’t seem to believe what she was saying.

“*Ho ho ho*. You know the story well, young lady. But I have no right to tell you the true secret behind the story of mine—do I, Vicius?”

“Quite. Needless to say, there have been some new developments.” Vicius clapped her hands together. “I have awoken the banished emperor for this

mission. I myself have grown and believe the time has come.”

“That doesn’t really explain... Eh, whatever. Stranger things have happened I suppose...”

Seems she’s given up on finding the truth of the matter—that’s just the kind of person she is. Riri cares for her Saber-toothed Tigers... And rather than sacrifice them for glory, she’ll choose to withdraw. That’s exactly what I like about her.

“...The old guy looks strong,” said Kaijin Fafnier, looking over at him enviously. “I think I’m stronger but...I don’t know. I can’t be certain... But he definitely looks strong. Right, Lancer?”

“Yes, sister. Setting aside whether he truly is the banished emperor or not, I sense a clear difference between his power and ours.”

“They say strength knows strength, so...we’re strong too, right?”

Riri looked over at the Fafnier Siblings and sighed. The rest of the Saber-toothed Tiger members all had varying reactions to what was unfolding before them. Some had broken out in cold sweats, others swallowing nervously, where some appeared unaffected, or even wore smiles on their faces...

But no obvious fear from any of them—they trust their leader. With her still alive and well, they will never lose the will to fight.

“So the other person you’re gonna show us... That him?”

The man’s intense presence had been bothering them all for some time. He was obviously at least as strong as the banished emperor—perhaps even more so.

“*Heh, heh...* Then allow me to introduce Shougo Oyamada! *Clap Clap Clap~!*”

A well-built young man emerged from the shadows as the Goddess applauded.

“As I’m sure you’re all aware, he’s a Hero from Another World.”

“My name is Shougo Oyamada. I’m pleased to make your acquaintance. I’m

here to participate in this mission for my mother, Vicius-sama. My name is Shougo Oyamada. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance. Praise be to my supreme mother." Oyamada straightened his back and bowed neatly to those around him.

"Y-you... You *are* Oyamada... Right?" Riri was taken aback. The members of her Saber-toothed Tigers looked confused as well.

"For the Goddess—my most honorable mother, I have been reborn. I am ashamed of the rebellious and violent way in which I used to behave. All I wish for now is to offer myself up to serve Vicius-sama."

"Ahh... Oyamada-san... *Sob*... You've grown up to be such a fine boy. Mother is so proud of you!"

"Mother!" Oyamada's face shone as he embraced the Goddess—and she embraced him back.



Riri looked disgusted. “Th-that’s... The same Oyamada? He looks just the same, but he’s... What the heck happened to him? Seriously...?”

Vicius turned her eyes from Oyamada to her.

“My kind instruction has inspired him to change his ways. At first, I merely intended to heal the mental scars he sustained in battle, but...*heh*. Gradually, he became this instead. Oyamada-san fell in with such a bad sort after coming to this world, you see... I should have cared for him personally, right from the start.”

Emperor Zera stroked his beard thoughtfully as he watched in silence.

“A-ahem...” Kaijin Fafnier broke in. “W-will he t-truly be of use in battle...?”

Oyamada removed his face from the Goddess’s chest and looked at Kaijin.

“I am a capable warrior. Because of my mother... For my mother...”

“B-but...”

Oyamada smiled and held out his hand in a gentlemanly gesture for her to continue. “Say what is on your mind. If we are to take this mission together, we cannot have unresolved issues between us.”

“A-ah... I-I’m sorry... At the White Citadel of Protection...y-you sobbed and wailed and...and ran from your enemies in such a pathetic way! I hear you weren’t of any help at all, and...e-even talking to the other heroes, n-none of them...s-said you were particularly strong or a-anything. T-to be honest, I just, like, have no idea who you are! I’m s-sorry! I don’t want to be mean, really! I just... I wonder if you’ll be of any use to us? I’m sorry, I’m being too honest, aren’t I...?!?”

Oyamada silently took a step away from Vicius, turned his back on her, and hung his head. His shoulders were trembling, and his fists were clenched tight.

“Oyamada-san, are you okay?” asked the Goddess.

Oyamada—was sobbing.

“I-I’m so sorry...!” Kaijin glanced up at him with upturned eyes, shrinking a little at the sight. “Y-you’re crying in remorse... Really? Isn’t it a bit late for that...?”

“The way I acted that day was pathetic...! I feel it in my heart!”

“A-hem... Y-you aren’t going to get mad? I-I’m sorry!”

“Everything you say is true! Do not fear, Kaijin-dono! I will not let it affect me! Thank you... Your criticism gives me another opportunity to banish my past self! Thank you, Kaijin-dono! Thank you, Mother!”

Vicius motioned as if she were moved to tears. “Ohh... You’ve grown so splendidly, Oyamada-san! I’m so happy I did not cast you out but dealt with you passionately. As a mother, I’m so proud of you. From the very bottom of my heart... *Sob.*”

“B-but...!” Kaijin pointed at Oyamada, unable to let the matter drop. “He’s gross! I-I don’t think I could go on a m-mission with some weirdo like him... I-I’m sorry!”

“I’m so sorry, Kaijin-dono! Thank you for your feedback! I’ll do absolutely everything I can do to improve!”

“V-Vicius!” Deciding that talking to Oyamada would get her nowhere, Kaijin turned her attention to the Goddess instead. “Wh-wh...what’s the matter with you...? U-using this failure of a hero for our mission—are you insane?! T-to be honest...I’m disappointed in you, Vicius! I’d accept Ayaka Sogou, sure...b-but this weakling runaway loser?! H-he isn’t going to be of any use to us out there! I don’t know the details of this mission yet...but I’m sorry, he’s just going to drag us down! Vicius! Are you crazy, o-or like what?! That big hole and the huge crack in the wall at the top of the stairs... You take out some of your rage against the building ’cause things a-a-aren’t going your way?! Wh-why don’t you go f—I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I went too far! I-I’ve always thought that stupid deliberate smile of yours was *s-u-p-e-r gro—*”

“Bullet!”

Oyamada moved in an instant—firing his unique skill straight at Kaijin’s head. She crumpled, her legs twisted inward beneath her.

“—ghfh?!” Kaijin’s body bent double, and she dropped to the floor. Vicius watched in silence.

“Who... Who the heck do you think you’re freakin’ talkin’ to, huuuh?! I don’t care what you say ’bout me, freakin’ dummy! B-but...M-Mother! Wh-what the heck did you just say about Mother, jackass?! Huuuh?! I’ll freakin’ kill you! Bullet! Bullet! Bullet! Know your place, scumbag! Bullet!!”

The red bullets struck Kaijin one after the other. Bit by bit, her human shape was torn away.

“Mghhh...! Ghhgh...!”

In mere moments, Kaijin was shredded. Oyamada did not let up.

“Ah—sister—! I’m going to kill you!”

Lancer barely had time to register what was happening. Now crazed with rage, he drew two chained swords from his waist and charged. Oyamada spun to glare angrily at him, his face drenched in blood, and took a deep breath.

“And...Heavy Bullet.”

A newly formed projectile shot from Oyamada’s fist. Lancer deftly dodged out of its path, but the red globe split apart in midair.

“Gah?!”

The bullet scattered into a shotgun blast at close range. Not even Lancer could avoid all the debris. Several of the bullets made contact.

“Eh...?” Lancer looked down at his chest but could see no signs of injury—though he’d been sure several of the red bullets had hit him. “Well, fine. Now I’m going to kill you, Oyamada!”

Then his face twisted. Something was wrong.

“Wh-what...?! M-my body feels s-so...*heavy*?!”

“...Augment Bullet.” Oyamada gathered energy into both his arms and began firing bullets at his own jaw and stomach.

“Wha?! Wh-wha...what are you doing?!” Lancer panicked. “Y-you go crazy or something...? N-no wait...that’s...!”

It was then that Lancer realized Oyamada’s whole body was glowing, surrounded by a kind of red cloak of mana. The bullets he fired into himself only made the glow stronger. Then he stopped. The red glow focused in Oyamada’s right arm, then concentrated further into his right fist, which began to swell and rapidly expand in size.

“How ’bout I test this one out on you... Huuuh?!”

“Kh...! V-Vicius!” Lancer could no longer keep up appearances as he begged the Goddess for help. “Stop him! This broken hero’s no use to anyone! Call him off!”

“*Oh ho ho...* I did rather think that if Oyamada-san was killed by you two, that would be the end of that. But I should’ve expected nothing less from my beloved son! Nh... Now your big sister’s been reduced to such a terrible state, I don’t suppose you’ll ever forgive him, will you? And of course, I’d hate for you to go betraying me like that Wildly Beautiful Emperor did...”

“Y-you... You scumbag, puke-brained Goddess! I told my sister before we came! No good’s ever gonna come from dealing with a foul, cheatin’ Goddess like y—”

“—Last Bullet.”

Oyamada released a massive bullet at Lancer, plowing into him with a dull thud.

“Fgh—!”

Crack—Splat! Crumble... Crumble...

The remains plastered to the stone wall slowly peeled off and fell with a wet slap to the floor. What had once been human was now shapeless and twisted.

“I told you! I told you...! I don’t care about me...b-but I’m not letting anyone insult my mother. I ain’t letting them, y’hear!”

Vicius clapped her hands together.

“I see! ♪ Now you’re even strong enough to defeat the Dark Walkers! What wonderful progress you’ve made, Oyamada-san!”

“Ah! M-my bad! I’m so sorry, Honorable Mother! These were meant to be our allies in the mission! When they insulted your name...I couldn’t help but...”

“Nhh... Well, I’m sure it’s fine. ♪ If that was truly all they had to offer us, they were the weakest ones here. And now we’ve determined just how powerful you’ve become, haven’t we?”

“Y-you’ll forgive me?!”

Vicius stepped toward him.

“Yes, I will. You were simply upset that they insulted your mother, weren’t you, Oyamada-san? I’m glad you acted as you did.”

“Ahh, Mother... *Sob*... You’re so kind... So kind...”

Vicius placed her hands on his temples and looked him straight in the eyes.
“*Ne-ver-theless.*”

“Y-yes?!”

“If any of the Saber-toothed Tigers, or Emperor Zera over there happen to insult me, you must not hate them for it. You must not kill or attack them. I will allow them to speak ill of me—is that understood?”

“...I understand. If that is what my one and only mother wishes.”

“Ahhh... To think your love for me runs so deep! Listen, everyone.” Vicius tore her eyes from Oyamada, and spoke to the others. “Just to be safe...do be careful what you say about me? Oyamada’s education may not be fully *complete* in that regard, you understand?”

“...If I might speak my mind.” Riri, who had been watching all this, smiled at

Vicius. A cold sweat ran down her forehead. “It appears this hero is still somewhat mentally unstable. And if possible, I’d like to work without him. I cannot disobey your orders, if this is what they are...but...”

It looked as if she had more to say—but Riri had seen Oyamada’s rage just as all the others had. Despite the Goddess’s command that he control himself, she was cautious.

She’s choosing her words carefully.

“Of course, you know where each of us lives, Goddess. Each and every member of our Saber-toothed Tigers...”

She knows. Turning her back on me would mean their headquarters—and all their family members who live in and around the capital—would meet such terrible fates.

“Fear not. I merely keep tabs on your group’s membership as a precaution. I intend to reward you greatly for living up to my expectations, you know? The same goes for your present mission. Success will earn you enough land and money to live the rest of your lives in peace. Please, consider this my final task for you and your group. Accomplish this...and a free and plentiful life of rest shall be yours to enjoy.”

She should already know how well I pay—I hired her group to train my heroes, after all. The wages they earned from that were at least enough for a year, perhaps two, of peace from their mercenary work.

Vicius gave Riri a few moments to collect her thoughts. After a long silence—she let out a long, deep breath in apparent determination.

“...We were interrupted, but let’s get back to the vital question at hand. There’s us, this banished-emperor-lookin’ old guy over there, and your son—but what’re we s’posed to be *doing*?”

The invasion of the Country at the End of the World ended in failure, likely due to Mira’s interference. The reports on the failure of the thirteen orders’s invasion

are incomplete—though I can very much imagine what they say.

Those same reports also suggest the two nations formed an alliance during the fighting. The Country at the End of the World appears to have a military and now a reason to raise arms against Alion. Will they continue this alliance with Mira even now that the battle is done? It's likely that the Wildly Beautiful Emperor has some method of gaining access to their nation. Knowing him—he will want Nyaki or Radice at his side.

“Why, the capture of a divine beast, or some other key to opening the door to the Country at the End of the World, of course...” Vicius smiled broadly. “...and the utter destruction of the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.”

Chapter 3:

To Luva, Capital of the Empire of Mira

AFTER LEAVING the Country at the End of the World, we headed west.

Our destination—the Capital of the Empire of Mira, Luva.

The hilly terrain leveled out the further west we got, and eventually we came out into a sparsely forested area.

“According to this map, we should find the road to the capital on the other side of this forest,” said Seras, who was riding atop Sleis in her second stage of transformation. Munin sat behind her, peeking over her shoulder at the map—I was riding the horse I’d taken from the knights of Alion.

I guess Munin could be in her crow form right now, but I know the transformation takes a bit of effort on her part. Her wings are out as well. She’s got that convenient way to tuck them away, but that takes energy too.

Munin gently stroked Sleis. “I’m sorry for the trouble, Sleis. You must be tired with both of us up here?”

Sleis gave an energetic whinny in reply.

“She looks in way better shape than this one, even riding double,” I said, looking down at my own horse.

Sleis brayed at us.

“Heh heh, reliable one, aren’t you? Thank you, Sleis.”

Sleis wasn’t all that much bigger than my horse, but was clearly more powerful—not to mention she had most of our luggage on her back as well.

Still, my mount isn’t bad either—when we were gathering runaway horses on the battlefield, Seras picked out the best of the bunch. Come to think of it... Sleis isn’t just a regular horse, is she?

Slei's power simply far surpassed that of any regular horse.

Whenever Slei received a compliment, Piggymaru squeaked along happily for some reason. The forest around us was growing dark, rippling clouds softly passing by in the dusk-stained sky above.

"Let's take a little break once we're out of the forest."

"Shall we take the road once it's fully dark?"

"Yeah. I'd rather avoid too many seeing us while we're on the move."

Feels like I haven't been in a human village in a long time. None of us are well disguised right now, but we'll have to hide our true identities when there are lots of people around... Kinda makes me think back to Monroy, before we first entered the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters.

But hey—I'm already completely used to blending in.

We prepared our camp for the night and ate dinner.

"Too-ka!" With a munch and a gulp, Munin put her hands to her cheeks in delight, her eyes sparkling. There was a bit of purple cream stuck to the side of the village chief's mouth. "What in the world is this *mont blanc* thing?! What is it made of?!"

"That's a bit hard to answer..." The mont blanc was purple-sweet-potato-flavored, the day's gift from my magic leather pouch.

Yesterday was a health-food kinda green tea and some oyaki... And today, finally the dessert that Seras has been waiting for. Seems like Munin really likes this stuff too.

I had told Munin my real name and the fact that I was a Hero from Another World before we left.

She's an accomplice of ours now... I figured she should know.

As I was thinking, she hurried over to me on her knees.

"What do you mean?!"

“...I mean, it just is what it is.”

“Is the outside world really overflowing with such amazing sweetness?!”

“Nah, this isn’t the kind of thing you’ll find just anywhere, it’s kind of unique to me... It’s like a treat I give to Seras and the others sometimes, as a reward I guess.”

“W-w-well I never! That’s a wonderful talent, Too-ka! Please, you just have to give some to Fugi when you get the chance!”

“Sorry, but I can’t really control what comes out of the bag.”

“Oh? Is that so?”

I explained that the daily rations were randomly selected.

I can’t take credit for the quality of the goods. Anyway...the person who’s really talented is whoever actually made these cakes, not me. If you’re going to compliment anyone, it should be them.

“Squee, squee... Squeeooh! ♪”

“Munch, Munch... Pakyuuhn! ♪”

Piggymaru and Slei approved as well.

Seras had her eyes half-closed and was smiling. “Munch, Munch. ♪ Munch, Munch. Haah...I’m so happy right now...”

Man, it’s even starting to change her character a little, isn’t it?

Munin stared over at her, her eyes filled with want.

...It’s just dessert, you don’t need to get so serious about a bit of sweetness.

“Chief Munin? Is something wrong?”

“I-I wonder, is the taste of yours different from mine?”

Seras was eating a standard chestnut-flavored mont blanc.

Looks like Munin is interested in the different color...

Seras took out her fork. She still had half of hers left. Taking a piece from the side, she held the fork out to Munin, her hand underneath to catch it if it fell.

“Would you like to try?”

“A-are you sure? W-well, I did intend this to happen when I asked...”

Seras laughed. “Please, go ahead.”

“Then if you insist...” Munin sampled the cake that was offered to her.

“Mhhh, it’s delicious—! Oh, this journey could end right now, and I’d have no regrets whatsoever!”

That’d be a big problem for me.

“Thank you, Miss Seras. Here, try some of mine.” Munin held out a piece of her mont blanc for Seras to try. “There we go... Open wide, okay?”

“Ah—ehmm...” Seras glanced over at me in embarrassment... But the allure of the unknown sweet before her was too much to resist. “I’m sorry—*nom.*”

The Princess Knight ate, taking care to do so in the most elegant way she could.

“Mmm—!” Seras placed both hands on her cheeks—her excitement coming across loud and clear.

These are the times when Seras acts her age, and her cute side really comes out... I guess she’s usually being way too much of an adult.

“Right? It’s really delicious, isn’t it? Then, ahem... Here, Too-ka.” Munin offered me some of her purple sweet potato mont blanc.

“I’m used to eating that stuff, you two go ahead.”

I don’t remember eating them that often—but compared to Seras and Munin, sure... I’m used to it.

“That will never do. Here, Too-ka. Open wide?” Munin drew closer, giggling as she brought the cake toward me.

...Can’t really refuse now.

“All right.”

Munch Munch...

The sweetness really spreads through your whole mouth. And not in an overpowering way, just a delicious one.

“Man, this is good... You too, huh?”

“Hm?!”

Seras froze in an amusing pose—she was clearly getting ready to stick some of the cake on her own fork and bring it over to me. “W-well... Since I do have some left...”

“Ah—I’m s-sorry, Miss Seras... I wasn’t thinking, being so forward like this, *heh heh heh*... Will you let Miss Seras do the same?” asked Munin.

And so, I ended up eating some of Seras’s cake as well.

The not-too-sweet chestnut cream, combined with the crispy pie crust base... They really do go together perfectly.

“Right, so this secret weapon of ours—the Forbidden Magic that can disable the Goddess’s protection...”

We sat around the campfire, full after our evening meal and dessert. I set up a black curtain around our small encampment, just in case anyone passed by. Though if anyone did, Piggymaru, Seras, or I would probably notice before it became an issue.

“It has about the same range as your Paralyze skill then, doesn’t it Too-ka?”

This is one of the reasons I didn’t want to travel with the Wildly Beautiful Emperor... We had to go back to the Country at the End of the World and do a test of this Forbidden Magic spell first.

It had worked—I remembered how those nine black chains had shot from Munin’s arm and flown toward their target. She had to say “Binding Curse,

Release,” when casting the spell, with a small pause between the words *Curse* and *Release*. When Munin tried to read the incantation as fast as possible, without any pause, the spell didn’t activate. It also appeared that the target of the spell had to be in visual range—the same as with my status effect skills. The black chains the spell produced didn’t physically wrap around or restrain the target, but disappeared as they were absorbed inside of them. The target’s body would glow once, with a chain-like pattern appearing around them, then the light would dissipate.

I can’t be sure—but that’s likely the signal that the spell was successful. We only tested the spell on a rock, but now we know the process and how it works. I was worried that we might not be able to test the spell without an actual divine, but thankfully things didn’t turn out that way.

As for the blue dragonstone—Munin held it in her hand as she cast the spell, and I watched it glow with pale light and slowly become absorbed into her hand as she performed the incantation. Once she had cast it, it was gone.

That’s one used up—but we still have plenty left. And well, it’s hardly a waste to do at least one test before the real thing.

“Can’t exactly use this Forbidden Magic stuff from super far away like my paralyze skill though... I thought if Piggymaru could link with you that would solve the range issue, but it doesn’t seem like that’s going to work.”

From what I could tell, the linking ability only worked with certain compatible partners—and Piggymaru was only able to link with the first person it had ever connected to.

“So we’re going to need to get in kind of close to Vicius to pull this off...”

“But it’s not enough to just get close, is it?” asked Munin, though it seemed she knew the answer.

“Nope. The incantation’s fairly short, but you’ll need to say it all in time. My skills work the same way. While you’re saying the words, we’ll have to both keep Vicius in range and protect you from any attacks.”

“Then one of us will need to keep the Goddess close, while the other shields Munin from harm,” said Seras, stroking the back of Sleif’s neck.

“...Yep.”

If we’re going to ambush her, we’ll need a distraction... Something to create an opening. We’ll need to create one if we want to finish this for good.

“It’s going to depend on how smart Vicius is. You’ve never met her before, Munin... Neither have you, right, Seras?”

“No... But I have heard from the princess, who dealt with her directly on occasion. The princess said she is cautious when she needs to be, sharp-eyed when necessary... She also has a very capable mind for strategizing, I believe.”

“If that’s coming straight from the princess, I guess it’s reliable intel.”

That also fits with what Erika described of her. She lived near that Foul Goddess for a time, so I’ve already heard her take—laced with a good deal of profanity.

“The theory is that she sees all that are not divine—humans in particular—as incredibly low and inferior beings. I also believe she uses her arrogance to hide her incredible combat abilities from others,” added Seras.

Erika had the same impression of her.

“That might be a way for us to trip her up...”

Maybe she thinks there’s no way a human could ever kill a divine... No inferior being could ever threaten her. I expect that’s the way she’s lived all this time—the way she disposed of me speaks to that.

“This is how it’s always been, so it must be the same this time too.” The rule of thumb: Humans do just the same.

“This has always been fine, so of course it’s going to be fine again in the future.” That’s what creates the opening.

If we’re going to crush her, it has to be there. Vicius’s only real enemy is the

Demon King, meaning she can't be completely arrogant. She can't ever be entirely comfortable, so long as he's around. The Root of All Evil is a kind of limiter on the divines—forcing them to play their part.

“Erika said she's usually hiding her true self...” I said.

“There is a lot that she does not say publicly, and she keeps many secrets from others, according to the princess.”

“So she's an actor, huh.”

That vapid smile of hers—there's nothing under the surface. Even just remembering it now sends chills down my spine. If only I can make that cursed face of hers twist up in pain and regret...this journey for the Forbidden Magic will have been worth it.

“During the attunement process, there was a phrase in the incantations you used... Forbidden Magic was originally called *primitive magic*, wasn't it?”

Makes sense, I suppose. It's only called forbidden because that Foul Goddess forbade anyone from using it. It had a proper name before she labeled it that.

Seras folded her arms in a typical, dramatic thinker's pose.

“*Primitive magic*... It's possible that those incantations form the foundation of all magic in this world.”

I brought one of my knees up to my chest and looked over at Munin.

“No matter where this magic's from...whether my status effect skills can crush that Foul Goddess all depends on your primitive magic. The Forbidden Magic. I'll do everything in my power to make sure your spell lands. I'm counting on you, Munin.”

“I won't let you down.” She placed a hand to her chest and bowed her head with a peaceful smile upon her face. “I will create a path for you and your status effect skills to get through, even if doing so costs my life. It is for our shared future—for the future of everyone.”

She looks determined... Maybe resolved is a better word, instead. I'm sure

right now I'm supposed to tell her to stop—not to throw her life away. I'm meant to tell her to think about the people waiting for her back home. I should say that all of us are going to make it back there safe and sound. That would be comforting. But knowing the history of the Kurosaga, and how long it's taken for this opportunity of theirs to come forth...I can't bring myself to say any of those things. What's "comforting" would only be a kind of denial to Munin... Denying the desire for revenge of all those countless Kurosaga who've suffered all this time.

I can't dismiss their resolve—not when it's taken them so long to get to this point. It's precisely because of the weight of emotion she carries that Munin can value them more than she does her life.

"I'm betting everything on this too."

Even my life.

Several days later, we arrived at the capital city of the Empire of Mira—Luva.

"M-my apologies. Please wait here for a moment."

Official access to Luva was through the east gate of the Third District—a huge chalk entrance set with magnificent white carvings. The high and imposing arch curving above us almost seemed to swallow us as we approached, and several guards rushed over in our direction. When I showed them our writ of passage, they immediately relaxed.

"A greeting party will arrive shortly from the castle, so please wait here," said one of the guards, explaining that they had been given instructions for our arrival—we were sent to a guard post by the gate in the meantime. I heard voices from the soldiers outside as we sat waiting in the room.

"Those are the rumored..."

"Yes, Belzegea, of the Lord of the Flies Brigade..."

"The former Ashint member... The one who defeated the Elite Five, and that

Inner Circle demon with his cursed magic...?”

The only voices we heard were from outside, however—the guards waiting by our side were clearly more aware of our presence and didn’t speak to us any more than was necessary. As for the ones waiting nearer to the gate—I could hear some conversation and clearly see them stealing glances at us.

“B-but isn’t that Seras Ashrain...? I’ve never seen her in person before...”

“The wanted posters and portraits don’t even compare to the real thing... I never imagined she could be more beautiful in person...”

Seems like almost everyone knows that Seras is a member of the Lord of the Flies Brigade now—news must’ve spread across the continent after the Battle for the White Citadel. Given there are posters and portraits of her in every nation now, there’s not much need for her to hide her face now that we’re in the capital, let alone on the road. The fact that Seras is here also proves that we’re the real deal—the true Lord of the Flies Brigade.

“That other silver-haired woman... She’s beautiful as well.”

“H-her figure... I’m even more into her than Seras Ashrain...”

“Oh, the silver-haired one just smiled at us...!”

“...I’m in love.”

Munin’s face was on full display, though with her black wings tucked away, there was no way for anyone to identify her as a member of the Forbidden Words Clan.

Couldn’t exactly have her hide her face for the whole signing ceremony, could I? Best to have them aware of her true face now, so they might give her a free pass in the future if we need it.

“Two beautiful women at his side... Just who is this Belzegea guy...?”

“Ashint always was a mysterious group, I guess...”

I was the only one hiding my face and wearing my Lord of the Flies outfit.

Neither Munin nor Seras were in their fly knight garb.

“B-but it’s reassuring to know they’re on our side now...”

“Yeah... It’s just as his majesty says. It’s like heaven itself is protecting us in this war.”

So they know that the Wildly Beautiful Emperor is forming an alliance with the Lord of the Flies Brigade, then—possibly because the emperor has spread the news himself.

I heard footsteps from outside, and a man appeared in the doorway to the guard post. The man had been at the negotiations—the aide with rounded glasses.

“I’m sorry to keep you all waiting.”

I think his name was...

“Allow me to reintroduce myself, I am Hawk Landing, chief aide to Lord Luheit.”

I stood up as soon as he arrived.

“It has been too long, Lord Hawk.”

“We have been waiting, Captain Belzegea... Vice-captain Seras Ashr...”

Hawk’s words trailed off, and he stood frozen in place, staring at Seras. A redness began to spread slowly across his face—only growing as, after some time, he pushed his glasses back up on his nose and continued.

“M-my apologies... I participated in the previous negotiations of course, but t-today is the first time I have seen your true face...”

Come to think of it, Seras was wearing her mask during the negotiations, huh? I think at the time I was worried that the people there might end up paying so much attention to her it’d be a distraction.

“Heh heh, I understand. When I first met Miss Seras, I was just as taken aback, and the shock took me some time to recover from. I can sympathize!” Munin

said.

Hawk nodded in appreciation and, after a slight embarrassed smile, turned back to the business at hand.

“Finally... Ambassador of the Country at the End of the World, Chief Munin—warmest greetings. I welcome you all to Luva, capital city of the Empire of Mira.”

Hawk checked his pocket watch. Then he motioned to the door, looking as if he was in a bit of a hurry. “Then if you please, I will guide you straight to the castle. I’ve prepared a carriage for you outside.”

The carriage was grand, white, and shining clean with extravagant decorations—covered in fine inlaid silverwork, even the wheels looked expensive. The horses pulling the carriage were white and looked refined and sophisticated right down to their reins. As I admired them, Seras led Sleii out from the simple stable attached to the guard post.

“I’d like to ride Lady Sleii to the castle alongside the carriage with the rest of you... Would that be acceptable?” she asked.

Hawk glanced at the carriage.

“N-no...” he said, trying his best to answer her gently. “I believe you would attract a great deal of attention on your way to the castle. It’s not in our best interests to stand out... Would you allow one of my soldiers to escort your mount up to the castle in your stead?”

“No,” I said, refusing the offer. I walked over to Sleii and asked her to follow our carriage to the castle in her second stage of transformation, then turned back to Hawk. “She’ll come—there won’t be any problems.”

Hawk quickly looked back and forth between Sleii and the carriage, before nodding that he understood. We walked toward the carriage together, and Hawk hurried to get us aboard, arriving at the door first and holding it open for us.

“...”

“Sir Belzegea? Ahem... Is something wrong?”

“Nothing. This is a fine carriage.”

“You are an important guest of our nation. It’s only natural that we would prepare for your arrival.”

I thanked him, and Hawk gestured for us to board with an elegant smile.

“Welcome to Luva.”

I looked inside the carriage and saw there was a young man sitting in the back seat, a little slouched over.

“—It is good to see you again, Lord of the Flies.”

It was the Wildly Beautiful Emperor. I straightened my back and bowed to him with as much politeness as I could muster.

“I never imagined you might come to welcome us personally, Your Majesty. I’m surprised to see you here. It is an honor to be so received.”

“Judging by the reactions of your companions, I *do* think you expected me to be sitting here, however.” The Wildly Beautiful Emperor smiled, just a little.

“Well, I have my reasons for being here. It’s rather difficult to listen in on a horse-drawn carriage in motion—they are indispensable at times when confidential conversation is required.”

The carriage was elegant, inside and out.

Makes sense I guess, though—this thing’s for an emperor.

The windows were covered with thick silk curtains.

So we can’t enjoy the scenery, but the emperor can travel in this thing incognito—that’s the trade-off, like it or not.

The seats were wide—spacious enough for Seras and Munin to sit on either side of me. Sitting opposite, in the center of his seat, was the emperor. Hawk sat to his right, his back straight.

I could sense his nervousness before we got on board—especially toward Seras and Munin, who'd apparently completely seen through his ruse. Never in his wildest dreams did he imagine that the emperor himself might come out to greet us, I bet... But like the emperor said, I did notice something was off.

First of all, though he was trying to hide it, Hawk seemed strangely hurried. It was like he knew he had to return to the carriage as soon as possible. He was glancing over at it a lot too. Now it all makes sense... The person waiting inside was far more important than us.

"Lord of the Flies, how were your travels?" asked the emperor.

"The writ of passage you granted us truly proved a powerful ally on the road. We arrived at the capital with surprisingly little incident thanks to its influence. Thank you so much for your help in easing our travels."

"I'm happy to hear that you were admitted through the checkpoints."

Happy, eh?

I chose to pass through those checkpoints on the main road, only because I know the emperor didn't give us that writ solely out of the kindness of his own heart. There are only a small number of people who hold them. And the number actively using them at checkpoints is even fewer. News probably spreads quickly to the capital whenever they're spotted—likely by magical war pigeon. He wanted to keep track of our movements as we traveled through his domain. We could've made it here without the main road, or ever presenting the writ—but that would have made the emperor suspicious. I decided to take the path through those checkpoints to show my trust in Mira. Maybe all this strategizing seems insignificant, but these are the kinds of things that can really stack up and pay off in the end.

I praised the emperor's writ of passage again and once more offered my thanks before changing the subject.

"How fares the battle against Ulza?"

We've heard stories on the road of the war's progress, but right now I've got the very emperor who started it all sitting opposite me—nobody's going to have more information than him.

"Have you heard of the fall of the Fortress of Zoldo?"

"I have, yes."

Seras had already explained to me the significance—the fortress was important to Ulza's defense.

"My forces have been slowly pushing their lines forward following the capture of Zoldo—though the arrival of Alion reinforcements led by Baron Pollary has slightly impacted the speed of our advance."

Baron Pollary, eh? The noble who fought in the Battle for the White Citadel.

"That said, it's simply a matter of time before my armies crush him in the field. Your decimation of the Thirteen Order of Alion—in partnership with the forces of the Country at the End of the World, of course—has played a large part in our success. With matters as they stand, what concerns me most in the battles to come is the appearance of the Heroes from Another World."

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor continued, watching me for my response.

"Incidentally... While it was only temporary, I understand that you fought alongside Baron Pollary at the White Citadel. I know you may feel conflicted about facing former allies in battle, but joining our fight against the forces of Alion will necessitate swallowing such emotions, no matter what. Even if that may mean going to war against the Empire of Bakoss with whom you also fought side by side."

The emperor slowly, but sharply turned his eyes to Seras.

"...Even the Holy Empire of Neah cannot be ruled out as future combatants."

He wants to check if we're prepared for that.

Seras neatly placed her hands, one on top of the other in her lap, and flitted her thin eyelashes to look down at them.

“I am prepared for that possibility. Yet...”

“Do not fear. I only intend on using Mira’s forces and the armies of the Country at the End of the World to suppress them in the east.”

Seras was silent—she didn’t move.

She had told me that she had no regrets, but I could clearly see the complex emotions swirling within her. She might be forced to oppose her princess—albeit indirectly. Munin looked past me, directly at Seras—peeking over with a look of concern. I leaned forward a little to speak with the emperor.

“Personally, I believe the Holy Empire of Neah would be a worthy ally to your cause.”

Seras raised her head in shock. The emperor crossed one of his legs over the other and looked at me with a clever smile.

“Hmh, that’s it.”

Hawk then pushed the curtain aside a little to peek out.

“How should we proceed, Your Majesty?”

“Keep driving. I wish to continue this conversation.”

Hawk opened a small panel in the carriage wall behind him and rang the bell inside three times. I felt us change direction—*we’re on a different route*.

“I believe Cattlea Straumss of Neah is a fine leader,” the Wildly Beautiful Emperor continued. “Excuse my impoliteness, but I find it hard to believe her the daughter of a man like Emperor Ortola. Should we be able to convince her of the benefits of defying the Goddess, I also believe she would make the wise decision to join our cause...”

“But...” I noted, “given their borders with Alion, Ulza and Bakoss, it would be difficult for them to come out publicly against the Goddess at present.”

“Quite so. Yet...”

“If we were to contact them in secret... They could prepare themselves to

rebel against the Goddess the moment the tide turns against her?”

The emperor smiled in satisfaction at my interruption.

“Yes. You mention their position... Strategically, they occupy territory directly at our enemies’ backs—they would be invaluable in that respect.”

He glanced at Seras once more.

“Most of all, I’m sure Lady Seras does not truly wish to do battle against the princess she once served, nor fight the Holy Knights of Neah she once led. I also understand that the Lord of the Flies Brigade’s internal hesitation to do battle against Neah may pose issues in the future.”

Might sound like he’s being really considerate right now—but there’s a different nuance to his words depending on how you look at it. He’s asking us to convince the princess of Neah to join him. This emperor really does try and use whatever he can to his advantage. I’m sure he was planning on leading the conversation in this direction as soon as the topic of Neah came up.

“Well, let’s set that aside—keep it in the back of our minds as a potential option, perhaps. We’ve still yet to receive any reports that Neahan forces are preparing to participate in the war against us.”

“As for Bakoss... What is your view on them, Your Majesty?” I asked.

“Hmph... That emperor’s one I can’t read. He wants to expand his nation’s borders—we could convince him to ally with us with promises of territory in the east of Ulza and some parts of Alion upon our victory. Depending on the circumstances, that could buy their loyalty. But with the Elite Five gone and Black Dragon Knights mostly destroyed, I don’t see Bakoss as much of a threat.”

“What of Magnar?”

“That all depends on the White Wolf Riders.”

“I believe their king is currently missing?”

“The people think him dead, yes... I don’t believe the White Wolf King could be so easily killed. But even in the case that he is, the next in line to his throne

would be his little brother, the ‘Black Wolf’ Sogude Sigmus.”

Seras told me that too.

“Sogude appears to have a close and somewhat friendly relationship with the Goddess. With Magnar in the north forming the front lines of all battles against the Root of All Evil, they are generously supported by Alion. I believe the ties between their two nations remain strong.”

“What of Yonato, then?”

“I’m confident they’ll side with Alion. They have little love for Alion itself I believe, but the relationship between their nation and mine is troubled. As I’m sure you’re aware however, they sustained a considerable number of casualties in the Demon King’s invasion. It will take time for their main force, the Holy Order of the Purge, to regain its former strength.”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor continued, twirling his hair through his fingers as he spoke.

“I am also told that their secret holy treasure and combat weapon the Holy Cavalry was destroyed. Its sole rider the Holy Priest of Yonato was heavily wounded. For the time being, they will be no threat to us. The absence of Yonato’s Four Holy Elders and Ulza’s Dragonslayer from the battlefield is quite fortunate for our nation. Yet...” There was a twinge of regret on his face as he spoke. “In truth, I wanted the Four Holy Elders and the Dragonslayer by my side in this war. I reached out to them in secret... The Dragonslayer in particular is an impeccable warrior in both character and strength of arms—he is far too good to be under the command of a man like the Monster Slayer King.”

Come to think of it, Sogou mentioned she owed him a lot too.

I had heard of his exploits at the White Citadel of Protection after the battle had ended.

It’s always like this... The good ones work themselves into the ground—and the better they are, the faster they burn out.

“Setting aside the Heroes from Another World, the only remaining forces we need truly be careful of are the Black Wolf Riders and the Disciples of Vicius.”

The Disciples of Vicius—Nyaki’s “Nee-nya” among them, Nyantan Kikipat.

“Oh—and one other...” The emperor placed a hand to his jaw, as if he’d just remembered them. “The Saber-toothed Tigers... They are impeccably talented warriors.”

I did find out they were pretty famous after I met them first in the Mils Ruins—but so much so that the Wildly Beautiful Emperor brings them up in conversation?

I remembered the considerate way they approached me, back when we first met.

They seemed like they had common sense—a good bunch, more or less... But as warriors I wasn’t all that impressed with them. Compared to the powerful enemies I’ve faced since Mils, the difference between them is clear—I don’t think they could ever have challenged Civit, Johndoe, or even the Sword of Courage. Of course it’s possible they’ve gotten stronger since I last saw them.

“They’re a mercenary band that owns their own base of operations—they excel in fighting as a group. They’re close to the Goddess as well, though. If we’re going to war, they’ll be on the opposite side.”

Plenty of enemies, huh? I’ve had fairly recent updates on the goings-on in different nations, but getting to talk directly to the leader of one of these countries really is valuable. Things look different with the emperor’s perspective and insight as well. It’s good to get a refresher on all this intel.

“I think I understand the current state of each of the countries, the main players in terms of military strength, and their relative allegiances. Apologies for asking, Your Majesty—but does Mira have the strength to defeat Alion in battle?”

The emperor didn’t look at all offended by the question.

“My army’s main strength is the Band of the Sun, of course, but every soldier under my command is better trained than the men of any other nation on the continent. I take pride in that fact. The troops of Yonato are well led, and those of Magnar are seasoned veterans of battle—but in this war we face an enemy led by a foolish king. Nothing more. Though, obviously, there is no room for complacency.”

He glanced over at Seras before continuing.

“If, for instance... We had the princess of Neah on our side, this war would become much more manageable.”

It’s my job to respond to this kind of stuff.

“I will discuss the matter with Seras in due course. Yet... If our brigade were found to be allied with Mira—contact with Princess Cattlea would become dangerous, both for her and for us. Surely, you understand?”

“Quite, yes... Vicius wouldn’t let a thing like that get past her. I have no intention of rushing you. Please, think it over in your own time.”

“...Can the anti-Sacred Alliance forces win this war?” I said the words before I really realized what I was saying.

“There is a chance, yes.” The emperor answered without hesitation. “If there is a yet unknown factor to be considered, it would be the Heroes from Another World.”

“Do you not believe the Demon King to be an unknown as well, Your Majesty?”

“The Heroes from Another World are the ones who will defeat him, after all.”

“And so, everything depends on them. I see... If they are taken out of the picture, Mira has the upper hand in this war according to your analysis?”

“Even should the ‘Black Wolf’ and Cattlea Straumss declare against us, yes. Though I’m sure they would be fearsome foes—the elite forces they are capable of fielding are far too few in comparison to those that Mira commands.

In short, all the unstable elements on this continent have been removed—except for the Heroes from Another World.”

The Elite Five, The Four Holy Elders, The Dragonslayer, The Holy Priest of Yonato, the Demon King’s Inner Circle’s top three, Yonato’s Holy Cavalry, The Sword of Courage, The Thirteen Orders of Alion, and Johndoe—plenty of actors have already dropped out. With things as they stand, Mira might actually be able to march on Alion without any problems.

That’s why Vicius has to pay attention to Mira’s movements whether she wants to or not—especially with the recent incident at the Country at the End of the World. So long as the Forbidden Magic exists, Vicius can’t afford to ignore Mira completely. But if the Demon King’s armies invade again, that’ll only cause more chaos. The more intense the fighting gets between Alion and Mira... The more that pushes the Goddess’s side into a corner... And the better that serves as a smokescreen that I can use to get closer to the Goddess herself.

This business of Neah—the Wildly Beautiful Emperor is trying to use that to his advantage... Then I’m not holding back in using him either. He can kick up a storm on the battlefield and distract the Goddess for me.

“And so... You intend on convincing the heroes to join you, Your Majesty?”

“In fact—I have already reached out to a certain S-class hero in Alion several times now.”

That’s a bit of a surprise. I figured he would try to make contact... But I didn’t think he’d have already been successful.

“I’d like you to keep this matter a secret in particular,” he said.

“Understood. But if you have already established contact, then...”

“When signs of the Demon King’s coming invasion began to appear, I was able to conceal one of my spies in the Alion capital. When the Demon King began to move against her in earnest, the Goddess had no time to pay such serious attention to those around her.”

I hear the Demon King is the Goddess's natural enemy—only makes sense that she'd focus on him.

"I once met a female hero—an S-class named Ayaka Sogou... Is that the hero you have been in contact with?"

"No. My contact's name is Hijiri Takao."

The Takao sisters, huh?

"I've had some positive responses—it doesn't seem that this Hijiri girl has much trust in the Goddess. Her responses have been favorable, likely because I told her that it's possible for her to return to her old world without the Goddess's aid. The last message I received mentioned that she would mention this to Ayaka Sogou when the opportunity presented itself. I have yet to receive further word."

So she's trying to get Sogou on board too. That might just work and Takao Hijiri could manage it.

"From the reports, Hijiri seems to be an intelligent individual. She also mentioned that her younger sister—an A-class hero in her own right—would likely defect with her. Yet...I do not completely trust Hijiri Takao. We have never met in person before, unlike Asagi Ikusaba. I must be wary that my attempts to recruit an S-class hero do not play directly into the Goddess's hands."

"From the way you speak, Your Majesty... Have you yet to inform her that Asagi Ikusaba and the other heroes assembled here have joined your cause?"

"With no way to prove such a claim without an in-person meeting—I have decided to delay revealing that fact."

...So those are the kind of moves he's been making behind the scenes.

If Sogou were to come with the Takao sisters and join Mira's cause... That would ease a lot of my worries about taking down the Goddess—especially with Sogou out of the picture. Depending on how the Takao sisters play this, the whole hero situation might get resolved much more easily than I expected.

“You mean to say that so long as something can be done about the heroes, the Goddess is your only remaining concern in this war?”

“Yes—there is still much that we do not know about the Goddess herself. But if we are to defeat her, it must be done decisively. That is why I seek the secrets of the Forbidden Magic.”

The emperor then turned to look at Munin for the first time. She sat neatly in the carriage beside me, looking appropriately nervous for the situation.

“The sealed room you mentioned during our negotiations, I take it?” Munin asked softly, careful not to sound too grave.

“Hmph, yes. From what I hear, Forbidden Magic is capable of stealing the defensive abilities of the divines.”

He probably means the disable spell that we’ve got.

“If that room contains Scrolls of Forbidden Magic—I believe that will only increase the viability of Asagi Ikusaba’s secret weapon.”

Ikusaba Asagi’s secret weapon—her unique skill, eh?

...Might be the right time to ask about that, too.

“Her secret weapon... During the negotiations, Your Majesty, you mentioned it could have the power to bring down the divines?”

“Yes. The power which she possesses—in some ways, it could even kill God.”

That powerful, huh? If it isn’t a status effect skill... Will it be able to get through that Goddess’s accursed Dispel Bubble? In that case, even without the Forbidden Magic, we’d be able to take down the Goddess with Asagi’s unique skill. Doesn’t seem like the emperor is willing to give me any more details than that about what she’s actually capable of though...

“This all still comes as quite a shock to me... I never thought the Heroes from Another World would betray the Goddess.”

“Asagi believes I have a better chance of sending her home than the Goddess

does—she told me as much herself.”

Figures. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor does seem more trustworthy than that Foul Goddess.

...Ikusaba Asagi. I knew it, there’s something about her that reminds me of me a little. I feel like she’s playing a character—one that isn’t her own. But I’m sure that’s not all.

It might look like she’s just going with the flow—but I feel like there’s a calculation behind everything she does. She’s always being ambiguous, making it hard for anyone to know her true intentions—frustrating their attempts to read her emotions. I think I might have always felt it, somewhere in the back of my mind. But in this new world and since seeing her again at the negotiations... she looks normal, but she isn’t.

I sighed internally.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor and Ikusaba Asagi... I might not get a single moment to relax in this country.

As our carriage ride proceeded, the emperor went on to ask me about the cursed-magic I used, and I gave him the explanation I’d prepared in advance to ensure he wouldn’t realize I used the skills of a hero. I didn’t lie directly, only fudged the details on points I wanted to stay secret—the way I always did. I also decided to show Piggymaru to the emperor, who had apparently been wondering about the presence concealed within my robes for some time.

He then went on to explain a few things to us about Mira itself, and Hawk gave us instructions on what we should do upon our arrival at the castle. It was just past noon when our carriage finally pulled in through the great castle gate.

We stopped in a kind of rounded plaza that looked to be for parking, and a number of people filed out from the castle to greet us. Hawk disembarked first, then the Wildly Beautiful Emperor and I followed.

We’ve got three main goals here.

First, the signing ceremony with Munin...

Second, receiving those items from the Great Vault of Mira that they've promised us...

And last, unsealing the room that's supposed to contain those secrets of Forbidden Magic.

Slei walked over and rubbed her nose against me for attention. She had followed us the whole way to the castle but seemed a little nervous. As I stroked her, I looked around at our surroundings. There was a gently sloping paved path leading up to the castle that our carriage had climbed. Looking east I could see all the way to the gate and the guard post we had waited in. In the center of the imperial capital was a majestic and brilliant looking castle, towering over us. It was surrounded by three rings of defensive walls, each larger than the last, leading up to the great chalk castle in the heart of it all. Back in Japan, it would have been the *kuruwa* and the *honmaru* within the walls.

The castle was mainly white, but there were spots of other color in places—silver lines running across grooves cut into the stone and accents in other areas adding vivid detail to its outer walls.

...Looks like the architect who built this thing wanted to make it fashionable.

The castle was ringed with walls, and I saw defensive steeples and arrow slits set into the stone. The city was divided into three sections. The inner district, enclosed within the first and inner wall, housed the emperor's castle, his relatives, and the high noble families of Mira.

The middle district was home to mid-level nobles and influential merchants. Outside the middle wall, lived the other residents of the city in the outer district. Farms, ranches, and hunting cabins dotted the land outside of the third, rugged and solid defensive wall surrounding Luva. Looking out from the castle, the whole city looked like a well-defended fortress.

I'd had some opportunity to see the capital from inside the carriage as well, as

the emperor had asked the curtains to be opened once we entered the castle grounds. The nation was at war, but it didn't seem like that here.

Well, I guess there is more of a nervous atmosphere to this place than there was in Monroy back when we first met Eve.

I watched as an official in a set of long robes hurried across the plaza to address the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

"In a rush?" he asked.

"...There has been a small problem. Ah, ahem... If we might speak in confidence." The official lowered his voice and began to whisper to the emperor.

Maybe Eve would be able to hear what they're saying, but I can't catch any of it.

Suddenly, there was a ripple of gasps and cries of admiration from a different direction. Following Munin, Seras had just stepped from the carriage.

These people are all used to looking at the emperor, but they still all react like that when seeing Seras for the first time, huh?

"Heh heh. You're an attention magnet," chuckled Munin, Seras's hand still in hers as she stepped from the carriage. Seras gave her a wry smile, a slight flush of red appearing on her cheeks.

"Perhaps I should be wearing a mask, like my master..."

"Excuse me, but I have urgent business to attend to," said the Wildly Beautiful Emperor. All the attention immediately shifted from Seras to him. "Hawk, please guide the Lord of the Flies Brigade to their rooms—my apologies, Sir Belzegea."

"Not at all—your nation is at war, after all. I did expect there might be some sudden changes in our schedule."

"I'm glad you understand. Fear not, this problem does not concern my vault nor the other matter I have you here to attend to."

The other matter—I guess he means the sealed room.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor then withdrew into the castle, flanked by a group of his retainers and guards. Hawk watched him leave, then turned back to us.

“First, allow me to show you to your lodgings, the house for our guests of state.”

We were led to a building next to the main castle, which looked like a particularly extravagant guest house—I saw that there were several such buildings in the area of various sizes. We entered one and looked around.

Feels like now we can finally relax.

“They really aren’t sparing any expense with this place...” Seras sat down idly on a chaise lounge and looked here and there about the room.

From the furniture and layout, I guess this is the living room.

“Squee! Squee! Squee! Squee! Squee-ee!” Piggymaru started jumping all over the place.

“Boioi-oing! Boio-oing!”

Maybe it was the size of the place, or how extravagant everything looked—but something was making Piggymaru very excited.

Way too excited, if you ask me.

Hawk had only given us some brief explainers about our stay in the castle before leaving, and had then left us alone. I sat down on one of the elaborately carved sofas.

“But, like, you used to live in a royal palace, right, Seras? This place doesn’t look like much to you, does it?” asked Munin.

I looked over to see her stroking the fabric of the chaise lounge.

“The craftsmanship of this furniture is like nothing I have ever seen before. Even the component materials are superb. I had heard the rumors but never

imagined they could be true...”

“Maybe they’ve given us their best house,” I suggested.

Munin sighed, dropped her bags, and sank down into one of the finely upholstered chairs.

“Tired, Munin?”

“Hiding my wings for so long does take a little out of me, yes...” She hung her head, and her long silver hair flowed about her face.

“You should be fine to take them out in here, so long as we close the curtains. Everyone saw them at the negotiations as well... And anyway, it’s just us here right now, so go ahead and take out your wings.”

She’s gotta rest when she can.

“Really? Hooray! ♪ Let me change clothes first—”

“Wh—! Ch-Chief M-Munin?!”

“Yes, Miss Seras? What’s the matter?”

“I-if you’re going to get changed, you might at least do it somewhere that my master cannot see you...!”

“Ah, oh, my. ♪ Y-you’re quite right... What was I thinking? ♪ I’ve given my heart over to master quite so completely... Oh, how embarrassing...”

“...”

“Ahh... Y-you’re absolutely right... But I’m sure Mister Belzegea wouldn’t be interested in watching an old woman like me getting changed anyway...”

“Not true. Go change in another room, Munin,” I said.

“Of course! ♪” Munin collected her clothes and disappeared into an adjoining room.

Seras breathed a sigh of relief as she watched the door shut behind her, then smiled as if trying to cover up her relief. “Munin can be quite innocent and

playful, I see... She's a pure individual, isn't she?"

"...I'm not good with people like that."

Click.

"Excuse me, *master*?! You aren't badmouthing me behind my back, are you?! Oh my! If you are, it's terribly mean of you!" Munin poked her head back in through the door, her shoulders left slightly exposed.

"...I know you're not really mad at me."

"*Heh heh heh*, you're no fun. ♪ *Heh heh*... I'll get changed, so just wait a moment, okay?"

She closed the door behind her again.

She's trying to keep morale high, I guess you could say. Probably because she's been a village chief for so long. She's just making sure our spirits stay high.

"*Kyah!* My bottoms are so tight they won't come off! Ah, no... Miss Seras! Please, help me get these off!"

"Chief M-Munin?! You're still getting changed?! I'll be right there!"

"Miss Seras, you... You don't think I've gotten fat, do you?! Has my waist gotten wider?!"

"I-I don't know how to answer that—!"

...She's still joking, right?

After she was done changing, we did a quick check of the guest house. There was nothing suspicious about the building—it seemed like a regular house for housing state guests.

"They did say we could go wherever we wanted..."

But of course, there are some places we won't be allowed in.

I looked out of the window at the yard outside.

"They don't seem to be spying on us in here, but I'm sure we'll be under some

kind of surveillance.”

This is the Wildly Beautiful Emperor we’re talking about—I’m sure he’s accounted for the fact I know I’m being watched.

Munin lay down on the sofa, looking completely worn out.

She’s not used to the outside world. It’s not just physical tiredness from storing her wings for so long; she’s exhausted mentally as well. Though I can see she’s trying to hide it, so we won’t worry about her. I can tell from her reactions and the tone of her voice that she’s tired—we should let her get some rest.

“Want to take a nap in one of the beds upstairs? You aren’t going to get much rest sleeping like that. It’s not like the signing ceremony’s happening today, either...”

Munin and I were the only ones in the room, as Seras had just left with Sleil to take a look at the stable at the back of the guest house.

Munin sat up from the sofa, her wings stretching out on either side of her as if inviting me in. “This sofa is ever so soft and comfortable... *Heh heh*, I’m getting quite enough rest over here, you know? Thank you for being so considerate, *master*. But you’re right...storing my wings can be quite tiring. But mostly it’s all this new exposure to the outside world... It’s all a little overwhelming, I suppose.”

Seems like she’s worried about people spying on us, even from the outside—she isn’t using the name “Too-ka” in here.

“Yeah, I know. It was tough for me getting used to it as well.”

“Ah, that’s right. You used to...”

Munin knows I’m a Hero from Another World.

“But ever since I met Seras, she’s taught me so much about this world.”

“It’s nice to have someone to rely on, isn’t it?”

“I hope Seras and I can become people you rely on too.”

“You already are... *Ho ho.* ♪ You can rely on me as well, you know? Of course... I don’t mind spoiling you.”

Why’s she making that heart with her fingers...

“What about you, anyway?”

“Hmhmh?”

“You’re the village chief—in a position like yours, you need someone you can really confide in... Hmhm, you’re not married, are you?”

Munin placed a hand to her cheek. “Y-you’re right. Perhaps if I had a husband...or lover...they’d be able to spoil me. Now that you mention it, I don’t think I’ve ever really been spoiled. Though I suppose I can vent to Fugi a little, relatively speaking...”

“I don’t know if it’s right to talk about this so lightly... But have you never thought about trying to find a spouse?”

“Well, I have considered finding someone someday in the future. But, first I have Fugi to think about. I don’t want to saddle her with some heavy burden... But once we’ve formed a happy and peaceful family, I think Fugi will become my successor—the next chief of the village. Ehm, I... To be honest, I always thought about leaving the village someday, venturing out alone to search for the Scrolls of Forbidden Magic. And well...on a journey like that, who knows when I might die? I wouldn’t want to marry with that possibility hanging over the relationship.”

...So that’s how much resolve she’s got as village chief of the Kurosaga—I’m amazed by her.

“In some ways, I was happy to hear about this trip.”

Now I understand why she so readily agreed to come with us.

“I get it. But... That’s exactly why it’s totally okay for you to rely on us now. And well...I guess it’s fine if you want us to spoil you too...”

“Oh, you don’t mind?” she asked.

“But I mean, I am younger than you. If you’re okay with that?”

I don’t know Munin’s real age, but she’s definitely older than me and Seras.

“Hmph... You think you can’t spoil me just because I’m older than you?” she said in a bit of a sulking tone, before placing her hands on her knees and standing up from the sofa. “*Heh heh heh*, as I said, master... I can spoil you as well, you know? You’re always so tense, never showing us any weakness... But if it ever gets too tough, you can... O-oh, my...?”

Munin swayed, staggered, and I quickly stood up to catch her in my arms.

“Squee!” Piggymaru gave a little pained squeak from inside my robes.

“Ah, you’ve gotten caught in the middle—I-I’m sorry, Piggymaru! Master, I...”

“Sit, sleep... I don’t mind, but you need to go get some rest.”

“Y-yes... *Heh heh*, but...” Munin looked up at me, smiling. “It’s not so bad, having someone here to catch me when I fall.”

“...Right?”

“Squ~...”

“Ah—I’m sorry, Piggymaru... Y-you’re being squeezed, aren’t you!” Munin jumped away from me.

“S-squeuuuh~...” Apparently, being pressed between me and Munin was painful.

“M-my, my...” Munin had jumped away from me, but her swaying continued. I rushed in to support her, careful not to make a Piggymaru sandwich in the process this time.

“Master... I-I’m sorry for all this. What’s gotten into me...”

“I’ve noticed you’re pretty absent-minded, aren’t you?”

“Hmph, th-that’s so mean!” Munin pouted and puffed out her cheeks.

“You look pretty happy for an angry person.”

“Heh heh heh, I do, don’t I? I’m only playing. ♪”

Click.

“—I’ve returned, my master.”

“A-ah, Miss Seras—no! Th-this isn’t what it looks like! Ahem... We aren’t embracing each other. I simply was about to fall, and Master came to support me and...”

“When you give panicked explanations like that, it only makes it sound worse, Munin.”

Maybe we’re lucky that Seras can see through lies.

“Chief Munin really must be tired... Though, well, I suppose it’s only natural. Traveling to a new country can even tire me out on the first day. I should have used my ability to detect lies to ask her earlier and advise her to rest... I apologize.”

Munin, for her part, was now sound asleep on the sofa beside us.

“It’s not your fault. I think the exhaustion came over her all at once as soon as we got here.”

It’s like she’s been in fight or flight this whole time...and now her brain suddenly, finally, gets to relax. Like when you get home from a trip or from work, and the tiredness overwhelms you.

“Well...we could spoil her a little more, I suppose.”

“She was so considerate of us the whole time we were on the road. It was like she felt it was her responsibility, as our elder... Munin truly is a thoughtful individual,” said Seras.

“I think now I understand why everyone in the Kurosaga Clan likes her so much, especially Fugi...”

“I like Chief Munin as well... I’d like to close the distance between us.”

To be honest, I'm tired too. She's clearly got some needs, but I'm not the best at handling people like Munin.

"I-I would also..." Seras said.

"Hmm?"

"...L-like to... Grow closer with you as well... Closer than we are at present," said Seras, her shoulders stiffening and cheeks blushing slightly as she looked down at her lap.

"—Yeah. Me too."

"Th-that's wonderful...!"

With that said, Seras and I surrendered ourselves for a while to the comfortable silence that fell upon the room.

SERAS ASHRAIN

SERAS INVITED MUNIN to take a bath with her once she awoke, intending their absence as a way of giving Too-ka some time to rest alone.

"Okay, let's go. ♪"

Seras had already been to the baths to get the hot water ready. There was a magical device inside that filled the tub with water once mana was poured inside, so she'd asked Too-ka to activate it while he was inspecting the house.

They stripped off their clothes in the spacious changing room and went to the baths together. Seras hid her body with a cloth towel in front, letting out a gasp of pure astonishment as she stepped through the door.

"This is..."

Luxurious!

The facilities easily rivaled the ones she had bathed in during her time in Neah—perhaps even exceeding them. They were the cleanest that Seras had ever

seen. There was scented body wash liquid and even what looked to be citrus blossoms floating in the water.

“Oh, it’s *perfect*...” came Munin’s voice from behind her.

“Yes... I could fall in love with this place.”

“Oh, no, I was talking about the view from back here.”

“Eh? M-me?”

“The way your body curves, looking at it from the back... Oh, I’m so jealous.”

“B-but Chief Munin... Your skin is white as snow, and you have such a well-balanced figure...”

“Miss Seras, the only way I could ever beat you is with the size of these...”
Munin placed her hands below her breasts and lifted them up.

Seras looked embarrassed, unsure how to find the words to respond—Munin put her hand to her cheek and gave her a wry laugh.

“But look, I’m sure you of all people know...there’s nothing good about having big breasts. Some men will compliment you on them, and I understand a lot of men prefer them big...but that hardly means a thing to me. These things give me a stiff back and make it a pain to find clothes that fit...”

“...I know what you mean.”

Cattlea always said that I should think of them as a blessing—as a woman’s weapon that men cannot possess. But I agree with Munin’s opinion on this matter.

“I mean, do you remember the way you helped me train as we were traveling here to Mira? I think I’ve gotten a little better at fighting, but sometimes I wish I didn’t have these on my chest. Don’t you agree?” Munin pouted and squeezed her breasts as she spoke.

“Yes, I do...” said Seras in earnest. “I know that I would evade enemy attacks with much more ease without these. And I would not be so limited in my

posture when drawing a bow.”

“*Ha ha!* I’m so happy you understand!” Munin approached her, taking Seras’s hands in hers and doing a happy little hop.

“Chief M-Munin... The floors are polished, and the c-condensation will make them slippery, so...”

She’s older than me, so it might be a little rude to say—but Munin is ever so cute when she’s excited like this. But this can also be somewhat overwhelming...

“*Yaa-h!*” And indeed, Munin slipped.

Seras made to catch her, and... “Oh no—!”

Her heel slid across the polished floor, and she slipped as well. There was a flapping sound as she lost her towel and after that: silence but for the dripping of water echoing around the baths.

“I-I’m so sorry. Are you okay, Miss Seras...?”

“Ah... I’m fine. Chief Munin, do you have any injuries?”

Munin was on the bottom and Seras was lying flat on top of her, their bodies pressed together. Munin had spread her wings as soon as they fell and then made sure she was on the bottom as they went down, using her wings as a kind of cushion against the floor.

“Th-thank you for being so considerate, Chief Munin.”

“It was my fault, so don’t worry about that. But... Now we’re stuck together, I can feel how smooth your skin is, Miss Seras—it’s like silk! *Heh heh heh*, I’d almost like to stay like this a while longer.”

Seras gave her a wry smile. “Th-thank you for the compliment...”

After they had both washed themselves, they got into the bath together. It was her first bath in a long time, which made Seras very happy.

Soon, their conversation turned to more serious matters—and back to the topic of Munin’s combat training.

“My weakness is my stamina, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I believe so. With your reaction to that fall, I can see that you have wonderful reflexes. But for extended periods of fighting, you may need more endurance to keep up.”

She’s quick to start panting after intense exercise.

Seras remembered one of their training sessions on the road, the way she had fallen to the ground on her knees at one point.

“Haah... Haah! L-let me rest for a moment... Please? Haah, haah! Cough, cough! S-so this is the outside world then, is it...?”

Seras thought her last remark was a little melodramatic but could see how much she was struggling.

“I’ve always done my best to maintain my combat techniques... But I wasn’t taking proper care to keep up my stamina as well, it seems. I regret that now. Am I too old for this, do you think?”

“You certainly don’t look it...”

“Oh, do you truly think so?”

Munin’s mood seemed to turn around for a moment, but she was quickly back to the slight smile as the sorrowful look in her eyes returned.

“Ah, Miss Seras... Over there, and this one here—I’ll tidy those up once we’re done. Please don’t mind the mess, okay?”

Munin was holding a black feather between her fingers that had been drifting on the surface of the water. There were several others that Seras could see floating in the bath with them.

“Not at all, I will help you clean them up. Don’t worry.”

After all, it was Seras that had suggested she leave her wings out as they bathed.



I'm sure she wants to wash them as well, but she seems bothered by the feathers that they shed. That must be why she stored them when we came in here at first.

Seras had debated whether she should mention it as they were stripping off their clothes.

“These black feathers...” muttered Munin, spinning one of them around in her fingers and sounding lost in sentimentality. “I wonder how they must look to the people of this outside world? We still have our oral history. The legends say some on the outside used to be scared of our wings—thought they looked black, like the darkest night. I mean...people are scared of the night, aren't they?”

“I like the color of your wings, Munin. They're calming—they make you look sophisticated.”

“I-is that so? I wonder... *Heh heh heh*, you're making me embarrassed. ♪”

“I believe Sir Too-ka feels the same—he said so himself. That the night is a friend to him, and that it makes him feel relaxed.”

“...*Heh heh heh*. Really... There's nothing not to like about Too-ka, is there... *Haah...*” Munin closed her eyes to rest.

There's nothing not to like about you either, Chief Munin.

MIMORI TOUKA

“**I**'M GOING TO GO take a walk around. You two are tired, right? Stay here and rest.”

I want Munin to get some sleep—but as the sole Kurosaga here, I can't exactly leave her alone either.

“Understood. I will wait here for you with Chief Munin,” said Seras, catching on at once that I wanted her to stay and guard our friend.

“Thanks.”

“Not at all, please be careful out there.”

In any case, it's going to be easier to get around if it's just me. The three of us wandering around out there would draw the wrong kind of attention. I might want Seras's lie-detecting abilities by my side—but Munin comes first.

I left the house, and walked around the side past the flower beds, following the stone path. After leaving the area, I turned right, passing through a small yard and into a connecting hallway. There was a door at the end of the hall, with two guards on either side of it.

“Lord of the Flies, Sir Belzegea, I believe? What can I do for you?” asked one, clearly somewhat nervous.

“I wish to see inside. His Majesty gave me permission to enter.”

“Yes, we have been instructed to allow you access to the castle—please, go right ahead.” The soldiers opened the door, and I walked inside.

There was a long hallway inside with a rug running down the center—*is this marble flooring?*

I looked at one of the glass windows inside—it was spotless, each aspect of its frame clearly crafted using only the finest materials. It was still bright outside, so the candles placed at regular intervals down the length of the hallway had yet to be lit. I leaned against the wall and looked at the map of the castle that Hawk had given me. The areas I was permitted to access were clearly marked in red.

Well—I bet this map is just for guests and visitors... It's not like each detail of the castle is going to be on this thing.

“ ... ”

There are three people surveilling me. One of them's good at concealing their presence—but not as good as Eve.

I showed no signs that I'd noticed them as I proceeded down the hallway, into

an open space with a high ceiling above. There was a staircase with an ivory handrail, leading up to a second-floor balcony that was visible from below.

“Mhm?”

There was someone atop the balcony—they noticed me just as they came to the head of the stairs.

“Who’s this now? Lookin’ like a fallen hero, ain’tcha, Lord of the Flies-chan?”

“Ah, I believe I know your name...” I looked up at her. “Miss Asagi Ikusaba.”

Chapter 4:

The White Army and the Black Fly of Night

“THERE’S A LITTLE PLACE called *Cafeteria Three* over there—good place to talk. Kinda reminds us of

the school lunches we used ta get in the old world, so us heroes are there all the time... But some of the people in the castle ain’t so fond of our company. We sorta occupy the whole place, I guess.”

I walked behind Asagi as she guided me toward the cafeteria to talk.

I intended to find her on my walk, and luckily, she stumbled upon me naturally. I want to understand her thoughts—and if possible, the true nature of that trump card unique skill of hers. Then there’s the matter of whether she knows who I really am under this mask.

There’s a risk she could find me out while we’re in conversation, but even then I think questioning her will be worth

it. When it comes to reducing the risk I’ll be discovered—I guess that all depends on my acting abilities. But to be honest, that comes down to Kashima Kobato. With Asagi, my main focus is finding out more about her unique skills.

Asagi entered the cafeteria and ordered something from the chef on duty as if she’d done so a thousand times before. She then picked up two wooden cups of tonic water and gestured with her head to a table in the corner.

“Over there.”

We walked over and sat down, and Asagi gestured to the cup she’d placed in front of me.

“Ah, perhaps I should have stated this first, but...”

“You ain’t gonna drink, huh?”

“My apologies, I am not.”

She was testing me—watching to see if I’d take off my mask.

“Must be real hard to hide your true identity all the time. Ain’t it hot in there?”

“It’s more comfortable than it looks.”

“You hate the Goddess?”

...That came out of nowhere.

“I cannot say I have a liking for her.”

“Is that cause she attacked the Country at the End of the World, who are lookin’ after all your close friends?”

“Yes. From everything I have heard, her actions do not paint a terribly good picture of her character as a divine—what is your opinion on her, might I ask?”

“Man, this tonic water’s good! I wanna sell it in the old world! Nh? Me?”

“Are you not a Hero from Another World? What was your reason for turning against the Goddess?”

“Well... See like... The Goddess says she’s gonna send us back to our old world once we beat the Demon King, yeah? I don’t think that’s how it’s gonna play out—I don’t believe that Goddess’s promises.”

“Do you have some proof? Something that makes you sure she will not?”

“Nope, nuthin’. Well... Just my skills as a people watcher I guess? I know she’s not people, but still.”

“You sound very confident in your decision, given the lack of definite proof.”

“Oh, I’ve got *proof*,” Asagi said determinedly. “Seems like gods ain’t all that different from us when it comes down to their emotions, the way they act.”

“Hmm?”

“I mean, the gods in this world are more like the ones from Greek myth,

yeah? Like, they're sorta gods, but their emotions and actions are sorta human."

"Is this Greek myth you speak of a story of the gods in your world?"

"Oops... Best you don't know anything more than the names of food and people from our world, y'know? Seems like the calamity comes for people in this world who know too much."

"Of course. I will not pry."

I've already heard about the calamity from Erika and Seras. If I'm playing the role of a person of this world, I've got to drop the subject.

"Returning to the topic at hand... After observing the Goddess for a long enough time, you came to believe she possesses the emotions of a human—and determined her to be untrustworthy."

"Kinda, yeah. But, like, whatever you think's the *truth* is all the *truth* is... People should just believe whatever they want, right? S'long as they take responsibility for thinkin' what they think."

Asagi's food arrived—a little plate of broiled meat on the bone, covered in finely chopped fragrant herbs. There were mashed potatoes too, with a thin layer of green sauce on top and a side of some chopped fruit.

I feel like she's sidestepping a definite statement there—almost like she's trying to avoid getting caught out by a lie detector.

"But even so—as a Hero from Another World, you chose to take up arms against the Goddess."

Asagi swallowed a piece of fruit and held one of the pieces of meat out toward me.

"Sure you don't want some? Really don't wanna take off that mask, eh? Who are you really, Lord of the Flies-san?"

"I'm a former Ashint member."

“What’s this cursed-magic stuff anyway? Is it any different from the incantations and spells and skills that we use?”

“Well, yes... We borrow the power of the Cursed God, you might say. Perhaps it’s closer to the spirit magic of the elves.”

“So can I use cursed-magic?”

“No. It is said that the curses are innate—their use only granted to those chosen by the Cursed God.”

“So like, you’re born with it?”

“Yes.”

“You’re su~re?”

“So I was told.”

“That cursed-magic is the stuff that killed Civit Gartland, right?”

“He was strong.”

“Like, was he seriously the Strongest Man in the World?”

“Likely so.”

“But you beat him, Lord of the Flies-san.”

“I was fortunate. But yes.”

“You mean you just got lucky?”

“I believe that in the end, what truly determined my victory was luck.”

It was a gamble. I tried to give myself the best odds I could, but there was never any guarantee I’d beat him.

“Hmph,” mused Asagi, licking some of the fat that had run off the meat onto her finger. “You not overconfident, huh... But then again you ain’t some fawning modest guy either. You’re calm, just lookin’ at the facts.”

“Do you like analyzing people?”

“I guess so. Only the ones I’m interested in though—otherwise I can’t be bothered.”

“You’re interested in the Wildly Beautiful Emperor then, I take it? If possible, I’d like to hear your opinion of the man.”

Asagi wiped her thumb on the sleeve of her shirt.

“He’s a smooth talker, I guess? He’s coolheaded and properly cares for his family. I get the feeling he’s making all this work by some kind of miracle, on like the border between dreams and reality. Walkin’ a tightrope, y’might say. And, like, he’s super hot too. Total eleven out of ten, I mean what the *heck*? I’m gonna take him back to the old world and make him cosplay!”

Setting that last comment aside—her impressions of the emperor are similar to mine. No—Asagi’s better at expressing it than I am.

“You believe he’s more trustworthy than the Goddess?”

“Can’t say that. But like, since we’re on his side, I guess so?”

She’s good at being evasive.

“In any case—you want to earn his trust, use that special power you’ve got—and bring down the Goddess, yeah?” asked Asagi, crushing some of the potatoes with the back of her fork. “And it sure seems like you wanna know about my special skill, yeah?”

“That does interest me, yes. Just as you were interested in my cursed-magic, I suppose.”

“*Well*, about that... Give and take, eh? All right then.”

The mashed potato came smooshing out from the gaps in the fork as she pushed down further.

“A unique skill—” Asagi answered plainly.

“Even among all the special powers you Heroes from Another World possess, unique skills are special, are they not?”

“Depends on how you look at it. They can be insanely strong, yeah. Like, they could even take down Goddess-chin, maybe... They started treatin’ me better here when they learned ’bout what my unique skill can do. I went from bein’ in charge of convincing S-class heroes to join us, to leadin’ the whole freakin’ charge into battle. I’m a shining star, right? But well...that Dispel Bubble the Goddess has got still bothers me a bit.”

“The Wildly Beautiful Emperor spoke of it, yes. He mentioned that your unique skill could perhaps be more relied upon once the contents of the sealed room were revealed.”

“But, like, my unique skills are supposed to be these status effect things, but... Like, I think they’re really something different, y’know...?” Suddenly Asagi looked off to the side—she raised an eyebrow.

“...Hmm?”

It’s almost like... She’s just realized something.

“Right before the Goddess disposed of Mimori-kun, he used a status effect skill on her. She said it back then, that her barrier made her immune to status effect skills. But she didn’t really say much about the *other* kinds of skills. Seems like attacks work against her...y’know? Maybe she doesn’t have an automatic barrier against ’em? Then maybe, like, some long time ago there was someone whose status effect skills were like, super powerful? Like in online games where a new class gets released that’s so strong, the devs have to nerf it... So much it isn’t even playable anymore, maybe? Like they’ve become completely worthless now, yeah? Otherwise what would be the point in the Goddess always having that barrier around her specifically to block status effect skills, if they’re s’posed to be so freakin’ weak and useless, right?”

The heroes’ common skills are divided into five sections—the Goddess explained them all to us after our summoning. There are offensive skills, defensive skills, healing skills, enhancement skills, and status effect skills. Asagi just said offensive skills seem to work against the Goddess. Hard to imagine

defensive skills could do much to beat her, and healing skills fall into the same camp there. But she thinks status effect skills might be able to do something, then. Does that mean Asagi's skills are the remaining "enhancement" type then, by process of elimination? Would that include debuffs as well—something to weaken targets? This special power of hers that could potentially bring down a divine—is it some kind of special debuff?

But what she just said about status effect skills... Sounded like she was just mumbling to herself, but that was some interesting insight. These status effect skills are supposed to be worthless—but the Goddess has gone through the effort of creating a special barrier around herself to protect her from them—a special defensive measure, designed solely to dispel them.

That said, my skills aren't getting through without the forbidden magic's help. Not much point in going too deep into Asagi's thoughts now. I guess that's enough questions about her trump card.

"By the way, Miss Ikusaba..."

"Ah... You mind calling me Asagi-dono instead? I really don't like it when people call me that."

"Asagi-dono, then... I meant to ask about the girl who stood next to you during the negotiations—she appeared sick."

"Bato-chin?"

"?"

"Her name's Kobato Kashima. So, like, Bato-chin. Or sometimes Pidgey-chan."

"Is she a hero as well?"

"Yep."

...I want to avoid seeming like I'm too focused on Kashima here.

"Are there other heroes with you?"

"More 'n I can count on one hand."

“Do they all agree with your decision to betray the Goddess? Well, no... I’m sure you convinced them. You appear to be good at that, Asagi-dono.”

“Ain’t got much else to do.” She cupped her hands behind her head and let all her weight swing back in her chair with a creak. “I give myself a mission, like... Do my best to *manipulate* everything as well as I can to achieve it. There’s nothing more fun than manipulating real life, y’know? You can drive people to suicide just like that... Never even gotta get your hands dirty—you can kill people indirectly, like.”

It almost sounds like she’s speaking from experience.

Asagi stuck out her tongue at me—but her expression was sincere.

“My real dad—I made him...” Asagi stopped mid-sentence to correct herself. “He went and killed himself.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“He freakin’ died.”

Her tongue still sticking out a little, Asagi gave some limp applause. Her expression remained sincere—only her eyes were smiling, curved upward in an unsettling manner.

“That’s how I protected Mama. Happily ever after, all that... *Hah hah*. He seriously, like...went and freakin’ killed himself.”

I never knew what Asagi’s family situation was like, but I could’ve guessed. I think I know why I’ve always felt she was similar to me now. You had terrible parents too, huh? But unlike me, you had your mother on your side. Still, I can sympathize with the situation.

But in some ways—so what?

What’s the point in telling me this, in the situation we’re in now?

Asagi massaged her eyebrows with her fingertips, closing her eyes.

“...Hmm-hmhmhm? Why am I suddenly letting you know I’m a psycho? Well...

Let's just say I made all that up, eh? Bit of improv to pull on your heartstrings, 'kay? I'm like a compulsive liar! Ah, ehm... Well, all the heroes I've got with me really accept me for who I am. All we gotta do now is get them other heroes on board, and we'll wrap this up in no time! *Hah hah hah*. Did I scare you just now? But, like, don't curse me to death, I'm beggin' ya~!"

"Sir Belzegea! Ah, and you are here as well I see, Asagi-dono." Hawk came into the cafeteria and recognized us at once—as if he was there to collect me.

"What can I do for you?" I asked.

"His Majesty has asked for you t—! Y-Your Majesty?!"

"My apologies for interrupting your chat."

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor glided into the cafeteria (which was small for the size of the castle)—the picture of dignity. The chef hurried over to greet him, but the emperor sent him away with a wave of his hand.

"You are here as well then, Asagi."

"I was just leavin', so see you later~!"

"No—this is perfect timing. Please, I beg you to stay." The emperor stopped her. He drew one of the chairs back and gracefully sat down next to us at the table.

"I will start at the beginning," said the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, launching immediately into an explanation. "There have been troop movements in the north."

"Hmm? Demon King-chin's comin' for us?"

"No... These are Yonato troops. They have positioned themselves at our borders."

"Uhhmm? So it's Yonato-chi? They were so beat up after the invasion... They don't really got the men for that, right?"

"Indeed. I was not considering sending any of my forces to combat Yonato. In

truth, my scouts report the army at our border are largely a collection of weaklings and stragglers, nothing to be truly afraid of.”

“Then, like, *meow*be they ain’t a threat?”

“The White Wolf Riders are with them.”

“Oh, man, they’re the main fighters of Magnar, right? But then, like, what about the fortress they were holding in the east of Magnar? I figured Alion thought the place was key to holdin’ back the Demon King’s armies.”

“Something must have happened on the Demon King’s side—something to turn the tide,” I interrupted.

“Hmph,” the emperor nodded. “They have some proof that the Demon King will not make his move for some time yet—something has happened among the Sacred Alliance nations. I heard there was a commotion in Alion of late—in the royal palace no less.”

“Ah, so...you think it had somethin’ to do with the Demon King?”

“The intelligence reports are complex, and nothing can be known for sure yet. But reports suggest that Alion was ambushed by the Demon King and succeeded in driving him away.”

“Meaning... Ayaka and the other S-classes are really that strong now, eh? Maybe I gotta update the way I think about those guys a teensy bit, huh?”

Did Sogou and the other heroes really fight off the Demon King? That Foul Goddess... Based on the Sacred Alliance’s movements, she’s up to something.

“Then, Your Majesty, do you think it possible that the Demon King himself perished in the battle in Alion?” I asked.

“No... The golden-eyes massing around the Nightwall are still under his control. When the Root of All Evil is annihilated, his control over them is clearly broken—they scatter.”

“Then he’s still alive...”

“In all likelihood, yes. But given Alion’s judgment that he will not attack them again any time soon, it’s highly possible that they dealt him a serious blow in the recent commotion.”

“I see. Guess the Goddess thinks she’s fine to send the White Wolf Riders over our way, since her heroes are strong enough to drive off the Demon King now, huh? Don’t tell me, Zine-chin... You want the Lord of the Flies-chin and his gang to go take down the White Wolf Riders?”

“No. I have sent Luheit to handle the forces amassing at our border. He has been given command of the elite Order of Grior and some of the Band of the Sun that remained here in the capital. The White Wolf Riders are strong, but they do not have the numbers. Even with the poor-quality Yonato soldiers, they have managed to scrape together, we still outnumber them. The military forces we are deploying against the White Wolf Riders may not match them in strength, but our soldiers are by no means weak. They should have a slight advantage in the battle to come. Nevertheless, against such an enemy we have no guarantee of victory and must have Luheit in the field to command our forces.”

Right now most of Mira’s forces are waging war against Ulza in the east—most of the Band of the Sun, which make up their main army, are stuck fighting there... Now he’s sending the remaining forces he kept here on standby off to fight the enemy in the north.

“Nh? Wait a minute now. If we just take out the White Wolf Riders, we’ll have no problems here, right?” Asagi’s question clearly showed she understood there was something else—some bigger issue the emperor had yet to raise.

“Luheit and his forces have arrived in the north, at the border... Yet roughly halfway between his position and the capital, we’ve received reports of large numbers of golden-eyed monsters roaming the land.”

Asagi leaned forward, hand on her cheek propping up her head. The way her hand pushed up one side of her face seemed to almost turn it into a twisted

smile.

“Hmm... That’s *some* timing...”

“There have been further reports—a mysterious ‘White Army’ has appeared in Miran territory.”

Asagi looked a little taken aback. “What...? What’s a White Army? This is kinda sudden, ain’t it? Where the heck’d they come from? They’re different from the White Wolf Riders, yeah? What’s with all these new reports anyway? This is way too much new info.”

“They are not the White Wolf Riders, no... Word is that the White Army may not even be human.”

“They’re monsters?”

“Their eyes are golden—those are the reports.”

White with golden eyes—makes me think of that Foul Goddess. She’s got that exact same color scheme going on.

“The White Army have been attacking fortresses, keeps and towns between here and the capital—they’re steadily making their way south toward us.”

“And Luheit’s armies did not come across them as they made their way north?”

“Hmph. It’s as if they were lying in wait, choosing their moment to strike.”

Their timing is too perfect. Like they were waiting for Luheit to pass before they made their move. The stationing of Yonato and Magnar forces on the northern border of Mira... It seems that might have been a trick to lure the Miran army out of position. All this is being coordinated somehow.

“I ordered the soldiers in the first fortress attacked by the White Army to retreat, and we are slowly evacuating cities and towns in the area. The casualties are strangely low.”

“So these mysterious White Army guys got a moral compass, and actually

they're pretty nice guys? *Naaah...* No way that's true, right—? Am I right?"

"Not exactly... In fact we cannot discount that possibility."

"Oho?"

"It appears the White Army is led by the Saber-toothed Tigers."

The Saber-toothed Tigers—so this is where we meet again. The emperor did say they were on the Goddess's side.

"...Hmm. Riri-san and the others—the ones who taught us how to fight as a group... So now they're standin' against us as enemies, huh? They're okay... Makes sense they wouldn't wanna go around slaughtering everyone. That's just who they are, yeah."

Come to think of it, they were in Yonato during the Demon King's invasion, weren't they? I heard a little about them after the Battle for the White Citadel.

"As enemies... They're going to be tough to beat," said Asagi. There was no trace of humor in her voice any longer.

Not even Ikusaba Asagi underestimates them.

"They have been taking no hostages and allowing our soldiers to retreat... They allow all who show no intention of fighting them to escape, the civilians included. It is just like the Saber-toothed Tigers to do so, one might say."

But still—how's this going to turn out? Those civilians are refugees now, washing over the country. The safe land will be taken piece by piece—where will they go?

"All those refugees will come flowing into the capital, won't they?"

"Hmph, yes. They aren't just letting my people go out of the goodness of their hearts..."

"They're planning to win this war, no matter what," I said, predicting what the emperor was about to say. He looked ever so slightly taken aback at my statement.

“Lord of the Flies... Your thoughts immediately went to the right answer, I see.”

“Eh? What’s goin’ on? I, like, don’t get this at all...”

The two of them seemed to be waiting for me to continue.

“I’m sure the capital citizens’ loyalty toward his majesty will drop considerably if he does not allow refugees into the city.”

Asagi showed signs of realizing what I was getting at, and I continued.

“This war against Alion was only possible because of the fanatical support his majesty receives from his people.”

“I would also mention that declaring this a war to save the Goddess was my way of reassuring the people,” said the emperor.

...I see.

“The nations of the Sacred Alliance are using the Goddess for their own ends.”

That makes this a war against the countries who are exploiting her, not against the Goddess herself—that’s the kind of logic he’s set up. In this world, there’s no TV, no internet or communication technology to connect the whole continent—there are no information networks to spread messages either. The Goddess can’t exactly access some international live broadcast news channel to explain the truth of all this to them.

To correct lies and spread important facts, she’d have to actually physically show herself—to come here and tell the people of Mira the truth. Meaning there’s a possibility she could be lured out of her home nation of Alion to do so... That’d make taking her out all the easier. If the emperor really had all that in mind when he decided on this grand cause, he’s quite the strategist.

“But without the support of the people, Mira could collapse from the inside. The citizens of Mira must have absolute confidence in their emperor.”

“So, like, ‘less Zine-chin rescues the big avalanche o’ refugees comin’ to the capital this war might be over just like that, huh? Makes sense, I guess. If they

think he's the kinda emperor that'll abandon his people when the goin' gets rough, most of these Mirans might turn on him."

"But with an influx of refugees in the capital, it will make it easier for enemy agents to infiltrate the city."

They could come here to assassinate the Wildly Beautiful Emperor—or even Munin. I have to consider the possibility that they're attacking Mira with the full knowledge that the Forbidden Words Clan are now on this side of the walls.

"Whether my nation of Mira accepts these refugees or not, we are placed in a tough situation."

"And if we choose to ignore the Saber-toothed Tigers and White Army, they may cease advancing south—and turn north instead."

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor looked to understand my worry immediately.

"Luheit and his armies in the north would be caught in a pincer attack. I see... They've even thought of that."

"But, like, not even you factored in these White Army guys, right, Zine-chin? This new power the enemy's got of just appearing wherever they want without any warning is, like, super totally unfair! It'd be unfair in any war, anytime, anywhere! How're we s'posed to prepare for their attacks?! This, like, sucks!"

If this were just the White Wolf Riders and a horde of monsters roaming his land, I'm sure the emperor could've dealt with them easily—he must've expected some attacks to come. But this White Army are a completely unexpected threat—there's too little information available about them. Not to mention with the way they're advancing... The situation's only deteriorating by the minute. The longer we wait to act, the more refugees they will create, the lower the emperor's support here in the capital will get, and the greater the risk to Luheit's rear guard will become. Things will only get worse and worse.

"There is good news too," said the Wildly Beautiful Emperor. "This White Army...several reports have suggested they are not quite as strong as their

numbers suggest. Trained soldiers should be more than capable of dispatching them. But the Saber-toothed Tigers make them too much for us to handle.”

“...Figures, yep. They fought like heck durin’ that mess at Yonato, but not one of ’em died there. When their group fightin’ style really gets going, they’re the real deal, y’know?”

“According to those that have crossed them thus far, they have been fighting as if their lives depend upon it. I believe that they will bring every ounce of strength they have to bear in their fight against us.”

“So you figure the ones controlling the White Army are the Saber-toothed Tigers ’emselves, eh?”

“Meaning if we can just do something about them, Miran soldiers might be able to mop up the White Army?” I broke in.

“Luheit’s stuck on the border, staring down the White Wolf Riders in the north—he cannot move from that position. The main strength of the Band of the Sun and the skilled warriors of the three princeps’s elector houses are deployed against Ulza in the east. My chancellor Kaize has no talent for war... As a result, the only forces that remain capable of countering the Saber-toothed Tigers, are...”

“Zine-chin and your personal guards... Our group... And the Lord of the Flies Brigade, huh?”

“I could lead my personal guard into battle myself...but they are the last line of defense for the city in which we stand...”

“And hey, if we lose you now, the whole country’s gonna collapse—*boom!* Want me and the others to handle this?”

“No... I believe you are poorly matched against an enemy such as the Saber-toothed Tigers.”

“Well, yep. When Riri-san and the rest get serious about fighting as a group... We’d need to get ready for some serious casualties. Or I mean, like—and

lemme be brutally honest here—I don't even know if we could beat them. There are some fights we're suited for, and some we just ain't... My trump card ain't much use against them neither."

It'd be too risky for the commander of this whole war to go riding out against the Saber-toothed Tigers—that isn't a realistic option. But the Wildly Beautiful Emperor doesn't want to send Asagi out to face them either—she's his key to defeating the Goddess, after all. Asagi herself also knows she isn't best suited to fighting them. They once battled side by side against the Demon King—she knows exactly how strong they really are. In other words, Asagi's just realistically analyzing the situation and thinks her group's chances of winning are slim, and there's a high possibility instead that they might all be killed or captured.

Now we're back to the start of this conversation, aren't we? The reason why Hawk—and the Wildly Beautiful Emperor were looking for me in the first place. They need someone relatively nimble, capable of facing off against the Saber-toothed Tigers, and there's only one group they're able to turn to...

"You wish for my Lord of the Flies Brigade to do something about the Saber-toothed Tiger problem, I take it?"

I explained the situation to Seras once I'd returned to the state guest house.

"...I see. I suppose with the Saber-toothed Tigers eliminated, the remaining White Army forces can be left to the Miran army. You intend to accept the Wildly Beautiful Emperor's request, don't you, my master?"

"Yeah."

"Then I will follow your decision," said Seras without a second's hesitation or doubt.

"The actions of Mira can be a smokescreen for us from the Goddess's eyes... But if their nation collapses now, it'll only make movement all that much more

difficult for us in the future. For now, I want the Goddess's attention focused on the Wildly Beautiful Emperor."

"Support for his cause could help us along the path toward your revenge, which is to our benefit... Yes. In the battle to come, however, might it not be an issue that the Lord of the Flies Brigade stand out in battle?"

"I don't think that'll be a problem."

The more the Goddess focuses on the Lord of the Flies Brigade, the better. I'll hide in the shadows of this disguise—until it's finally time for Mimori Touka, the invisible man, to make his move. That's the main reason I've decided not to hide the existence of the Brigade here. With Lord of the Flies and Fly Swordsman outfits, I can hide in plain sight.

"But I do wonder about us riding out to fight this enemy alone. Is it wise?" asked Munin.

"Ah, about this battle—I'm going to have you and Seras stay here."

I raised my hand to stop Seras and Munin from speaking as they tried to interrupt.

"The enemy we're up against this time... I feel like it's a diversion. Intel about the Saber-toothed Tigers has been far too easy to come by from the sounds of it... That makes me suspicious."

"Now that you mention it..."

"This might be a trap—but as I just explained, ignoring this problem is only going to make the situation worse."

"Hmm..." Munin groaned—she sounded troubled by what I was saying. "But Mister Zine's the emperor of this country, and Miss Asagi's the trump card to defeating the Goddess... So you don't want to expose her to danger if possible, right? Meaning..."

"They want to rely on the Lord of the Flies Brigade."

"But there's a huge number of those White Army forces out there, right? And

the Saber-toothed Tigers too... Shouldn't you at least allow Seras and I to support you in this battle? I can turn into a crow after all. I'd be perfectly suited to scouting out the enemy for you...!"

Munin assumed a fighting stance as she tried to convince me.

"No. We don't know if the Wildly Beautiful Emperor is the only one they're after. Munin... There's always a chance they might be here for you."

"Ah..."

"Ultimately the one that Foul Goddess wants rid of the most is you. There's also the possibility someone could shoot you down while you're out scouting in your crow form. And...I also just feel like it'd be easier to do this on my own."

"While you are on the road, any number of unknown foes may confront you... My master is being careful of those dangers too, I take it?" asked Seras.

"If something sudden were to assault us—I wouldn't want to lose you to an attack from my blind spot. When I'm on the offensive it's easy for me to maneuver—it's only when I'm on the defensive that I feel restricted."

"In other words—you wish us to stay here and defend the castle?"

"That's why I'm leaving you here too, Seras—there's nobody else I could count on."

"Th-thank you. Understood... It's an honor to be spoken of so highly." Seras looked embarrassed and apologetic.

This Princess Knight... She's as modest as she's ever been, huh?

"I'm leaving Slei here too."

Slei raised her head with a "*pakyuh?*"—she was sitting in the corner of the room in her pony form.

"We can't be sure that the enemy's strategies and forces are limited to what we can see out there now, they might have something else up their sleeves. If you feel like this place isn't safe anymore, don't hesitate to mount Slei and

escape. I'll borrow a Miran warhorse."

Slei gave a worried "*pakyu~hn!*" and there were tears in her eyes. I bent down to stroke her.

"I'll be fine. You just look after Seras and Munin for me, okay?"

"Pakyuh!"

"Squee—!" Piggymaru cheered her on as well, and I stood up from the floor.

"Seras, if you have to flee the capital... We'll meet back at the place we agreed, out on the road."

"And if that fails, we are to meet by the door to the Country at the End of the World, I take it?"

I had already predicted that the capital of Mira might suffer some kind of attack while we were staying there—and Seras and I had agreed on a meeting place if we ever found ourselves separated.

"You're okay with this, Munin?"

"Yes, if that is your decision, I will follow it. *Heh heh heh*, well then... I'll be sure to hug and squeeze and spoil you to bits upon your safe return. ♪"

"Gotcha."

"Oh, I just knew you wouldn't fall for that!"

I ignored Munin as she jumped up and down and turned to Seras instead.

"I leave the rest to you."

"Will you be all right out there...? On your own, I mean."

"I'll make it work." I placed a hand to my mask. "Don't worry—I'll get this done quick. Be back before you know it."

"Understood. If you say so, then I will not worry for your safety. Good fortune in battle... That is all I will say."

Seras's hand crossed her chest, as if making a vow. "I will protect Chief Munin,

no matter what it takes. I swear it on my honor as a knight.”

“Protect yourself too, okay?”

The Princess Knight’s face softened into a broad smile. “Yes. But, I...”

It looked as if this in particular was hard for Seras to say.

“Don’t hold back. What is it?”

“Your enemy are the Saber-toothed Tigers... Well...those you encountered in the Mils Ruins—you mentioned that they treated you with kindness...”

“I guess I did, yeah.”

“I apologize. I did not mean to dampen your spirits before battle.”

“Nah—I’m glad you brought it up.”

This battle isn’t going to be a direct one to begin with—more of a covert infiltration mission. This is going to be like my fight against the Sword of Courage—that’s the feeling I get. But there is one big difference between that situation and this one.

The enemy I’m facing this time aren’t pure scumbags.



I was alone in the Mils Ruins.

I remembered the words the Saber-toothed Tigers spoke to me, back when I was just some rookie mercenary to their eyes...a complete stranger no less.

“I know it’s not my place to order you around, but you should head back, too. Let’s leave this to the Baron’s guys, huh? He wants that cup so badly, he can come down and get it for himself.”

“You ended up down here by accident? We’ll take you back up to the surface with us if you want.”

“All right. But be careful, okay?”

SABER-TOOTHED TIGERS— RIRI ADAMANTINE

THESE EVENTS TRANSPIRED before the forces of Yonato and the White Wolf Riders made camp upon the northern border of Mira...

The Saber-toothed Tigers entered Yonato through the northern route, accompanied by Emperor Zera and Shougo Oyamada. They had fought in the recent invasion by the Demon King and were now returning. The Goddess had announced their arrival to the authorities in Yonato ahead of time, and so they easily found passage into the country. The Saber-toothed Tigers in particular received a warm welcome from the people of Yonato, who they had fought fiercely beside to beat back the recent invasion.

As they waited, preparing to put their strategies into practice, the White Wolf

Riders arrived in the capital of Yonato at the Goddess's imperial command. There was a Disciple of Vicius with them for a time too—Nyantan Kikipat. It had been a long while since Nyantan had seen the Saber-toothed Tigers, who she had once ventured into the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters with as part of the heroes' training.

Upon seeing Oyamada's transformation, Nyantan was shaken. And despite her best efforts—it showed.

"You... You *are* Oyamada-san, aren't you?"

"I cannot blame you for being shocked by my rebirth, Nyantan-dono. I apologize for my terrible rudeness toward you when we last met. I regret it deeply, truly I do. You are one of my mother's precious subordinates. Please, forgive me my foolish past."

There was the slightest trace of emotion on Nyantan's face, that could have been pity.

"Riri, he..."

"He's been reborn. All *thanks* to the Goddess."

"..."

"Well. We do the work that's been given to us. You too, right?"

"Y-yes..." Nyantan mumbled as she watched Oyamada walk away. "Yes, of course, you're right."

They proceeded to send forces to the border between Yonato and Mira just as the Goddess ordered, taking as many soldiers with them as they could scrape together. Nyantan and the White Wolf Riders went to the border as well.

As for the Saber-toothed Tigers—their task was to kill the Wildly Beautiful Emperor. They infiltrated Mira while all the attention was on the north and followed the border with the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters south, using the forest for cover.

After several hours of waiting, Emperor Zera returned from his scouting

mission.

“Hmph... It appears much of their strength has gone to the border with Yonato. *Ho ho ho*, I expected nothing less of the legendary braves of the north—the White Wolf Riders! Perhaps even stronger now than it was even in my day.”

“So... A lot of the emperor’s forces have been lured north, and now we’re just s’posed to infiltrate the capital and kill the guy? This is insane. I know we needed elites for this mission, so I brought along the best of the best, thirteen members includin’ myself... That makes fifteen with you and Oyamada here. But a group this small stormin’ the capital is just...reckless.”

“*Ho ho ho*—I will do my best to even the odds. Farewell for now,” said Emperor Zera, leaving them again. The Goddess had decided that he was to lead them for the time being—meaning this mission had been left entirely in his hands.

At least we’re not followin’ Oyamada. Despite his blind belief in the Goddess—that guy creeps me out. His personality has totally flipped...almost. When his temper flares, he’ll crack—the real him is still in there somewhere.

Riri’s thoughts were interrupted by Emperor Zera’s return—he was leading a large number of golden-eyed monsters behind him.

“Emperor Zera... What’s the meanin’ of this?! You don’t mean to use these monsters to sow confusion across the capital, do you?! Idiot! These blasted golden-eyes won’t listen to you! You ain’t the Demon King; you can’t order them around! Soldiers, ready your weapons!”

The members of the Saber-toothed Tigers were ready for battle before Riri even gave the order.

Oyamada lightly held up his greatsword.

“Mother told us that Zera-dono is in charge. I trust him.”

“*Ho ho ho*, never fear. Leave them to me!” Emperor Zera was swift for his age.

He grasped out for one of the smaller monsters, lunging while his back was turned—and caught the monster’s face in his hands.

“Gh, ah?”

The monster’s head was larger than Zera’s hand, so his fingers sunk painfully into the creature’s flesh. It struggled, its arms and legs flailing and flapping in the air.

“Conversion—” The moment he spoke those words, the Banished Emperor’s eyes flashed gold.

“Gh, gh... Ehhh...? Gyah.”

Riri heard the sound of meat being twisted up as the monster’s flesh crushed and compressed into a ball smaller than a human head.

The lump of meat swelled, expanded, and...

Splat!

A human-shaped *something* dropped to its knees on the ground below. The ball of meat above it split as it exploded, creating four bodies in total.

“Wh-what?” shouted Riri, cutting down one of the small golden-eyed monsters that had lunged for her in the meantime. “That monster was crushed... You t-transformed it...?”

The white, human-shaped creatures had only eyes, black and cavernous like Emperor Zera’s—with unnatural golden pupils twinkling in their center. They had no noses, mouths, ears... Nor hair or protuberances of any kind.

Then the four white bodies stood up, almost in unison. They were tall—taller even than Oyamada. The white ones stared down silently at Emperor Zera with their golden eyes flashing.

“*Ho ho ho...* Good, good, seems I was successful. Four small ones, not bad.”

“What is going on? Nobody explained any of this to us.”

Ignoring her, Emperor Zera placed a hand to the thick breast of one of the

white creatures.

“Hold down any of the monsters that you can keep still until I get to you. Any that look dangerous, you may crush. I wish for them to be left alive—but prioritize your own survival. Now go.”

The four white ones leaped toward the golden-eyed monsters, charging in as they tried to restrain those they could. In the other direction, Oyamada swung his great sword at a monster that charged his way, stepping on it to prevent it from escaping as the broken thing lay bleeding.

“Guehhh?!”

“Here you are, Emperor Zera. Go right ahead.”

With one graceful hop, Emperor Zera was at Oyamada’s side, placing his hands on the dying monster at his feet.

“—Conversion.”

It happened again.

The monster was crushed in an instant, a ball of flesh—and then transformed, several white bodies kneeling in its place. Emperor Zera gave the same orders to the new white ones he had just created, pointing them toward another horde of golden-eyed monsters and watching as they charged forward.

“I might be startin’ to get this...” said Riri, slicing through a monster as it tried to pass her, at the same time providing cover for her companions with a shower of offensive magic spells.

“You’re usin’ the monsters as *material* and usin’ that weird power to make *new soldiers* on our side...”

Emperor Zera laughed, sounding quite like a good-natured old man. “False Eucharists.”

“Eh?”

“That’s their name. The name the Goddess herself gave them.”

“Ah... My mother has such a perfect, beautiful sense for names. They’re shining so perfectly... My mother truly is a god...”

“This is the ability the Goddess granted me... A gift she shared with me, you might say? The way it works...” Emperor Zera continued transforming more monsters into more white soldiers as he spoke. “...is as you just described, young lady.”

He shot a glare at Riri.

“You went to the underground ruins near here, and deliberately drew out the monsters that were inside, didn’t you? So you could use them for those false Eucharist things?”

“*Ho ho ho*, how observant of you.” Emperor Zera looked off toward Luva, the capital of Mira. “My descendants are surely not so foolish as to let the fifteen of us approach their castles. I hear the Wildly Beautiful Emperor is an outstanding man, even compared to emperors past. *Ho ho!* I look forward to having an audience with him.

“Careful now, more of them are on the way. Protect yourselves and try not to kill them if you can. No complaints if you do, but... I’m much less successful with corpses, and it does affect the quality of the soldiers apparently. I want them alive. It keeps them strong—something about the soul power the Goddess mentioned.”

Soul power— isn’t that the source of the heroes’ strength? The thing that helps them grow stronger.

“So you can take the monsters the Demon King’s spawned and turn ’em into obedient, livin’ soldiers... Jeez...” Riri clicked her tongue.

If you had that all this time, why didn’t you use it sooner?

Emperor Zera continued spawning false eucharists—but there were too many monsters pouring from the underground ruins for him to convert them all into false Eucharists.

After everything was done, the whole area fell silent—Riri felt no presences nearby, and a good number of monsters seemed to have run away, breaking into Miran territory to the west. All that remained were the silent forms of the false eucharist army, standing in a neat formation. They did not speak. Though they had no ears, they seemed to hear and understand language. They followed Emperor Zera's orders without fail.

"I'm sure those monsters will be a thorn in the empire's side."

Oyamada inspected the false eucharists, looking almost on the verge of tears. "I feel Mother's holy power in these creatures. It is an honor. Oh, I want to see her again..."

"*Ho ho ho*, I've assembled quite the numbers. Now then..." Emperor Zera took a map from his backpack and beckoned Riri and Oyamada over. "Look. These are the underground ruins that are located in Miran territory. I was granted a special *voice* by the Goddess to call the golden-eyed monsters out from their hiding places..."

He returned his sword to its sheath and rubbed his hands together. "Let's split up, for now."

Riri and Oyamada looked up at him.

"After I've explained to you the whole plan, I'm going off to act alone."

"Alone? Are those Mother's orders?" Oyamada asked the emperor.

"Hmph, indeed they are."

"Well, then, fine. Ah... How I wish for Mother's soft chest once more... I will do my utmost as well."

Emperor Zera's eyes turned to Riri. "Now then, young lady."

"...Yeah?"

"The army of false eucharists I just spawned are now yours—they belong to

the Saber-toothed Tigers.”

“Eh—wait, now hold on a minute. What are we s’posed to do with them? Don’t they only follow the orders of the one who created them?”

“*Ho ho ho*, that shouldn’t be a problem. If I just order them to follow *your* orders, they’ll do so without question.”

Riri snorted at that, a smirk spreading across her face. “Well, huh... That’s a pretty convenient solution, isn’t it...?”

“This strategy’s going to depend a lot on you Saber-toothed Tigers, you understand? You’ve an important role, and I want you ready for it.”

“...”

“Oh oh? Something still on your mind?”

“Nah... It’s nothing worth mentionin’. Forget about it.”

“No, please. Don’t be shy—ask.”

Riri scratched her nose with her finger, pondering something.

“Well, so... If you had this power from the start, these false eucharists... I was wonderin’ why you never used ’em in the fight against the Demon King?”

“That would’ve been impossible.” Emperor Zera stroked his white beard. “I was born of this world. The Demon King Essence would weaken me, just as it would weaken you.”

“And the false eucharists too?”

“Eh?”

“They used to be golden-eyed monsters, unaffected by the essence... You could just stay in the back lines of the fight, sendin’ streams of those white things at the Demon King, right? Based on what I got from the fight, it looks like they don’t need food or sleep, do they?”

“But that would not work.”

“Why?”

“I told you, did I not? The Goddess granted me this power.”

“Ah.”

“Now you realize, I see. The false eucharists are created by the *divine* power the Goddess granted me. You understand?”

“Just like the Goddess... They’re affected by the influence of the Demon King Essence.”

Makes sense.

Emperor Zera has an incredible power at his disposal, but it can’t be used against the Demon King—that’s why he’s been sent here to deal with Mira.

But then, Oyamada isn’t affected by the Demon King Essence, and yet...

No... Given how brainwashed he seems, the Goddess must not want him meetin’ the other heroes. That S-class Ayaka Sogou—there’s no way she’d forgive Vicius for this. That must be why he was sent somewhere else. With the hostages she has, giving her leverage over us, she knows we’d never tell Sogou about him. She plans on taking down the Demon King with all the heroes she’s got...aside from Oyamada, I guess.

Emperor Zera went on to explain his entire plan to Oyamada and the Saber-toothed Tigers, rolling his map back up when he was finished and tucking it back into his bag.

“Well now—let us put this plan into action.”

After parting ways with Emperor Zera, The Saber-toothed Tigers led the false eucharists to the closest fortress they could find and proceeded to attack. They urged the soldiers inside the fortress to retreat before their onslaught, and let any escape who tried to. Then they used the weapons and armor they found inside to arm the false eucharist army.

This was all according to plan. Those retreating soldiers would be driven toward Luva. They had been instructed to do the same for every city and town between here and the capital—attack, suppress, and then allow for retreat. Their goal—to flood Mira with refugees and direct that flow toward the capital.

“Tch, this is dirty work... But I guess we’re the ones doin’ it, huh?”

The strategy was proceeding as intended—but there was an unexpected development.

Oyamada had disappeared.

Riri scanned the area before them, listening to the sounds of panicked men and women fleeing their homes.

“You find him?” she asked, turning to her vice-captain, Foss.

“Nope, he’s gone.”

Foss was a dark-skinned man, with his hair brushed back. He used a buster sword and was the raid leader of the Saber-toothed Tigers, mainly responsible for leading the group into battle.

“Who saw him last?”

“Big. Spotted him out near the north gate, I hear. Nobody’s seen him inside the city itself. Might be he didn’t participate in the attack at all... Sorry. I told everyone to keep their eyes on him.”

“Well, there’s not much we can do about it. Wouldn’t want any of ours to get hurt trying to stop him from leaving either. You saw him, right? The way he just flipped, turning in an instant when he got pissed.”

Foss put his hands on his hips and sighed. “...Well, yeah.”

They both looked out over the city, watching the false eucharists wandering the streets, the flames licking at the walls, and the trails of black smoke rising into the clouds. Riri felt a gloom coming over her but tried her best to shake the feeling off.

“What do ya’ reckon?” she asked. “Think he ran?”

“Knowing him...I can’t really picture him running. He believed so strongly in the Goddess. I feel like he’ll see the plan through, no matter what it takes. But it ain’t like he agreed to always stick by our side either. Goddess didn’t say he should, and neither did Emperor Zera.”

“You think maybe he always planned on going it alone? Like he’s still somewhere nearby, or maybe he’s long gone by now?”

“I got no idea. Sorry.”

“I said it’s fine. We’ve got our own roles to play.”

“Cap’n, there ain’t no more people left in the city... Least none I could find”

Drawer walked over to them—she was wearing her pointed hat and looking every bit the typical witch. Her face was pretty and her figure clearly enticing to men—she even said herself that her revealing outfit was meant to draw their gaze. Behind her was a kind-faced young man named Yuon. He was much shorter than she was, making him look like her little brother.

“Man, this battle to come...it’s going to be the biggest we’ve ever fought, real one for the history books! Even I’m starting to get nervous,” he said.

Behind Yuon came a short-haired man named Pozik with a cheerful smile on his face. “Hey, what else is a guy to do?! This was Big Sis’s decision, y’know!”

“Hey, you three, I said wait! You’re way too fast... Jeez, it’s so annoying!” A short girl came running after them—Izelna, muttering curses under her breath as usual.

“...Sorry, Captain. I should’ve kept a better eye on young Oyamada.” Big awkwardly made his appearance as well—he was the oldest member of their party, and one of the most experienced veterans of the Saber-toothed Tigers.

Foss patted him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry about it, Big. You’re rock solid, always supporting us. Given what we owe you, you could make a few more mistakes and we’d still be square.”

“C’mon, I’m always telling you, aren’t I?” Riri broke in. “First we have to ask if you did this on purpose—but you didn’t, right? Then we figure out how to improve, right? Make sure it doesn’t happen again, either with some self-improvement, swapping you out for someone better suited for the task, or with everyone’s help. And if you’ve apologized properly, then nobody’s going to blame you for anything. So let’s just move on, yeah?”

“*Heh heh*, see... This is what I really like about the Saber-toothed Tigers,” Drawer said.

“I really love that about this group too,” replied Pozik.

“Right?”

“Totally—!” Pozik folded his arms and laughed openly. “What?! Ain’t nothin’ to worry ’bout, Old Man Big! I mean, I make mistakes all the time! Right, Big Sis?!”

Thwomp!

“Ghh?!”

“You should take the time to learn from your mistakes, young Pozik!”

“H-hah... Sure...”

The sound of peaceful laughter filled the air, and Big pulled his helm down over his eyes. “...Sorry to make you all worry about me.”

The core of the Saber-toothed Tigers were the seven members assembled there in the forest.

Come to think of it—us seven were the ones that delved into the Mils Ruins that day in Ulza. That was quite a long time ago—why am I rememberin’ it now?

Riri watched the members of her group laughing before her, never letting the mood get too dark, and smiled.

I always try to bring everybody home alive...but is that too much to ask? Well,

at least we haven't been tasked with the slaughter, so that's something. But...

Riri placed a hand to her neck and bent her head to the side with a crack.

If I could, I'd just go home right now. All of us.

Before long the other six joined them, and they headed for their next destination—the white ones in tow.

SABER-TOOTHED TIGERS— FOSS

THE SABER-TOOTHED TIGERS continued their invasion south, leading the eucharist army as they went. They'd still had no contact with Emperor Zera or Oyamada and were completely unaware of their movements.

The group had just taken another town. A light shower of rain was falling, and the sun had set, sending the area almost completely into darkness. It was a humid and unpleasant night, the wetness sticking to their clothes. A hooded Yuon came to see vice-captain Foss, who was in command of the front lines.

"Hey, Yuon."

"Good evening, Foss."

There was a short silence as Yuon looked about the town, the streets were deserted but for the shifting forms of the eucharists.

"Even if we win this battle, I bet the Saber-toothed Tigers are going to be hated by the people of Mira for a long time to come."

"We anticipated that. Yuon, If that bothers you, I wouldn't hold it against you if..."

"Wait, Foss. I'm not leaving. I'm following the captain no matter where she goes—I've already made that decision. And well...we all understand the

situation.” Yuon sighed, then smiled determinedly.

“Our families and friends are hostages of Alion, people we could never get back if they were lost. The captain doesn’t have a choice in any of this. I’m prepared for our good name to be soiled here in Mira.”

They had orders to display their affiliation in battle—their name was bound to find its way into the ears of the people of Mira, whether they liked it or not.

“Don’t let it get to you, Yuon. Most people are gonna blame Mira for starting this war in the first place. And hey, I’ve got my own doubts about the Goddess as well. But like you said, we just have to follow Riri right? Still...”

He shone his lantern at one of the eucharists, standing perfectly still, slightly hunched forward in the dark.

“These things are creepy. After our orders are done, they just stand there waiting for more. They don’t respond to anything we say except the orders... Someone could be screaming right next to them, and they wouldn’t even flinch unless it was a direct command. This one-sided communication...it doesn’t sit right with me.”

Absent any orders from the Saber-toothed Tigers, the eucharists stood there motionless, like lifeless puppets. Lightning could crack above and they wouldn’t even flinch. Too many orders seemed to confuse them, so the tigers’ instructions had to be simple and direct.

This eucharist army’s convenient, sure. But completely useless without someone to lead them.

“I know what you mean. They don’t need food or sleep. Convenient sure, but hard to think of them as comrades.”

“The way they die, too...”

Yuon looked down at two dead eucharists lying nearby. The milky liquid leaking from their corpses mixed with the rain—*enough of that comes out and they die, just like us humans.*

And when a eucharist died, white wings shot from their eye sockets to signal their end.

How they all act right before they die is just as creepy... They try to hold hands. Dunno why. I don't know if there even is a reason. But when death comes for these things, they try to hold hands. Slowly... They stretch out their thin arms and silently try to connect.

"Hard to work with them when we don't even know what they are, right?"

"I'm kind of scared they might turn on us suddenly as well. I mean, Emperor Zera's the one whose orders they really follow."

"Got my suspicions about that as well. Some former emperor of Mira who's supposed to be long dead is given life by the power of a god... Man, this is messed up. Are divines even allowed to do that kind of thing?"

"How come he's called the *banished emperor* anyway?"

"He tried to sell his country out to the King of Alion, I think? Zera said something about dispelling the curse of the first Emperor Falken and his successor Emperor Dot. The second in line at the time and the three princeps's elector houses took his throne, and he was banished from Mira or something... I only know bits and pieces of the history, but I think that's about the shape of it."

"Foss... Ah, and you're here too Yuon. Got a minute?" Big placed a hand to his hood, coming in from the drizzling rain outside.

"What's wrong, buddy?"

"There's a horde of golden-eyed monsters coming this way—they seem to be leftovers that Emperor Zera couldn't convert. We're going to group up to go and deal with them."

"Can't exactly make more eucharists ourselves, can we? I'd rather not lose these white soldiers to a bunch of monsters either. We'll handle 'em. And hey, right now I'd much rather be fighting monsters than people."

“Hmph, I have to agree, Yuon. Are you ready, Foss?”

“Yeah. I’ll catch up with you after I’ve given orders to the eucharists around here.”

Big and Yuon disappeared into the foggy rain, and Foss made to call all the eucharists toward him to give them orders to...

“Someone!”

A voice... It came from one of those houses.

“Someone, anyone! Help! My dad!” It was a young boy, screaming.

Another voice broke in, deeper—an adult. “Stop it, Talam! They’ll find you! I’m fine! Hurry up and run!”

“N-no! I can’t leave you here! If I can just move this thing, then... G-ghh! Someone! Is there anyone there?! Help... *Sob...* Please!”

“Enough, Talam! Please, just go!”

“I don’t wanna! I...I’m not giving up! Come on! Move! Move—!”

That’s the house. It looks like it could collapse at any minute. Some furniture must’ve fallen during the attack and crushed the boy’s father.

Foss quickly analyzed the situation.

But...it might be a trap. Some Miran soldier trying to lure me in. It’s possible.

Still—Foss approached the house.

I can’t leave them to die. Can’t bring the eucharists with me either—that would only scare them, and the boy might run.

Foss walked toward the house he’d heard the voices coming from, grinding his teeth. He was conflicted but didn’t hesitate...

...What am I trying to do, atone for attacking this town?!

Before he had time to get his feelings in order, he found himself inside the crumbling building. He didn’t call out before entering.

This isn't like me—I'm being reckless. I should tell someone in the group what I'm doing first. We always avoid acting alone as much as possible, especially when we're separated. I'm breaking the Saber-toothed Tigers rules to do this.

"Hey. I'm here to help." He crept forward slowly, sword drawn. The calls for help had stopped completely, and Foss's lantern found nothing in the dark house.

"Where are you? I'm here to save you."

There was no answer. Foss felt ashamed at how hasty he'd been coming.

Was this a trap after all? Or are these people hiding... Wary of the ones that attacked their town?

"If you need help, just say the word! Don't worry, I'm not going to hurt you! I know we attacked this town, but most of the people here escaped safely. They evacuated before we came...!"

Foss tried raising his voice a little, but it was no use.

The rain outside suddenly became softer, and Foss stepped firmly onto the boarded floor of the adjacent room with a creak. With the rain quieter, he was sure he wouldn't let the sound of any footsteps escape his ears, no matter how stealthy they were.

If anyone approaches the house, I'll hear them—feel their presence... There'll be time to react.

He felt lucky the rain had let up—the weather was on his side.

...There's something here. Nearby. Where? Where is it?

He felt a chill. Foss couldn't tell where the presence was. He focused his hearing—there was no sound to be heard.

He froze.

Above me...? Is it up there? But that— isn't that the ceiling? Is there a hidden attic?

Shallow breathing—my own. There’s no other sound... Is whatever’s up there breathing so faintly that I can’t even hear it over the rain outside?

Haah, haah, haah...

His breath made white fog in the air, his clothes sodden with rain clung freezing to his skin.

What are they doing up there? Why don’t they attack?

No... Just my nerves. They’re making me think something’s up there. Or were the sounds of that father and his son imaginary... Maybe I’m just hearing voices, looking for some way to atone for what we’re doing here.

Maybe that’s it, and I just...

“...!”

No, they’re there!

Haaah... Hff, hff hff, hff... Foss’s breaths got shorter.

...I have to find them. Get eyes on whoever this is... Or I won’t know how to...

Foss plucked up the courage to jerk his head to the ceiling and look. There were eyes in the darkness... *Red eyes...*

“Gyah?!”

Thump.

SABER-TOOTHED TIGERS— IZELNA

“THAT VOICE... Wasn’t that Foss?!”

“Couldn’t hear so well over the rain...but it sounded like him, yes.”

Izelna and Big were out searching for Foss—the only member of their group

who hadn't come when they

assembled to take on the golden-eyed horde. They reasoned he might be struggling in battle against some golden-eyed monsters on his own—but with the large number of enemies approaching, Riri and the others had to gather what eucharists they could and face them.

Izelna and Big had separated from the group during the fight and gone off to find Foss. Expecting a large number of monsters to stand in their way, they took a handful of eucharists with them on their search.

“Th-the voice came from that building over there!”

“Indeed it did. We both heard him calling for help—I don't think the *both* of us could be hearing things.”

“It sounded like his leg's hurt, and he can't move.”

“We can't lose him. I'll go inside.”

“I-I'm going too—I'm definitely coming!”

“*Heh...* I knew you would, especially for Foss.”

“Wh-who cares about that now?!” Izelna respected Big too much to make the comment a bigger issue. The two of them checked their exits, placed the eucharists on standby outside, and entered the ruined house.

“Foss! Where are you?!”

“Foss?!”

They searched the rooms, but he was nowhere to be found—they couldn't hear his voice any longer. There was a flash of lightning—a pause—then the rumble of thunder.

“Kyah!”

They heard thick drops dripping from the eaves of the roof outside as the pounding rain fell on the house once more.

Izelna opened her eyes after she'd momentarily screwed them shut in fear

and stood from her crouching position.

“Hah, I hate lightning... I wish it would just disappear from this world. What do you think? It doesn’t seem like he’s here, does it?” she asked, swinging her lantern from side to side as she scanned the room. Big stood behind her, watching her back.

“Maybe it was the next house over...? If he hasn’t answered by now, I don’t think he’s in here.”

“B-Big?” A chill ran down her spine as she turned around. “Eh?”

He’s gone.

“B-Big?! Where did you go?! Answer me, please! Big!”

“—yu—” There was something behind her.

Izelna quickly jumped to turn and face it. “D... Did I really just hear that? I-it was like a kind of cry...”

Tap-squeak-tap-squeak-tap...

She heard footsteps above—they sounded like those of a small animal, and a cry she’d heard many times before.

“I-it’s just a mouse... Someone should take care of that thing! Hah... Ahem, I bet Big’s just searching one of the other rooms... I’m way too jumpy today.” She gave a sigh of relief and turned back to where Big had been standing. “—Huh?”

There wasn’t supposed to be anyone behind her—*nobody but Big*.

What is that thing... Reaching out toward me...

Red eyes... A fly...

She felt the blood draining from her face.

“Gyah-ah!”

Izelna thought she heard something—it might have just been her own scream escaping her lips.

She lost consciousness.

SABER-TOOTHED TIGERS— RIRI ADAMANTINE

THE EAST SIDE OF TOWN was packed with rows and rows of now lifeless houses. The sheer number of monsters and the speed of their advance was terrifying. The Saber-toothed Tigers returned from giving their orders to the eucharists in the area to deal with the threat.

We can't use up too many eucharists. We should take these monsters out ourselves, as much as possible.

At first, it was easy going. Riri Adamantine's sword tore through flesh, and the screams of golden-eyed monsters filled the air. The eucharists that she'd positioned as her shields were all dead.

I knew it—these creatures aren't capable in battle. The Tigers are needed for the real fighting.

Riri Adamantine took the grip of one of her swords in her mouth and held it firm with her teeth. She leaned forward, like a beast on all fours, and took swords in both hands, with another hanging from the leather belt behind her. These were her fangs, her claws, and her tail.

The monsters around her howled with confusion and rage as they advanced.

She swept through the endless stream of monsters, cutting down all in her path. She knocked a creature off its feet and plunged her blade down into its chest directly from above. There was a strangled wail as the monster died—it remained in her ears as she launched the blade in her left hand at a new enemy.

Splash—!

The monster that had been charging at her from the left fell lifeless to the mud. Riri's hair flew wildly with every swing, water spraying as she twirled, dropped the blade from her mouth into her left hand and leaned forward once more.

A tiger is s'posed to be a beast on the battlefield.

Her senses were better honed than they had ever been—nothing within 30 meters would escape her notice. No matter what came at her, she could respond in an instant. Monsters swarmed her, squelching through the rain and mud as they charged on all sides. She let out a beastly growl and attacked—quickly dispatching any that approached her.

A second wave came, and Riri fired spell attacks from her magical ring and threw swords to clean up those that remained. She drew the sword from her tail to fill her open hand. The ground was littered with monster corpses.

If Emperor Zera were here, he would've been able to make so many eucharists with these.

"Foss! Big! Yuon! Is anyone there?!"

There was no reply.

The Saber-toothed Tigers fought together in close formation through the narrow alleyways of the town. Fighting as one, supporting each other, scattering then regrouping, communicating—that was how they always did battle.

Vice-Captain Foss would always create the openings to lead their raids. Big would follow close behind, a rock-solid guard behind Foss's back. Yuon supported both, covering their blind spots—the way they worked together was a masterclass in combat. Each of the other members fell into place behind, choosing the best methods to support the advance—and enemies which were too much for the three of them to handle, Riri put down.

I'm strong, even though there are countless warriors who surpass me in this

world. But with my companions, I feel like I—that we can be stronger than the sum of our parts.

That premise was falling apart in front of Riri's eyes.

What's happening... Where is everyone?

The monsters were much stronger and more numerous than expected. Riri decided to bring in the eucharists.

Better to lose them than one of us.

Just as the eucharists slowly started turning the tide of battle—something strange began to happen. Riri stopped hearing from the members of her group. One by one they disappeared from view. They hadn't been fighting as a single, back-to-back defensive unit during this battle. With powerful monsters barreling toward them, they needed space to maneuver and dodge.

Scatter, regroup, communicate.

They usually stuck to their plan, but some members of the Saber-toothed Tigers had stopped responding to the calls for communication. Yet Riri hadn't seen a single corpse—none of her companions lay dead.

Weird. It's like they were gone in a flash.

She spat mud from her mouth but had no time to wipe her dirty face as she took a sword from one of the eucharist corpses and held it between her teeth once more.

What's happening here?! This is a nightmare!

She heard the wet thumps of monsters stampeding toward her through the mud—*three... No, four!* With a piercing battle cry, the group of monsters leaped onto a nearby building before launching themselves toward her from the roof. The rain buffeted Riri from the side, blocked for a brief moment by the creatures descending on her.

She raised her arm and fired off some magical attacks—two fell, and the other two she took out with sword throws.

“Another?!”

In an instant, Riri tried reflexively to turn toward *it*. Her body moved almost unconsciously. The ground was littered with monster corpses, but she could clearly sense the *thing* behind her now. As she looked over her shoulder, she saw a black human hand reaching out from underneath the corpses.

“—Paralyze.”

I know I could have detected any movement within 30 meters. But if that thing was there waiting right from the start, lying completely motionless under the monster corpses...

I would have seen it if it approached. If it got so close, it must have been there all along.

The monster corpse that had concealed the black hand was shoved aside, and *it* approached Riri, who found herself completely unable to move. The four attacking monsters fell to the earth, clearly unable to continue the fight. They rolled around at her feet wailing in agony, but Riri wasn't concerned with them anymore—it was the new threat approaching that mattered most.

“Kh... Heck! Wh-what...?!”

The Lord of the Flies?! He's on Mira's side?!

My companions... The ones who disappeared during the fighting. Did he get to them too?

I can't move! He's coming closer. I'm done for!

All the faces of those the Goddess had taken hostage came flooding back into Riri's mind.

If we're all gone, they'll have no value to her... But no reason to kill them either—right, Vicius? Please...

I hope everyone's safe. To my companions who've come with me so far, I'm sorry your captain had to be a failure like me. Right up until the end, Vicius used

me.

But I...I thought I was happy. Getting to live with all of you, to laugh with you... You're too good for me—each and every one of you.

“What the h-heck... S-ser...iously...”

...Yeah. If we meet again in hell—I'll have to thank you. When we do, please... Blame me for some of this. Blame me for being the gutless coward I am.

“Haah...”

Right here at the end, the least I can do is give it everything I've got. Move this worthless body of mine by force and strike! Strike back! Give them one last...

“Sleep.”

Just before Riri's consciousness faded, she heard a voice.

“Made it just in time. Tch... You people are too good for your own good. Trying to be role models or what?” The sound of the rain, and his last few words were all Riri heard as she drifted off. “Every freakin' one of you—bunch of tryhards.”

WILDLY BEAUTIFUL EMPEROR

A DRIZZLING RAIN fell on the imperial capital.

There were less refugees coming in from the northeast—reports suggested that the White Army's advance south had been halted, and all news of the Saber-toothed Tigers had dried up as well. Soldiers from one of the garrisons in the north who had yet to suffer any attacks had marched out against them and were beginning to clear the white ones from the battlefield.

That Lord of the Flies has done well. And yet...

“Report, Your Majesty. We opened our gates to allow refugees from towns in

the northwest past the first two layers of walls... But it appears the white ones have begun to infiltrate the inner wall.”

“Can you fight them back?”

“Those of House Dias have taken command of a group of soldiers outside the castle walls and are presently holding them off.”

“Understood. I’ll send several members of my personal guard to handle any that might make it past.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

Outside the walls in the northeast and west, the White Army had appeared and begun its onslaught.

But where are they coming from?

Zine pondered as he read the report.

Before these white ones appear, we always have reports of golden-eyed monsters flooding the areas as well. There must be a connection.

“Power of the gods, hm?”

“...Your Majesty?”

“Asagi said it as well. What are we to do with these sudden attacks, against soldiers of unknown strength. Vicius... She underestimates us humans at every turn. Kaize.”

“Yes.”

Kaize Mira, Zine’s older half brother—eldest son of the former emperor. Initially slated to ascend the throne after his father’s death, he now served as Mira’s chancellor instead.

“I leave the refugee matter in your hands. We cannot allow reports of this attack on the capital to shake the resolve of Luheit in the north or our forces fighting in Ulza. Send word—tell them that their emperor is alive and well, and he has a plan which is already safely in motion. Tell them to believe in the

emperor who believes in them.”

“Understood. But in truth, we... This won’t be an issue, will it?”

“It will not. I will make sure of that. I’ve had Hawk call the Forbidden Words Clan woman here—Vicius’s forces may be aware of her presence. If possible, I want her here by my side for her protection.”

“But are you sure she will agree to come?”

Zine leaned on the armrest, propping his head up with a hand against his cheek. “It may prove difficult, yes. I don’t believe the Lord of the Flies Brigade fully trusts me yet.”

“Should she be brought here by force if necessary?”

“No. If there are signs that she intends on escaping of her own volition, you must allow her to do so. This is the Lord of the Flies we’re talking about, not some worthless pawn. I’m sure he has come up with some plan for an emergency. It might be better to allow his plan to proceed than to force our protection upon her.”

“Very well, it will be done.”

Kaize left, and Zine called in the others who had been waiting outside. His personal guard, and a group of ministers filed in to stand before his throne—waiting for the next reports to come in. The most elite members of his personal guard stood by his side while their men formed ranks in front of him.

Before long, he heard some kind of commotion out in the hallway—panic ran through the ministers, and the guards prepared for a fight. Finally the screams were right there—right outside the door to the throne room in which the emperor himself sat. A knight leaped into the room and shut the door behind him, his face pale with shock.

“R-report! A mysterious man has broken into the castle and is trying to meet with you...! I’m so sorry, Your Majesty! W-we couldn’t stop him! We tried, but even with our numbers...! Even your personal guard were no match for him at a

—”

Crash—!

“Ghaah?!” The door and the knight before it were blown away. He struck one of the pillars in the room and fell unconscious.

Zine narrowed his eyes.

“Ho ho ho! Your defenses are so thin...so very thin. And you’ve remained right here in the throne room—I’m so impressed you haven’t run! I’m so terribly glad to meet you, truly from the bottom of my heart—Falkendotzine MiraDiAsordseat... Wildly Beautiful Emperor!”

The ministers began to murmur—there was something about the man’s appearance and clothing that stirred Zine’s memory also. He was a pale old man, his beard long and unkempt like corn silk.

“Ho ho... I see. The rumors didn’t lie about your beauty... Was it your looks that seduced your two obedient older brothers?”

“An insolent old man, aren’t you? Don’t you think it’s sensible to at least offer me your name?”

“Oh, my apologies. Well, many of you have already realized, but my name is Falkendotzera MiraDiAsordseat. My former name now, I suppose. *Ho ho ho.*”

A wave of murmuring began to spread among the ministers.

“The banished emperor. But a wonder you still live, no? You should be long dead of old age now by all rights. I see—the Goddess has even granted you the secrets of life. The thing before us is no longer human.”

His advance from the northwest through the towns and cities there... The experienced hand I’ve felt behind this attack on the capital... It makes sense now. He was raised here, after all. This is the land he ruled, for a time.

“I’m here today to lecture you!”

“So... Revenge against Mira, the empire which banished you.”

“Hmph, not quite, but in a way. This is about undoing the curse of the first Emperor Falken and the second, Emperor Dot... With the Goddess around, there’s not much sense in trying to dominate the world anymore.”

“You believe this world is right with her in it?”

“Yes, yes. Peace can be achieved if all nations throw away just a little of their ambition. The Goddess protects the balance of this continent. Peace is best for the citizens. Surely the Root of All Evil is the only real threat?”

“You speak some truth...though you seek to deceive. The true peace I wish for will come from the uniting of the continent. The Goddess’s continued existence prevents that from ever becoming a reality.”

“For so long, the Goddess has been the de facto ruler of this world. This is unification, no?”

“If the unifiers were humans and demi-humans, perhaps then I could see your point of view. But that Goddess does not view us as people. So long as this world hinges on that dubious outsider, I do not call it safe.”

“Well, several emperors of Mira have been indirectly killed by the Goddess for displeasing her. I understand why you must hate her—she brought that on herself, *ho ho*. You’re avenging those past emperors that the Goddess has killed, are you? *Ho ho ho*, well, I’m taking revenge for my banishment.”

The banished emperor continued. “Revenge is just a fleeting emotion, a vulgar and base thing, no substitute for a true cause. And yet you dare to speak as if you’re doing this out of consideration for the whole world! How craven of you—Wildly Beautiful Emperor! *Ho ho ho ho!* You’re crazed! Truly insane!”

“You may call it a curse, but perhaps it’s best called a legacy.”

“Eh?”

“My father... Those were his words. The words of the former emperor.”

Emperor Zera stepped forward—toward the throne. There was a shortsword in his hand, the blade of which seemed a little too long and unbalanced.

“Ho ho ho—very well! That will do just fine! This was meant to be educational, but I’ve lived long enough to know the ways of the world! Those with conflicting opinions can so rarely see eye to eye! Nothing left but conflict, rooting out the enemy and destroying them! Fear! Violence! The most certain methods for resolving problems are fear and violence—the simplest and clearest too! So long as humans remain slaves to emotion, they’ll never be able to escape providence! Let’s go, my beloved descendant! I’m so ferociously happy right now for some strange reason! I’m so thankful for this world and everything in it!”

Zine stood and drew his sword from the sheath at his waist with one smooth motion. In his hand, he held the divine sword Exbringer.

“Fool...” said Zine. “Or so I would like to call you... I cannot disregard all you have said to me as sophistry. It is true, what settles a dispute like this can only be violence—destruction.”

“Quite right! Truly this is a fine day to be alive! This banished emperor before you has returned for revenge. Use your strength to put me down, Idealist Emperor Zine! *Ho ho ho ho!*”

The room was long, with thick marble pillars flanking the thick carpeted path to the throne itself. The pillars grew more ornate and elegant the closer they got to the throne. The carvings on them became more detailed, and the decorations became more extravagant as well. Most felt in awe of the decor as they approached the emperor—emotions welled up inside them as if every step they took closer to him, the hands on their back pushing them forward became stronger and stronger.

Emperor Zera appeared to feel none of those emotions as he advanced toward the throne. The knights who had been frozen in place as they watched the scene unfold, sprang forward to attack, but...

“Gwaaah!”

Almost by the shock wave of the swing alone, the knights were tossed back by

a single blow from his sword as if swept up by a hurricane. Most had their bodies ripped in two—the lucky ones lay motionless on the floor. The group of ministers took shelter behind the pillars of the throne room in panic—but Zine’s personal guard could do nothing but stand firm in his defense. Fear in their eyes—they raised their swords in preparation to protect their emperor.

“Guards, step back!”

“B-but, Your Majesty...!”

“I will need your strength in the battles to come. I cannot lose you now. I am the only one capable of facing the enemy before us—worry not, I will defeat him.”

“Y-Your Majesty...!”

Zine stepped forward—not waiting for Emperor Zera to reach him.

“Ho ho ho... Coming then, Zine? I’m proud of you, my boy.”

The blade of the divine sword began to glow with pale green light. He swung it once, leaving a trace of light in the arc he drew through the air. Then he adjusted his aim and swung once more.

What appeared merely a trace of glowing had substance—condensed light that could shield the emperor or be used to attack if necessary.

“How tiresome. You’ve grown senile I see. You still believe yourself to be a member of my family, even. It surpasses idiotic and strays into the realm of pathetic, I fear.” Zine created more glowing traces of his blade in the air around him, ordered them into place—then raised his sword to face his foe. “You are a banished man of this realm, nothing more—it is time you understood that, *Zera.*”

“Ho ho ho! How unworthy of you, child! It’s your vessel! Your vessel brings shame to the name of the emperor, Zine!”



SERAS ASHRAIN

SERAS SAW the messengers of Mira returning from the battlefield as she peeked out between the curtains of the state guest house. She grasped the situation at hand in an instant and immediately started planning.

“The imperial capital is under attack from that mysterious White Army...”

She and Munin were in the living room of the state guesthouse.

“If they’ve opened the gates of the middle wall, then doesn’t that mean it’s possible they believe the enemy could reach this inner district? What should we do, Miss Seras? Should we flee the capital?”

“Yes, well... If Mira tries to secure you, then this will become a different matter entirely. But we do need to consider that the enemy may be able to reach us here. We should keep an escape route open as a possibility.”

“Ahem, Miss Seras... If the White Army is here at the capital, doesn’t that mean that Mr. Too-ka has...”

“No... The messenger that just came said that attacks in the northeast—the direction Sir Too-ka went in, have stopped completely. New information has also ceased to come in regarding the Saber-toothed Tigers, according to reports.”

“Ahem... Does that mean that he was successful then?”

“Yes. I believe it’s only his success that has stopped the enemy’s advance. It seems Miran forces are even in the process of mopping up the remaining White Army in the area. The ones attacking the capital at present...are somewhat different. They may perhaps even be newly created.”

“Then maybe we should stay here after all? Or do you believe Mr. Too-ka will be heading to the west, where this new White Army came from?”

“No, I trust he will be at our meeting point. He mentioned that regrouping with us would be his top priority after his mission was complete. I think we should leave the capital.”

“Very well. If that is what you think, Miss Seras, I will follow.”

“Thank you very much, Chief Munin.”

Slei was in the stables around the back of the house. Too-ka had left her in her second stage of transformation, with 990 MP poured into the crystal on her back—*just 10 more to transform her into her final form.*

“Ah, once Miss Slei is in her third stage, you can rely on me to provide mana for her, okay?” Munin said.

Seras felt grateful to be able to rely on Munin’s mana regenerative abilities when the need might arise. “Thank you. First let’s head to the meeting point. We must consider that Sir Too-ka may be on his way back here...but if he returns and finds us gone, the meeting point will be the first place he will check.”

They had discussed the plan before he left.

“If you judge it too dangerous here to remain, don’t wait for me—just head straight for our meeting point. If we end up missing each other, I’ll catch up with you there once I find you’re gone.”

“What of the Wildly Beautiful Emperor... And the other heroes?”

“We have to be most worried about losing Munin. Without her, we’d have to rely on Fugi for all our Forbidden Magic. Munin herself doesn’t want that, and neither do we.”

Munin is risking her life for this. Too-ka is. And so am I. It’s only because she’s so precious to me that I can protect her so fervently.

“Same goes for you, Seras,” she recalled him saying. “Losing you would mean losing far too much.”

Yes... I feel the same way, Sir Too-ka. If by some chance I were to lose you,

everything within me would crumble and break. I know it for a fact.

Seras placed her finger between the curtains to open them just a little and gingerly looked out at what was happening outside.

“It seems all the people from this area have gone. I don’t sense anybody watching us either. There were not many in this district to begin with—but now I believe they’ve all been evacuated.”

Slei’s speed and ability to break through enemy lines will be best in her third stage of transformation—but that will also make her stand out. Given the state of the capital now, however, we could hardly be stopped for questioning by the guards.

Seras had considered several different routes. The district they found themselves in was for welcoming important guests, and so there were hidden escape routes available to them—even one, to her surprise, which involved a horse-drawn carriage.

“In peacetime we might not have been able to get out, but in all this confusion I think we may be able to escape their attention!”

“Miss Seras? What’s wrong?”

“Mr. Hawk is being kidnapped.”

“Eh?!”

Seras could see Hawk being dragged by the back of his collar outside. He seemed hurt, perhaps even unconscious. Seras didn’t recognize the man who was dragging him.

No... Wait. From what Sir Too-ka told me... That almost looks like...

“It can’t be... A Hero from Another World?”

Standing there was a hero that Seras had never seen before. But Too-ka had told her enough about their characteristic features for her to recognize them, such as the Takao sisters and Takuto Kirihara.

“That’s... Oyamada Shougo?”

The man who looked like Oyamada called out, raising his voice as if he didn’t know who he was talking to or how many of them there were.

“Are the Forbidden Words Clan out here?!”

Seras was shocked—*so he does know that Munin is here.*

“I’ve been through so many hostages now! Kindness makes them spit out the truth, yes! It’s just like Mother said! No need for physical pain at all! The trick is to make them think you’ll hurt them unless they tell you the truth! They might’ve sworn loyalty to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, but humans are weak! This man’s the only one that didn’t break, no matter what! But Mother told me... She said the tightest-lipped ones are usually the best hostages! I knew it! I knew Mother was right!”

“...M-Mother?”

“And wouldn’t you know it, the man I’ve got in my hand is someone pretty important! The chamberlain told me he’s in charge of looking after the Forbidden Words Clan! Come on now, Forbidden Words Clan! Show yourself or I’ll hurt him! Then I’ll kill him! How ’bout I take off his fingers one by one?! Or maybe, like, ripping off his ears would be better?! If you think I’m being mean, come out! People of the Forbidden Words Clan, listen! Please, please! Oh, Mother is so great!”

“What’s going on?!” A knight emerged from the castle, sword in hand, at the commotion. “Eh?! Lord Hawk! Y-you... Who are you?!”

“Me?! I’m a Hero from Another World, I’ll have you know!”

“Wh—?!”

“The only son of the Goddess Vicius—Shougo Oyamada! Do you have any value to me as a hostage?! Doesn’t look like it, so—Bullet!”

“Gyaah?!”

Red balls shot from Oyamada’s fist and sent the knight flying. He crashed to

earth surrounded by fragments of his broken armor, spitting up blood as he hit the ground. The stone paling of a nearby building was also hit, demolishing the top half completely.

Such speed and capacity for destruction... I have to be careful of those attacks. He truly is Sir Too-ka's classmate...

"What should we do, Miss Seras? Mr. Hawk is going to..."

Seras hesitated.

Hawk isn't a bad person. He has shown his consideration for us in subtle ways ever since we first arrived here in Mira—though I assume that those were the Wildly Beautiful Emperor's orders, in part.

"He was the one who told us of the escape routes out of Mira, should it come to that. He does not know of our plans to escape, but he asked us to consider leaving the city if we felt we were in danger."

Am I going to abandon him to his fate?

"Forbidden Words Clan?! You ain't comin' out?! Right then—first finger!" Oyamada sliced off one of Hawk's fingers.

"Gh...ah...?!"

He's still alive...

Seras was somewhat relieved to hear his voice, but Hawk sounded exhausted. He was injured and looked terribly weak.

Thinking about this rationally—we shouldn't respond to their provocations. We should mount Sleis and run. If we leave through the back entrance now, they may not notice our escape.

"...Be good to those who treat you well," Seras murmured to herself under her breath, like a mantra.

He... He left the decision up to me. I...

Shougo Oyamada is an A-class hero—the same as Tomohiro Yasu. That fact

alone is testament to his strength. That said, they're considerably less dangerous than S-class heroes—at least in Too-ka's estimation.

Too-ka had also told her that Oyamada was an emotional individual—that his lack of composure might give her opportunities to strike at him.

I'm not good at manipulating the emotions of others like he is...

Munin's expression was serious now, and she opened her mouth to speak, sounding about as determined as Seras had ever heard her.

"Miss Seras, I..."

"I'm going to go and save Lord Hawk."

"I"

"He is an important member of the Wildly Beautiful Emperor's inner circle. He is worth saving, I believe."

"Y-yes... Th-then I will come with you, and—"

"No, I must go alone."

"Y-you can't, Miss Seras...! That will..."

"I'm sorry, but I cannot put you in danger. That was the promise I made Sir Too-ka."

"But then what about your safety...?"

Seras smiled at her—there was a clear helplessness in her eyes. "Chief Munin, I appreciate your worry. But it does not seem that we have the time to debate this."

"...Miss Seras."

She looked out of the window once more.

"Please transform into your crow form and remain at the window on the second floor, ready to escape at any moment. If you could turn Slei into her third stage of transformation before doing so, that would also be of much help.

Once I have rescued Lord Hawk, I will escape with him on Sleif's back. Please flee this place when the opportunity presents itself and locate us from the sky as soon as you can."

Munin clenched her fist and held it tightly to her chest. Her expression showed how much she was holding back. "...Y-yes, right. I would be more of a hindrance than help to you in battle. You would concentrate better without me, wouldn't you?"

Munin wasn't being hard on herself or sulking—she had clearly analyzed the situation and come to that conclusion.

Her true power is in Forbidden Magic—her disabling ability. I trained her on the road with some basic fighting techniques, but against a high-level hero she would be a distraction at best. She understands that—I'm glad she's able to view the situation objectively at times like these.

"Thank you for understanding. And... I'm sorry for making you say it, Chief Munin."

"*Heh heh*, that's fine. I'm sure if Too-ka were here, he wouldn't want us taking any more time than necessary with these conversations...and I believe he would agree with your decision not to abandon Mr. Hawk. As you mentioned, saving Hawk here will be advantageous to our cause in the future as well. Let us proceed with your plan, Miss Seras."

"One more! And as an extra penalty... I'll give him a sock in the face! I wish Mother could see this! Oh, I really do!"

"Gh-ah—?! Ghfh?! Gh-hn..."

"There's no time, Miss Seras! At this rate, Mr. Hawk is going to..."

"Yes," Seras replied coldly, rushing out into the hallway to prepare to leave. Munin followed, and they prepared to go their separate ways, Munin to the back door and Seras to the front.

"If I should fail... Then you must escape alone, and head to the meeting point

by yourself, Chief Munin.”

“Miss Seras, but...”

“My wish is for Sir Too-ka to achieve his goal. That goal cannot be achieved if you are lost... And your wish will be lost as well. Please.”

Munin’s expression told Seras that she thought this was an unfair demand, but she relented.

“Then promise me, Miss Seras. Promise me you will succeed, no matter what.”

“I promise.”

They smiled at each other and went their separate ways.

Seras quickly changed into her spirit armor, somewhere away from the windows where the glow would not attract the attention of those outside. Steeling her resolve, she slipped out of one of the windows in a place she knew was out of Oyamada’s line of sight. She peeked out at him, her back to the wall.

This is likely the closest I can get without him noticing me. Roughly thirty meters. He would be in range of Too-ka’s paralysis skill... If only I had that power. At least thanks to this rain, I don’t need to rely on the spirits to mask the sound of my footsteps.

“Huuh?! You think maybe they’ve already gone?! Ah, c’mon! What the freakin’ heck! The Forbidden Words Clan just ain’t coming out! Ah, Mother! What am I supposed to do now, Mother?! Nobody in this castle seems to know *anything* about the divine beasts either!”

Hawk was limp, hanging motionless from where Oyamada had him by the back of his collar. It was as if he’d given up. Oyamada swung his body furiously to the left and right, like a child throwing a tantrum.

“Aaah! I’m going to lose face with Mother—! Aaah I don’t wanna! No! N—!”

Scrape!

“Ow! Ouch. Huuuh?”

By Oyamada’s side were the remains of the stone paling he’d destroyed as he attacked the knight. The paling was cracked, leaving the sharp edge of the stone exposed, and he’d cut himself on the jagged edge.

“—Ah.”

Seras felt a wave of unease come over herself once more. Oyamada looked as if he’d been struck by lightning—his mouth was open wide, both hands to his face.

It was as if some shocking revelation had suddenly hit him.

“...Ah, ah. Right. Huh. *Pff... Pfhht!* I-I...I was brainwashed by the Goddess and she sent me here?! Now I remember...this is awesome. I remember everything about the brainwashing too... All of it. This is like, an amazing experience, yeah? It’s like I was me, but not me.” He paused for a moment. “Okay, okay. Forbidden Words Clan...that’s right! I gotta get them so I can dive into the big tits of that brainwashing Goddess and get myself a piece! This mommy issues stuff is hilarious! *Gyah hah hah!* Man, the Goddess’s body is so freakin’ soft! Ah, what’m I gonna do now?! Should I keep pretendin’ to be brainwashed and work my way up?! I’ve gotten way stronger with all that ruins diving, after all!”

Ruins diving...? Brainwashing?

From the looks of it, whatever it was the Goddess did to him, the spell has been broken. It must’ve been the pain of that scrape that did it...

“Man, I really wanna show Ayaka and all the rest how strong I’ve got! What are Takuto and all the others doin’ right now anyway?! The Goddess doesn’t tell me anything! Well, whatever! It’d be so lame to go back... Maybe I should just live however I want in this world, huh?! Build some power under the Goddess, go get myself some girls, y’know?! S’long as I keep flattering the Goddess, I can climb pretty high in this world, yeah?! Guess I’m swapping out Takuto for a Goddess upgrade!”

There's my opening. Now—can I take him out? If I can get closer and land a single attack...

Seras carefully crept forward, trying to circle around behind Oyamada's back.

"Ah... Who cares about this guy anymore. The Forbidden Words Clan are gone... I'm just gonna take him out! He's gettin' in my way!"

"I"

"Who gives a heck about the imperial capital or whatever! That banished old dude is gonna take care of this, yeah?! Ah, there were some nice girls in that Saber-toothed Tigers group, huh... If I catch 'em when their guards're down, maybe I can get a taste! Some of those cold mercenary girls that are so freakin' friendly with each other! Anyway, I really wanna get some pet girls in this world and live with 'em! Please, make my dreams come true, Goddess! *Gyah hah hah hah...* Ah, this guy seems pretty important, yeah? I'll take a souvenir back for the Goddess."

I wanted to be closer, but...

"St-stop right there!"

"Huh?"

"That man... Put him down."

"...Huuuh? Ah! You..." He glared at her and patted Hawk once on the head.

"You're totally Seras Ashrain, ain'tcha?"

Chapter 5:

With all the Malice I Have

I'M HERE NOW—standing before him. But if I had not revealed myself, Hawk would already be dead.

Oyamada looked her up and down, as if running his tongue over Seras's whole body. "Oh... Ooh! That sexy figure all soaked by the rain! Like, whoa...you're hot! Like, what are you doing here? You're with that little buzzin' fly band yeah?"

"I will answer your questions once that man is released."

"You sure about that? Then, like, I'll let him go if you do what I say, 'kay?! First lemme see your tits! Take 'em out! *Bo~ing!*"

"—!"

Seras immediately knew he was lying—Oyamada had no intention of handing Hawk over. She had expected as much, but still, the shame, the rage... Seras's cheeks felt hot. Before she realized what she was doing, her left hand was covering her chest.

"...You... Have you not a shred of pride...?"

"Pride?! *Gyah hah!* What'cha blushin' for?! Naive or what?! Huh—? Boys think with their little head, y'know...and women just gotta take it. That's how the world works! We gotta make more kids somehow... Gotta sow our seeds, right? And I ain't gonna feel ashamed about that! Learn some shame yourself, Seras Ashrain! *Gyah hah hah!* Anyway, them pointy ears...you're an elf, right? Are all elves such naughty babes?!"

Seras felt fear—just a little.

Too-ka told me about this man, but he may just be the most vulgar individual I have ever met. There's an unsettling quality to him that I cannot quite place.

Something that seems shallow at first—but masks a much deeper, cavernous evil.

No... There is no time for such thoughts.

“Lord Hawk? Lord Hawk, are you still alive?”

If he’s dead, Hawk would have no more value to Oyamada as a hostage—and there would be no reason for me to have revealed myself.

“Yeah, yeah—he’s not doing great, but he’s still here.”

He’s telling the truth.

“What’s it gonna be, then? We ain’t getting anywhere if you won’t strip for me. We doin’ this or what...? You got twenty seconds to decide, tick, tick, tick... C’mon, I’m gonna kill him if you don’t. Start with the boobs, yeah?”

Oyamada placed his fist to Hawk’s temple.

“—!”

“Fifteen more seconds... Clock’s running... You doin’ it or what? You think your pride’s more important than this guy’s life? Well, you might be right! But, like, it’s so freakin’ hilarious how you still front like you’re some fine upstanding human when you’re just an elf?! Demi-humans are the lowest of the low, right?! I can do whatever I want with you! Time’s up!”

“Kh...”

I know he won’t let Hawk go, even if I do what he says... And I must be careful that I don’t end up as this man’s hostage under any circumstances.

“Ah, this is such a drag. Just take the guy...here!” Oyamada tossed Hawk squarely at Seras. In the same motion, he charged straight toward her, his fists pointed at Hawk. Seras dashed forward, trying to catch the hapless man before he fell, while avoiding Oyamada in the process.

I can absorb some damage from his attacks—my spirit armor can handle it. If I can just rescue his hostage, then...

“Heavy Bullet.”

Boom!

The balls of light came racing toward her.

“Eh?!”

In the next instant, they exploded and split into a scattershot shower of red.

There’s a chance I could dodge all of them with my footwork—but not while protecting Hawk... I need to take some damage to shield him from the blows.

Seras honed her concentration to its very limits, calculating the projectiles’ paths in an instant, predicting where they would land on her body and preparing to use her spirit armor to absorb the attacks and avoid any serious injury—

“Checkmate.”

“Eh?”

The bullets passed through her spirit armor. Several of them disappeared into her like phantoms, absorbed by her body.

“Wh-what is h—?!”

My body...f-feels heavy?

It wasn’t just the weight of Hawk in her arms that she felt. It was something else—a terrible, unsettling sluggishness.

It’s because I let him hit me with those attacks! No—!

I knew he was a hero—Too-ka has demonstrated to me what that can mean. I should have expected there to be more to his skills than simple brute force. I was being impatient. I was too focused on saving Hawk.

Seras fell to her knees, holding him to her with one arm. She ran cold blue lines of ice through her sword as she glared over at Oyamada, resolute.

“Ah... I always wanted to say that—*checkmate*, y’know? Man, that felt good...

Like, I knew it would. ♪”

He grinned down at her.

“Listen, sometimes you just gotta lower your standards, right? God, you’re stupid... The self-righteous idiots in my world were just as freakin’ annoying. Talkin’ crap like making the world or society better—why don’t you try and fix your own life before you save other people? Yeesh! You think hypocrisy’s better ’n doing nothing at all? It’s gross! *Gyah hah hah!* Takuto says countries that listen t’ all that hypocrisy stuff always go down in the end! But in the country I’m from, they only listen to dumb hypocrites who can’t admit there’s such a thing as necessary evil! The place ain’t got no future! So, like, why don’t I just make a life in this world?! The girls here are so freakin’ beautiful, and I can do whatever I want to ’em!”

I know it’s because of Oyamada’s ability—but the rain soaking my clothes feels so heavy.

Seras stopped moving.

His pulse...

“Lord Hawk...?”

There’s no pulse. No heartbeat... Nothing.

“N-no... He’s dead...?”

“Huh? Seriously?”

Oyamada said he was still living...because he truly thought that Hawk was still alive. My lie-detecting ability couldn’t detect that as a falsehood, because he wasn’t aware that he was lying.

“Wh—?! What’re you doing kicking the bucket, Hawk-san?! Man, that’s hilarious! So, like... You’re such an idiot, Seras-san! Like, you protected him with your life, and the guy was already a stiff! It’s brilliant! You’re, like, way too nice, y’know?! It’s almost freakin’ cute! You’re so kind! Ohhhhh, man, I’m getting fired up now! Check this out!”

Oyamada kicked Seras as she knelt, sending her flying.

“Ahgh...?!”

“Hawk-kun! You were pretty useful for makin’ Seras-chan weaker, but now you’re in the way. ♪ *Gyah hah hah!* Move!”

Oyamada laughed loudly, his mouth wide open as he kicked Hawk’s corpse to the side.

“Kh-h...” Seras pushed herself up from the ground with one hand, trying to stand.

It’s not as strong as Too-ka’s paralysis. I can move, but—I feel so heavy.

“Oh, man, you’re doin’ pretty well to be movin’ about over there. Yeesh... Watching you struggle is seriously turning me on. Ah...what should I do next, eh? Maybe I’ll take you in that house over there.”

A new worry now ran through Seras’s mind—not fear for her own safety but concern that Munin would try to save her.

That would be the worst-case scenario. I have to avoid that, no matter what.

“If we must...then let us do it here...”

“...Eh? What’s that? You *want* to do it with me? Seriously?! Man, you’re lewder than I thought, ain’tcha?! The Lewd Princess Knight! You’re trying to seduce me, huh! Man, that’s so freakin’ funny!”

“Kh...”

“*Gyah hah hah*, what are you moaning for?! It was your idea. What, are you getting shy now?! Man, you’re so funny! I’ve never met anyone like you before, seriously! Right, fine, fine! If you want me that bad...”

In an instant, the red eyes were upon him.

A shape leaped toward Oyamada, a huge, intimidating dark mass of eight black legs with two horns atop its head. There was a bray, like a thunderclap—as if the beast was crying out with indignant rage.

“Lady Sleii!”

“Bullet.”

“Stop!”

Slei brayed as she was blown backward, and her body collided with a nearby wall.

“Lady Sleii!”

“Huh? Oh, so this is the little fly band’s horse? So you’re here to save the sexy little elf you love so much, yeah? *Gyah hah hah!* You’re so freakin’ weak! Sit there and watch, all right? We’re gonna put on a show for you!”

Slei brayed once more.

“Hm?”

Her legs trembled as she stood and prepared to charge.

“Huh, you still wanna do this? Interesting... C’mon then, let’s go... You move, and I finish this one off too—you got that Seras?”

“Lady Sleii! Run, please!”

She refused. Slei was getting herself ready for battle—nothing about her stance suggested she would ever run. Once more, the black steed charged.

“No, Lady Sleii! Please!”

Oyamada sent his red bullets flying, and Slei tried to dodge—but with her injuries, she couldn’t avoid all of the attacks.

“Stop it, please! Oyamada-san! Lady Sleii, you must stop this as well! I-I’m fine, really!”

She couldn’t detect Munin anywhere nearby, so she chose her words carefully to indicate she was alone. There were more bullets. Slei was sent sprawling to the ground, blood pouring from her mouth.

The tableau repeated itself, over and over again. She wouldn’t stop, no

matter how many times Seras called to her. The difference between her strength and Oyamada's was clear as day, but even so...

She brayed feebly. Her legs were shaking, eyes glowing red in the pouring rain. She stood and the Lord of the Flies's steed readied herself to charge once more.

"Still standin', eh?! You've got more guts than I thought! *Gyah hah hah*, you're so desperate it's gross! What? You broke through the species barrier and fell in love with this pure and sexy lil' elf?!"

There was stubbornness and duty in her eyes. Every motion the blazing-eyed black steed made showed she had no intention of backing down. The wet droplets in Seras's eyes were no longer just from the rain.

"Wh-why... Why are you doing this?"

Suddenly, she realized with a start.

Those last words Too-ka spoke to Sleii before he left. "I'll be fine. You just look after Seras and Munin for me, okay?"

"Pakyuh!"

A promise.

She was told to look after us. She trusts him more than anyone in this world, and he's relying on her to do this. Even if it hurts, even if it costs her her life... She's protecting me.

"Lady Sleii... It's okay, you can stop... You don't need to stand up! Please, don't stand up...!"

Sleii brayed at him.

"Man you're freakin' annoying. Ah, I know... I'll break your legs. All of 'em... Crush 'em into paste, yeah?"

Oyamada's words sent shivers down Seras's spine.

"Hey, that sounds fun! I can like, smash all the bones inside so they're floppin'

around like octopus legs—man, that’s wicked! That thing’s a monster, yeah?! It ain’t animal abuse, so who cares! Y’know, despite how I look, I really do like animals!”

“St-stop... I-I can’t let you do that!”

“Then make me stop, eh?”

“Ah—”

“If you don’t want Sleikyun’s legs snapped, then think... Think how you can stop this, yeah? You ain’t doing a freakin’ thing... Just sitting there bitching, ain’tcha.”

“I-I... I...”

“Huuuh? Speak up, c’mon! *What—are—you—gonna—do—for—me?*”

“...I-I just have to take off my clothes... Right?”

“You for real?! You’re an exhibitionist! You totally are!”

“...!”

“Huh? You ain’t gonna admit it? You don’t want me to see you naked? You’re tryna seduce me! Admit it! Ah, how ’bout I just kill this thing like I killed Hawk. Turn it into horse meat!”

“W-wait—p-please. Y-yes... I am...” Seras placed a heavy hand to the clothes covering her chest and looked down in embarrassment. “I am... Trying to seduce you...”

Her lips were tightly pursed with the humiliation of what she was saying.

“Right then! First let’s get an apology—!”

“Eh? Ah... I’m so sorry...”

“How ’bout you strip as you’re sayin’ sorry, eh? ♪ Then, like, gimme a seductive look! But hey, I don’t mind so much if you ain’t into this! C’mon take it all off, hurry up!”

“—!”

I have to buy time—at least enough for Munin to escape. So long as she survives... Munin can regroup with Too-ka, and he can get his revenge. Same with me. So long as I can survive this. No matter what happens here.

Too-ka would do the same. He would survive. No matter what humiliation he had to endure. He would live. Against all odds.

I won't let Slei die either. No matter what.

Seras placed her hand on the fastener of the armor at her chest.

“Gyah hah! What’s the matter Seras-san?! You’re drawin’ this out like you ain’t never been with a guy before! All right! I’ll give you a break, let’s go do it inside. Yeah? ♪ Man, this other world is freakin’ awesome! Oh? Slei-kun’s finally given up and ain’t even tryna stand no more! C’mon, Seras-chan, I’m gonna treat you right, ’kay? Man, who even cares about defeating the Demon King now?!”

“Oh, and what ’bout my classmates?! How ’bout I go do it with Ayaka and the Takaos after we’re done here?! Kashima, Ikusaba, Murota—that harem can be my back-ups, yeah! But there ain’t nothing to worry about! Once I’ve done it with the best of the best, I ain’t gonna be satisfied with any other girl! *Gyah hah hah!*”

“Like, hurry up and take your clothes off! You just pulled it down a bit! C’mon, why’d you gotta treat me so bad! Fine, fine! I’ll take it off for you, jeez! Ah, just seeing you soaked in the rain like this, you’re way too sexy...I can’t hold back! Huh? Huuuh? Are you crying? Seriously crying? *Gyah hah hah!* Seras Ashrain’s crying! That’s freakin’ funny, but to be honest I can’t stand chicks that cry.

“Whatever. I don’t care—! Ah, I can’t hold back! I’m gonna use my skills to make you so heavy you can’t even freakin’ move, and do whatever I want with you, yeah! This is sick! Stop takin’ that off, I don’t want that no more! I’m going to strip you at my own pace, got it?! *Gyah hah hah hah!* I’m gonna make you cry even more! Like, cry about how good this is gonna feel! All right! All-you-can-

eat, comin' right up—!"



“...Huh?”

“Yo, Oyamada.”

OYAMADA SHOUGO

IN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL, Oyamada Shougo had joined a certain group—a *gang*, they might’ve been called by the government. He was invited by a friend to one of the leader’s hangout spots, and they took a liking to him.

“You got promise, Shougo.”

Oyamada’s family was pretty well-off. His father ran a used-car dealership that was famous for taking any car from anyone, never asking where it came from. His mother sold insurance to elderly people on the verge of dementia.

Oyamada was an only child, and so his parents showered him with love.

He liked his parents—easy marks that they were—but couldn’t shake the feeling of wanting to go higher, to another world up above his normal life. It was exactly how content he was with the everyday that made him want more—made him seek out stimulation.

He was sick and tired of the boring old world, plain and simple. He started to seek out those he thought could give him some excitement. The leader of the group Oyamada belonged to was called Mitsumi.

To Oyamada’s eyes, Mitsumi was amazing.

He went to *goukon* parties to meet girls all the time, getting rich and handsome university students he knew to organize them. He even had influence over medical and law students at the best universities in the country.

“Like, you can knock a girl out with drugs by slippin’ em in her drink while she’s in the bathroom, right? But the drug companies have started catchin’ on, makin’ it so their sleeping pills turn the drinks blue when you put ’em in. The ones who are always coming out for free drinks have started gettin’ suspicious, but I’ve

got these pills that don't turn the drinks blue, and they don't smell or taste like nothin' either. Girls just let their guards down and drink... Then, like, we help ourselves. Take nice clear videos and pictures, so then the fun doesn't have to be just a one-time deal!

"When we get bored, we move on to the moneymaking... And hey, we don't mix in any of the real drugs 'cause that'd mess up the videos, yeah? We get contracts signed, give them ten percent, and get 'em to agree... It's all legal."

"But don't some of them try to sue you?" Oyamada had asked at the time.

"You got a good mind for this stuff, Shougo! But it's all good. Sometimes there are stupid chicks who try and threaten me with lawsuits, yeah. But the university students I'm usin' to draw them in are from good families...money, power, the whole deal. They're elites, you get me? You see this stuff all the time, yeah? It ends with no prosecution or, like, settlements out of court. The girls are better off with a bunch of settlement money anyway—they don't wanna drag all this bad shit out into public. All of 'em figure out it's better to take the freakin' money and shut up. And if they lose, all they get is lawyer's fees and not a single freakin' yen from me. Most of these chicks realize how strong my lawyers are halfway through the proceedings and come beggin' for mercy. And if they don't, I start calling in noise complaints at their house, work, their parents' place. All of 'em get scared and give up in the end."

Oyamada thought that was awesome—he respected Mitsumi and had been to his parties which had been *agreed* to by all the girls in attendance several times. Just as Mitsumi said, even if there were disagreements, it all ended with out-of-court settlements.

This is freakin' awesome. If you've got money and status in this country, it's like crime isn't even criminal!

But Oyamada wanted to go higher—up to where Mitsumi was. He followed Mitsumi's every order and dirtied his hands with whatever evil was asked of him. It was incredibly fun. Oyamada felt like he was finally *living*.

Mitsumi had all kinds of *business* ventures: fraudulent investment schemes, bank transfer scams, drug smuggling operations, and schemes to use underage girls to catch idiots in extortion rackets. The list went on.

Mitsumi was ruthless when it came to dealing with the leaders of rival groups as well. He would make moves on family members and girlfriends of his rivals without a second thought, and use that to threaten them with violence. If things went too far, he used his “underage knives” to do his dirty work. That was the name Mitsumi gave to the young kids he would pressure into stabbing his enemies.

“Here, take this money. Things might get messy after you’ve done it, so use the cash first on whatever you like. And if you take it and run, your parents are gonna regret havin’ you for the rest of their lives. Don’t forget that.”

Most of the kids would remember his words and commit terrible crimes on his behalf. Oyamada’s country was surprisingly light on the sentencing of minors—kids could do whatever they wanted until they turned into adults. Mitsumi once used an underage knife to take out a girl who tried to sue him after one of his parties, and had the kid take all the blame.

“You’re one of the good kids, Shougo, that’s why I ain’t using you like that. Don’t worry man. You’re going higher.”

At the time Oyamada was worried, he was still a minor himself within the group.

But Mitsumi-san likes me—it’s okay. Even if I do get caught, the crime won’t be that bad. They won’t even put my real name in the media so I can start over however many times I want. I’m freakin’ invincible!

Oyamada was happy with that knowledge. But one day...Mitsumi was finished.

His group was crushed by a much more dangerous gang. Someone had invited the wrong girl to one of his parties—a girl who belonged to *them*.

The group who crushed Mitsumi's was called "Eclipse"—and they were a little different from the usual gangs. Their leader called them a collective. Oyamada didn't understand any of it but couldn't escape feeling unsettled by them. The most dangerous guy that Eclipse had was someone named Iokibe.

Oyamada later heard that the university students Mitsumi had used to attract girls to his parties had all gone missing,

One day, a package arrived, addressed to the remaining members of Mitsumi's group. It contained a bag of teeth, cleanly removed one by one, and two smoked testicles. Mitsumi's dental records confirmed that the teeth belonged to him—as the sender had likely intended them to.

Oyamada left the group as soon as Mitsumi disappeared. He had a bad feeling about what was happening. Before long, members of the group began facing charges, one after the other. Oyamada trembled with fear at the thought that he might be next... But thankfully, he was safe. He breathed a deep sigh of relief once he saw he was in the clear and spent the rest of his days in junior high school laying low. Then he quietly advanced to high school.

When he got to Okito Academy, he felt the terrifying experiences of his past were long behind him. The days of boredom returned...

Until he met Kirihara Takuto.

Oyamada learned that Kirihara's family were pretty rich and tried to ingratiate himself. To his surprise, Kirihara accepted him with open arms. Kirihara was lenient to those that agreed to serve underneath him. But Oyamada hadn't given up on getting *higher* just yet.

I'm going up.

But it can't be like Mitsumi, in that dark underground world. That's the world where Iokibe and Eclipse operate—darker people than I could ever be. And the cops would catch me eventually. If I'm going to get higher, it has to be out in the open. Somewhere like the place Kirihara Takuto's at.

Oyamada had been to Kiri-hara's house parties, which left a strong impression on him. Everyone there was a successful member of society—nothing like Mitsumi had been. They were always talking about high dividend stocks, margin trading, and the like.

"Given the way the world's going, those are the next futures to invest in, eh?"

"I hear that's the newest country for tax avoidance, you know?"

"The next age will be for NFTs and Web 3.0, I'm sure."

"I'm actually going to lunch with that legislator tomorrow."

"He has quite the influence in that group, doesn't he?"

"Man, I'm makin' bank on subscription services!"

"Nah, you've got to get into influencer marketing!"

"I'm rolling in it with all these invitations to give lectures and seminars!"

"Call that office and get them to get me some girls!"

"Man—now this is what I call a wealth gap!"

It was amazing! So awesome and cool and brilliant, it was all Oyamada could think of.

Kiri-hara was amazing too, the way he held himself in front of all of them. He joined in with the conversations of the successful like it was nothing at all—though of course as the son of the family hosting the party, he received some special treatment. Still, Oyamada felt numb when he saw how fearless Kiri-hara could be in conversation with them.

"If I stay by Kiri-hara's side, I'll get a slice of his power. I'll get in on top, right?"
he began to think.

At first it annoyed him to always have to be lower than Kiri-hara, but with time that stopped bothering him. His position within the class wasn't bad either, and his parents continued to spoil him with cash just as they always had.

But Oyamada knew his parents' connections wouldn't be of any use to him. If

he wanted to get higher, he knew he had to use the people in Kirihara's world.

The world Mitsumi lived in had no future, there's always a dead end there somewhere... Jeez. It sure was fun though.

Oyamada felt like he was really living when he was in Mitsumi's group. But even so, he knew the public world was the only place he could really end up on top.

There's just not enough stimulation here.

There was something boiling up inside of him, seething. One day, he decided to get back in contact with a minor that Mitsumi had used for his extortion schemes.

All the rich guys at Kirihara's house parties... They've got status they want to protect—public image is important to them... And right now they just know me as Takuto-kun's friend Shougo-kun.

I'll just play pretend like this kid's sugar daddy for now... Plan something bigger after we get back from the school trip.

"Looks like you're having fun here."

A shiver ran down Oyamada's spine; he felt shaken to his core.

There was one time—a long time ago—when I got Mitsumi upset. I got a bit scared. But this guy behind me... He's way more dangerous. He scares me like Iokibe, the guy that took out Mitsumi, did.

Oyamada wanted to run, get out of there as fast as he could.

"Wh-what? I-I c-can't m-move—ghgh?!" When he tried to struggle, an indescribable pain ran through his whole body. He started bleeding—sharp pain racing up inside him—then he began to spit blood. "Gh-fh?! Wh-what? Wha...?! Gh..."

Think! I-I heard something behind me, didn't I? I was talking, all full of myself

and loud. There was a voice behind me, right? The rain and the echo of my own voice—I must've thought it was just my imagination at the time.

There was something else that worried him too. Whoever it was standing behind Oyamada had called him *by name*.

That voice... I feel like I've heard it before. Who the heck are you?

But of all the faces that appeared in his mind now, Oyamada couldn't make the connection.

"Man, you stink... Oyamada."

I-it sounds like this guy knows me. He's got to know me in this world, or—no... Even earlier than that? Who is it? Whose voice is that...?

"You got the same stink those scumbags did...you freakin' reek of it."

Huh?

"Y-yo... Your voice. Y-you ain't... N-no... Wh-who are you?"

"Sorry about this, Seras."

Whoever it was behind Oyamada ignored the question and started talking with Seras.

"N-no... I-I made a mistake... I may have misjudged the situation."

"You had your reasons. I don't doubt that, given how well I know you. Sle... you didn't need to go so far to stick to your promise. I wasn't clear with you on that. I'm sorry."

"Bray... Kyuh..."

Seriously, who is he? Feels like I know him... But I don't at the same time.

The man behind Oyamada's back circled around to face him. He stood between him and Seras Ashrain, as if blocking his path.

The man in the fly mask—*leader of the Lord of the Flies Brigade... That's Belzegea. But how's he know who I am? We've never met.*

Oyamada had no idea what was happening to him.

“Y-you... Who are y...?! I... I’ve heard yo... Voice before!”

“Still guessing, Oyamada Shougo?”

“!”

Oyamada Shougo. Not Shougo Oyamada.

Huh? Only people from the old world would put the names in that order.

“W-w...w-what? Y-you...”

From the old world... There’s only one person this could be. But no, he wasn’t like this. He didn’t have this deep, constant poison in the way he talked. It can’t be.

“I-impossible... Y-you’re alive...? Y-you... Seriously...?!” Oyamada spoke his name, though it sounded with every breath that he wanted to deny it was true: “Mimori Touka—?!”

“Jeez. I was talking to you in my regular voice this whole time. How’d it take this long to notice?”

“Mi-mori... Y-you... You were d-disposed of... You bit the f-freakin’ dust...?! L-like...y-you’re alive?! H-hey...”

“Not sure I can kill you right away—you went a bit too far for that?”

“I can...n’t m-move... Did you do this—?”

“How ’bout a change of scenery? Sleep.”

Oyamada Shougo lost consciousness.

When he awoke, he was in a hallway, somewhere inside and out of the rain.

Standing before him was the Lord of the Flies, with Seras Ashrain beside him. The Lord of the Flies took off his mask.

“...!”

His expression was different, but now Oyamada was completely sure.

*But he was sent to the Ruins of Disposal right after he was summoned here.
He should be dead—*

“Mimori...”

“Bingo... Mimori Touka’s alive, Oyamada Shougo.”

“Wh-what... Where... Where have you been all this t-time...?!”

“Shut up.”

“Huh?!”

“You don’t get to talk, Oyamada.”

“Wh-what did you j-just s...”

“I’m asking the questions here.”

“Ulp—” The point of Oyamada’s greatsword was poking against his neck.

Mimori must’ve picked it up somewhere.

His wrists were tied behind his back, and he was on his knees, though Oyamada had no recollection of how he’d gotten there.

“You show signs you’re going to resist, and I’ll drive this blade through your throat. You’ll be dead in an instant.”

“Gh... M-Mimori...!”

“Man, that’s annoying. I’ll make it so you can talk.”

He made some motions in the air, like he was pushing a switch.

“Screw you, Mimori... What, you’ve flipped too like that freakin’ jumped up Yasu, and... Huuuh? How come I can talk? Gh... But I still can’t move! C’mon! Ain’t the old guy or the Saber-toothed Tigers s’posed to come and save me?! Come get me, idiots! Ghhah?!”

A sharp pain ran across his cheek where Mimori had just cut him.

“You think I’m kidding around... Seriously?”

“Gh... Wh-what the heck... Big man now, huh...”

There’s something different about the way he holds himself. This isn’t the same as Yasu’s empty posturing. I know this feeling—the sinister vibes he’s putting out.

It was the world of shadows—the one that the people of Mitsumi’s group had taught him about. He remembered hearing about the teeth—and the smoked balls.

Oh, shit, this is how lokibe does things. Is this terror?

“Huh? Me? Scared of a guy like Mimori...? Gyah!”

Mimori stabbed the blade into his shoulder, then quickly withdrew it and pressed it back to his throat.

“You just keep mouthin’ off. God, you’re irritating...”

“S-screw you...! What do you want to ask then, huh?! Huh?! You come at me with, like, *yeah actually, I’m still alive, I’m running the Lord of the Flies Brigade, and I’ve got Seras Ashrain as a pet*, like... I don’t know what the heck’s goin’ on! St-stop it! All right, all right! Don’t stab me again! Stop cuttin’ me!”

“So talk... What did that Foul Goddess tell you to do here? What’s Vicius planning?”

“Huh? You gonna save me if I tell you? I don’t care about that Goddess... I’ll tell you if you want, y’know? But, like, first I gotta be able to move, yeah?”

“You stupid or what? You don’t have any other choice, Oyamada.”

“Ghhhh...! Screw you, Mimori... What’s a bottom of the barrel E-class hero doin’ with an ego like that?! You said *sleep*, yeah? Huh? That’s, like, what, your worthless skill that totally whiffed on the Goddess, yeah? I said wait, wait! Stop!”

“I’m the only one who decides when to stop here. Might even let you go,

depending on what you tell me.”

Let me go? He just said that, right? Gyah hah.

Sogou Ayaka drifted into Oyamada’s mind.

Right, yeah... He’s like Ayaka, ain’t he? There’s no way he’d kill me. We’re from the same world—classmates, like.

“Tch... Fine. I’ll talk.”

Mimori asked several questions, and Oyamada lied and blustered his way through them all. It wasn’t like there was anything he particularly wanted to hide, and more that he couldn’t stand to answer any of Mimori’s questions, honestly. Once Oyamada gave him an answer, Mimori quickly moved on to his next question, never asking any follow-ups to determine the truth of his statements.

Oyamada inwardly mocked him.

He trusts me. He’s just a loser, this guy. He’s “doing the right thing” just asking to be scammed by others. He thinks I’m a bad guy but that he can change me.

What a freakin’ idiot. This is why people like him always get taken advantage of. Suckers.

With every question he answered, Oyamada inwardly scorned Touka more and more. Eventually, there was a break in the questioning.

“I see... So most of the Miran knights and soldiers around here have gone to protect the Wildly Beautiful Emperor from that banished emperor you mentioned. I heard explosions and screams from over there—makes sense. The others have already evacuated, huh... Didn’t see anyone else in the area.”

Oyamada had no idea what Mimori’s intentions were.

Based on his questions though... He wants revenge on the Goddess who disposed of him, eh? Why should I give a heck about that? Do whatever you want, jeez. But his attitude pisses me off.

Seras stood silently behind him, only ever making small movements from time to time as Oyamada talked.

That pisses me off too. She's a top-class babe, and I could've smashed her... I was so freakin' close. I can't die like this. I've gotta give it to her first.

The way she's actin' toward Mimori pisses me off most of all. What the heck, are those two a couple or what? Doesn't even seem like Mimori likes her that much, she's the one that's after him... Man, that just ain't right.

"What? You're interested in Seras? Sorry—but I ain't ever letting you lay a single finger on her."

"Gh..."

This is too freakin' much—but what am I s'posed to do about it? If I show the slightest sign of attacking, he's going to kill me.

Oyamada had tried to just say the name of one of his skills, prepared to blow himself up even—but Mimori had cut him across the lips before he could get the words out. He'd let out a cry when it happened.

Man, that was so lame.

What happened to this guy, anyway? This is the same Mimori Touka, right? It's like he's a whole different person. I don't know who this Mimori Touka is.

Back when I heard all those university student friends of Mitsumi had disappeared, I thought I was in trouble. That's why I left the group as soon as I could and distanced myself. I got this bad feeling all over again.

I made it out in the end—no skin off my back. Now I've got the chance to do whatever I want to again. No matter what I do, I can get away with it in this world. I can start over as many times as they want.

That's because idiots like this will always give me second chances. I've just gotta pretend to be real sorry, cry like heck, and say the freakin' words. Sometimes they even let off selfish freakin' murderers for their crimes.

They can't protect the victims, but they go ahead and protect the culprits.

Because they're stupid. Idiots like Mimori'll let you go if you just abandon your pride. In this world—escape means victory.

The ones I've really gotta be careful of are the guys like "Eclipse"—the true deep, dark ones.

Blood began to dribble from Oyamada's split lip, dripping to the ground.

"I get it... So you survived, huh, Mimori?" He let his head slump forward and felt the blade moving from his neck to the space above his head. "...Sorry, man. I did some terrible stuff to Seras Ashrain... To you too, Mimori. When you got disposed of, I—I didn't know a freakin' thing. I ain't asking you to forgive me or nothin'. But... Now I get it. That Goddess is the real wicked one. She's just using us, manipulating the heroes to do whatever she wants 'em to. I can't take it anymore. I hate her, Mimori! I hate her so much!"

Oyamada jerked his head upward, his face soaked in tears.

"I...I was so scared. B-back in the old world, I bet you just thought I was a scumbag, right?! My whole family was like that; I came from a scummy house. I was so freakin' frustrated all the time, there was so much happenin'! I couldn't get by without actin' tough! The weak get eaten, same in this world like it was in that one! E-ever since I came here, I...I've really been so scared!

"Takuto's like a whole different guy, I'm freakin' terrified of him now! The Goddess too, and these humanoid monster things! *Sob...* Like, Ayaka was the only one, y'know? The only one who still worried about me, didn't jus' throw me away! I get it now! I...I want to be useful to her, here at the very end! I want to help the class rep! I see it now, Mimori! If you want to kill me, go ahead and do it! But...give me time! Let me help her... Work with all of them... So we can defeat the Demon King together, like!

"I'll help you too, of course! I see it now! The real enemy's that Goddess! N-no... I know I was wrong too... I was weak, and I hurt everyone around me to protect myself. I'm scum. I'm trash, yeah! I want to blame the way I was brought up... *Sob...* But those are just excuses, yeah?! Then lemme prove it to

you with action! Please, Mimori! Let me go! I'll change my ways, I'll help people! I'll try my best to be someone that helps others! Seriously! I-I'm so sorry, Seras-san, really I am! I...I'm sorry! So please...please! Trust me! I...I'll change! I won't try and run from my weaknesses anymore! After everything I've done...I want to be able to save someone!"

There was silence—only the sound of the rain, and faint screaming cries from somewhere far across the city...

Seras Ashrain looked down at her feet mournfully, then turned away—she bit her lip. She hugged her chest tight as she spoke:

"That is a lie."

"Huuuh?"

"Not like I'm one to talk, but lying sure does seem to come naturally to you, Oyamada. *Hah hah*, man... Makes me sick how much you go on."

"...Huuuh? How come you think I'm lying—"

"Compared to how honest Yasu was with us..." Mimori said, interrupting him. "You're hopeless, Oyamada."

"Wh-what?! Did you just say *Yasu*?! You seen that guy?!"

"Hey, Oyamada."

"What?"

"I could've disguised my voice if I wanted to, you know?"

"S-so?"

"But I didn't. I've been speaking to you normally this whole time."

"...?"

"I wear the mask 'cause I want to hide my true identity...keep the fact that I'm Mimori Touka a secret. But I'm not wearing the mask to talk to you. You know what that means, right?"

“What the heck are you saying? You...you wanted to show me you’re still alive, yeah? Show off your super sexy elf girlfriend. That’s why, ain’t it...?”

“I knew it. You’re a freakin’ moron.”

“Huuuh?!”

“It’s because I’ve already decided to kill you.”

“—! Wh-what...?!”

“Seras can use the power of the spirits to tell when you’re lying. There were some half truths in there, but I know you’ve been lying to me. So...nice try, Oyamada. We’re done here.”

“Huh... Huuuh?! What the heck?! You freakin’ conned me!”

“What... No more begging for your life then?”

“You’re gonna kill me?! *Mimori’s* gonna kill *me*?! You’ve gotta be kiddin’! I’ll kill *you*!”

“Oyamada... You don’t understand what you’ve done to Seras and Sleil, do you? You don’t get how long I’ve waited, or just how much you’ve always...” Mimori’s expression was twisted and warped like a spiteful demon from hell. “... *made my freakin’ blood boil.*”

“Yaaah!”

“I already told you... You stink. Stink like the scumbags that made me. I want you gone.”

“Ah...”

Oyamada realized in that moment.

I was wrong. He isn’t like Ayaka, some naive saint—he’s on the dark side. He’s in the shadows. He’s lokibe...

“St-stop, Mimori! Look, I... I don’t actually hate you as much as it seems! Come on, give me a chance! I can be useful to you! Seriously!”

“Seras.”

“He is lying.”

“Sh-shut the heck up, bitch! Stop spouting crap like you know my mind, whore! Listen, Mimori! Y’know they say the beautiful ones get raised to be real good kids, yeah?! That’s a lie! They just end up super mean and selfish! Don’t let this one trick you! That brainwashed elf who ain’t got nothing but her looks... She’s got you by the balls! Wake up!”

Mimori laughed a little at that.

“Huh... Huuh?”

“Man, sorry... You’re just too much. It’s almost impressive.”

“Huh? You... You’re makin’ fun of *me*?! Listen, Mimori! You sure you can kill me?! Think about Ayaka, yeah?!”

“...”

“She says she doesn’ want any more of her classmates to die, yeah?! Not even a guy like me... So you’d be betraying her by killing me, huh! That chick’s the only one who stuck up for you when you got sent to die, yeah?! You’re gonna do her like that?!”

“Who cares.”

“...Gh.”

“There’s evil in this world that only brings harm to everything around it. People who do nothing but spread evil with their presence, hurting everyone they come into contact with. People like that brought me into this world, and I think it would be better without them in it. Better if they just *disappeared*. That would be the wrong way to think about it in our old world, but...”

“Y-yeah... You’re wrong, man! P-people can start over, as many times as they need to... Th-that’s, like, human rights or something... Everyone gets the right to start over. It’s all equal, like...”

“Yeah, I hear what you’re saying. I just don’t agree with it. More importantly... You tried to hurt the people who are important to me. Oookay, this conversation’s over. Listen, Oyamada, I can’t freakin’ save you. Maybe some people would try—but not me. And nobody’s going to come rescue you.”

“Seras-san! You’re kind, I know you’ll save me! I believe in you! Please, help me!”

“*Hah!* It was worth taking the risk and time to come here, to make you understand the weight of the things you’ve done, Oyamada Shougo. You feel like crap right now, huh? Am I right?”

Oyamada’s patience and reasoning collapsed as he reached his limit.

“S-screw you, Mimoriii! I ain’t gonna forget this! Kill me, and I’ll curse you for the rest of your freakin’ life! Huuuh?! You’re just trash anyway, some background character nobody even knows is there! The way you butted in on the bus was so freakin’ annoying! I should’a taken you out before the Goddess disposed of you! I wish I’d freakin’ known! Ah, man! I’m gonna kill you! Kill you! Freakin’ kill you! That stupid horse can go first! I’m gonna turn it to meat right in front of you, pull off one of its legs and shove it inside of Seras! Then I’m gonna bang her in front of you, Mimori! I’m gonna rape her all day long right in front of your eyes till you go insane! She’s just some sexy-lookin’ elf that’s fugly as heck on the inside! Looks are all she’s got! Then I’m draggin’ her all across the continent, yeah!

Every man we meet’s gonna get a turn with her until she goes freakin’ insane! She ain’t gettin’ a break no matter what they do to her! No matter what, you hear me?! Aaah! Why the heck are you still alive anyway, Mimori?! What’s a guy like you suddenly doin’ on top?! It pisses me off, it pisses me off, it pisses me off, it pisses me off, it pisses me ooooooff!”

“Oyamada.” Mimori’s expression was cold—terrifyingly so. “You’re hopeless.”

Then he said: *Berserk*.

In an instant—Oyamada felt as if his whole body erupted with heat. He was

boiling over. Red blood spurted above him as he was torn apart.

Among the spurt and splatter of blood stood Seras Ashrain, with a look of pity in her eyes, and Mimori Touka—completely emotionless, ruthless and cold.

The two of them standing over him was the last thing that Oyamada Shougo ever saw.

THE BANISHED EMPEROR

“**H**O HO HO! Nothing can stand in our way now! Let’s have a long talk... We shall discuss the future of Mira

as we cross swords, eh Wildly Beautiful Emperor?!”

Zera was almost at the throne. It was almost within reach, when it happened... Something Zera could never have expected.

They’re so small.

The girl looked so weak, she could hardly pose a threat to him.

Why on earth would I worry about children in my path, too insignificant to even make me stumble? My goal is right before my eyes—the one I’ve spent so many years longing for.

The girl looked too carefree to be strolling across a battlefield, almost as if she were simply taking a walk across the throne room as she emerged from behind a pillar. She came over, and as if by way of greeting, touched Emperor Zera on the shoulder.

“—Queen Bee.”

“What? What do you want, child... Hm?!” He suddenly felt strange. His body wasn’t responding to him in the way it should—he felt weaker.

“Then like, Queen Bee—there we go, startin’ to take effect eh? Whoa-whoa, seems like it’s having a big effect on you already, Mr. Banished Emperor. I guess

that means my stingers are workin' their magic."

"What is this... What did you do to me, whelp?"

"That's a great question! Thanks for asking! What'd Asagi-chan do to you just now? Can we get one minute on the clock?! Hey, Kobato-chaaan!"

"Ah, sure... Disclose." At the first girl's call, another one peeked out from behind a pillar behind her. "R-right now, his stats are...*I-lower than everybody else's*, Asagi-san!"

A feeling ran through Zera's whole body, one he hadn't felt in quite some time—worry.

I can't rely on myself. I feel I don't have the strength.

"Wh-what...? Hm?"

Another girl, of about the same age as the first two, shuffled out from behind another of the stone pillars.

She poses no threat to me—never could. Nobody they have behind those pillars could ever threaten me. They couldn't possibly.... Could they?

"Welcome to the world of us weaklings."

The first girl—the one who touched him... For a moment, the expression on her face was almost inhuman.

I know that face—I've seen it before. The eyes of someone who doesn't view their enemy as human.

She gave an order—but so flatly and unenthusiastically, it hardly sounded like one: "Right then, like... Go gang up on him."

This weakness of mine—it's her doing, I have no doubt of that.

"Girl, this feeling... You did this, didn't you?" Zera swung his sword at her, feeling he had to take her down as soon as he could.

"Hyaaaah! Save me, sa~ve me!"

Clang! He was blocked. There was a fully armed girl standing there who had jumped in to defend her.

I was blocked—by this infant? It's clear as day now. My speed, my strength... everything is failing me spectacularly.

“Oh, thanks a million, Atsuko—! Love ya!”

“Sure. Even when I know how this stuff works, it still makes me shiver... But, like, hey...”

The girl named Atsuko counter-attacked.

She's fast.

“Gh, nh?!” Zera wasn't even able to defend himself in time. He was cut by the girl's blade. “What... What is happening here?”

He looked down reflexively at the palm of his hand.

“*Myo ho ho*, you've got the same stats that I do, Zera-chin. Then, like, I added a debuff... So in terms of stats, right now you're weaker than I am!”

“Child, you...! Such mockery...! The frivolous manner of your speech...! It can't be—Asagi Ikusaba?!”

“Oho? You know me? Heard about me from Vicius-chin?”

“So you have chosen to join Mira...”

“Hey, Zine-chin,” Asagi spoke to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor without turning to face him. “I think we should kill this guy, y'know? We won't be able to hold him back once the weakness wears off, or whatevs. He'd be way too strong without the debuffs on him.”

The emperor's eyes were ice-cold as he looked down at Zera.

“Very well.”

“Zine...!”

“I never expected you would be willing to finish him. Marvelous work, Asagi

Ikusaba...”

“Zine, look at me!” Zera pleaded.

“Hmph... You wish to speak to me of the future of Mira? Insanity. I have no time to discuss anything with you. Take those regrets of yours back to the grave for good this time, you senile coward... I will see into the ground myself, Zera.”

“Z-Zine...!”

“I know not what you hoped to gain from me, nor do I care to hear what you came to say. You are finished. Your gamble has failed, and you have been defeated. Accept your fate.”

“Right then, we’ve got the okay!” Asagi never looked away from Zera as she spoke. “Kill him! One more for good measure...Queen Bee! *Myah hah hah!* Go and get him, everyone!”

A group of armed girls rushed to surround Zera, and magical attacks started flying.

“G-gh?! Such weak abilities, y-yet I cannot defend myself...!”

“Wonder if we’ll get EXP for this? He’s got golden eyes, so maybe...? Let Atsuko get the last hit on him if you can, eh? This strategy ain’t going to work anymore if I get strong myself, y’know.”

Zera flailed around wildly with his sword, as if trying to swat away a swarm of attacking insects... But no matter how he blocked, the group of armed girls kept coming.

“*Wah hah hah!* Fightin’ as a group, just like the Saber-toothed Tigers taught us! You love to see it, right?!”

There was little technique to their fighting, but the girls clearly had the overwhelming upper hand in terms of physical strength. Zera was terrified—he never knew how it felt to be attacked by a group of those much stronger than he was.

“Nh, gh... Ohhhh?!”

Slash! Slice! Stab Stab! Slash! Slice!

“Ohh, now things’re gettin’ gruesome! Man, this is hard to watch... Wahh, oh, it’s jus’ terrible! Sorry about this, Mr. Banished Emperor! Nothin’ personal, but you kind of have to die, ’kay? Di-ng.”

Blood and white liquid sprayed out into the air, an endless fountain of gore.

“Z-Zine... Gah... W-we...s-s...still...h-ha...ven’t...t-talked

a-b-bout...M-Mir...a’s...future... Gah?! At l-least l...l-let m... Oh... l-l’m disappearing...? M-my soul p-power... l-l c-can’t...d-die like th-this... Y-you’re n-not worthy t-to... Little girl... Gh-ghhaaah!”

Slice! Stab Stab! Stab Stab Stab! Hack Slice Slash!

MIMORI TOUKA

“I GUESS THAT’S THAT, for now.”

The rain had stopped, and all I heard now from outside the state guest house were drips from the roof hitting the paved stones below. Some semblance of calm seemed to have returned to the castle as its residents settled in for the night. The Miran soldiers who had come to clean up the mess outside had just left.

Seras and I were standing in the hallway, our backs to the wall. Sleil had been treated for her injuries and was resting in the stables outside. I had just sent Munin to the baths, hopefully to help her relax. Piggymaru, who’d been trembling inside my robes ever since we came upon Oyamada attacking Sleil, was now nestled up sleeping by her side. It seemed to really shock the little slime to see its friend so hurt—enough that I judged we’d be unable to use our linking ability.

The Miran soldiers were currently busy cleaning up the aftermath of the recent attack. Several of them had come to carry Hawk’s body away a few hours

ago—his funeral was to be held in the coming days.

As for Oyamada Shougo's corpse—that no longer exists. I used Freeze to take care of that—reduced him to dust. He has disappeared completely from this world.

I had yet to meet with the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, Asagi, or anyone else since my return to the capital.

I'm sure they're busy with other things. From what the soldiers say, I hear the guy named the "banished emperor" or something broke into his throne room. Sounds like he was defeated... Maybe Asagi had something to do with that. That secret weapon of hers, perhaps. There were witnesses who saw Asagi using her unique skill—I should press them for details later.

Reports suggested that the White Army assaulting the capital melted away as soon as the banished emperor died. They dissolved completely, the white liquid in their bodies washed away by the rain. Nothing remained of them once the battle was done. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor's conclusion—so far as the soldiers knew—was that the banished emperor had been responsible for spawning the white monsters, just as the Demon King was capable of spawning golden-eyed ones.

Though golden-eyed monsters die when the Demon King himself does.

"Seems like whoever was coming to annihilate the Wildly Beautiful Emperor had been held off for now, at least..."

"Yes, the first wave for certain."

Reports were still coming in from Luheit's army in the north, who remained in position staring down the White Wolf Riders at the border.

But once the enemies in the north learn this attack has ended in failure, it's likely they'll withdraw. Their movements were obviously coordinated with the banished emperor and Saber-toothed Tigers.

"I knew about the Saber-toothed Tigers and Oyamada, but where did this

banished emperor guy come from? If some second wave rushes the capital out of nowhere, I don't know what we're going to do."

"The banished emperor and his White Army... As you say, Sir Too-ka, I think it's right to assume the Goddess had some reason for not deploying them earlier. I believe they were not pawns she could send into battle so lightly."

"Yeah. Given how she was keeping them back, I think she understood the risks of using them. I guess news of the Sword of Courage and Sixth Order's failure has gotten back to that Foul Goddess. And now she's got no choice but to use what she's got...might be a good sign for how little she has left at her disposal."

Finally, the time is right for my revenge.

"But hey, I'm sorry. I might have misjudged the situation this time around."

"No... None of this was your fault, Sir Too-ka." Seras looked down remorsefully at her feet. She had already told me what happened with Oyamada while we waited for Hawk to be carried away. I sighed and tried to dismiss the subject.

"Well, Munin's quite the handful, eh..."

"I'm so sorry. This all happened because of me... Because I was naive. All of it."

Munin hesitated until the last moment—unsure whether to try and save Seras or go and find me at the meeting point. Things obviously would've been too late by then, though. With Sleil so injured, Munin knew she was the only one who could save Seras—and it was just when she'd made up her mind to fly to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor for help that I appeared.

"Seems like Munin would have an easier time sacrificing herself than any of her companions. I guess that's why the people of the Kurosaga Clan love her so much."

"..."

“You couldn’t abandon him, could you? Hawk, I mean.”

“No.”

I exhaled through my nose and leaned my head back against the wall with a *thunk*. “To spare or to kill... Much easier to make those kinds of decisions when you’re dealing with a villain. I guess it would’ve been easier for you to leave if he was a bad person.”

It’s harder when he’s one of the good ones. He became a shackle around Seras’s ankle because she couldn’t ignore someone who treated her well. And neither could I. Turning my back on Hawk would be like doing the same to my foster parents.

“I’m just the same, you know? I don’t know if I could’ve abandoned Hawk and run if I were put in that same situation. But well—no sense beating a dead horse. You might not have been thinking clearly in the moment, Seras.”

Not like I have any right to scold her for that though. I just want her to understand how dangerous and foolish what she did really was. I too should have taken Oyamada out quickly and gotten ready for what might have been coming next... But not even I could keep a clear head given what was going on. No more excuses.

“Sir Too-ka, ahem... What happened to the Saber-toothed Tigers?”

“I let all of them live.”

I explained to Seras that I’d put them to sleep, restrained them, and locked them in the basement of a certain house.

They should be waking up right about now. That was tough work... The problem with Paralyze is that pretty strong targets can cause themselves serious damage by struggling against the effect. I don’t mind my enemies hurting themselves, but some of the Saber-toothed Tigers might have died by trying to force their way through the paralysis effect.

That’s why I had to get close, use Sleep on them to prevent damage. I only had

to use Paralyze once, against that red-haired girl with the sharp eyes—I got a bit impatient with her. There were also too many buildings and obstacles around, making it difficult to use my link with Piggymaru.

“I told Hawk’s replacement earlier about where they’re tied up. How they’re handled is up to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor—but I’ve already given him my opinion on the matter.”

“You did not kill them, then.” There was a hint of relief in Seras’s voice.

“Like I just said. Much easier dealing with villains, isn’t it?”

It was hard to deal with the Saber-toothed Tigers, but that’s the way it had to be. I watched them all, choosing my time to attack carefully—but each and every one of them were so nice. They also seemed aware of the things they were doing—and ready for anything. They were prepared to stay cool to protect the lives of innocents. Ready to be hated by the people of Mira—even ready to die if they had to.

“It was much easier to fight the Sword of Courage, even though they were clearly stronger than these guys.”

The two fights might’ve appeared similar, but they were actually totally different.

Speaking of differences...Oyamada said he wanted to be reborn—to change and start anew from the beginning. Yasu used the same words. But the two had totally different meanings.

“...”

I stared at Seras, until she cocked her head to the side and looked back at me questioningly.

“Hmm?”

Being able to see through lies really is a powerful tool for knowing people. If there were powers like Seras’s in the old world, I wonder how many people would really choose to be honest with themselves.

“Ah, ahem... Sir T-Too-ka...?”

I smiled at her. “I’m always telling you, aren’t I...? You’re awful at lying.”

“M-my lies? I-is there something strange about what I said? Ah...”

I drew her close to me—held her tight against my chest. I just held her—as tight as I could.

“You’re so brave. You did so well to keep it together... It’s over now. It’s okay.”

“S-Sir Too-ka... I-I...”

She brought her hand up to my chest and squeezed at my robes, her fingers were trembling. I wrapped my arms gently around the back of her head and tried to keep my voice as soft as I could.

“I’m sorry—I’m sorry I made you so scared.”

“I-I... W...”

After Oyamada was dead, Seras went to check on Slei immediately, and I went with her. Munin emerged from the house, all tears, and a storm of apologies followed that I could do nothing to put a stop to. After she’d calmed down a little, I had her tend to Slei as Seras and I carried Oyamada inside.

She’s been busy this whole time—devoting herself to other things and other people. Finally, she’s able to assess the mental shock and come to terms with what just happened to her.

As I held her, Seras began to sniff softly. She hiccupped from time to time but didn’t say a word. Just stood with her face pressed to my chest and cried quietly. I said nothing, only holding her in my arms in silence.

“You’re always thinking about yourself last, Seras Ashrain.”

Maybe that’s why...

“It’s the way you are—and it sure seems like I’m hopelessly in love with you for it.”

I felt the grip of the hand she had clutching my chest grow tighter.

“I know I scolded you earlier, but I wasn’t able to keep my head either.”

Seras flinched a little in surprise, and her sobbing became quieter.

“As soon as I saw Oyamada, you, and Sleii... I feel like for the first time in a long while, I completely lost control. I wanted to murder him. Murder Oyamada. I wanted him dead, that’s all I could feel.”

“...”

“But after I did it, I...I felt terrible, through and through. I’m just like him... We’re no different. All I could think of when I saw him was killing him—that’s all.”

If I were really a kind person, I’d never be able to feel that way. My foster father wouldn’t have felt what I felt—I’m sure of that.

“No... You’re a kind person. No matter what anyone else says, to us you are kind.”

“That’s some solace then—just a tiny bit.”

“Sir Too-ka.”

“Yeah?”

“Do you want to go upstairs...?”

“...Yeah.”

We sat side by side on the edge of the bed in one of the second floor bedrooms. Seras had calmed down a fair bit, and I sat wiping the dirt from her face. Munin was in the house baths, but all we’d done was change clothes so far.

“Ahem... I’ll wipe your face next.”

Seras was cleaning my face when there was a knock at the door.

“Excuse me, I’m out... I-is there even anybody in there, I wonder? Are you two still in the house?”

“Ah, Chief Munin... Yes, we’re here.”

“Come in if you want,” I said.

“Oh my? You two aren’t enjoying yourselves in there, are you...? Am I interrupting?”

“We aren’t doing anything we’d have to hide.”

“S-Sir Too-ka...!”

“...”

Well, there really isn’t anything we’d need to hide about what we’re doing in here... But hey, I can kind of understand what Seras is imagining.

“Oh my, I’m ever so hot after my bath. ♪ Right then, I’m coming in—!” Munin, who had just exited the bath, came in.

...You could take a bit more care not to show so much skin, though.

“Ah, I’m sorry for how I acted earlier. I know you two were the ones who went through it all, and...I simply couldn’t pull myself together. I completely lost composure, and...”

Ah, she means that hurricane of apologies, does she?

“I already told you, don’t worry about it.”

“*Heh...* Oh, my master is so kind...” She narrowed her eyes at me a little and fidgeted with her hands.

Not sure if it was that bath that did it, but it looks like Munin’s back to her usual self.

“Ah-ahem... Are you okay, Too-ka? Well...I know the person you faced today was from the same... Ah—s-sorry. It’s inconsiderate of me to even bring it up, I suppose.”

“Nah, it’s fine... To be honest, I don’t feel any regrets about killing Oyamada.”

I’ve killed lots of people. But this time’s different—this is someone I studied with... We sat in the same classroom. He was my classmate. I thought I’d feel something—some unique emotion that would well up inside me.

But there’s nothing...less than nothing. No sadness, no regret. It’s just like it was with the White Walkers, the first ones I killed. I don’t feel anything at all. The proper response just doesn’t come to me, I don’t have the right emotions. I do feel a sense of relief though.

...I guess this proves I really am his son, doesn’t it?

“Chief M-Munin... Please, don’t be upset. I’m grateful for how considerate you’ve been toward me.”

“N-no, I... You’re the one that had to deal with all that fear, and...all I could do was feel conflicted, and frozen. I’m the eldest here, but I...” Her voice was trembling as she trailed off, and there were tears forming in her eyes again.

She can’t bear to inconvenience others, eh? All right, then, I guess I should change the topic.

“So. Munin.”

“Eh? Ah, yes? Whatever is the matter...?”

“You said if I came back safe, you’d really spoil me, didn’t you?”

“Ehhh?! Ah—I s-suppose I did... *Heh heh heh.* ♪ Y-yes... Just so long as Seras-san doesn’t mind...”

...That didn’t take long. I think she’s just being considerate again though... Right?

Seras gave me a cheerful but wry smile and scratched her cheek. “I-if that’s what you want, Sir Too-ka... I trust you that it’s quite necessary...”

Hey, you’re supposed to be a bit upset you know, Seras... You trust me way too much.

Just as I was feeling surprised, and a little guilty at how highly I was constantly being thought of...

Tap Tap.

“Oh my? Who could that be?”

Munin opened the curtains, to reveal a little white bird standing on the window ledge outside.

“It’s banging against the window...” When we appeared, the bird flopped over onto its back—*showing us its stomach*. “Wait, Seras.”

I gently opened the window.

Seems like she’s realized it as well—that was a signal. This bird must be...

“It’s one of Erika’s familiars.”

Epilogue

HOW LONG HAS it been since Kiri-hara arrived in this place, I wonder?

The furthest northern reaches of the continent were a barren wasteland, surrounded on all sides by impassable seas. This was the Land of the Root of All Evil. Most of the sky above was covered by thick thunderclouds that allowed no light to shine through. There were steep mountains separating the land from the habitable parts of the continent, and access to the north was limited. The Demon King sat in his ancient castle, of which only the first floor remained. The number of rooms in which the ceilings had not caved in could be counted on one hand.

Kiri-hara was a short distance from the castle, killing golden-eyed monsters in order to gain their soul power—EXP, as he called it.

He was the one that made the suggestion.

The Demon King spawned the monsters, and Kiri-hara killed them for experience.

That will make him stronger.

He was supported by regular deliveries from the Nightwall, allowing him to live a fairly normal, human life while in the north.

The humans had plenty in their stores. More than enough to feed a single boy.

“I’m done for the day.”

Kiri-hara strolled into the ancient throne room, the gray sky looming above, and sat by the Demon King’s side. The throne he occupied had once belonged to the Demon King himself.

It matters not to me where I might sit—but to Kiri-hara, it seems to be important.

“The throne of the king awaits me—it always has.”

He had wanted the throne—and so the Demon King sat in the queen's throne at his side instead.

"How is it?" asked the Demon King.

"My leveling is slowing, as expected. This was already beginning to happen during the unfortunate time I had to endure at Vicius's side. Even I am reaching the ceiling, it seems."

"You have no more room for growth, then?"

"I must say I'm surprised at how narrow your perspective is."

"..."

"What makes a king a king? A true king has no limits. He has endless potential for growth. I may be approaching the limits of this 'leveling up' system, but that is just one way in which I have improved myself. I now have to explore other methods in which to advance, that is all. If you have the makings of a true king, you should be capable of understanding."

"Then what will you grow next?"

"Everything."

"Hmm?"

"The end of my leveling journey signals that my foundations are securely set and ready. The king may now emerge. Though, well...perhaps my skills may still have some room to develop." He paused. "I have nothing but potential."

That is not an empty statement.

The Demon King knew at once that Kirihara believed the words he had just spoken—that he had confidence in them, from the bottom of his heart.

"Because a true king has no reason to lie. In himself, he is everything... Yes?" asked the Demon King.

"Continue to learn from me, and some day you may approach my heights... Once I am king of this world, all will become me. And a complete world will be

reborn.”

“In the end everything—even *I*—will be annihilated, you mean?” asked the Demon King, trying to search out Kirihara’s true intentions.

“Understand the difference. If you become Kirihara, you will be you and you will be me, both at the same time.”

“How so?”

“It’s like being impressed by someone’s ideas and accepting them as your own. Children live with their parents, mirroring their reactions, their faces, their voices, their ways of thinking... In the most extreme sense of nation—you will become me.”

“I do not quite understand... What is your goal, Kirihara? That is what I wish to know. What do you wish to attain by demonstrating your strength to the Goddess and the other heroes?”

“It’s important to know people, Demon King. Those in the old world thought only of themselves and so rarely bent their ear to what others were saying. They were never truly listening or taking anything in. That’s why humans make mistakes. Never listening means never learning. Sogou and the others have got that wrong too. They had to learn from me—that was the only way.”

“I want to learn. I want to learn your ultimate goal. What is it you want, at the end of all this?”

“Questioning your allies again, I see. There’s no end to your suspicions... All you can do is doubt. Is that what being a king means to you?”

“Then you will not say.”

“A king only moves for those who show they are willing to listen. Destiny, you could say. Very well. I wish for a country—it will be mine.”

“I am enemy to divines and men alike. I must destroy them. That is my fate. It has been from the moment of my birth. There is no reason. I must annihilate divines and men...”

“Without exception?”

“I’m sure I can make one exception...”

“Very well.”

“You won’t ask any further...? You don’t want details?”

“I am your exception, of that there can be no doubt. I will choose exceptions of my own in turn—they alone will survive and become citizens of my nation. Do you have a problem with that?”

“But in the end all must be destroyed... I can give you a refrain, but I must annihilate all divines and men before I am spent—that is my fate.”

“How long will you live?”

“...Five hundred years.”

“Very well.”

“Pardon?”

“Overlook my nation, so long as I remain alive.”

“Wh-what?”

“I care for nothing beyond my own death. Had you seen the older generation in my old world, I’m sure you would understand this yourself. No matter where I looked, none of them ever truly thought or acted to improve the world after their own demise. They paid lip service to the idea, of course...but in the end, humans live only for themselves and die in much the same manner. Some realize that fact, and some do not. But I am special.”

“...Your country—I need only protect it for as long as you live?”

“No... I wish for one other nation to be left standing.”

“Why?”

“There must be someone left to bear witness. An enemy to tell the tale of the true King’s life... It will be quite the story, after all...”

“...”

“You are also to spare those I choose to let live. The others you may kill as you please.”

“Who will you choose?”

“The heroes maybe... Seras Ashrain, perhaps. Not many.”

“Hmm.”

“There are seven nations on this continent. Five I permit you to destroy without awaiting my death. Vicius too, of course.”

“...Are you sure? The Goddess aside, the humans are your kind, are they not? I was born to torture and kill them. Pure sadism from your perspective. Those instincts are carved into me, a part of my nature. Do you not mind it at all?”

“Those too foolish to recognize me as king are no brethren of mine. Any death they should meet is entirely their own doing. Good that they should regret their decision, even.”

“And you take no issue with the offspring dying alongside their parents?”

“Enough. A world without me in it is no world at all. The world would end if I were to be removed or cut off from it.”

“I do not quite understand. There is a kind of obstinate belief in your thinking... Very well, I accept your proposal. There is but one last thing.”

“Your endless questions begin to annoy me. I will allow one and only one.”

“Do you not wish to return to your old world?”

If there are divines and humans there too, I wish to destroy them. But with no choice but to rely on the divines in traveling there—it is impossible.

Kirihara swept his hair behind his head and sighed.

“As I told you, back when we stood before Sogou... The old world is dead—finished. No matter how powerful one becomes, there is not a limit to what is obtainable. Nobody can become Kirihara in that world, not now, not ever.”

“...I see. Very well.”

“My, my... Finally, you understand. Good. Then it’s agreed—everything is settled.”

The Demon King had read the history books that were taken when the Nightwall fell. No hero in history had ever joined hands with the Root of All Evil.

Is this possible? There’s no doubt that Kirihara believes every word that he says—this I know to be true. Kirihara truly wants to join with me in opposing this world. It is unbelievable, yet the truth is there. I believed at first he intended to wait for an opportunity to strike me down and that he was only pretending to ally with me. But he does not lie.

I feel no murderous intent emanating from him, nor any deception. He even shows fondness toward me at times. This Kirihara...he is so strange.

The values the Demon King once held were beginning to crumble—they all seemed so fragile now. Kirihara was so different from the humans the Demon King had known. He thought of ways to dispose of him at first—or perhaps to use him as a shield against the truly dangerous hero—Sogou.

When she fought against Kirihara, Sogou’s movements clearly slowed. He can be a pawn I use to counter her. Heroes fighting heroes—how amusing.

The Demon King knew Sogou was dangerous—every instinct in his body had screamed out when he faced her. And while Kirihara had allied himself with the Demon King, the Root of All Evil made other plans.

And yet...

He gazed at him.

Perhaps I will have to reevaluate them—these humans. They may be much more formidable than I first thought. Not physically but mentally... Are they deeper than I assumed?

He found himself a little interested, even, in this “human” animal.

I wish to know more... Sometimes the thought appears in my head.

Kirihara stood from the throne, laying a hand on the handle of his katana. “Perhaps now you’re finally a fit match for Kirihara. Fine. Let me show you a thing or two, Demon King. The spectacle of this great invasion will begin—it must.”

“Very well. I look forward to seeing what you have to show Sogou.”

Kirihara continued killing golden-eyed monsters, and the Demon King kept spawning new ones for him to absorb as experience points. He had to both create experience for Kirihara and create a new army for the next invasion to come.

Perhaps it is because I have been spawning day and night, but the wound Sogou dealt me in battle has been healing much slower than usual. It may also be the power I shared with Einglanz.

According to the report yesterday, the humans are at war with themselves. A country named Mira has risen up against the Goddess.

As soon as the report came in, the Demon King began amassing his armies south of the Nightwall.

We will keep them in fear of our armies in the north—the Goddess will have difficulty finding the troops to fight us there with this Miran Empire revolt.

“As you said, I will leave one nation be... Perhaps it should be Mira, as reward for their betrayal.”

“Mira. Ruled by the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, no? I’d choose to leave Alion standing...but Mira will do. I can do nothing but assent if they have the makings of a fine punching bag—I have no choice.”

Kirihara’s level had increased by one that day. He wiped some of the monsters’ blood from his cheek with a cloth. As usual, they sat together in the thrones of the king and queen.

“Your information gathering abilities seem quite impressive. I have to compliment you on that, Demon King... My strength is almost fully prepared

now as well. The demons seem especially useful, those that understand the human tongue... The Fourth of the Sworn and below are putting out quite good numbers as well. I am the only one that can judge them, of course.”

The Demon King stood.

“Kiri-hara, I—”

Boom—!

“?”

He looked down at his chest.

A blade was jutting out of it—a katana wrapped in golden light.

“Dragon-ic Sword...!”

Boom!

Sharp pain ran through the Demon King’s whole body—an acute agony he had never experienced before.

“Ghah...?! ”

He buried his eyes in his head, then popped them out on the back of his skull. There, he saw a man who should not have been there. And yet, unbelievably, there he was.

“Kiri-hara... Wh-what are you... Doing...?”

“I changed my mind.”

“Wh-what...?! ”

Boom!

A third wave of golden light burst into the Demon King’s body, running rampant inside him.

“Ghh-aaahh?! ”

Before the Demon King knew what was happening, he was on the floor. He strained to crawl upward, trying desperately to get back to his feet.

“I am king here! Curse you, Kiriharaaa...!”

“Gyahrhhaah!”

A number of golden-eyed monsters and inner circle demons rushed toward them, sensing the Demon King’s distress.

He won’t be able to defeat this many. His MP will run out, and then his body will fail him. He has already hit the limit of his leveling—there will be no absurd recovery from that process to save him. He may be an elite hero—but this is the end for him.

The Demon King tried to move his weak and trembling hands, attempting to stand.

This was a completely unexpected attack. Kirihara did not lie—everything he has told me has been the truth. That is what caused me to lower my guard. He promised we would fight side by side—and intended on keeping that promise when he made it.

At that time, he truly did, yet... Kirihara changed his mind?

There was no pretense in that statement of his—he simply decided on a new course, with no forewarning nor logic. He took no time to plan this attack against me. What worth does the power to see through lies have then?

“Wh-why...? Why did you change your m-mind...?”

“I realized something at the very last moment. Would I really be satisfied with being a king in this world? Am I simply running from the old world? I have to admit that to be the case... I know it now! Once I have completed my ascension to king of this world, I will return to the old to fulfill my destiny and become master of that one as well! I must! Kirihara cannot escape Kirihara’s face—all is Kirihara!”

“I-I... Do not understand...”

“Demon King!”

“D-do it... Go... All of you... Kill him...!”

“Yes, Sire!” The monsters and inner circle demons leaped at Kirihara from above.

“The past Kiriharas...I now leave behind. The next Kirihara stands here before you. Now I am truly the ultimate vessel of the King...

“—Dragonic Chain.”

What looked like a hundred golden chains burst from Kirihara’s body.

“Wh-what...?!”

Half of the monsters instinctively defended themselves, but the opaque chains passed through their arms and were absorbed into their bodies.

“I have already tested its effects. You no longer serve the Demon King. Now you are mine. You can only serve me. There can be no other way. These chains are the bonds between us. You are my subjects—I permit you to approach me.”

The monsters and inner circle demons stopped attacking, landing near Kirihara instead and surrounding him.

“Gh, nh!”

Kirihara stood on the Demon King’s back as he tried to squirm away.

“This Dragic Sword of mine... Its range isn’t much, but its raw power is incredible. A worthy skill.” He took a black crystal necklace from his pocket. “Vicius already granted me this necklace. Maybe she had no idea who would take you down, so she gave these to all the S-class heroes. It would make sense.”

“Kirihara...”

“Allow me to apologize. You had your good points. But to return to my old world, I require your heart—and the special Demon King essence within it. I’m sorry, truly I am. But I have to return to my old world, I absolutely must. To be

king in this world alone—I could not live with myself. I could never be satisfied. I needed to realize my destiny. No matter what.”

So that is why. Another reason I couldn't respond to his surprise attack in time. There was no malice behind it—no true intent to kill. There is still none. All he has for me is pure goodwill. He does not pity me. He favors me as a king might a capable subordinate, and the pure, unadulterated force of that favor is blocking out all his other emotions.

This human—he feels nothing but goodwill for each person he murders. As if their deaths mean nothing to him. As if all those promises and words mean nothing at all.

“I like you, and I recognize your strength. But I had no choice but to kill you. It seems my path to becoming king will be painted with the blood of my friends. I can do nothing else but accept providence.”

Blood... That is blood. The golden-eyed monsters and inner circle demons by his side—they are crying blood. They can do nothing to stop him...

Kirihara stabbed the Demon King four times with his sword. “I’m going to attack you with all my strength now, make sure you don’t suffer. You understand me? I’m sure of that. I could never bring myself to hate you—now die.”

“A-a... Are you h-human... K-Kiriha—”

“Dragonic Sword.”

The Demon King exploded, rising so high it appeared pieces of him might touch the sky. A golden light went with him.

All that was left when it was done was Kirihara Takuto, and the monsters who had been helpless to save their creator...

And finally, the heart of the Demon King.



KIRIHARA TAKUTO

BEHIND HIM STOOD countless golden-eyed monsters and inner circle demons lined up in rows—an army stretching as far as the eye could see.

The ones behind him were grinding their teeth and crying tears of blood. Before them all sat Kirihara Takuto, his legs spread wide, the tip of his katana buried in the dirt below. He propped himself up with it as he leaned forward on the throne.

“Now the king’s army is ready... I have to thank the Demon King for all his hard work. The time has come... The new Kirihara begins.”

He quietly turned to glare in the direction of the Nightwall, as several of his golden dragons danced in the air about him.

“The king’s battle proceeds to its next stage.”

A new golden king. What will he gaze upon? What will he accomplish?

“You first, Vicius.”

Afterword

IF THERE'S A BIG THEME for this volume, I suppose it's presenting things in pairs, or in contrast. Groups like the Saber-toothed Tigers and the Sword of Courage could be viewed as contrasting pairs, as could individuals like Oyamada Shougo and Yasu Tomohiro, and Kiri-hara Takuto, and Sogou Ayaka. There are others who aren't perfectly opposed, but similar yet different pairs such as Mimori Touka and Johndoe from the last volume. Finding these pairs could be one way to enjoy this story even further.

One of the biggest features of this printed volume has also been the addition of new scenes with Seras Ashrain, of course. Perhaps your view of the later half of this book could change with the added context of these scenes. The web version continues to be Too-ka's story, where in print I've tried to present Too-ka and Seras's story instead—I think that might have shaped this volume in particular. I feel like these extra scenes may even have a big impact on the ending of the story.

There was also an additional scene with Munin in this book, which served to show how prepared she is for the journey to come and to give the reader a little more insight into her character. Or I suppose I can imagine that is the case, but this is a light novel of course and scenes like the one Munin and Seras get into are very important, aren't they? Well, that's about all I have to say about that.

Next, a few acknowledgments—thank you to my editor O-sama for always handling my annoying questions even at your busiest times. To KWKM-sama, your designs are always on point, and your illustrations always spark my imagination to write more (I really thought Seras's shocked face and Munin's design were perfect in this volume)—thank you. Keyaki Uchiuchi-sama and Sho Uyoshi-sama, thank you for always pulling me in with great cliffhangers in your manga adaption and the way you bring out Seras's charm in your work. Not only that, but the awesomeness and crazed anger of the characters really come

across well in the manga—I feel like the *Failure Frame* world is expanding and getting deeper with every new volume. Thank you also to everybody who helped in any way in bringing this ninth volume to print.

Thank you to all my readers online for your support. I'm incredibly happy you've chosen to buy the printed work as well.

Thank you, last but not least, to you, for picking up this ninth volume. The big double-digit number 10 is finally in view, and it's all because of your continued support...

I pray we meet again in the final volume, where *finally* is the word of the day. Thank you very much for your support.

—Kaoru Shinozaki



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