



Written by
**KAORU
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KWKM



FAILURE FRAME

I BECAME THE STRONGEST AND **ANNIHILATED EVERYTHING**

WITH LOW-LEVEL SPELLS

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A close-up illustration of a young woman with long, straight, light-colored hair and blue eyes. She is wearing a white dress with a black lace collar and a white lace sash. She is holding a small, fluffy white bird in her hands. The background is a warm, golden-yellow color with a red curtain visible on the left.

MUNIN

“Ehh?!
This little bird is
Mistress Anael’s
familiar?!”

SERAS ASHRAIN

I slipped my arm around
Seras's slim waist.

“Ah...!”

“I bet there won't be many of them
willing to come up and chat now...”

I said, surveying the faces
of the hangers-on.

“...Now they've seen this.”



PRIME ARRIVOR



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WRITTEN BY
KAORU SHINOZAKI

ILLUSTRATED BY
KWKM



Seven Seas Entertainment

HAZURE WAKU NO [JOUTAI IJOU SUKIRU] DE SAIKYOU NI NATTA ORE
GA SUBETE WO JUURIN SURU MADE VOL. 10

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Prologue

VICIUS LOUNGED in her personal chambers, a bundle of reports clasped in her hand—but her gaze kept slipping from the words on the page. Her mind was fixed on what was to come.

First, Mira.

Once the Wildly Beautiful Emperor has been erased, his nation will crumble. With the death of their emperor, the forces they have dispatched to Ulza will retreat as well, I'm sure. The Banished Emperor should be able to handle Mira for me. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor will never expect the False Eucharists. My plan to use the Banished Emperor will bring a blade to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor's throat.

Vicius had carefully considered and analyzed Mira's military strength and determined that it was possible for her to eliminate the Emperor. Once that was accomplished, she would investigate just how deeply the connections between Mira and the Country at the End of the World ran. That would lead her to the Forbidden Words Clan...and finally allow her to exterminate them, as had long been her desire.

Yes. Mira will pose no further problems. My issue lies with the Demon King.

Vicius turned her cold gaze on the reports and flicked the surface of the page with her fingernail. She'd thought that everything would proceed as planned if she left matters up to Hijiri Takao. She'd been certain she would be capable of controlling the other two S-Class heroes. Her belief had proved correct...to a certain extent. But now Hijiri had rebelled, and those plans had ended in failure.

To think she had gained the ability to see through lies, thought Vicius, infuriated by the memory. And that allowed her to detect the fact that I have no intention of returning the heroes to their old world. Loose lips sink ships, indeed.

“ ... ”

In truth, I need that ability of hers to see through lies for myself.

She had once tried to take the special powers of the heroes for herself—but no matter how she tried, success eluded her. Vicius propped her head up with a hand on her cheek, listlessly flipping through the pages of a rather unimportant account.

Hijiri must be dying alone of the poison right about now. Kirihara has been taken out by the Demon King, I expect. I have lost two of my three S-Class heroes. How should I fight the Demon King now? The Banished Emperor is weakened by the effects of his essence, just as I am—I cannot use him against the Demon King. The Sabre-Toothed Tigers are not strong enough. Shogo Oyamada can be counted among my forces, but against the Demon King...He does not have the power on his own.

Vicius had sent Oyamada into ruins to fight against the humanoid monsters she had captured—a precious resource. That had leveled him up considerably and he was stronger now...

But in order to reach the level of an S-Class hero...

“...”

She wished she had more time to brainwash him. Oyamada had flown into a rage under the temple when Kaijin Fafnier insulted her, making it apparent that his brainwashing was not complete. Prior to the incident she thought her control over him was absolute. Perhaps the mental injuries he had sustained at the Battle for the White Citadel had healed over time and Oyamada's powerful ego was asserting itself once more.

She had applied another round of brainwashing after the incident, cramming in as much as she could—but the process remained incomplete. There was a chance that it might wear off at some point.

If he carries out his mission and returns to me, I suppose that means the process is complete. Most importantly, I cannot allow Sogou to meet with Oyamada before his brainwashing is complete. She would inevitably distrust the

sudden change that has come over him if she saw him in such a state. Sogou should also never be allowed to find out about Tomohiro Yasu. It is likely that the Sixth Order eliminated him—or perhaps he was killed alongside them.

“As for the rest...”

Asagi Ikusaba and her group were stuck somewhere in the vicinity of Mira.

They can be used to support Sogou, I suppose. But in the worst case, I believe we can manage without them. They are not all that important to the battle with the Demon King. Perhaps I can use that Kobato Kashima as a bargaining chip during my discussions with Sogou.

I suppose the other pawns with strength that come to mind are the Disciples of Vicius. But well, they mostly specialize in working as spies—they are nothing close to first rate warriors. Nyantan Kikipat is the only one that will be of use on the battlefield, I expect. She is strong, the stand-out member of the Disciples of Vicius.

Now that I have considered the resources at my disposal, it seems that to dispatch the Demon King—

“—It will have to be Ayaka Sogou, won’t it.”

She was the hero who had driven the Demon King away. Vicius had even heard that she had fought toe to toe with Kirihara. There was even a suggestion in the reports that she might have been holding back against him.

I hate to admit it, but despite being an insolent brat with a vanishingly short lifespan...when it comes to the fight against the Demon King, she is undeniably the strongest individual on our side. I would prefer to brainwash her, and make use of her that way...but breaking her mind in order to control it would be a gamble. Countless heroes have had their minds completely destroyed by the process, rendering them useless. Brainwashing must only be performed on the expendable heroes. With Sogou gone, I would have no other means of opposing the Demon King.

A knock sounded on the door, though Vicius had already sensed the presence standing outside of her chambers. The knocks were coded to inform the Goddess of her visitor's identity. On this occasion, it was one of her spies—and the knock had been one used in emergencies.

"Enter."

"E-excuse me."

The Goddess's spy entered, reaching behind them to close the door.

"I would simply love to hear some good news. ♪"

"A-ahem... All of the eucharists detected within Mira territory have... Well, they've *vanished*."

Bang!

Vicius reflexively slammed her fist down on the desk before her. The spy turned pale. Vicius sighed, then narrowed her eyes to thin slits and pouted faintly.

"Hmm... Vanished, you say? I see."

"...Y-yes, vanished."

The False Eucharists have all vanished. That can mean only one thing—the death of the Banished Emperor.

"And, there is...one more thing. Information th-that I believe you should hear, my Goddess."

Vicius could already tell from the tone of his voice that *this* wasn't going to be good news either.

"The Empire of Mira... It appears that they have allied themselves with the Lord of the Flies Brigade," said the spy.

"...Are these reports reliable?"

"N-no... We cannot be completely sure of the veracity of such rumors. But there *are* other reports from our agents in the imperial capital, and...they are

very likely to be true.”

“...Ah, I see.”

Vicius recalled the recent reports on the invasion of the Country at the End of the World by the Thirteen Orders of Alion.

Those documents made no mention of the Lord of the Flies Brigade, and yet...

“It appears likely that from the outset of that particular battle, their forces were aligned with Mira... In that case...”

Tap, Tap, Tap.

Vicius drummed sharply on the desk with one finger.

“The Sword of Courage, the Sixth Order... Even John Doe. Perhaps it was the Lord of the Flies Brigade that got to them after all.”

To Vicius, that was the only answer that fit.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor—or the black leopardman that was rumored to be raging across the front lines... It might simply be that they are all much stronger than I expected. And yet...

When Vicius considered that the Lord of the Flies Brigade might have killed the Sword of Courage and the Sixth Order, it somehow all made sense.

But why in the world would they have chosen to side with Mira?

Vicius couldn’t fathom what might have motivated them.

“In f-fact... Mira doesn’t appear to be hiding the fact that they are allied with the Lord of the Flies Brigade. Rather, they’re all but publicly announcing it... It has caused rumors to spread, even beyond the imperial capital.”

“Ah... Perhaps *that’s* what this is. They’ve been taken in by the Wildly Beautiful Emperor. Oh, I can see it. It’s quite possible...he’s ever so charming, that one.”

There was something enchanting about the man, which could drive people to insanity—and his charms did not extend merely to the opposite sex.

“He is intelligent, quick-witted...to say nothing of his beauty. I can think of no reason the Lord of the Flies should detest me, so we should assume the Wildly Beautiful Emperor has persuaded him, somehow. But after the Great Invasion... the actions of the Lord of the Flies Brigade that day are known far and wide. I expect the emperor has won them over and is announcing their friendship to raise the morale of his people. Well, frankly, I do not care about their reasons. If this Lord of the Flies chooses to oppose me, I need only crush him, no? Let us set about doing that, shall we? ♪”

Then Seras Ashrain is against me as well. She is now entirely my enemy—and I will treat her as such.

“Oh, my my.”

Vicius leaned back in her chair with an air of abandon and looked up at the ceiling.

“She could have been a useful pawn. My, my, my... Oh goodness. Those Lord of the Flies have landed in entirely the wrong camp. How unfortunate for them.”

It was then that Vicius noticed that her spy was watching her, waiting carefully for an opening to speak again. It appeared there was something more that needed to be said, and it was only Vicius’s monologue that had silenced them.

“Oh, is there something further? Hoh hoh, my apologies. Please, go on.” Vicius smiled, and urged her servant to continue.

“Ah, yes... The Sabre-Toothed Tigers and Shogo Oyamada...have gone missing.”

“...Oh heavens.”

“According to the reports, the Sabre-Toothed Tigers vanished in Yohgolee and Shogo Oyamada was last seen just north of there...in Lew.”

Oyamada followed my orders, left the Sabre-Toothed Tigers, and infiltrated

the imperial capital. He was told to seek out the Forbidden Words Clan while the Banished Emperor's False Eucharists caused chaos throughout the city. He was ordered to immediately kill any that he found. I personally gave Oyamada those orders, but considering the situation—he may be dead, as well. There is a strong possibility the Sabre-Toothed Tigers have been wiped out too.

“Hmm. I must admit that Oyamada and the Sabre-Toothed Tigers might have been defeated. The Banished Emperor, on the other hand... Mnh...”

The defeat of the Banished Emperor was an unexpected development. He had been facing not the Demon King, and the powerful effects of that weakening essence, but mere humans! The Wildly Beautiful Emperor wielded a divine sword, but even so... Vicius could not imagine he had the power to defeat the Banished Emperor.

Was it the Lord of the Flies who slew Zera?

“Using the same cursed magic with which he defeated the First of the Sworn, the most powerful of the Demon King's Inner Circle... I expect this cursed magic will prove to be some as-yet-unknown, ancient magic item. Perhaps an incantation from a forgotten text...”

Setting Oyamada aside, the report left her worried about the safety of the other heroes.

Perhaps it was not the Sixth Order that killed Yasu Tomohiro, but the Lord of the Flies instead. He might also have dispatched Asagi Ikusaba and her group. All news of their movements has dried up, and they've ceased sending me letters, so it's possible they're dead.

Let this be my excuse, then. Sogou treasures her fellow heroes more than anything in this world. She will never forgive the ones responsible for their murders. I will use Ayaka Sogou as a spear to pierce the heart of the Lord of the Flies.

Vicius listened as her spy continued with the rest of their report.

The Lord of the Flies. Belzegea, she thought suddenly, narrowing her eyes. You are beginning to bother me. Just who are you, anyway?

Once the reports were done, the spy seemed to remember something they had forgotten.

“Ah... My Goddess Vicius, in Ulza—.”

But before they could finish, the door to Vicius’s room swung open, interrupting them. One of her retainers bolted into the room.

“My Goddess Vicius, I-I have a report for you!”

“My my, aren’t we busy today—? Well, then, what is it?”

“We have received an urgent request from the Monster Slayer King...! He requests reinforcements, and as a precaution, would like to temporarily evacuate to Alion with a group of his retainers!”

“Huh?!”

“Well, ah... After the fall of the Fortress of Zoldo, half of the Monster Slayer Knights were pursued and eliminated. Their captain and vice-captain were both killed in the attack. And it seems that the Monster Slayer King has become faint of heart following their loss...”

“The famously skilled commander Luheit Mira is not in Ulza at present, is he? And he still could not defeat their forces? The Monster Slayer Knights are far too weak...”

“W-well... They had little in the way of real combat experience. It seems they’ve been relying on the Dragonslayer in recent years. I believe that is the reason for their performance...”

“Hah... The state of the war is dire then, I take it.”

“Ah, well... The Monster Slayer King Jin grew so despondent, at one point, that he felt he had no choice but to surrender his capital city of Monroy to the Mirans. But the forces of Alion, led by Baron Pollary, are putting up a much firmer resistance than expected. They are slowly being driven toward retreat, of

course, but they are putting up a good fight...”

Vicius raised her eyebrows at that.

“That army is mostly made up of the soldiers who fought at the White Citadel of Protection, no...?”

“Yes... I’m sure that the absence of Luheit Mira has played some part in slowing the enemy’s momentum. But Baron Pollary appears to be doing a good job of rallying the now leaderless Monster Slayer Knights and the previously routed Ulza soldiers that remain in the field... M-meaning—Baron Pollary’s forces are holding out much more effectively than anticipated!”

“Ohoh, finally some good news. Well, he was never exactly an unskilled commander to begin with.”

Vicius’s problems did not begin and end with the Demon King.

If the Wildly Beautiful Emperor gets his hands on forbidden magic, he might become a threat to me. With that in mind, I need to wear Mira down as much as possible. Most pressingly, I must prevent Ulza from completely falling into their hands.

“Hmm—not many options left, I suppose. Let us ask Neah and Bakoss to send troops. And I won’t allow them to use their exhaustion after the most recent invasion as an excuse, you know... They’ll just have to step up and give it their all. ♪ Hah... Sending the Banished Emperor to face Mira was supposed to settle things. This has rather spoiled my plans. I wouldn’t be dealing with this mess if the Wildly Beautiful Emperor were dead right now...”

If he’s still alive, he may pay a visit to the eastern front. There’s a good chance he’ll bring the Lord of the Flies Brigade with him when he does. Baron Pollary will be unable to resist them. And with Seras among the Lord of the Flies Brigade’s ranks—how effective will Cattlea of Neah be as a shield against them?

“I will give you your orders in due course,” said Vicius, sending her spy and retainer away. Once they were gone, she looked down at the drawer in her

desk. She opened it, finding four deep purple spheres inside. She stared at them for a time, then plucked one out and placed it on her palm.

“Disorder and confusion... My plans have been thrown into disarray. How it vexes me... Truly, it does. I do not wish to use this yet. The time is not yet right. My, my, my—now then.”

With the failure of her plan to eliminate the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, the future looked hazy.

We must hurry up and defeat the Demon King.

“How I move *her* about the board will be key, now. I never dreamed Ayaka Sogou would ever be so vital to me.”

Vicius called for one of her servants.

“I am taking Ayaka Sogou and the other heroes to Magnar. We depart tomorrow morning. We will join up with the White Wolf Riders and the Magnar army...then journey north, to the Land of the Root of All Evil—to finish this.”

“N-need we not concern ourselves with the fight against the Empire of Mira...?”

“We will send reinforcements not just from Neah and Bakoss, but from Alion as well. What we require on that front is not victory, but time. If our forces try their utmost to stall, they should be able to hold out for a while, I imagine. But well, if even then, it proves difficult for them to hang on—”

Vicius looked down at the four deep purple spheres, then closed her desk drawer.

“Then I will have to try a new tack.”

The next sunrise was orange and blue in the morning light. Long streaks of white clouds floated in beautiful layers in the sky, and white birds cried out as they wheeled above and flew north.

The dawn air was clear, fresh, and somewhat cold on the Goddess's skin.

The clear air settled on the smooth plain as the lines of soldiers stood to attention, trampling the early morning dew.

Warhorses and horse-drawn carriages waited at the ready, impatient for the signal to depart. The heroes were present, as was a force of about one thousand soldiers from Alion. There was also a newly formed, hastily assembled unit of Alion knights in attendance, to serve at the Goddess's beck and call. Vicius faced Ayaka Sogou, who had long since completed her own preparations for their departure.

"Good morning, Sogou."

"Good morning."

"Hoh hoh, shall we get going then—to put an end to the Demon King?"

"Yes."

"Oh, and to rescue Kirihara."

The light in Sogou's eyes was far stronger when she heard those words than when the Goddess spoke of defeating the Demon King.

"Yes," she nodded firmly, tightening her grip on her spear.

Well, that's assuming he hasn't perished yet.

Vicius kept those words to herself.

"Right, then." She mounted her horse and turned toward the rest of the heroes and soldiers. "The madness of the Wildly Beautiful Emperor—a man who was supposed to be our comrade—has forced us into an unplanned and unexpected expedition... But we, the Sacred Alliance, assemble here to do battle with the Demon King. We will defeat him and bring this war to an end! We will never give in to evil! Let it be known that we will never lose a battle again! No matter how many times we fight... No matter how many times!"

A great cheer went up from all those around her, and the Goddess turned her

horse to lead the way.

“Now onward! To the north!”

Chapter 1:

The Coming of the Familiar

“**E**_{HHH?!} This little bird is Mistress Anael’s familiar?!” Munin exclaimed, even after I’d given her a brief explanation of the situation. One of Erika Anaorbael’s familiars had come to see us in Mira and we opened the window of our house to let the little bird in.

“Mistress Anael... The Country at the End of the World owes her a great debt. I never imagined I’d have the honor to speak with her, even through a familiar. This is incredible...” Munin’s hands were on her face as she was overcome with emotion.

Meanwhile, the familiar was waiting for us on the table, where I had already prepared the letter board.

“There’s information we want to share with you too. It’s about the Country at the End of the World, and... Hm?”

The familiar didn’t wait for me to finish, jumping on to the letter board immediately and scurrying to convey its message. Erika’s familiars could speak with her voice, but doing so took so much of a physical toll on Erika that it left her bedridden for several days. That was why we used a letter board based on a Ouija board to communicate.

“You’ve got something you need to tell me first? All right then...”

The bird began hopping about.

It really does take a while to say anything with this letter board.

But the intel that Erika’s familiar conveyed was well worth the wait.

“—The Takao Sisters?”

“Do you mean those two elite heroes...?” asked Seras, who also knew who they were.

Of the members of the Lord of the Flies Brigade, Eve encountered the two of them back in the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters. But I haven't seen them since the Goddess disposed of me.

“So Vicius failed to kill them and they escaped into the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters.”

I'd already gotten some intel about the Takao Sisters from Oyamada, but he only knew that they rebelled against the Goddess, then escaped. So they'd run into the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters to try to get the Forbidden Witch to help them. Then, on the verge of death, they met Erika.

Seras also looked surprised to learn what had happened between Erika and the two sisters.

“So do the Takao Sisters know what's happened to Sogou and Kirihara?” I asked.

The familiar tapped out an answer.

“They don't know either, huh.”

I got intel on Sogou and Kirihara from Oyamada. I heard that Sogou had the Demon King on the ropes before Kirihara stepped in to help him and betrayed the Goddess... But the Takao Sisters don't know that. They must've fled straight to the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters, anticipating that they'd be pursued. Sounds like this is the first that Erika's hearing about Sogou's encounter with Kirihara, too. I guess she hasn't been gathering intel in Alion in recent days, focusing all her energy on her top priority of locating us.

Erika went on with her report while Munin prepared drinks. She waited for a pause, then offered some water to the familiar as well. It didn't take long for Erika to finish.

I've gotten a few more details on the Takao Sisters' journey, from their rebellion against the Goddess to the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters. Apparently, the Demon King suddenly appeared in the castle and his essence

weakened the Goddess. The sisters saw that as a chance to strike and tried to eliminate Vicius... But she used some kind of mysterious dark sphere to power herself up and strike back. After that, they went to the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters to seek the help of the Forbidden Witch. To top it all off, the Goddess has no intention of ever returning the heroes to their old world—according to the elder Takao sister, at least.

“And... The younger Takao sister doesn’t want to give out any more information?” Such as details on their unique skills, for instance.

It seemed all Itsuki had said was *“I can’t tell you anything more until Aneki says it’s okay,”* and *“I’m an idiot, so I don’t know how much I should say.”* Followed up by *“You saved us... I’m sorry I can’t tell you everything.”* Just apologizing and leaving the important decisions up to her older sister... That sounds about right. Takao Itsuki’s trust and devotion for her sister bordered on religious.

“But... The younger Takao sister really does seem truly grateful for your help, Erika. Right.”

Poison... That foul Goddess was using poison, huh? We were lucky Erika was able to mix up an antidote.

“From what I’ve heard, it doesn’t seem likely that Vicius has sent those sisters there to assassinate you...”

“I do not think that these sisters are assassins sent by Vicius.” Erika came to the same conclusion.

She’s right. If this is an assassination plot, Vicius is leaving herself wide open for anything and everything to go wrong. Even if the older sister’s unique skills do happen to include some ability to counteract poison, there was no need for her to risk losing her eyesight for a plan like this one. Walking into the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters without a map is already reckless enough...and the chances of Eve or Erika encountering them were slim to none.

...There’s only one scenario I can imagine that might convince Hijiri to risk

losing her eyes for this.

“Just checking here—do you think it’s possible they’ve been brainwashed?”

“No, I do not,” Erika communicated simply.

So she doesn’t think that’s a possibility.

It was then that Seras broke in with a question of her own. “Ahem, Sir Tooka... Does this perhaps mean that we might be able to fight alongside the Takao Sisters?”

That’s an idea I already had in mind.

“Yeah, we could join forces... There might be room to consider that.”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor and Asagi already suggested that we might try to convince the other heroes to come over to our side... Not to mention the fact that the Takao Sisters have already betrayed the Goddess—it should be that much easier to persuade them. But the main problem is that we won’t be able to negotiate until Hijiri regains consciousness. The younger one, Itsuki, won’t make any important decisions—or rather, she can’t. We’ll have to talk to them about an alliance once Hijiri wakes up... And Erika’s got no idea when that might be.

I conveyed that information to everyone else. Munin gave a “hmm...” and a concerned look once I was done.

“But the older sister... If she can’t see, it might be difficult for her to return to the battlefield...”

“You’re right. It might be hard for her to fight in person if she really has been blinded. But I think she’ll be useful in many more ways than just combat. Though I have to admit she is a little...odd.”

Come to think of it—I wonder if those sisters have changed at all since they’ve come to this world.

“Well... One S-Class and one A-Class hero leaving the Goddess’s camp is good news, whether they choose to join us or not.”

All that's left is the Demon King, huh. Apparently, Sogou almost had him beat, meaning there's a good chance he's seriously injured right now. Even if he isn't, I bet he's being much more wary about Sogou now. Does he understand that he can't beat her in a straight fight?

What's the Demon King going to do now, then? Is he going to try to defeat us with his strength in numbers? Based on the intel I just received about the raid, it wasn't a large-scale assault—meaning that he likely can't ambush us with a large army.

It's probable that he'll make a new move—like an invasion from the Land of the Root of All Evil. One more head-on attack, bringing his entire army with him. That's my prediction, anyway. But I also hear the Great Invasion weakened his forces considerably. Vicius is anticipating that and has determined that there won't be another attack from the north any time soon. That's why she sent the White Wolf Riders west to Yonato.

...Still, Sogou Ayaka is more powerful than the Demon King now. According to Oyamada, she's currently in Alion, but...it might be that she's about to come and stand in my way. That would make her a real problem.

If I do ever face Sogou as an enemy, I should avoid combat with her at all costs. If she's strong enough to do battle with the Demon King one on one, I don't have a chance against her in a straight up fight. In that case...it's best that I find some underhanded way of disabling her.

I do really want to convince her to join us, if possible. I can think of a few different ways she might be persuaded. Chief among them the revelation from the elder Takao sister that the Goddess has no actual intention of ever sending the heroes home. This is Takao Hijiri we're talking about, after all. If she's saying it, she must have almost conclusive proof.

...Convincing Sogou to join us, huh. That might be difficult if she's been brainwashed like Oyamada, though it doesn't seem like any of the other heroes have been obviously mind controlled. It might be too risky to chance it and see

what happens.

I decided to ask my knowledgeable Dark Elf acquaintance about the topic.

“Erika, can you tell me anything about Vicius’s brainwashing?”

YES, came her response.

...I should’ve known. Erika was by that foul Goddess’s side for a time, I suppose.

“So the target’s mind—it needs to be sufficiently broken first, huh?” I mused, after reading Erika’s explanation.

So Oyamada had some sort of breakdown, after which he was brainwashed.

“But it’s also dangerous then, eh? There’s a risk that the target won’t be useful to you if you fail...”

The Goddess wouldn’t want that happening to a hero of the highest rank, her secret weapon against the Demon King. Oyamada’s not an S-Class, so she could have accepted either outcome. In other words, as long as the Demon King is alive, the Goddess can’t risk trying to brainwash Sogou Ayaka...all the more so now that the two other S-Class heroes are beyond her control. There’s no sense in worrying about her being compromised by Vicius, then. That fear’s unfounded.

“By the way, Seras...” I began, after spending some more time in thought. “I’ve been thinking about that ambush by the Demon King. Has the Root of All Evil ever used teleportation techniques like those before?”

“Not so far as I am aware,” Seras replied.

Erika also didn’t know of any past instances.

“Then it’s safe to assume Vicius never saw that coming either.”

Was that teleportation a one-time deal? If not, she needs to be cautious of ambushes by the Demon King now. There’s even a possibility that the Demon King will jump into the fight just as I’m confronting that foul Goddess. I should

keep that in mind. It's an unknown variable.

“—But I’ve got to hand it to Eve, she’s really done well.”

Finding the Takao Sisters in the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters—that was nicely done.

“Seems like Vicius intended to eliminate Takao Hijiri with some kind of poison. If she believes she was successful, that means that Takao Hijiri can operate as a *dead hero* from here on out.”

Just like me.

The familiar began moving again.

“I have not told the sisters about any of you, Too-ka. Nothing of my connection to the Lord of the Flies Brigade, nor your true identity.”

So that was what Erika had decided? “That was a good call.”

The familiar performed a gesture that made it look very pleased with itself.

“I will continue to conceal my connection to the Lord of the Flies Brigade.”

And so, that matter was settled.

“Right, then. I suppose I should share some intel with you about our situation too.”

We had discovered the corpse of a familiar just before entering the Country at the End of the World. Following that, our connection to Erika and her familiars had been severed. Apparently, Erika had continued to try to make contact with us, using the body of another familiar she had nearby—but that creature was shot down and killed by Alion knights. That left her with no familiars nearby and was the cause of the long delay in her getting in touch.

In other words, Erika has almost no idea what happened to us in the Country at the End of the World.

Erika also talked about how she found us after some commotion in Mira caught her attention. She’d sent her familiars out to gather intel and heard the

name of the Lord of the Flies spoken there, leading her to investigate further into Mira.

And that's how finally she ended up here... It seems rumors that the Lord of the Flies and Mira have joined forces are gradually spreading. I expected the news to get out, though, so that's no problem.

I told Erika what had happened in the Country at the End of the World—about the forbidden magic, and the Kurosaga. This led to Munin introducing herself halfway through my explanation.

“Ah—m-my name is Munin, I am chief of the Kurosa...saga! It is such an honor to meet you, Mistress Anael! I have heard so many stories... Ah, b-but I wonder if it is quite right to say I have *met you* when we are speaking through a familiar? Ahem... I-I'm not married!”

Petrified with nerves and formalities, Munin's eyes were positively gleaming as she introduced herself to the little bird.

To anyone who walked in and didn't know that bird was a familiar, this situation would look absolutely bizarre. And...why would she care that you're single? What in the world led you to come out with that line?

With that, Munin was done introducing herself.

“...Hah, I was so nervous—hmmm?! I-I-I-I mean, that's the legendary *Mistress Anael*, you know? Don't you understand? To the people of the Country at the End of the World she's like a figure from myth! A *legend*!”

“Right.”

“Too-ka, don't you understand?! This is amazing! Truly incredible!”

“I just think of Erika as an ally, and a real dependable one at that... She's amazing, I'll admit that much—I just think I'm more comfortable around her than you are.”

I looked down at the little bird on the table. For a moment, I thought it looked happy.

Might've just been my imagination, though.

After Munin's introduction was over, I changed the topic of conversation. We turned to the Sword of Courage, who had slaughtered Eve's parents, along with the rest of her clan.

Given what's to come, and our future plans, I feel like I need to talk to Erika about those scumbags.

"So about that... I think we should leave Eve where she is, in hiding. I get the sense she isn't all that fixated on revenge," I said.

Erika's familiar expressed her agreement.

"Eve is living in peace with Lis, like she's always wanted. I don't think we need to throw her emotions into turmoil right now. Same goes for Lis."

I told Erika about what we'd learned about Lis, too—about the Sixth Order.

"We should tell her someday. But for now, she's living happily in peace, and that's enough. I mean, those two... Doesn't seem like they're the kind to revel in getting revenge, right?"

The suffering those two endured was real, and nothing in the world can ever change that. But they aren't bound by what happened to them—at least, that's how it seems to me. They aren't trapped by their past experiences, the way I am.

Well... Yeah.

There's a line that gets brought up often whenever people talk about revenge. Something about how rather than living your life beholden to the people who've done you wrong, the best revenge is actually to just forget all about them and live your life as happily as you can. I think that's how it goes, anyway. And hey, I know that would be the right way to go about this. That would be the straightforward approach to revenge. You could say that I'm walking the wrong path. But I'm going to walk that wicked road all the same—and I'm getting my revenge with my own two hands. All that remains to be seen is whether I'm prepared to accept the consequences of that revenge. That's all.

“And well... So anyway, that’s why I don’t want to tell Eve and Lis about what’s happened.”

Erika didn’t object, spelling out the word “*understood*,” for me on the letter board.

“Now that we’ve finished sharing intel, there’s actually something else...” The familiar hopped around on the letter board, spelling out Erika’s closing message. *“Thank you for saving the Country at the End of the World, Too-ka.”*

Erika was involved in the founding of their country... I bet she was worried about it.

“It’s not like I saved them for your sake—and you’ve helped us out way more than anything we’ve done for you. Getting a thank you from *the hero Mistress Anael* does feel pretty good though, I have to admit.”

“You don’t look that straightforward at first glance, but you actually are, aren’t you, Too-ka? How very like you.”

“You’re way too straightforward yourself. More than I expected you to be.”

“It’s okay. I choose who I show that part of myself to.”

Erika went on to request instructions, mainly regarding what she should do with the two sisters now staying with her. I gave a few brief answers in response.

“If you have anything else to ask about the Takao Sisters, let me know by familiar. I never expected this to happen, so I haven’t given much thought to how to handle the situation. I’ll give you further instructions once I make up my mind.”

We decided to talk about the attack on the imperial capital of Mira another day, as Erika was getting tired. All I ended up telling her about our fight was that Sleil had suffered some serious injuries, but was doing okay.

“You know... We’re going to need a birdcage, aren’t we?”

Erika was about to stop controlling her familiar, and once her consciousness

left the bird it would turn back into a regular animal again. The little bird would likely just fly away and could be shot down or hunted by predators, like some of Erika's other familiars had been before.

"Come to think of it..." mused Seras, placing her index finger to her lips. Her gaze wandered around the empty air, like she was searching her memory for something.

"This state guest house... I think I saw an empty birdcage in one of the rooms. It was there when I first checked over the building. In the far corner of one of the second-floor rooms, I believe."

We went up at once and found the birdcage just where Seras had said it would be.

I suppose given what this place is meant for, some of the Miran state guests bring birds, huh.

Grateful that they did, I put the familiar in the birdcage. It seemed Erika was still controlling it.

We're going to need to find some seed too.

"Hm?"

A bell rang—the one fitted to the entranceway downstairs. Apparently, we had a visitor. I briefly thanked Erika before she cut off control of her familiar and I put on my Lord of the Flies mask.

"Come with me, you two," I said.

Before we'd made it down the stairs, I could see from the window who was outside.

"The Wildly Beautiful Emperor."

There were four bodyguards with him. I walked to the entranceway and opened the door.

"Your Majesty... I hope this means the situation has somewhat settled

down?”

“I have arranged for the cleanup to begin, and all my orders have been sent out to the relevant parties. For the time being matters will be left to my chancellor—and I am here to check up on you.”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor looked behind me.

“I have already received the report, but I am glad to see with my own eyes that Munin of the Forbidden Words Clan is safe. Seras Ashrain also appears well...although perhaps she should rest a while longer, given her condition. What of your black steed?”

“She is receiving the treatment that you arranged for her, Your Majesty,” I replied.

There had been a new messenger, a replacement for Hawk, that came to us after the incident with Oyamada. They called themselves Ibara Seat—a human, and member of one of the princeps elector houses of Mira. I’d asked Ibara if they could handle Sleï’s treatment.

“I will pass your request on to His Majesty,” Ibara had replied formally, and roughly an hour later several men and women in white coats had arrived and begun treating Sleï’s injuries in the stables.

Right, then—can’t exactly ask the emperor to stand here in the doorway forever, can I?

I made way to let him come inside. But with a look and a gesture, he conveyed clearly that he wanted to talk at the entranceway. I silently expressed my assent in much the same way.

“Your Majesty, my sincere condolences. Please allow me to express my deep regret at our failure to save Sir Hawk. I apologize unreservedly...I feel true remorse at the end to which our battle came.”

I felt Seras’s body stiffen up behind me, as the Wildly Beautiful Emperor’s long eyelashes flitted to the ground.

“He was a talented retainer. Yes—perhaps Luheit will take his death harder than I. He was quite fond of Hawk.”

Luheit Mira’s the commander general of Mira’s army, right?

“The time I was allowed to spend with Sir Hawk was short...but I found him to be an intelligent and talented individual. A fine upstanding man, above all else,” I noted.

“Honesty to that degree might make one appear simple... But his was a character quite difficult to maintain in the world in which we reside. Truly, he will be sorely missed,” replied the emperor.

I heard Seras swallow behind me.

“I-I... Ah.”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor held out his palm to stop her.

“You need say nothing further. Vicius sent that hero... I am aware of how you confronted them once Hawk was taken hostage. You may feel personally responsible—but know that, for me, this matter has been settled. Regret your actions if you wish, or feel agony and remorse over your decisions, but you will excuse me if I have no intention of joining you.”

The emperor did not coldly push Seras away—nor did he warmly embrace her emotions. He let his hand fall, turned his gaze to his own left shoulder, and began to softly stroke the golden hair that lay draped upon it.

“But...you may yet have a role to play in things to come. And thus, Hawk Landing would not have wished you to remain so fixated on your feelings of guilt that you become unable to move forward.”

“Ah—”

“If you wish to seek out someone to blame for the incident, then I, too, bear some of the responsibility for sending Hawk to find you. But where does that leave us? How far back should we go in our search for someone to blame? Who would be the root cause? The pursuit of *maybes* and *what-ifs* must cease at

some point. If you are unable to abandon it..." The Wildly Beautiful Emperor turned his gaze back to Seras. "Then let that feeling of responsibility become your rock."

"M-my rock..."

"Let his death shape you. Use it as fuel for further action. You seek the defeat of Vicius, just as Hawk did. To fulfill that aim, learn from these last few days—and use those experiences to hone yourself. That would be the greatest offering you could give... A tribute to Hawk Landing, no?"

I sensed Seras's lips purse behind my back.

"—Yes... Absolutely."

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor's expression softened faintly.

"That honesty of yours is almost dangerous... You remind me of Hawk, somewhat. The way you both seem at odds with the world around you. Hawk was never made for the dark madness that has descended upon us now, nor the underhanded dealings of court. Perhaps it was his misfortune that his talents made him so suited for a position on your side of the divide."

He raised his well-formed chin to the sky.

"That pure, unfiltered honesty was a precious thing, as was his deep, frank kindness. It was also a double-edged sword—especially in a world as rough as this one. In an ideal world, honesty and compassion would be assets. Reality is different. It is my belief that pure goodness cannot defeat pure evil. Goodness is precious, but it can be terribly restrictive. It can bind one's limbs and chain one's thoughts."

His way of thinking—it's similar to mine. The only thing that can put down evil is more powerful evil.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor exhaled softly through his nose.

"But those with such honesty and kindness... I cannot help but like them. And I feel no compulsion to remove them from my service."

“...”

“Hmph... I take it that you are one of the bound, then, Seras Ashrain.”

“I—”

“The defeat of Vicius would create a world in which those such as Hawk may live free... That is what I wish for.”

“...”

“Do not let the memory of this incident become an anchor that pulls you down. You are sincere to a fault, and people such as you tend to be overcome by distress when such incidents occur. Well, perhaps I need not worry—so long as the Lord of the Flies is by your side.”

The commander of the Lord of the Flies Brigade shares some responsibility for what happened to Hawk, too. But the words that the Wildly Beautiful Emperor just spoke are ones I couldn't say...not in my position. “Don't worry about it”—the only ones who could say such a thing to Seras right now are Luheit, and this young emperor who stands before us.

“Oh, and on a personal note—setting aside my role as Emperor—I wish to express my most heartfelt thanks to you for acting as you did. For choosing not to abandon Hawk to his fate. I give you my thanks. I, Zine Mira, am grateful to you.”

These, again, were words that only the Wildly Beautiful Emperor could speak.

Perhaps he plans to hold this against me. I can't afford to disrespect these “considerate” words, though.

“Your Majesty, thank you for your consideration and compassion...and for your leniency in this matter. Toward Seras—and toward myself,” I said to show respect.

His eyes softened, and he smiled faintly, once more showing his youth. The expression didn't seem false. He was genuinely smiling at my remark.

“Ah, I see. That *is* why I find myself so attracted to you, after all... Your

emotions are such that even I cannot help but feel somewhat surprised by their originality. That said..." The Wildly Beautiful Emperor directed a meaningful glance toward me. "I have called Luheit here. Prepare yourself to receive any words he might have for you. I *expect* things will be quite all right. He has the bearing of an emperor as well, after all. He has been prepared since this battle began to lose his subordinates, no matter who they may be."

He sighed a little, almost like he'd used up his speech ability and it was now on cooldown.

"...I have gone on too long without getting to our main topic of conversation."

So this wasn't the only reason for his visit today.

"I am referring to the items within my treasure vaults. I intend to pass them to you today."

He glanced back toward the castle.

"If this is a convenient time, I should like to guide you there now. If you are still exhausted from the fighting, we can arrange to do so another day."

Seras and Munin both answered that they were fine.

And I'm fine, of course. There are two things I want from the Great Vault of Mira—teleportation crystals and the purple beetle. The last piece of the puzzle necessary to concoct the final monster enhancement solution for Piggymaru.

We followed the Wildly Beautiful Emperor into the castle, noting how busy everyone around us seemed to be. There were people running through the hallways constantly—and through the bustle we strode with the emperor and his men.

I walked by the Wildly Beautiful Emperor's side, at his personal request.

It feels a bit disrespectful to walk shoulder to shoulder with an emperor...but hey, he's the one who asked for this. It should be fine.

"I would also like you to hasten your survey of the sealed door, but that must wait until Luheit has returned. I do not know what will happen once that sealed

room is opened, and I would fear for Mira if something were to occur, leaving Kaize alone with the city,” said the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

We turned a corner down a hallway, drawing looks from everyone as we passed by.

“I should have passed you the contents of the vault before this recent incident... But it came upon us suddenly, you see.”

I thought back to when we had arrived at the castle, and the retainer that had rushed to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor’s side.

Didn’t he whisper something to him? So even back then, the White Army was on the move. He’s right—I would’ve liked to have enhanced Piggymaru before I went out to deal with the Sabre-Toothed Tigers. The purple beetle needs some processing to extract the necessary ingredients, though. Three full days, at minimum—time we didn’t have to spare. Piggymaru’s enhancement had to wait.

As for the teleportation crystals—it would’ve been too soon to use them then. I want those on hand when I go to fight the Goddess. It’s not like drawing a magic circle on the ground only takes a few moments, either...

Seras and Munin hadn’t found any items on the list that they particularly wanted. There were things on the list that the Country at the End of the World had requested—but no matter when we got our hands on those, it would be some time before we’d be able to deliver them.

In any case, we had good reasons to put off going into the Great Vault of Mira before the attack on the imperial capital.

We’d already been told, back when we were handed the list, that almost all of the useful weapons and magical items in the vault had been given to the Band of the Sun.

There’s not much left in there that’d be of any use in a fight. Teleportation crystals on the other hand... Those will look like gemstones to the untrained eye,

and the purple beetle would look like the corpse of some weird bug, unless you already knew the item's value. Those kinds of items are the only ones left, then.

“As previously mentioned, many of the items within the vault are unknown to us. We have given them temporary names and descriptions for management purposes...but there are plenty that we have not had time to depict.”

“I take it you believe the undepicted items may include some that we would find useful?”

“Yes. You may find some items in my vault that I know little of, but which are nevertheless of value to you. If you wish to take any such item, I intend to hand it over right away.”

I see—so that's the reason he's bringing us there personally.

We proceeded down a spiral staircase into the depths of the castle. At the bottom of the stairs, we emerged into a long hallway, so dark I couldn't see to the end of it. The walls were smooth and glossy, like polished marble. The flooring showed no signs of unevenness.

Kind of like the floor in some fancy hotel, or an art museum.

The emperor's guards went on ahead with lanterns in their hands.

I've got my pouch and Seras has her spirit of light...but let's leave the illumination up to these guys.

After some time, we came to the end of the hallway and were faced with a set of double doors. They were grand and textured like bronze. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor took a large key from his pocket and handed it to one of his guards. Two of the other guards rushed up to the doors as the one with the key unlocked them. Once the two guards on either side heard the lock click open, they grabbed their respective door handles and began to pull. It seemed to take a lot of effort, but before long, the double doors were open.

Then the Wildly Beautiful Emperor took the lead. He entered, placing one white hand on the wall.

“Wait here a moment—I will get the lights.”

In the old world, that'd be about where the light switch would be.

Instead, there was a crystal board fitted into the wall, with crystalline lines radiating out from it. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor's hand glowed with pale light, and then the board began to as well, the shimmer moving up through the crystal lines in the wall. The light proceeded up the walls to the ceiling and stretched out across the floor until it had illuminated the whole room. I was able to see much more in the growing brightness.

I see... Pouring mana into the crystal board turns on the lights, then.

Now we could see much more clearly around the room—or rather, the vault.

The first thing that my eyes settled on was a series of tall and massive shelves, all of which were neatly arranged. They reminded me a little of the basement room I'd visited with Erika and the searching we'd done beneath her house.

...But the scale of this room is much larger. It's incredibly spacious.

The ceiling was high and airy, so much so that this hardly felt like an underground space. The patterns drawn by the lines of light across the walls and the floor were beautiful. The vault was roughly rectangular in shape.

At least what I can see of it.

The lines of shelves continued off toward the far end. There was no clutter to be seen, no messy piles of random treasures.

If anything, the storeroom in Erika's house was the messy one... This place looks more like a huge, well-organized warehouse for some online sales operation.

There were neat lines of ladders set against the walls, and plenty of step stools beside them. I could also see a number of workbenches. Beyond the standing shelves was an area that looked like an exhibit at an art museum—probably for items that were difficult to fit on the shelves.

“You'll just have to put up with the dust, I'm afraid,” said the Wildly Beautiful

Emperor, running a comb through his long hair. “If you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to ask. The guards I brought with me today are those responsible for management of this place. They can answer any inquiries that you might have.”

One of the emperor’s guards was clearly a warrior, but the others looked like regular people who managed the vault.

One is the son of a court painter, apparently.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor looked down at his finely crafted pocket watch and left us with a few words.

“I am limited in how long I can stay with you, but please, take your time inspecting the items here.”

The items we had requested ahead of time had already been prepared for us on a table near the entrance—including the purple beetle and the teleportation crystals. I picked them up and looked them over.

This purple beetle looks just the same as the illustration in my Forbidden Arts: The Complete Works. This is the real thing, no doubt about it.

Hm?

“Seras, look! Isn’t this necklace just wonderful?!”

Seras and Munin were some distance away from me, looking at the other shelves together—or rather, it looked as if Munin was looking and dragging Seras along. Munin was holding a slim silver necklace fitted with green gemstones up to her own neckline, grinning as if to say “*doesn’t it suit me?!—*” the kind of gesture people made when they tried on clothes.

“Y-yes... I think it looks quite wonderful.”

Seras shot a glance in my direction, seeing me watching the two of them from afar.

“But Lady Munin, we are here to find items that might assist our master in carrying out his goals... I think perhaps fashionable necklaces might be off the list.”

“Whaa—?!”

Wait, did Munin seriously think she'd just get to take anything she wanted? Well, actually...I do think the emperor would give it to her if she asked.

“Oh no... Nothing for me?” she sobbed dramatically. Seras looked on with a troubled, wry smile.

“I-I wonder about that. Unless our master asks His Majesty the Emperor, then we won't know for sure...”

“It wouldn't be for nothing—it would serve to raise the morale of the members in our party! I mean, perhaps our master would actually be quite happy to see *you* wearing this necklace?! For instance if...ah, if you were to wear this necklace while naked, then I'm sure that... No, I'm positive that it would...! Ah, wait a moment! No, this will never do... It's too much! The scene I'm picturing is far too intense... Haaah... Hngh.”

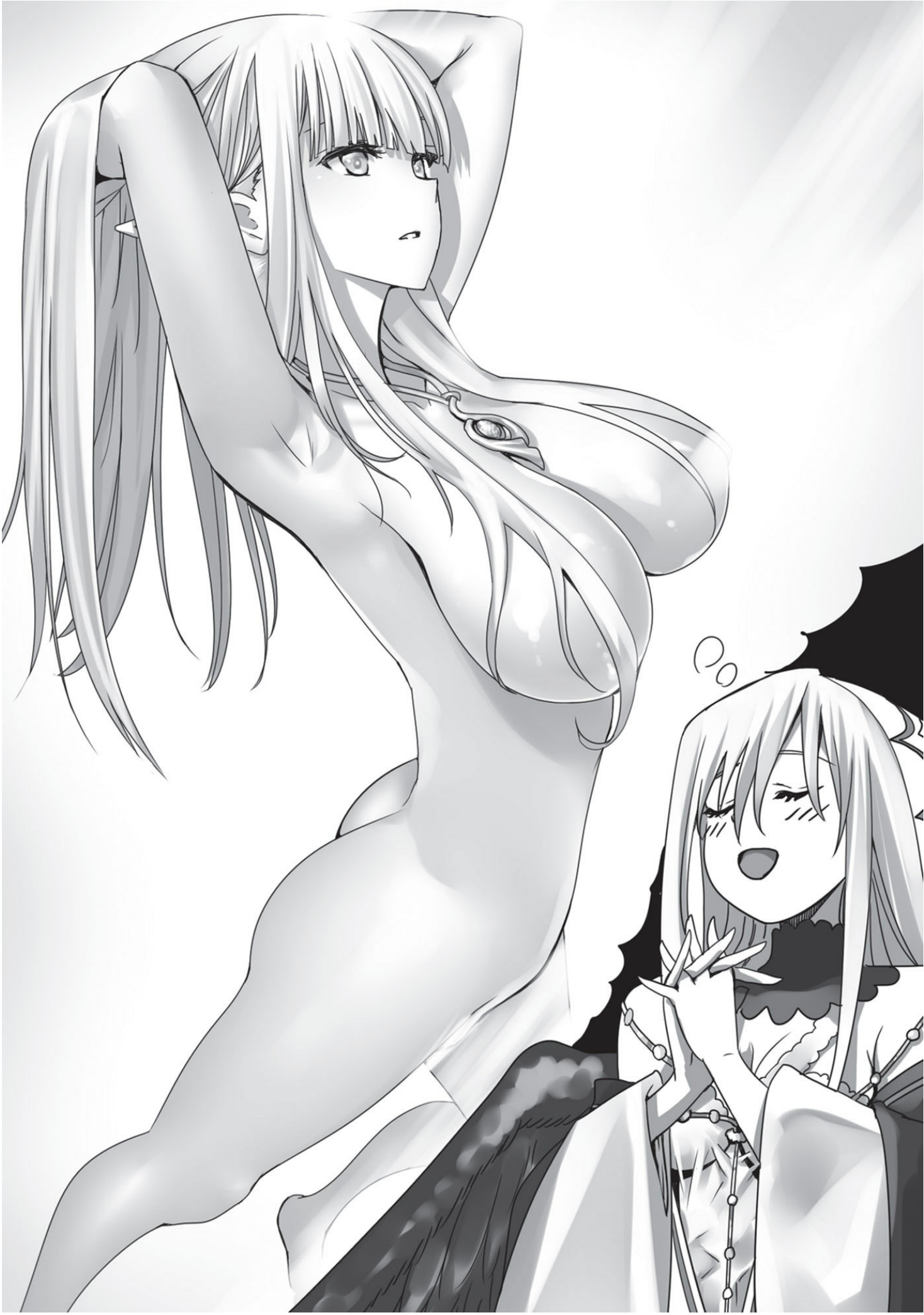
The more Munin's internal fantasies went on, the redder she got. The Chief of the Kurosaga then began to calm herself down—which was clearly quite the exercise in willpower.

“L-Lady Munin...” Seras's smile gave way to a nervous laugh. Munin slowly opened her eyes.

“Seras—don't move. Stay where you are.”

“What is it? Is there an insect on my face?”

“Don't move a muscle. I mean it.”



“U-understood...”

“There!”

Munin passed the necklace over Seras’s head and hung it from her neck.

“Huh?! Ah, Lady Munin?!”

“Oh my! I did mention having you wear it in the nude... But even clothed, it suits you so wonderfully! Truly, it does, Seras! It’s just marvelous!”

Munin was so overcome with emotion that she hugged Seras tight.

Maybe hug is the wrong word—Munin looks like she’s really squeezing her.

“Lady Munin...?”

Munin pulled her head back a little, until she was almost nose to nose with Seras.

“Oh hoh... You really *are* beautiful, Seras. You’re like a gemstone come to life in elf form! And it’s not just your appearance I’m speaking of... You’re a beautiful, sparkling jewel inside and out.”

Seras’s expression turned from flustered to a soft and gentle smile.

“Heh heh. You always compliment me so highly, Lady Munin. It’s as if you’re trying to cheer me up.”

She cleared her throat, her hand curled to cover her mouth like a cat’s paw.

“Ahem. Setting aside whether I am at all worthy of the comparison...” Seras’s eyes softened, and she smiled at Munin like sunlight on a beautiful day. “... Thank you very much, Lady Munin.”

“...”

The chief of the Kurosaga stiffened, as if the Princess Knight’s gaze had frozen her in time. Eventually, Munin’s face melted entirely, her cheeks dyed red.

“Th-that smile ... It’s so unfair, you understand? We are both women...and yet even I am starting to wish I could take you as my bride,” she said, sounding

dazed.

“...Lady Munin?”

“Ahem, what are your hobbies?”

“I-I like reading books...”

“What are those two up to over there?” I asked myself.

Overhearing me say that seemed to bring Munin back to her senses.

“Ah, what is this foolishness? Seras belongs to Master!” With a bright smile, she walked to stand behind Seras and placed her hands upon the Princess Knight’s shoulders. “Heh heh—well, that’s enough joking around for now, I think. Shall we go and appraise the vault items together?”

“Ah... Y-yes,” answered Seras, who still looked a little bewildered as Munin pushed her onward.

“Heh heh heh, I was enjoying myself a little too much, you see? And well, you play along as you do, Seras, never a hint of irony... I can’t help but want to indulge myself.”

The light of realization shone in Seras’s eyes. She smiled softly at Munin.

“I see... Well if that’s what you mean, I don’t mind spoiling you at all. I’m just not all that good at understanding the humor of others... So, I am unsure if I can properly respond.”

“That’s quite all right! ♪ But doesn’t it bother you at all when I get like this, Seras?”

“No... But thank you for asking. There’s a part of me that’s so grateful for how bright and cheerful you are, Lady Munin. I think, perhaps it would be wonderful to have an older sister such as you.”

“Oh my ♪! Seras, you simply just... Oh I love you!” Munin grappled Seras from behind, and squeezed as hard as she could. “...How about a light spot of tickling while we’re at it, eh?”

“Lady M-Munin...! Please, not that...”

“Come on then, your big sister will take you around the vault now, okay?
There’s a good girl. ♪”

Seras has her usual wry smile...but there’s not a hint of upset on her face. Munin’s so considerate about things like these. Very mature, I guess you could say. I could never act like that. And I feel like if I suddenly came at Seras with that kind of energy, she’d be more terrified than happy.

Right, then... I should probably take a look around myse—

“...”

A certain someone was beckoning me over from behind one of the shelves.

That gesture was out of character—well, no. I guess that was him just actually acting his age, wasn’t it?

I walked over.

“Is there something you need—Your Majesty?”

“You intend to search the rest of the vault, do you not? I am quite knowledgeable about this place. I believe I would be the perfect guide. Not to mention...” The Wildly Beautiful Emperor glanced over at Seras and Munin, who were off searching as a pair. “I sense we might not have many opportunities to speak alone.”

“Then of course... I also wished to speak with you in private if the opportunity ever arose, Your Majesty.”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor tilted his head to the side a little and smiled at me faintly.

To be honest, I have been waiting for a chance like this. This is the perfect opportunity.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor turned to look around the inside of the vault. “We are not strictly alone now, but—perhaps in due course?”

And so we found ourselves side by side as we began to walk the vault together.

“Allow me to thank you once again for what you said earlier, Your Majesty,” I said, scanning the shelves as we passed.

“To Seras Ashrain, I take it? I’m sure you have noticed this too... But I believe that she is under the impression the entirety of the blame for Hawk lies with her. It does not, of course, but I sensed she was unable to rid herself of those emotions. I thought it necessary for the relevant parties to *forgive*.”

I looked over at Seras, who still had Munin clinging to her back. It was a calming sight.

“The confusion that stems from a mind in chaos and disorder can slowly settle with time... Your party needs only support her through the process,” said the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, who was looking over at them too. He continued, “Of course, we will surely require Seras Ashrain’s strength in the coming fight against the Goddess’s forces. It would not do to allow her to falter now.”

“This fight to come against the Goddess... How do you intend to proceed, Your Majesty?”

“Once Luheit has returned, we will uncover the secrets of that sealed room. Once that is complete, I will join the forces of Mira in the east and we shall press the attack—all the way to Alion.”

“You intend to march on Alion once the conquest of Ulza is done, then. I take it you cannot ignore the presence of Neah and Bakoss, given your invasion route. How do you intend to deal with them?”

“Neither Neah nor Bakoss presently have the forces to match my army in the field. Now that the Alion army has lost their Thirteen Orders, I do not believe even their forces could halt my advance. In any case, the real attack is to begin once I have joined them in the field. Even what limited combat my troops have managed in my absence has overwhelmed the armies of Ulza.”

“However—”

“Yes.”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor has realized it too—the three big unknowns that lie in the path of this invasion through Ulza to Alion.

“First, the Demon King’s movements might greatly interfere with my offensive plans. The Demon King choosing to ally himself with Alion would be the worst-case scenario. Well...I do not think that possible.”

“The second unknown factor relates to the Banished Emperor and his White Army, does it not?” I asked.

“Yes. We cannot discount the possibility that the Goddess will produce some unexpected unit of substantial military strength from her side... To that extent, I believe all we can do is proceed with the assumption that she has kept some of her forces in reserve.”

“The final unknown is the Heroes from Another World,” I said.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor slowly brushed a white finger against the edge of one of the bookshelves as he passed, then stared down at the thin layer of dust it had left on his fingertip.

“The recent attack on the Castle of Alion...the Demon King’s ambush... Details are slowly beginning to trickle in about what happened there. Alion is in panic after the incident, making it much easier for my agents to slip in.”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor went on to tell me what his spies had gathered. All the information matched up with what I’d heard from Oyamada, and second-hand from the younger Takao sister—though the emperor had acquired some newer intel as well.

“One of the three S-Class heroes has betrayed the Goddess and allied himself with the Demon King. A man named Takuto Kirihara, my sources say. There might have been some internal discord among the heroes...but the Root of All Evil is the natural enemy of the Heroes from Another World. I have no doubt

that this Takuto Kirihara is being used, and will be eliminated in due course.”

...

Is it possible Kirihara’s just trying to get close to the Demon King, to then surprise him with a sucker punch?

Right now, Kirihara Takuto’s strength is completely unknown to me. I’ve heard he was effective on the eastern front during the Demon King’s Great Invasion... but it sounded like the soldiers who saw the heroes on the battlefield were actually more impressed with the older Takao sister. I’ve even heard him being unfavorably compared to her—but that’s all hearsay, I suppose.

“What worries me more is the disappearance of Hijiri Takao.”

“According to the words of the hero Oyamada... She rebelled against the Goddess and was injured during their conflict.”

I’m going to keep to myself that I know where the Takao Sisters are right now—being cared for by Erika. As for whether Hijiri was in touch with the Wildly Beautiful Emperor... I want to hear that from her before I decide to keep or reveal that secret. Of course, if it becomes necessary to talk to him about the Takao Sisters before then, that’s my decision to make.

“If the Demon King appeared in the castle—within the capital of Alion—then the Goddess must have been weakened by his essence. I expect that factored into her timing.”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor hummed quietly at my remark, looking deep in thought.

“Then, during the conflict between Hijiri and the Goddess, the Demon King’s retreat allowed the Goddess to recover some of her powers. After which, Hijiri was attacked. I believe that to be the most likely conclusion,” he noted.

“We should keep in mind that the Goddess may have a trick up her sleeves—the Banished Emperor and his White Army, for instance. I believe she might have a way of neutralizing the effects of the Demon King essence for a short

period of time,” I replied.

“...That may be possible. But a hidden trick, you say? If the Goddess has more pawns like Zera in reserve, that is not welcome news for our side.”

“I don’t believe the Banished Emperor and the White Army are pawns that the Goddess can easily deploy. From what Seras has told me, she has never deployed her forces in this manner before. The Goddess has been forced to resort to these measures—she’s cornered, one might say.”

“...She would rather not have them in the field, then.”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor brought a balled fist to his mouth, sinking into deeper thought.

“Perhaps this has something to do with why the Goddess has not used Alion—her nation of residence—to unify this continent under a single rule. Or so it seems to me, at least.”

“I agree on that point.”

Vicius can’t just do whatever she wants with this continent—and in reality, she hasn’t. She doesn’t take direct action to achieve her goals, but chooses roundabout methods to get what she wants, instead. Though she has powerful pawns and other means at her disposal, she seems to prefer to hold them in reserve. There must be some constraints that are placed upon her—otherwise, her actions don’t make sense.

“The Takao Sisters... It may not be prudent to place too much hope in them now,” said the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

“You believe they may be dead? That Vicius has already eliminated them but is lying about their condition?”

“She may have had them removed, and is pacifying the other heroes by claiming that the two of them are missing and a search is underway. It is, of course, possible that two sisters are still alive and attempting to make their way here—I will conduct a search of my own. I do, however, believe it would be

dangerous to place too much stock in their safety.”

“It would be risky to cling to such an unknown... It is as you say,” I agreed.

“Speaking of unknown factors,” said the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, his clear eyes filling with apprehension. “The remaining S-Class hero—she will be the greatest *key* to the events to come.”

He must mean...

“Ayaka Sogou,” I answered.

“Yes. While these are the words of Ayaka Sogou herself, and so the report remains somewhat unreliable... It is said that she faced down both the traitor hero and the Demon King—and fought toe to toe with the pair of them.”

“I do not think she is the type to lie about such matters.”

“You know of Ayaka Sogou? Ah—you fought side by side at the Battle for the White Citadel, didn’t you. What were your impressions of her?” asked the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

“A young girl, honest and filled with compassion. Though I also sensed a danger within her.”

“It is possible that we could fight the Goddess without them. However...now that we can rely on neither the traitor hero, nor the Takao Sisters, Ayaka Sogou is absolutely the *key* to this war against the Demon King.”

“I heard that you wished to bring her on board as an ally,” I noted.

“There is another hero, Kobato Kashima—”

Kashima?

“She explained to me that she wishes for a chance—the *opportunity*—to convince Ayaka Sogou to join us,” the Wildly Beautiful Emperor concluded.

“She says so because she believes there is the possibility of success, I take it.”

“Asagi Ikusaba also has expressed that she believes there is a good chance we may be able to convince Ayaka Sogou to join our cause. If she says it is so—then

I suppose it must be.”

“We can get back to our old world without the Goddess’s help.” I think that line would be effective at convincing Sogou to switch sides—unless the Goddess has some leverage over her. Maybe the Goddess has swept all obstacles out of Sogou’s way and has won her over with her smooth talking. Maybe there’s been a death, and it’s triggered a mental breakdown in Sogou. Maybe someone she knows has been taken hostage.

Right...Kirihara isn’t the only hero I don’t have any recent information on. The same goes for Sogou.

“She’s gotten a lot stronger.”

I have almost no way of finding out more about her right now. Erika’s familiars are going to keep an eye on the movements of the Goddess and those around her—maybe they’ll get me some intel on Sogou in the process.

“...”

Back then—when we were reunited at the White Citadel, I still remember what she said.

“If there’s someone out there that wants to do harm to the people I’ve decided to protect—I will stand in their way, with all my strength, no matter what.”

She’s still the class rep. She tried to save Mimori Touka when he was about to be disposed of. She was the only one... The only other student who defied that foul Goddess back then.

“It is as you say—she may be the greatest unknown,” I said.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor tilted his head slightly and looked up at me with great interest.

“Hmm?”

“If the heroes truly are to become our enemies, then Ayaka Sogou will be the most difficult one to deal with... I agree.”

“Then if we are to face her, we will need some kind of back door, I suppose,” said the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

“You believe that facing her directly would be a mistake?”

“I have heard that she has an honest character.”

“It is precisely why I cannot read her.”

She might seem simple, but that’s precisely what makes her complex. There are elements with her that could cause her to go either way. She’s a cluster of dangerous possibilities.

“The Heroes from Another World... Their influence extends beyond our battle with the Root of All Evil, after all.”

And in a way, I’m one of them.

“Come to think of it... I have yet to hear of an autopsy of the hero that you dispatched. What did you do with his body?”

“I disposed of it myself—it is gone without a trace. Please do not worry, though. I made sure to have him surrender all necessary information before dispensing with him.”

You know, come to think of it...that’s a seriously villainous line right there.

“I see.”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor didn’t press me any further. We returned to the topic of strategy, and our next moves. He was going to head to the eastern front, and so I asked how he intended on handling the Demon King in the north.

“To the north of Mira are the nations of Yonato and Magnar. Both seem exhausted by battle, but do you believe you can defend the imperial capital from them with the forces that remain garrisoned here? Or, Your Majesty, do you intend to—”

“Yes. I intend to immediately ask the Country at the End of the World for their assistance.”

Mira's strong, but right now it's isolated and unsupported. The aid of the Country at the End of the World means a lot to them right now. I understand why they were so willing to meet their demands at the negotiating table.

I decided to ask about sea routes. According to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, while his nation did have a navy, after a fashion, it wasn't fit to be a major player. He explained that this was true of all the other countries on the continent, and for good reason.

The appearance of the Root of All Evil had awakened terrible sea creatures that made the waters visibly rage and churn. The reefs changed too, warping into protuberant shapes that made warships all but useless. Catching fish became risky, as fishermen hesitated to venture out onto the open seas. The Demon King's domain was surrounded by impassable seas on all sides—meaning an invasion by sea was off the table.

I'd heard a bit about this from Seras already—turns out everything she said was true.

“There are some, however, who will risk the dangerous journey—departing from the ports of Yonato in hopes of escaping to the barren lands of the west,” said the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, with a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

There's another continent across the sea, to the west of Yonato. Apparently, it's uninhabited. There are some people who live on the small islands between the two continents, but it isn't safe. Based on the stories I've heard, monsters will appear from the sea and attack people.

“Unless we defeat the Demon King, the seas will never be at peace again—and to defeat the Root of All Evil, we have only a land route.”

“So there is also only one way in,” I noted.

“Hmmh.”

The Land of the Root of All Evil was cut off from the rest of the continent by an impassable mountain range. To get beyond and into the north, one had to

pass through Magnar's Nightwall fortress.

"Speaking of Magnar, what of the famed White Wolf Riders I have heard so much about?"

"Aside from the heroes, they are one of the Goddess's few pawns of real strength that we must remain wary of. I am sure you have heard by now, but their Chief Rider Sogude Sigmus is a remarkable individual. His older brother, the White Wolf King, often spoke of wishing to surrender his throne to Sogude. It has even been said in some circles that the only reason the present White Wolf King took the throne is because his younger brother stubbornly refuses to accept it. It is very unfortunate that Magnar—and Sogude in particular—are allied with Vicius."

The White Wolf King is missing, and it's believed that he died in the great invasion. The Black Wolf is essentially the King of Magnar now, for all intents and purposes.

"If we are speaking of others we might need to be wary of—the Disciple of Vicius, Nyantan Kikipat comes to mind. I have heard that she is the most talented of Vicius's disciples by far and is quite precious to the Goddess at the moment, given her difficulty in acquiring new allies."

Nyaki's Nee-nya.

"Incidentally... She is the older sister of one of your followers, I believe?"

"Yes."

"If she chooses to stand against us as a foe, we will have no choice but to fight her. But let us do all that we can to ensure that she makes it through this war."

"I appreciate your consideration."

"Still... When it comes to Nyantan Kikipat, the White Wolf Riders, the heroes, Vicius, and the Demon King...we do not know what their next moves will be."

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor sighed—melancholy, but not despairing.

"We will respond to whatever situation we are met with. I can speculate

about the future, but I cannot predict it in its entirety. We must always expect the unexpected to occur.”

That sounds similar to something Seras has said to me in the past.

“What is most important now is how we prepare to deal with the rapidly changing events as they present themselves. We will not emerge on top unless we can remain flexible.”

With that, the Wildly Beautiful Emperor stopped, and looked up at me. The corners of his eyes softened just a little, and a thin smile spread across his face. He placed the tip of his ring finger to his temple in a deliberate gesture.

“Many people are under the false impression that I, the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, am some omniscient and omnipotent god. It is difficult to live up to their expectations. You—of all people—should understand my position somewhat, no?”

“Yes. Very much so,” I replied. “I believe it important to express that difficulty to the ones with whom one is close. It is best not to keep the frustration to oneself.”

Not like I’m one to talk ... And hey, that’s just something that Seras told me anyway.

“Worry not,” said the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, who then set off walking again. “There are two individuals, at least, who understand this about me.”

We turned right, into a row of shelves—we had gotten a little way from Seras and Munin. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor stopped in his tracks again. He ran his hands through the two bunches of long hair that hung down over his chest—one over each shoulder. His hair was tied up with string at his neckline and looked almost like a tail when it was hanging behind him. He held up the two bunches, one in each hand. They flowed like high-quality silk, slipping from the palms of his hands to the floor like pure, clear streams of water.

“These two bunches of my hair... Luheit and Kaize retie them for me at regular

intervals. It is a kind of ceremony—the way in which we prove *our* commitment.”

The ones who understand this beautiful emperor’s position—it sounds like they’re his two older brothers, then.

“Our family’s desire is thus—the elimination of the Goddess Vicius and revenge. Unless we of Miran descent can take revenge upon Vicius, we will never escape this vortex, never be free. After the humiliation the second emperor, Dot, endured at Vicius’s hands... All emperors who followed have knelt before her and been forced to suffer. As those past emperors put off dealing with the problem, those around them were slowly eliminated... The dream held by our first emperor, Falken—that we would someday have the power to overturn her authority—remains as yet unrealized. In a way, what Zera said to me was correct. We are cursed. The imperial name of Falkendot is the root of it, the cursed font from which we have sprung,” the Wildly Beautiful Emperor muttered, half to himself.

I could see the emotion in his eyes—his heartbreak and his sorrow. There was something in his tone of voice too...a misty sort of shadow hanging over his words. It was unusual for the Wildly Beautiful Emperor’s emotions to be so clearly on display.

A curse that his bloodline has carried, eh? If I believe what he just said is true, then it’s lifting that curse that’s motivating him to take revenge on Vicius. To finally dispel his family’s affliction—except for that Banished Emperor guy, I suppose.

“Then your older brothers are cursed alongside you...both your accomplices and those who understand you best, I take it.”

“Yes. I felt like we should have had more jostling for the throne, but at a certain point the two of them submitted to me, as did their mother. And so, they chose to serve me, as I rule as emperor.”

There’s one thing still on my mind.

“I understand this may be an impolite question, but might I ask you something, Your Majesty?”

“Ask anything you like of me. As to whether I answer or whether your words stir my emotions—that will be up to me.”

“It appears that there are rumors, Your Majesty... That Sir Luheit is displeased with your rule. These rumors are not spoken behind closed doors, but spread quite far and wide. I wish to ask if there is any truth to these reports.”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor must have heard the rumors... But when I heard him talking about his two older brothers just now, they almost sound like different people from the ones I’ve heard talk of.

“A precaution,” the Wildly Beautiful Emperor responded simply, shooting me a sideways glance like he had just given me a riddle.

A precaution? I set my mind racing. *A precaution... Some kind of insurance? He can’t mean...*

“You mean to say... You spread the rumors yourself, should this rebellion be unsuccessful?”

“Heh heh, a single word was enough to guide you to the correct conclusion, then. I do appreciate a sharp mind... Yes, it is so. The ploy is not certain to work, but it *may* eventually serve its intended purpose, you see?” The Wildly Beautiful Emperor tilted his head slightly, looking just a little mischievous.

I think I get it... In case Mira loses this war, Luheit can betray the Wildly Beautiful Emperor and kill him. The story would be told thus: “Luheit Mira was always dissatisfied with the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.” He was unable to oppose him, fearing the strength of the Wildly Beautiful Emperor’s faction, or perhaps because he was being blackmailed. But once the Wildly Beautiful Emperor was facing the threat of imminent defeat—Luheit took his chance and started a rebellion of his own.

“At heart, Luheit was always dissatisfied with the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.”

With those rumors laid out ahead of time—precautions were in place.

“Should it come to that, I need only *descend into madness.*”

“...”

“The more I act out and cause the people of Mira to detest me... The more heroic Luheit will appear when he strikes down the evil emperor I will have become. If this war should come to the worst conceivable end—perhaps the Empire of Mira will be able to survive it.”

Meaning if Mira is defeated, he's going to offer up his own head to Vicius as the flag-bearer of the whole rebellion, huh? ...If that evil Goddess will allow that to happen, that is.

“Luheit and Kaize are both aware of, and understand the situation. My brothers, working together, will be able to handle the aftermath should it come to that. Yes, I know my brothers will be up to the task...”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor smiled with a kind of acceptance. There was a brief flash of something in his expression though—something that spoke to the fleeting nature of it all.

“Even if we win this fight, Mira may come to be hated by the other peoples of this continent in the process. If that hatred grows too strong and too powerful to ignore, I am prepared to offer myself up to sate it. My execution should be a grand display. A single head in exchange for peace—a small price to pay, no?”

Sounds like the Wildly Beautiful Emperor is really prepared to give his all in this war—to get revenge for his ancestors, and lift the curse that hangs over his family.

“You need only be victorious, then.”

“Hm?”

“It may be important to think of what will happen should you be defeated—but these problems will not present themselves if we win this war. In addition...” I looked down at the Wildly Beautiful Emperor through my Lord of

the Flies mask. "...the same is true of your concerns about the aftermath of victory. You need not surrender your life—only completely deceive and manipulate the populace. Indeed, many of your people already believe you to be an omnipotent and omniscient god, no? You will be capable of manipulating them. I, at least, believe it is so."

For a moment, the Wildly Beautiful Emperor's expression stiffened. He then looked down with a faint smile.

"My my... You make it sound so easy."

"I mean these as words of encouragement, such as I am capable of offering them."

"I did not expect to be encouraged. Hmph."

That might have been an impolite way of putting it, but he doesn't seem offended.

"Ah, and also... Spreading rumors that Luheit is dissatisfied with my rule has one other effect," said the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

I thought about it for a moment.

"...Exposing the members of the opposing factions?"

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor has charisma in spades, but it's not like everyone in the empire is going to be one of his admirers.

The emperor looked at me sideways, the corner of his mouth curling up slightly, and raised his index finger.

"Indeed. It presents a fine opportunity to determine those who wish to quietly move in support of Luheit, wouldn't you agree?"

I see. So that's part of his aim as well.

I peeked over at Seras through the bookshelves. We were now some distance away from them.

"Your Majesty, you mentioned thinking Seras should take more time to rest...

I believe that you should also, perhaps, take a longer break to recover.”

“Even all-seeing, all-powerful gods must rest?”

“I apologize for the discourtesy—but as you are but a false deity, I believe you still get tired.”

A short chuckle escaped the Wildly Beautiful Emperor’s thin lips, as if I had caught him off guard and he just couldn’t help but laugh.

“You are quite right. A false deity indeed.” His eyes softened. “Understood. I will do so, as far as I am able.”

When people are tired, it’s easier to get to their true feelings...and it can make them despair easily, too. Even the Wildly Beautiful Emperor is human. Maybe he’s actually been looking to talk about this stuff with someone else... I kind of get the impression he might be, which is why I’m letting him talk. I guess, given his position, there aren’t many people he can complain to, even if he does have two older brothers that understand what he’s going through. Well... I’m the same way. It was exactly because I loved my foster parents that there were some things I just couldn’t talk to them about.

“I’m sure there are some things that are easier to speak about with those who are not your relatives,” I offered.

“...Perhaps so.”

After he had walked a few more meters, the Wildly Beautiful Emperor stopped and spoke again.

“I find you easy to converse with and have something else I wish to discuss. There has been talk on my side that you could be invited to become one of my subordinates.”

“Me, Your Majesty?”

“It was suggested that you be given an official title—that it might be easier for Mirans to fight alongside you as a fellow countryman in arms. With your true identity unknown, the process would instill trust in you among the people of

Mira... Such was the suggestion.”

I guess I did claim to be a former Ashint member. They don't know where I'm from. I'm just a guy in a Lord of the Flies mask who doesn't get to show his face. Can hardly blame some of them for not trusting me.

“However...I have no intention of taking you as a subordinate. I turned down the proposal.” The Wildly Beautiful Emperor kept his gaze straight ahead as he continued. “The relationship that Mira has with your Lord of the Flies Brigade is, if anything, an alliance. We will spare no effort to support and accommodate you. The Lord of the Flies Brigade is, however, a separate entity—a freely operating raiding unit of sorts. Or so I intend it to be. I believe that will be the easiest way for you to operate. Still...I wished to hear *your* opinions on this matter.”

“I am very grateful for your consideration, Your Majesty. Such an arrangement would make it easiest to conduct our operations, and I think of our hierarchy in much the same way.”

More chains that would just mean more trouble later down the line. I appreciate the freedom.

“Personally—” began the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, narrowing his eyes as if looking out toward the horizon. “I do not particularly wish to officially have you be my subordinate.”

“Might I ask what you mean?”

“An emperor and a lord... I intend to converse with you as an equal. I do quite appreciate having a conversation partner with whom I feel I am on an even footing.”

“—Being emperor can be lonely then, I take it?”

“Being the vessel of an emperor is not always a blessing to the one upon whom it is bestowed. As one who is the vessel of a lord, I believe you must understand?”

“No. I do not think of myself as being the vessel of a lord or king.”

I’m nothing but an avenger.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor cleared his throat.

“...Let us return to the topic at hand. There is another matter on which I wish to speak. The official signing ceremony to establish Mira’s alliance with the Country at the End of the World will be conducted tomorrow. The situation is changing rapidly, and so I wish to have the process done quickly, to make clear to the people of Mira that the people of the Country at the End of the World are our allies... Though given the present circumstances, there will only be a very limited number of individuals in attendance.”

This signing ceremony is one of the reasons we’re here in Mira in the first place.

“What is this other matter then, Your Majesty?”

“Hmph. I will be holding a small evening party after the ceremony and would like you and Seras Ashrain to attend.”

“There is a specific reason you wish us to participate, I take it?”

“I wish you to meet with the three princeps elector houses.”

“You refer to the great and powerful families of Mira, who have supported it all these long years?”

“Yes. All three families will attend the evening party. Dias, Ord, and Seat—the heads of all three houses.”

“You wish me to gain their trust?”

“We will show them that we can converse on a personal level, leaving them with a strong impression of our mutual camaraderie. The other nobles must leave with the same view. Even merely giving them the opportunity to have a conversation will, I believe, change their impressions of you.”

“I’d heard terrible things about him, but he seemed like quite a nice guy when

I actually met him.” I suppose you do hear that a lot.

“In addition... I would like to explain to those in my circle that I am fully aware of your true identity, and of your intentions. Some will be reassured by this knowledge—and I would like you to play along with that narrative.”

“Understood.”

“Well... In truth, it does not appear that the three princeps elector houses have a bad impression of your character. I believe rather that they simply wish to meet you in person to size you up for themselves.”

Seeking to dispel what true doubt might actually exist, then. I see.

“And so, that is the situation. Will you do me the favor of attending?”

“Yes. Now that I understand your aims, I will attend for you, Your Majesty.”

“—I frankly care nothing for discovering your true identity,” said the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, loosely rolling up his long hair with his fingers, as it lay draped over his right shoulder. “I need only be sure that we are united in our goal. That fact is all I require. I judge whether an individual is worthy of my trust by their will, their words, and their actions. What matters is whether my aims can be achieved... Your true identity is insignificant. I have judged by your will, your words, and your actions that you are worthy of my trust. That will suffice.”

“I am glad it was you, Your Majesty.”

“?”

“I am truly, from my heart, glad that you were the one who chose to rebel against the Goddess.”

“Do you intend to flatter me?”

“Of course.”

“Hmph... Very well, then.”

We talked for a while, still touring the shelves. I managed to find several items from the vault that I chose to pick up—mostly strange desiccated animal

remains and dried plants, as I remembered what Erika had been muttering the last time I saw her.

“Ah, my stock of these... It seems I’m almost out. This really is the big problem with living in isolation, you know. I could easily replenish my stores if I could only walk freely through this world... Oh, if only that evil Goddess would begone... Ughh.”

I had taken a list of things that she was running low on, thinking they would make good souvenirs if a chance to hand them over presented itself before my final battle with the Goddess.

Right, then...

“I will be taking this dried insect corpse and these crystals.”

The purple beetle and these teleportation crystals.

“Are the remains of this carapaced creature valuable?” asked the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

“Yes. It’s called a purple beetle and is a rare component material.”

“Hmph. I had my own personal apothecaries and scholars research such things, and preserve plants and animals they deemed valuable when possible. It appears they were correct in their assessment. There are poisons created with ingredients that no longer grow on the continent—should Vicius choose to employ them against us, we will need antidotes. There is, however, a chance that the materials will not be available to us when the time comes. That is why I chose to preserve these curious and rare items... But our studies have not been able to identify them all, and there are a great many here that we can find no use for.”

I’m betting Erika would know.

“I apologize for keeping you waiting.”

Seras and Munin returned to us. The only items they had found for themselves were ingredients and component materials, much the same as I had

—things that could apparently be used to help recover from exhaustion, and to heal injuries.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor led us back to the entrance to the vault. There were several workbenches lined up near to the door, and a flat black box sat on one of them.

That's a pretty big box.

I took a closer look.

This thing is fancy...like, the brushed silverwork is so finely done, and it's inlaid with gemstones too. It looks expensive.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor took a key from his pouch and unlocked the box, then placed his hands gently to either side, and carefully opened it.

“These have been passed down the line of emperors in my family for generations. I will allow you to take what you like from the contents. Think of this as a reward, Lord of the Flies, for the matter which we previously discussed.”

The emperor's guards, watching us from afar, looked surprised by the gesture.

I guess he's giving away this country's national treasures right now—I'd be shocked as well.

I took a look inside the box. It seemed to mostly contain jewelry, but there was also a decorative short sword that appeared ceremonial in nature. Nothing particularly stood out to me.

I'm sure these would be worth a lot of money if I sold them...but pawning these off for gold sounds like the fastest way to lose the trust of everyone in Mira.

“What do you think?” I asked Munin, just in case.

“Hmm, well... These items are all beautiful, but I'm not sure we will have need of them in our coming battles... And we can't just request the national treasures

of Mira either, can we?” she replied, placing a hand to her forehead and smiling wryly.

Figures. Of course not.

...Hm? Seras?

“What is it?” I asked, noticing that her gaze had been fixed on a single point for some time. “Something catch your eye?”

“—Eh? A-ah... Well, there is no guarantee that this is a genuine item, but—no, it can’t possibly... What would one of *those* be doing *here*...?” Her words seemed to trail off into monologue at the end. She pressed her lips to the back of her hand, looking incredibly serious all of a sudden.

I followed her gaze and saw that she was fixed on what appeared to be a fairly normal looking gemstone.

It looks a little like a diamond maybe?

Countless rays of prismatic light ran through the transparent crystal. Seras gulped.

It doesn’t seem like she’s just attracted to the gemstone for its beauty—there’s something about it.

“Have you seen gemstones like this one before?” I asked.

“This crystal—I believe it may be a *prime tear*.”

“A prime tear?”

“They are unbelievably rare items. I was not aware that any remained in existence—but no... This only assumes that it is real, of course.”

“What does it do?”

“It is believed that all spirits come from the prime spirit... Prime tears are said to be crystallized tears shed by that spirit itself. Legend has it that several of them exist in this world, but well, this... To us elves, it is practically an item from a fairy tale... Even if they may have once existed, I believed all of them to be

lost...”

“From the way you’re talking, it sounds like these items *did* exist a long, long time in the past, right? It’s not like their actual existence was in doubt, was it?”

“Yes. But these items are so rare, it was said that they were all used up long ago.”

So they’re used for something then. They’re consumable.

Seras looked to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

“Your Majesty... Might I touch this item for a moment?” she asked nervously.

“Of course. I do not mind.”

She thanked him, and with trembling fingertips, she moved to touch the gemstone. As her hands grew closer, the item reacted—glowing with pale light—until finally, she laid her fingers upon it.

In an instant the surface of the gemstone yielded to her touch. Seras withdrew her fingers, and the light faded.

“I believe—” She swallowed once more. “This item is genuine.”

“I’m told this was passed down from the first Emperor of Mira. It has a strong connection to your people, you say? I believe it was granted to my ancestor by a certain nobleman.” The Wildly Beautiful Emperor couldn’t help but smile. “This was given by the elves to the first emperor, Falken. Now it crosses the path of an elven knight... What a strange turn of fate this is.”

“A-ahem...” Seras began, leaning forward to peer at the gemstone, with cold sweat running down her face. “You mentioned that...that we should take any items that may be of some use to us in our fight against the Goddess.”

“Will this be of use?” asked the emperor.

“The legends say that the Prime Tears have the power to bring a spirit closer to its prime source.”

“So...what does that mean, exactly?” I asked.

“If the stories are accurate... It will make the spirits with which I am presently contracted more powerful. As a result...” Seras concluded. “It will, I believe, bring my spirit armor closer to *completion*.”

Once we were done in the vault, we returned to our state guest house. We parted with the Wildly Beautiful Emperor inside of the castle. Thankfully, he’d given us permission to take the prime tear.

“If we lose this war, our national treasures will be ripped from our hands. Better that you take it now, if it will be of use to you in your fight.”

He had, however, given his guards a strict warning that not a word was to be spoken to anyone of the gift.

I guess there are some in the elector houses, or among his retainers, who might complain. Makes sense though... I mean, these are the national treasures of Mira.

As soon as we were back, I set about the extraction process. It involved a kind of boiling—bringing out the flavor so to speak—that would last a few days. As for Seras, the prime tear strengthening process was far from instantaneous and would also require a fair bit of time to take effect.

Piggymaru’s final stage of enhancement, and the buff to Seras’s spirit armor... Seems like we’re going to have to wait a while for both of them to fully develop. It sounds like that sealed room is going to have to wait until Luheit gets back too.

“But hey... We can think of this as gaining time to get some rest, I guess.”

Seras was with Slei—as I had been a few minutes ago. Piggymaru had been with Slei while we were in the Great Vault of Mira, and still was. Apparently, something about the little slime calmed Slei down. She was recovering from her injuries quickly, much as she always had done. The more mana I poured into the crystal in the back of her neck, the faster her recovery got.

Not sure exactly how that works, but there's no harm in a faster recovery.

And so, for the time being, I'd given Slei quite a bit of mana.

Erika's familiar was inside its birdcage, and the Wildly Beautiful Emperor had provided us with some food for it. Once we returned from the vault, all the items we requested had been waiting outside our door for us, like the postman had been by. But Erika's consciousness had departed, it seemed. It took a toll on her to operate her animals.

I bet she's sleeping right now.

I walked to the simple stables and peeked inside, holding a silver tray in my hands. To be honest, the stables were big enough to fit three horses, and so well constructed that I wasn't even sure calling them "simple" was right.

Well, even if they are simple, they're still attached to a state guest house, I suppose. Makes perfect sense that they're better built than anything I've seen from here to Mils.

They were spacious and wide, with high ceilings and good natural light. There was fodder packed into a space on one of the walls. Seras had mentioned that the stables had everything needed to keep a horse. There was also a bench for resting one's feet and a table for grabbing a bite to eat.

Seems like a person could easily spend a comfortable night here too.

Inside the stables, I found Slei in her first stage of transformation, as well as Seras, Piggymaru, and Munin.

Munin... Wait, is she sleeping?

She sat slumped on the bench, leaning forward, with her arms around Piggymaru. Her eyes were closed, and her face was a little red.

She did mention something about wanting to have a drink and relax for a while, come to think of it...

"Sq...uee... Ueee."

Piggymaru was sandwiched between Munin's lap and her chest. The little slime had puffed itself up to serve as a cushion for her—but the pressure it was under looked like more than the slime had bargained for. It was struggling a little.

Probably decided to maintain the status quo because it thinks that Munin's having a nice sleep and it doesn't want to disturb her. It's not wrong, though. Munin does look really happy and comfortable, mumbling in her sleep.

"..."

Keep up the good work, Piggymaru.

Seras was on her knees on the floor, by Sleis's side. She was stroking Sleis's face to comfort her, and there was a faint smile on her lips.

"Pakyuu~h."

Each time Seras stroked her, Sleis returned the favor with a happy little nuzzle.

"You're more than well enough now I see. It's all thanks to Sir Too-ka, who has given you so much mana, I expect."

"Pakyuh."

"I really am sorry for everything that happened... I made so many bad decisions that day."

"Pakyu~h... Kyu-kyuhn."

Sleis shook her head from side to side in a gesture of denial.

"It's not your fault"—it looks like that's what she's trying to say.

"Sleis says she wants you to forget about all that, I think. She wants to see you happy again," I said, leaning against the entranceway.

"Sir Too-ka." Seras turned to look at me, and Sleis raised her head too.

"Pakyuu~hn. ♪"

Perhaps because I'd been being deliberately quiet, it seemed nobody in the

stables had noticed me looking in on them.

“Here, I got you a present. I finally got something that I think you’ll like.”

I showed Seras the contents of the silver tray—sweets from my old world, taken out of the plastic and neatly placed on proper plates.

“Wh-what are those?”

“Canelés. They’re pastries.”

I think they’re originally from France, right? I’ve only ever eaten them twice before, both times at my foster mother’s recommendation. I remember seeing them in the convenience store now and then.

I’d been using my magic leather pouch at regular intervals, but it wasn’t as if the process *always* produced some snack that Seras would appreciate. Then last night, it delivered a few bags of canelés. Given the packages, they looked like they were from a convenience store or maybe a supermarket.

“I brought enough for Munin too.”

“Mneah nyeah... Zzz...”

“Squee.”

As Munin snored softly, a trail of saliva dripped from her mouth and onto Piggymaru.

I sighed.

“Piggymaru, wake Munin up. That’s an order.”

“Squ?! Squee! Squee-eee!”

“Zzz... Hyoh?! Wh-what’s the matter, Piggymaru...?”

Piggymaru had been putting up with a lot to avoid interrupting Munin’s peaceful sleep, but I gave it no excuse but to wake her.

...I wonder if that qualified as a rescue.

I handed out the plates to everyone.

“Th-this is delicious... Hah...” Seras balanced the plate on her knees and placed both hands to her cheeks.

To be honest, I kinda like watching Seras’s reaction to eating sweets and snacks. Maybe it’s because at times like these, I get to see a bit of a different side to her.

“Pakyureeh. ♪”

Slei, who seemed to be copying Seras, placed her two front legs alongside her face as well.

Munin looked to be in a blissful state of relaxation.

“It feels so squishy and soft in my mouth...it tastes so wonderful. The outer crust is delicious too. This lighter part on the inside is so refreshing, but perfectly sweet as well! Oh, I wish that I could give Fugi some of these... I’m so filled with joy! Oh, especially after I drank those strong spirits earlier. This sweetness truly is wonderfully delicious.”

Strong spirits... What, like whiskey, brandy, that kind of stuff? Maybe Munin and Erika would make good drinking buddies.



“Squee Squee... Squee!”

Piggymaru digested the canelé, then turned into the shape of a canelé itself.

“...”

This isn't bad, eh? Eating snacks in the stables like this... But I bet we'd be having way more fun if Eve, Lis, Erika, Nyaki, and all the people from the Country at the End of the World were here too, I thought to myself absent-mindedly.

Before I realized it, it was dusk outside the window. The previous day's attack on the imperial capital almost felt like it never happened, given the quiet that had settled over our guest house. I resolved to spend the rest of the day relaxing and preparing for the next day's signing ceremony.

Seems like Munin might be a bit nervous—maybe she was drinking to settle her nerves. But this is Munin we're talking about. She'll be okay. She was great during the negotiations with Mira, doing everything her role required. She really becomes the “Kurosaga Clan Chief” at times like those.

The next day—just past noon—Ibara arrived right on time. All of our preparations were long since complete, so we left the guest house and proceeded to the signing ceremony.

Chapter 2:

Name

MUNIN PRESSED DOWN on the signing treaty with the royal seal. She then took a quill and signed the document as the representative of King Zect. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor had already signed his own name. The gazes of all those in attendance were fixed on the finely carved table—almost an altar—where the Emperor and Munin were seated. Munin had her wings out—deliberately demonstrating her connection to the Country at the End of the World with the prominent display. She was dressed as she always was, with the addition of a neutral-colored cardigan that she had been lent by the people of Mira.

Even that cardigan alone is enough to make her look like she's dressed for this ceremony. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor looks like he's in his ceremonial outfit too. I mean...he could even pass as a princess, no problem. But hey, I suppose it's the custom over here to wear a bit of make-up at big ceremonies.

Once the signing was done, the two of them stood and read their declarations in turn. The signing ceremony took place in one of the halls of the castle—the same place that they were always held, apparently. There was a solemn atmosphere to the place, like the inside of a church. The walls were hung with great, extravagant tapestries and there was a line of statues that seemed to depict the former emperors of Mira. The candlestick holders fitted to the pillars of the room did not exactly glitter, but they certainly exuded prestige. There was a huge stained-glass window fitted into the far wall of the hall behind the Wildly Beautiful Emperor and Munin.

Seated at one end of the long table, Chancellor Kaize Mira made the next move. He stood before the emperor and Munin, bowed once, then took the signed document from the table with ceremonial practice. He then turned back to the crowd and showed it to all in attendance.

“The Empire of Mira’s alliance with the Country at the End of the World is

hereby established. May both our nations enjoy eternal prosperity.”

After Kaize’s announcement, applause followed. The clapping was far more intense than I’d expected.

There are fifty people in here, give or take. I don’t know if that’s a large or small number for ceremonies like these. Some of these people look really stern—but the majority look friendly. As for the gazes I’m getting as Munin’s companion...

“...”

Nope. Those looks aren’t for me. Almost everyone’s looking at Seras instead, huh.

Seras and I sat side by side in the chairs that had been prepared for us. I was dressed as the Lord of the Flies. Seras on the other hand... She wasn’t wearing her Fly Swordsman armor that day, but a dress that the Mirans had prepared for her.

She had tried to gently refuse the offer. But, considering that her outfit had been requested by the emperor himself, she had eventually agreed for fear it would be impolite to say no. She had been allowed to pick out the dress herself, and had chosen a white one accented with notes of blue which exposed neither her shoulders nor her chest.

She wore long gloves like those of a noble, with embroidery on the back. Her hair was tied back in a high ponytail with a white ribbon with blue accents. Her high-heeled shoes followed the same color scheme, and looked like the kind a dancer might wear. Her ankles, peeking out from below her dress, were covered with white tights.

Come to think of it—this might be the first time I’ve ever seen Seras dressed in anything like this. She looks like a sophisticated and beautiful princess. I mean, I’m not all that good with words...but that’s exactly the impression I get when I look at her. I guess she is an Elven princess, technically speaking.

“You’re the real deal, after all.”

“...?”

Seras looked a little confused by my mumbling, as if a little question mark popped up above her head.

Munin sure does look calm up there. She looks totally relaxed, way more than she did right before we headed here for this ceremony. She’s handling this like a real adult—or maybe she’s just acting her age. When I see her up there, it does make me respect my elders. She’s really good at adapting to different situations on the fly.

Hey, I guess that’s just what it means to be an adult.

Once the ceremony was over, we were directed into a different hall for the small evening party.

Meeting with those three princeps elector houses and the other nobles then, just as planned.

Some people were already on the move from the ceremony hall, so I stood to join them.

“It looks like Munin’s going to be going with the Wildly Beautiful Emperor. Let’s get going, shall we?”

“Yes.”

Seras and I left the hall together.

“...”

We were met by around ten people the moment we left, all of them men, who looked to be nobles who had just attended the ceremony.

Doesn’t look to me like any of them are the heads of the three princeps elector houses—they don’t match the descriptions I was given.

I could tell, however, from their glances and general air that every one of them wanted to speak with Seras. The noblemen were keeping themselves in

check, but very much leaning in her direction. Seras looked daunted by the prospect of talking to them, and silently drew herself closer to me for assurance.

“I’ll be with you until we get into the next hall, don’t worry,” I said.

Seras looked down at the floor, embarrassed.

“I am truly sorry. If you don’t mind... Thank you.”

I heard she was bad with evening parties back when she lived in Neah, too. I think she mentioned that at a certain point she just stopped attending them at the princess’s wishes. She must get tired of being talked to death all the time. And she might be feeling uncomfortable and out of place here, given how many people are staring. I spent years living as a background character that nobody really noticed. I can’t say I understand how she feels.

Seras’s nerves finally got the better of her, making her freeze up.

“Your waist...”

“Eh?”

“Can I put my arm around your waist?”

“O-of course... Go right ahead. Th-that... It poses no issue to me.”

I slipped my arm around Seras’s slim waist.

“Ah...!”

“I bet there won’t be many of them willing to come up and chat now...” I said, surveying the faces of the hangers-on. “...Now they’ve seen this.”

I don’t feel great about doing this—expressing publicly that Seras Ashrain belongs to the Lord of the Flies. But this gets them to keep their hands off Seras. I’m deliberately discouraging them with this gesture. I’ve never done anything like this before. There’s never been a need for it. But now, there is. I’ve made it clear, and anything they try from here will be done with that information in mind. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor is also counting on the Lord of the Flies

Brigade. These people might end up badmouthing us to the emperor if we did something out of line.

“Anyone who comes up to talk to you now... You can assume that’s not what they’re after.”

“Th-thank you for being so considerate...”

“Not at all. It wasn’t exactly the nicest way of going about it.”

“No... But it’s true, after all.”

“True?”

Seras’s ears turned red, and she looked down at the floor.

“Ah—no, I meant... I think that I... I would in truth like to be *yours*, my master.”

Seras looked like she was turning into a boiled octopus. Her eyes were wide as saucers, and the set of her shoulders exuded an odd kind of tension.

“I don’t really like the idea of you *belonging* to anyone, like you’re a possession. But hey, if you think that much of me...maybe I am kind of happy to hear that.”

Seras’s eyes just grew wider and wider. Just when it looked like her mouth might soften into a smile, she pursed her lips as hard as she could. I took the opportunity to lean my face in closer to hers.

“Back when you went to evening parties in Neah...were you always with the princess?”

“Ah, yes... She was so attentive, and always came to rescue me.”

“I bet you could never let your guard down if all of those parties were as bad as this one.”

“With you by my side...I believe I will be able to make it through this evening.”

“If you don’t mind, I’ll stick with you then.”

“O-of course I do not mind—not at all.”

“I’ll stick with you Seras, but... I think right now you might be *sticking* to me a little too closely, don’t you think?”

“Ah! I-I’m so sor—!”

“C’mon, let’s go.”

With that, we entered the evening party hall. I started to sense the delicious scent of food as we got closer and saw a buffet spread out before us as we walked inside. There were extravagant dishes laid out upon each and every table, and one large table set up at the far side of the hall that looked to be for the guests of honor. As expected, Munin and the Wildly Beautiful Emperor were seated there. There was a stream of people walking up to talk to Munin, giving their introductory greetings. I guided Seras to a strategically located table so that we could keep our eyes on our friend.

...A bunch of them are still following us.

I looked over at Munin for a while, and eventually she noticed me.

“Are you okay over there?” she asked, with a gesture of her hand.

“We’re fine,” I silently replied.

Looks like the Wildly Beautiful Emperor is sitting beside her and helping out when needed. I should leave them to it.

“Sir Belzegea.”

As the crowd of onlookers circled, hesitating over whether to approach us or not, a single man strode leisurely through their midst.

“I am Chancellor Kaize Mira. I apologize for how long it has taken us to meet in person.”

The second son of the Mira brothers, second in line to be emperor... He’s just as beautiful as the other two are.

Kaize looked more masculine than the others, especially with his defined

eyebrows—and he looked intensely serious. His bountiful golden hair was a sharper, deeper shade of gold, and hung below his waist. There was nothing androgynous about him though—he looked more manly than his brothers did. He was tall, but still a little shorter than Luheit, and on the thin side.

To be fair, he's wearing a long robe. I guess I don't know what he's actually built like underneath.

“Hah hah,” Kaize gave a short chuckle, and looked around at those who were near our table. “Everyone seems interested in you, Lady Seras. I don't suppose I can blame them, given how you look in that dress. I'm used to seeing His Majesty every day, but even I was shocked when I first caught sight of you.”

He says that, but I don't get the impression Kaize is actually as smitten with Seras as everyone else is.

I looked over at the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, who noticed my gaze immediately. I gestured subtly to Kaize with my jaw, and the emperor nodded at me.

I see... So the Wildly Beautiful Emperor sent him over.

“I would also like to apologize for the lateness of my greeting, Lord Kaize. This is the first time we have had such an opportunity to sit and speak together.”

“Lord Kaize—you've raised me too high, Lord of the Flies.”

“I see—Sir Kaize, then.”

“Hmph. His majesty told me of your plans... Told me much else besides, too. Worry not. If His Majesty trusts you then I have no choice but to do the same. Nay, I *do* trust you.”

“It appears that His Majesty also trusts you incredibly deeply.”

“Well, yes. He's worthy of the support.”

We hadn't been seated, and so I casually offered Kaize a chair as we spoke. He refused it with a reserved gesture. I followed his gaze and noticed that he was looking at the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

He started to say something but stopped. Then he spoke again—as if he had resolved to say what he had come there to say.

“...Don’t betray us, Lord of the Flies.”

That doesn’t sound like a threat to me. More like the words of an older brother who’s worried about his younger sibling. It’s not a warning—it’s a request.

Kaize leaned in closer to me, closing the distance between us like he was about to tell me a secret.

“I think Zine likes you,” he said, returning his eyes to the emperor. “He has nobody who he can call a friend. He never has. There is no end to those who come seeking his friendship...but he’s *selective*, do you understand? I don’t know what his standards are, but he unconsciously screens them, as a form of self-defense. He’s an *emperor* through and through, to put it plainly.”

He mentioned that there were two people who do understand him.

“Might Sir Luheit and yourself not fill the role?” I asked.

“Brothers are brothers...not friends. You understand, don’t you?”

“I see... As for your other statement, please do not let it concern you. I am absolutely confident that I am worthy of His Majesty’s trust.”

Kaize flashed me a fearless smile and drew away.

“It seems you’ve realized it was His Majesty who sent me here. I wanted to speak with the emperor’s favorite on a personal level, though. For now, I can’t say I have a bad impression of you. But hey... As I said, if His Majesty trusts you, I’ve no choice but to do the same.”

I received the *truth* signal from Seras. *So everything Kaize has said so far has been the truth.*

“And yet...I’m just the first skirmish in your present war.” Kaize looked off across the hall.

“ ... ”

The crowd had split once more. Three people stood in the space that had opened up.

I think those three must be...

“The heads of the three princeps elector houses are over there. I think they want to talk to you too.” Kaize gestured toward them, telling me their names. “From the left—that’s the head of the House of Dias, Sir Hausen Dias.”

He was an old man, his gray hair elegantly swept behind his ears and tied up like a tail behind him. His clothes were mostly black and reminded me of a kind of military uniform. He was tall, and his back was straight—*too straight*. Given his looks, I could imagine that he must have been popular as a younger man.

“That is the head of the House of Ord, Madam Yoyo Ord.”

He indicated a woman of advanced age. Her white hair was cropped close, and she had deep wrinkles on her face and sharp eyes. She was thin and dignified—beautiful, even.

I bet she’s been beautiful since she was young.

What surprised me most was her fine posture, same as the head of the Dias house who stood beside her. ...No, it was actually her height that truly caught my attention.

She’s even taller than he is... She might even be taller than Luheit...

In any case, she was the tallest one present.

“Finally, that is the head of the House of Seat, Madam Linne Seat.”

Linne Seat appeared to be a middle-aged woman, in her forties or early fifties. She was a little plump and dressed the most ostentatiously of anyone in attendance at the party, with a floaty, wide-hemmed skirt. Her face suggested a strong will, and while there was white in her hair, it remained neat and somewhat glossy.

The head of House Dias—Hausen—approached me for a handshake.

“You must be the Lord of the Flies I have heard so much about, eh? Take care of His Majesty now, won’t you? I do beseech you.”

I shook his hand. The man was humble, but there was nothing frail about him. Next came the head of the House of Ord, looking down on me from above—Yoyo.

“To think you’d gain the trust of His Majesty without ever showing your face. But His Majesty ain’t some fool for con men to exploit. You’ve gotta be the real deal.”

“Ah! I cannot bear it any longer! Excuse me! Seras Ashrain!”

The head of the House of Seat closed in on us—but it wasn’t me she was after. I moved to put myself between Seras and the woman, but Kaize indicated to me with a look and a wave of his hand that I should hold back.

It’s okay, his eyes communicated.

“Y-yes? I apologize for my late introduction... I am Seras Ashrain, of the Lord of the Flies Bri—”

“Excuse me, but what *in the world* is that dress?!”

“Ehm... Ah, I borrowed this from His Majesty... If there is some issue with my attire, I can ch—”

“It just suits you *perfectly*, you know?!”

“E-excuse me...?”

“I’m the one who tailored it, after all! It was *moi*! Oh, it’s just *divine*! I don’t think anyone but you could pull it off! Wonderful! Oh... You’re miraculous! Outstanding! Making such full and fantastic use of my dress! How splendid!”

Linne smiled. Seras just seemed overwhelmed by the situation.

“So the dress that I borrowed was tailored by you, Madam Linne? It really is wonderfully made... It is an honor that I have been allowed to wear it.”

“Oh my! You’re such a wonderful person too, Seras Ashrain! I accept you into

our fold, Seras Ashrain! And so that means the House of Seat automatically accepts the lovely Lord of the Flies as well!”

“Th-thank you.”

“Ohoh! Nhah! All of you men! Out of the way now, you’re obstructing my view! I need nothing else in my line of sight! You’re spoiling the beautiful picture before me! Go further! You may look from afar! You are interfering with this artistic masterpiece! Are you listening?! The only men that may approach this table are His Majesty, Sir Kaize, and the lovely Lord of the Flies! Oh, and old Hausen too, I suppose... Oh, but you’re so beautiful, Seras Ashrain! Won’t you do a little pose for me? Like this, okay...? Ahah, simply sublime! Call the court painter immediately! I want them here at once!”

Kaize looked at me knowingly.

He was right. This Linne’s a powerful character...but Seras should be fine. It doesn’t seem like Linne means any harm.

“Hoh hoh hoh... Despite first impressions, she is the most capable leader the House of Seat has ever had, you know? She manages her family very well indeed,” said Hausen, stroking his gray beard with two fingers.

Yoyo snatched a nearby empty chair and drew it toward her.

“Linne’s a fan of tailoring clothes and crafting anything under the sun. She has the mind of an artist,” she said, sitting down, crossing her long legs and keeping her back perfectly straight. “She’s also a talented head of her house, as Hausen said... Y’can see the way she acts, but...you shouldn’t judge a book by its cover, eh?”

“Our lands have been mostly bequeathed to our successors at this point,” said Hausen cheerfully, laughing like a good-natured old man. “The fight against Ulza will be left to those who come after us. We old men and women usually spend most of our time relaxing in our mansions in the capital. We’re old—retired, you might say.”

Yoyo frowned in displeasure at that. “Hmph. You crafty old dog.”

“Oh hoh? What does an old vixen like you have to say about it?”

Yoyo tried to kick Hausen from where she was sitting, but he lightly stepped back and out of the way.

“The way you’re talkin’ is gross, you damned geezer.”

“Tch... And you’ll have that foul mouth of yours until your last breath, Yoyo.”

I had taken Hausen for an older gentleman, a refined butler type—but those preconceptions of him vanished in an instant.

“Those two are old childhood friends,” said Kaize, looking on warmly.

“I see. They cannot seem to get rid of each other, then,” I noted.

“That’s about the shape of it. While Sir Hausen is correct that many of their duties are customarily left to their successors, these three individuals continue to wield great influence as heads of their households. I believe His Majesty is comfortable fielding this attack against Alion precisely because the three of them are still alive and well,” added Kaize.

“They would be able to do something about the other lords, if complaints arose?” I asked.

“Such a situation has already presented itself. Of course, it was the influence of His Majesty that brought the country together—but the heads of the three elector houses strengthen the ground on which he stands.”

“Right then, Lord of the Flies...” said Yoyo, looking over at me. “I have heard much of you from His Majesty. He knows of your identity and your goals, and that’s why he’s chosen to trust you. Fine. No complaints from us. The three princeps elector houses support you. Let us know if there’s anything you need, and we’ll make it happen.”

“Mmhm, use us old folks however you need to,” picked up Hausen, whose tone had gotten much more informal since his introduction.

“I see. Understood.” I agreed.

Hausen and Yoyo inclined their heads. I looked at the head of the House of Seat, who was still fussing over Seras, then looked back to the other old household leaders.

“Now that I have met you all—the three heads of the princeps elector houses—I feel I have an understanding of why His Majesty made his decision to launch this anti-Goddess war.”

“Ohoh?” mused Yoyo, raising her chin and encouraging me to continue.

“The Empire of Mira does not rest solely on the shoulders of its young emperor. I had heard that this empire was filled with talented individuals, but now I see... You are all extraordinary in your own right. I believe the Sacred Alliance might even have a chance of defeating us if you all chose to join them.”

“Doesn’t appear to be flattery. You have passed the test,” said Hausen. “But the three princeps elector houses don’t provide the emperor with unconditional support. We’ve withdrawn support from former emperors when we judged them unfit to bear Mira’s legacy. They might rise to inherit the throne—but still, we reject them. We’d even abandon Mira itself if we judged the empire to be beyond saving.”

“Historically, emperors have striven for perfection to keep that from happening,” continued Yoyo. “Of course, we in the three princeps elector houses support them in their quest for perfection... But if we judge that they’re rotten, that’s the end of that.”

“We keep up our education efforts, of course, raising our own standards as much as we can. Families with influence can go corrupt real quick... It can be exceedingly difficult to maintain a certain level of decency over such a long period of time, see?”

“You are the pillars of the empire—and so if your families are overtaken by corruption, the empire will follow,” I said.

Yoyo spread her knees, placed an elbow on each, and raised the corners of her mouth in a grin.

“Hmhm. That’s exactly right, Lord of the Flies.”

If judiciaries and the third-party entities turn corrupt, a state or organization can’t continue to function in good health. All it can do is rot and die. That’s why the three princeps elector houses are needed—they’re always putting in the work, tirelessly trying to keep standards high.

“Ah—I get it now. The way you choose your words, your *quickness*... No wonder His Majesty likes you.”

I responded humbly to the compliment, then spoke once more.

“I am very grateful that the emperor has taken a liking to me, and that he trusts me. However—and I understand it might be strange for me to ask this—but do you not think me at all suspicious?”

“Oh? Well, of course, yeah,” answered Yoyo immediately. “But even if you are a bit odd, we’re at war. And we’ve got to use whatever we can get our hands on. This isn’t a fight we’ll win head-on, with straight up tactics and fair play—we’re going to need poison too.”

“It’s the honest ones with the cleanest hands that leave themselves open to the low blows, after all. Just like Yoyo here.”

“Huh! I can’t believe I’m hearing this from an old man whose defense of the imperial capital was to let the enemy penetrate our walls!”

Kaize stepped between the two of them, and began lightly mediating the conversation.

“Now, now, Madam Yoyo... There was a limit to what could have been done, given the numbers that assaulted the capital and the forces that remained in the city’s defense. Sir Hausen even took direct command of our forces during the battle, and I believe his leadership is precisely what limited our casualties...”

“Don’t inflate the old man’s ego, chancellor.”

“Hey, Yoyo, remind me. Wasn’t it your House of Ord soldiers that let Zera’s bones reach the throne room?”

“If I’d been in the capital, I’d have crushed that monstrous Banished Emperor in a second!”

Kaize leaned over to whisper to me.

“Madam Yoyo’s forces, those of the House of Ord, were stationed outside of the castle walls. She ventured to the northwest of the capital into Ord domain to gather her reinforcements, should the situation in the city worsen.”

The two of them traded insults, but eventually...

“Hmph... You’ve aged, but it’s true your skills with the sword haven’t dulled, Yoyo.”

“Tch... You’re as fierce a commander as ever, even in your later years.”

Their words were harsh, but I could see the respect they held for each other shining through. Judging by the reactions of everyone else around us, this interaction was nothing out of the ordinary.

I bet this is just what they’re always like.

Yoyo turned from Hausen to face me instead.

“So... Mysterious group of cursed magic users or not, if His Majesty accepts you then there’s nothing more we have to say on the matter. Today’s event is not to appease us, it’s probably a goodwill party to earn favor from some lily-livered noble from who-knows-where. Hmph. Keep up the good work.”

“But actually, getting to speak with you like this, personally...” started Hausen, shoving his hands into his pockets and looking off across the hall.

I’d noticed them, too. Another group had just entered.

“...I’m starting to feel like it might be more dangerous having *that* one on our side. There’s a lot I can’t grasp ’bout the way her mind works, in a whole different way from the situation with you, Lord of the Flies. His majesty says

that he trusts her, but...I can't help but think the emperor ain't as fond of her as he is of you."

I followed Hausen's gaze until I found the person he was looking at.

"Uhyooh?! Jeez, this is one heck of a fancy spread! Wouldja look at all this, Atsuko?! Everyone, everyone! It's fightin' time, get stuck in—! Nh, all right, then! Let's restore our energy, then, eh?"

It was Ikusaba Asagi and her group of heroes.

After that, I went and had a conversation with the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, making sure to show our closeness to everyone present just as we'd planned. The evening party was, after all, for that explicit purpose.

"It seems that His Majesty has put a good deal of trust in the Lord of the Flies," I heard someone faintly whisper as I walked the hall and saw as much in the expressions of those I met. I'd made a few quiet requests of the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, then left my seat. I then went to stand against the wall, making it obvious that I wished to be alone.

"..."

Seems that the aura I'm giving out that says, "Don't talk to me," is doing its job.

Seras was at the same table as Munin, as ordered. I had asked the Wildly Beautiful Emperor to allow Munin to change seats and seat them with the heads of the three princeps elector houses. Kaize sat at the same table as well.

"Leave the two of them to me," he had said. *"Oh... And do not fear. My heart belongs to another—famously enough that I am wholeheartedly teased for it. I also have no intent on making a lord of cursed magic my enemy."*

Seras's lie detector had indicated that he was telling the truth.

...Probably fine to leave this situation to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor and Kaize, then, I suppose.

“Is there something you require from me?” I asked.

I had been making myself as unapproachable as possible, but someone approached me nonetheless, with a determined look on their face.

I’m standing against the wall, so I suppose she was waiting for a moment like this. I didn’t need to go to her—she came to me.

“A-ahem... I’d like to speak with you for a moment... Would that be okay?”

Kashima.

She’s looking.

Asagi’s looking over at us.

“S-Sogou-san...!” said Kashima, plucking up all the courage she had and raising her voice. “...Lady Ayaka Sogou? Ah, you plan on convincing her to join us? I heard His Majesty speak of it.”

“In the last big battle... At the White Citadel of Protection. You met with Sogou-san, didn’t you?!”

“Yes.”

Kashima bit her trembling lip. “I’d like you to tell me...tell me about Sogou-san. I want to know if she was okay, and how she looked... I know it was some time ago, but still. I haven’t seen her in such a long time. I’ll take whatever I can get!”

From the expression on Ikusaba Asagi’s face, I could tell what she thought of Kashima’s request.

“Oh... So that’s what she’s doing,” was written all over her face.

Asagi seemed to then lose all interest in what Kashima was doing, returning to her group.

It does seem a little like Kashima just effortlessly found an excuse to come up and talk to the Lord of the Flies. Was she raising her voice just now to make sure Asagi heard her? Is she doing this because she knows that I’m Mimori

Touka, perhaps?

I don't know—not right now.

I looked toward the door to the hall.

“This place is a little too loud.”

“Hm? Ah, yes... Maybe it is... But I...”

“You aren’t all that good with crowds yourself... Isn’t that so? I remember what happened during our negotiations with the Country at the End of the World.”

“I-I’m sorry about that...”

To be honest, she doesn’t look all that great right now, either.

“Please wait a moment.”

I walked up to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, exchanged a few words with him, then returned to Kashima.

“I have received permission from His Majesty. Let us change venues, and perhaps get some rest while we’re at it.”

“Ah—o-okay...”

I walked from the hall, taking Kashima with me. Asagi glanced over at us once as we left but didn’t appear suspicious.

Probably because Kashima wasn’t lying. She does actually want to know about Sogou Ayaka. Everything she told me was the truth. That must’ve been what convinced Asagi. I had time to call Seras to my side and use her lie-detecting ability...but that would have changed the way Asagi perceived our interaction.

...To be honest, I still don’t know what her angle is. Does Kashima Kobato really just want to ask me about Sogou, or...

“Right, we’ll use this room.”

Kashima and I went inside.

The private chamber was close to the hall. I'd asked the Wildly Beautiful Emperor ahead of time if we could use it.

Apparently, it's used during these evening parties for guests to relax and have a few moments of quiet.

The room was designed for use by nobility, and so it was far from plain. The interior was extravagant, but not overly so. Perhaps because of its function as a space to relax, it was decorated in calming colors.

I offered Kashima a seat, and she sat down nervously, restlessly fidgeting in her chair.

While I wasn't directly facing her, I sat across from her on a chaise longue. There was at least a meter of distance between us.

We shouldn't have been followed... And I don't sense anyone outside the door.

"You wanted to speak about Ayaka Sogou, then?" I asked.

Kashima flinched and snapped her head up to attention. "Y-yes... I heard that the Battle for the White Citadel was on such a grand scale. I know that we were pushed back, and almost lost... But you were the one who came and saved us. That's why we won that day."

Kashima neatly lined up her knees, straightened her back, and bowed to me.

"Thank you so much! For saving Sogou-san... For saving everyone!"

"I visited that battlefield on the wishes of Seras Ashrain, to save Princess Cattlea. I am, however, pleased that my actions also succeeded in rescuing the Heroes from Another World from danger."

"...Ahem."

"Yes?"

"Sogou-san... How was she?"

"Once the battle was done, she came to thank me directly—upright individual

that she was—and...”

I went on to explain how she had looked and behaved—from the point of view of the Lord of the Flies, Belzegea, of course.

“I see... So that’s what happened then.”

“She seeks to protect *all* of her classmates with her own strength. And wishes to become stronger than any other—I felt the strength of her will when I heard her speak those words. I see she has grown to be so powerful a hero that she can even force the Demon King to retreat from her.”

“...Yes, I heard of her battle against him too, and all about the ambush on Alion. That Kirihara-kun betrayed us... And that Hijiri-san and her sister betrayed the Goddess and are missing now...”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor told me that I could share that information with her, but it seems like Asagi’s group already knows.

Kashima covered her face with both hands, like she was sinking into despair.

“Hijiri-san... Itsuki-san... I hope they’re still safe...”

I could tell that she was really worried about the two sisters.

Kashima Kobato and the Takao Sisters... They shared no connection back in the old world. But come to think of it, wasn’t Kashima with the Takao Sisters back when they encountered Eve in the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters?

Eve said the sisters were looking for a girl named Kashima. They might have gotten closer since coming to this world. Their relationships have changed too—in a way, everything has.

“The betrayal of those elite heroes... Well, no. It’s possible that the Goddess was the one who took the first step in betraying them. I cannot think that the Heroes from Another World would defy the Goddess so lightly.”

“Actually...” Kashima let slip, “Asagi-san said once, that...she thinks maybe the Goddess has no intention of sending us back to our old world.”

I've heard all about that from Asagi herself—we talked about it in the cafeteria.

“With everything that has happened... I think Asagi-san might be right. Maybe Kiri-hara-kun realized it too, and that's why he sided with the Demon King. And Hijiri-san and her sister also found out...”

“So, the Wildly Beautiful Emperor knows a method of sending you back to your old world without the Goddess's assistance. And you wish to make contact with Ayaka Sogou in order to communicate—” I stopped myself and reworded my thoughts. “To convince her of that fact and win her over. You are the one who has volunteered for the role, I take it?”

“I would like to think that I can convince her,” said Kashima.

Yasu would have been able to take on the task as well. He was almost killed on the Goddess's orders. I'll bet that hearing the story from Yasu himself would shake Sogou's trust in her. It's just that Yasu's currently on a journey to sort out his own feelings about...everything. I don't know where he is, and there's no guarantee he'll just pop up for a meeting with Sogou at a convenient time.

Sogou might also be wary of Yasu, given how radically his personality has flipped. Back when I last saw him, he still looked a little unstable, and it's not like he and Sogou have known each other long enough to build up a relationship of mutual trust or anything... It's unclear how much Sogou would believe him, even if she did get to meet him.

When you're trying to convince someone of something, and your target has even minor doubts, you need to bring decisive proof to the table to win them over. It's best to send someone they can trust and believe without any proof, of course. Given that...Sogou might believe Kashima Kobato, since they've always had a good relationship.

“You like Miss Ayaka, don't you, Miss Kobato?”

“Huh?”

“I can tell by the way you look when you speak of her, and the shift in your tone of voice.”

“Eh, ah...ahem. I like her, yes, but...I mean, Sogou-san, she...she has everything. I look up to her, and...most of all, she’s so kind.” Kashima placed both hands upon her chest. “Sogou-san is kind, yes... She really is. I’ve never known anyone like her before... Someone so warm and reliable.”

I could see in Kashima’s face how much she meant those words. *I’d go so far as to say she’s fallen for Sogou.*

“Even if we are able to defeat the Goddess with our own strength, we will require hers in order to defeat the Demon King, I am sure. I do not think it an overstatement to say that convincing her to join us will be the key to this battle to come. Those are my thoughts, and those of His Majesty as well.”



“Yes... I will convince her, no matter what... I *will*!”

“If there is anything at all I can assist you with, please do not hesitate to ask.”

“Ah... J-just getting to hear about Sogou-san from you... You’ve been of more than enough help. Ah, excuse me, but...”

“Yes?”

“You’re Mimori-kun, aren’t you?”

Chapter 3: Shifting Ground

“M_{IMORI-KUN?} Is that a person’s name...?”

Kashima’s voice had been trembling for some time, although I had thought her nervousness was a result of our meeting—of being alone with the Lord of the Flies. She was looking up at me, above my head, as if confirming something to be true. Her gaze then dropped, and she looked me in the eyes.

The way she’s looking at me... It’s not like she’s trying to figure out who I am. It’s almost as if she’s sure it’s me.

Kashima wasn’t hyperventilating, but her breathing was short and shallow.

I waited for her to continue, and once she had calmed herself somewhat, she looked down.

“There’s no way it should be up there,” she said.

There was a moment of silence, as if she was waiting for the right time to speak again.

“The people of this world... They don’t have stats.”

Stats should only be visible to individual heroes and to the Goddess. I’m not displaying mine right now and my stat window isn’t open—but can Kashima see it? It must be some kind of unique skill she has. That’s the only possibility I can think of.

Kashima’s shaking fingertips traced through the air, as if interacting with an invisible smartphone. She looked like she might burst into tears at any moment. Eventually she spoke.

“Too-ka Mimori—.”

She called me by my name, then proceeded to read out my stats—my level,

the numbers, the status effect skills I had, and even their respective skill levels.

This can't be a wild guess. I'm the only one who knows those details—not even Seras knows all of them. Kashima Kobato can see the stats of others—that must be what her unique skill does.

Her expression faltered, twisted up, and tears formed in her eyes.

She repeated the question. “You’re... Mimori-kun... Aren’t you?”

...I can't do it.

I can't talk my way out of this one.

I took the voice change crystal from my mask and lowered my voice.

“You’ve found yourself on a battlefield in this world...but you’re as timid as you’ve ever been, huh? Kashima.”

“Mi-mori-kun—y-you’re...alive...!”

As if some dam had burst inside of her, for a time, all Kashima did was sob.

Once her crying finally subsided, she sniffled, then began to speak once more.

“I-I’m sorry. I don’t know if I’m more happy, relieved, or surprised... I feel just all over the place right now.” She wiped away her tears with the base of her palms. “You... You are Mimori-kun, right?”

She asked me the question a third time, like she would never stop confirming my answer.

“You have some kind of ability that tells you that, Kashima? Yeah... It’s me.”

Kashima’s tears overflowed, and her expression crumpled once again.

“...It’s really you, Mimori-kun.”

I went over to sit beside her, so that we could keep our voices low as we spoke. After another bout of sobbing, Kashima apologized to me once more.

“I...I’m sorry, okay? The whole time we were talking just now, it was constantly on my mind how I needed to just come out and ask you, but...I went

with the flow and kept talking instead...”

Seems like she’s calmed down enough to have a normal conversation now.

Kashima took a deep breath, then went on.

“I’m sorry... I still haven’t processed it yet really... *Hah...*”

“Back during the negotiations with the Country at the End of the World—did you know back then, too?” I asked.

“Ah, yeah. Actually...”

Kashima came straight out and told me what her unique skill was, and how it could be used effectively to support Asagi’s skill and the other heroes in her group.

“That sounds difficult to use in direct combat, but it’s an interesting ability.”

“Ahem, well...”

Kashima went on to tell me about the moment that she realized that it was me under the Lord of the Flies mask. It had only been by coincidence that she had caught sight of the stat display above my head. She’d forgotten to turn off her unique skill, apparently.

“At first, I just thought I was seeing things. I thought that maybe some people in this world might have stats too, or... That you might be descended from heroic blood.”

But I wasn’t.

Kashima’s unique skill let her see the stats of other heroes. She could use her fingers to display stat windows, and expand them—though, apparently, it depended on how far she was from her target.

Meaning she can’t display the stats of someone who’s too far away—and she can only display them in a small window.

“Right... I guess I had no way of blocking you. There was no point in all that acting.”

“So you’re alive then. But... You were sent to the Ruins of Disposal, Mimori-kun... The Goddess said you had no hope of survival...”

“I was desperate... I did everything I could to escape.”

“They say you can do cursed magic... So you used your unique skills to get out of there?”

“Yeah.”

“I-I see...”

“I’ve been through a whole lot after my escape, but that story would take too long to tell.”

“Yes... I suppose you’re right.” Kashima gave me a wry smile, then fell silent for a few seconds. “I-I’m sorry.”

“?”

“R-right before you were sent down to the Ruins of Disposal, Mimori-kun... I was so scared. In that corner of that room, with the rest of our classmates who were too terrified to move, I just stood there and shook. I could hear you... I heard you, but I—”

Her voice was filled with regret—as if she were confessing to some crime. Kashima pushed her forehead into her knotted hands and started crying again.

“I wasn’t brave enough, like Sogou-san was... I was so terrified! All I could think of was myself! I’m sorry—I-I’m sorry!”

“What, that’s it?”

Kashima raised her head to look up at me.

“...Huh?”

“You couldn’t have done anything to help me. Course you couldn’t. I think Sogou’s amazing...but no normal person would ever defy Vicius to try to protect me in that situation.”

“B-but...”

“Don’t let it bother you, Kashima. It’s just...” I put the brakes on my thoughts for a moment.

Am I really doing this—am I going to try to use her, even now?

“If you think you’ve done something wrong... I would kind of appreciate it if you would help me out a bit.”

Even I could tell that I sounded awkward, for once. Off my game.

“O-okay... I don’t know if I can make it up to you...b-but if there’s anything you need help with... P-please, just say the word!”

“Then first up, would you mind lowering your voice?”

“...Ah.”

“You never know who might be listening, after all.”

“...I-I’m sorry.”

I don’t sense anyone outside the door, but still.

“First I want you to keep up the pretense that you don’t know who I really am.”

“O-okay... There’s a good reason, ehm...that you’re hiding your identity, right?”

“Yeah, there is.”

“...Ah, Mimori-kun... The people of the Country at the End of the World looked after you. Then you got angry when the Goddess sent soldiers to attack them...and you joined up with the Wildly Beautiful Emperor to make sure that doesn’t ever happen again. That’s why you’re trying to defeat the Goddess, isn’t it?”

“I’m going to crush Vicius. That’s all.”

“...I-I see. Right.”

Seems like she’s accepted that answer—but what she’s really thinking right

now, I don't know. Kashima's reactions can be surprisingly hard to read sometimes.

She gave a wry laugh and lowered her eyebrows.

“Th-this is kind of weird... You're alive, Mimori-kun... I'm here talking to you. I was sure there was so much I wanted to say, but...it's like all of the sudden *poof*, my mind's gone blank. I don't know what to say. Hah hah. Just like Pidgey to forget things...” her smile deepened. “Ehm, so is there anything else you need my help with? I don't really know if keeping your identity a secret really qualifies as helping much...”

“Then will you tell me all about Asagi's unique skill?”

“Asagi-san's skill? ...Sure, okay.”

“Are you sure you don't mind? I mean, you are a part of Asagi's group after all.”

“It's okay. I mean, I can only tell you what I know anyway, but...”

So she doesn't feel like this is a betrayal—I'm sensing that she's open to this.

“Well first up, Asagi-san acquired this unique skill, and then...”

She explained that Asagi's unique skill had evolved. She wasn't only capable of buffing large numbers of targets, as Sogou had told me, but could now add debuffs to single targets too.

“So she's got the ability to make a target's stats the same as her own,” I noted, once Kashima had explained it.

I see. So that's the skill she used to defeat Banished Emperor What's-his-name. The range on her skill is the main issue, though—it's much shorter than Paralyze and the range of forbidden magic. It requires her to get in pretty close.

Kashima also explained their battle with the Banished Emperor.

“...And that's how we defeated the old man who called himself the Banished Emperor.”

“...”

The way Asagi won that fight... That was way too much of a gamble on her part, wasn't it? It's difficult to understand for people who value their own lives. It's possible that the Banished Emperor could have just killed her the instant he got close enough. This is Asagi we're talking about, so she must have considered that possibility. Was she really prepared to die if the worst-case scenario happened? If that's true—then something's broken inside her... Her normal sense of the world. She's cut her own brakes.

“No weakling would ever approach me so casually,” the Banished Emperor must have thought...and it was exactly that miscalculation that led to his defeat. Anyway...

“Thanks, Kashima. You telling me all that really helps me out.”

“N-not at all! It's fine! I mean, we're allies... And I'm trying to make amends with you, Mimori-kun, so this is partly for me too...right? Hah hah...”

Allies, huh.

“Are you going to stay by Asagi's side, Kashima?”

“...Yeah.”

“What do you think of her? Can you trust her?”

“Eh? Y-yeah... I think I can trust her now.”

Kashima proceeded to tell me about their fighting in Yonato, and how they had come to betray the Goddess—how the Wildly Beautiful Emperor had invited them to join Mira, and Asagi had accepted.

But there was one thing that Asagi said back then that had always bothered Kashima a little, she explained.

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

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

“But really, Asagi-san’s the reason that none of us got badly hurt when we were fighting in Yonato. I feel like we’re kind of heading in the right direction to get back to our old world. That’s why everyone trusts her, and why I do too.” After a moment’s hesitation, Kashima went on. “I think... I think I can trust her right now.”

...Betting on the winning horse, huh? Meaning there’s no guarantee she won’t betray us at the last minute. If we aren’t the winning horse, she could just go right back to the Goddess’s side.

“Ah, look?” Kashima cut off my train of thought, taking a confiding tone. “When we were only just summoned here, Asagi-san... She was kind of mean to me, I think. I felt, for a while after that, she was irritated with me about something... She was being cheerful and happy, but I felt that there was something dark underneath.”

Kashima seemed to be searching her memory.

“But I feel like she’s been gradually changing... That’s the impression I get. I might just be imagining things though.”

“You’ve probably gotten closer to her after the time you’ve spent together, eh?”

“You might be right. It’s just... I’d feel uncomfortable calling her a friend. I wonder why. It still seems like she’s irritated with me...but she’s gotten nicer than she used to be. Also, I don’t really get why...but it seems like I’m the only one she really confides in.”

“She only talks to you? She doesn’t behave in a similar way around anyone else?”

“Yeah, I think it’s just me—ah, but I suppose that’s just what I’m seeing of the situation, you know? It’s just, ehm...sometimes she’ll say one thing to everyone else, then the complete opposite to me. It’s like she’s letting me in on her

secrets, telling me what she really means... Hah hah. I guess Asagi-san seems to think I'm a hopeless idiot, so...maybe she thinks it doesn't matter all that much if she tells me her secrets? That's my guess, anyway."

Kashima laughed, looking a little embarrassed, but also self-deprecating.

This squares with my impression of the situation...but I do think it's possible Asagi has some unique feelings for Kashima.

Kashima brought her hands together, trying to change the topic.

"A-anyway, so ehm...so long as I'm careful...I don't think she'll notice that I know that you're really Mimori-kun. I mean, to Asagi-san I'm still just her *slow, stupid little Pidgey-chan* after all..."

"...I don't actually think you're stupid though."

"Huh? Y-you don't...?"

"I mean... You were talking loud enough for Asagi to hear when you approached me to ask about Sogou, right? That was good work. It came off as natural, and it was a good way to get yourself an audience with the Lord of the Flies."

"Heh heh...really? Hah hah... I'm kind of happy for the compliment, I suppose."

Anyway, Kashima's behavior might change now that she knows my true identity—and knowing Asagi, she might notice that. That realization might somehow lead her to discovering who I really am. No, it's possible she already has her suspicions. I should keep that in mind, just like I do with Vicius.

Right then. Look at the time.

"Mimori-kun... Ahem."

"Hm?"

"Do you remember? Ah... The little kitten we picked up together..."

"Yeah... You ended up taking it in, right Kashima? Thanks."

“Huh? Y-you knew?”

“I was wondering what would happen to it, so I went to ask the vet and they told me. Now that I think about it...that vet was being really accommodating with us, weren't they? Pretty sloppy with the rules, though, depending on how you look at it.”

“R-right... W-well, ehm, you see... I'd been meaning to talk to you about it. There was...one time you came up to me at school to talk to me, do you remember? Back then, I couldn't say it...I'm sorry. I just couldn't say a word... I was so scared of talking to boys back then... It was you, but still, I...I...I've always regretted not being able to talk to you.”

Kashima looked on the verge of tears again.

But well...I kind of knew that already. I'd been trying to talk to her about the stray cat we'd rescued the day before, I think. But then I thought better of it and decided not to. It would only draw attention to me. I could just imagine it—a girl who almost no one talked to, being approached by a boy. A sure-fire way for a background character to stand out.

I'm a background character. I don't need to exist within the class. I prefer to disappear, unnoticed and unremarked. That's the easiest way to deceive them—to even deceive myself. That's why I decided to stop trying to talk to Kashima.

“It's okay. It didn't bother me.”

“But...you came over to talk to me, and I just stood there in silence... It was awful, right? I'm sorry, Mimori-kun...”

“Well it was a bit embarrassing for me, yeah. I mean, I might've gotten teased for talking to one of the girls in class if someone saw me, right? By Oyamada, guys like that.”

“Y-you might be right...”

That reason's going to be easier for Kashima to accept, I guess.

“Anyway... You've apologized, so let's leave it at that, Kashima.”

“...Mimori-kun.” Kashima, on the verge of tears once more, smiled at me.

I’m keeping Oyamada’s death a secret from Asagi’s group for now. I’ve asked the Wildly Beautiful Emperor to suppress that intel, so only a very limited number of people know that a hero died in the assault on the imperial capital.

I had a brief chat with Kashima about my future plans. Well, it was mostly just me one-sidedly giving her information.

“About your plan to convince Sogou to join us... You’re really going through with it?” I asked.

“Yes, I am. And Mimori-kun, about what we talked about...”

“If it comes to that, I leave the decision in your hands.”

“...Right. Okay.”

I stood up.

Need to get going soon.

Kashima got up as well and smoothed down her skirt with her hands.

“Heh heh, I know you’re being really careful right now so you probably can’t... but I was thinking I might—ahem, want to meet *you*, the real Mimori-kun, face-to-face once all of this is over.”

“Sure. Someday.”

I glanced down at my pocket watch.

“We shouldn’t stay in here for too long, or Asagi might catch on to who I really am. We’ll be moving independently from now on I guess, but let’s help each other out whenever we can. I want our groups to stay separate, but moving toward the same goal—are you good with that?”

Kashima’s expression stiffened.

“Understood.”

“I’ll leave first.”

“Okay.”

I slipped my voice change crystal back into my mask.

“See you, Kashima.”

“...Right!”

When I returned to the hall, Ikusaba Asagi approached me before I’d even gotten inside.

“Pretty long chat you just had with my Pidgey-chan jus’ now, eh, Lord of the Flies-chin?”

“Once I explained Miss Ayaka Sogou’s condition to her, Miss Kobato began to speak of her feelings for her, and...she was very emotional for much of what she had to say.”

“What, she stopped to wail at you every few seconds then?”

I gave her a knowing grin from under my mask.

“Yes. I did most of the listening. She really does appear to have a great fondness for Miss Ayaka.”

“Yeah, there’s that. She’s head over heels crazy about the girl. Kobacchan never was all that great with guys in the first place.”

“She appeared very worried about Miss Ayaka. I believe it must have been on her mind for quite some time. It seemed as if everything she had kept bottled up came pouring out.”

I’ve run all this past Kashima already—we’ve both got our stories straight.

“Maybe you’re easy to talk to, eh Lord of the Flies-chin? ...You aimin’ to be the castle counselor or somethin’? Heh heh heh. Seems like you and Zine-chin are gettin’ on like a house on fire too, eh?”

“His majesty is a person I can respect, and I have a fondness for him too, yes.”

“Uhuh... What, so now you got the most beautiful guy *and* the most beautiful girl in the world on either arm, hey? Is this some roundabout way of flexing on everyone?”

“Heh heh. You are an enjoyable hero to converse with, Miss Asagi.”

“Eh? You ain’t tryna rizz me up too, are you? Ah, hey, Kobacchan.”

Asagi’s eyes jumped from me to the hallway behind me, as Kashima walked back into the hall a little after me, just as we’d agreed.

“Ah... Lord of the Flies. Ahem...I’m so sorry for my lack of composure just now... I apologize that you had to see that.”

“Have you had time to calm down?”

“Y-yes...”

It was then that Asagi jumped in.

“You ask about Ayaka?”

“Yeah... But, well...I feel like I might have just talked and talked about my own feelings Sogou-san? Ahah hah...”

“Only idiots unconsciously abandon rational thought and let their uncontrolled emotions take the wheel. Man, it pisses me off,” said Asagi.

“Huh?”

“N-n-nothin’! I was just thinking, you really are a big dummy, Pidgey-chan! I love ya! C’mon, let’s get going!”

With that and a “*see ya*,” Asagi lightly walked back into the center of the hall, and I went back to sit with Seras and the others.

Once the evening party was done, we all returned to the guest house.

Seras and I went to check on Slei before walking inside to sit in one of the first-floor rooms, which we were treating a bit like our living room. There was

another small room next door for getting changed.

Munin was feeding Erika's familiar. I'd suggested at first that we take turns, but Munin had requested the chore for herself.

"This is the care of Mistress Anael's familiar we are talking about here. If you two wouldn't mind, I would like to be the one responsible... Please? Can I be the one to do it?"

The task was an honor to Munin, so I left it to her.

"Squee—! Squh~! ♪"

I'd brought some food from the party back to the house and left it with Piggymaru and Slei.

"Pakyu~h ♪! Pakyo~oh ♪!"

It sounded like the two of them were happily eating outside.

Setting aside the issue of whether what Piggymaru is doing really qualifies as eating...those two have quite a bit of variation in the sounds they make, huh.

"Tired?" I asked. Seras gave me a wry smile.

"Yes, a little... But everyone I sat with was very considerate in their conversation, so I was made quite comfortable. I was grateful for their company."

Seras needed to change after the party, so I helped her—the dress was difficult to get out of on her own, apparently. A maid had accompanied the Miran messenger before the ceremony, but she was no longer there to assist.

"Would you mind undoing that part there?"

"Right here?"

I untied the knot on the back of the dress, and watched the tight fabric relax, and hang a little looser.

"Thank you. I can do the rest myself...though I believe it might take me some time."

With that, Seras disappeared into the small room adjacent to the living room. Before long Munin returned, full of smiles.

“Now the ceremony’s finally over! I’ve finished feeding Mistress Anael’s familiar!”

“You did a lot today, Munin. It must’ve been hard, right?”

“Heh heh, I knew this task would be difficult when I accepted it! But if you asked me to do that *every* day, even I might keel over at some point.”

“You really behaved like the clan chief up there—a proper representative for the king.”

“Oh, my. ♪ You’re quite skilled at flattery, master... Oof... Oh, there we go.” Munin sat on the sofa, smoothing down the hems of her skirt and taking off the jacket that Mira had lent her. “Well, the emperor and his retainers were very organized, and terribly considerate, so I think that made everything go quite smoothly on my end too. They’re all so young, but already such wonderful individuals—why don’t you take that off, master?”

The room’s shutters were all closed.

“Sure.” I took off my mask. “Phew... I’m used to this thing, but it’s way easier when I’m not wearing it.”

“I’m sure stripping off all your clothes and getting into a hot bath will relax you even more. I’ll be taking one later.” Munin stretched out her back, puffing out her chest—then froze. “...Would you care to join me, master?”

“You know I’m going to say no, what’s the point in asking?”

“Heh heh, I suppose you’re right...” Munin lay draped over the backrest of the sofa, giggling as she gazed over at me playfully. “But... You have taken baths with Miss Seras before, haven’t you?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Ohh—that’s a boring answer.” Munin sighed, and looked down. Her expression had changed—she looked much more serious now. “Now I’m

finished with that responsibility...the next is that sealed room of forbidden magic. Then finally on to the Goddess Vicius, for..."

"...Our showdown. Yep," I said, finishing her sentence.

"Yes. Then I can finally put an end to the relationship between the Goddess and the Kurosaga."

"I'm counting on you, Munin."

"You may do so." There was an unshakable determination in her eyes as the clan chief of the Kurosaga nodded at me. "I will see this through."

It was half past ten at night, as I lay on top of my bed flipping through the pages of my *Forbidden Arts: The Complete Works*.

"Piggymaru's final round of enhancement... Seems like there'll be a lot more I can do in battle once that's taken care of."

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in, it's open."

"Excuse the intrusion, master. ♪"

Seras and Munin walked through the doorway, both fresh from the bath. They looked as if the steam had gone to their heads a little, and their cheeks were flushed. Both had some drops of water left in their hair, still a little damp.

"There's something we're here to ask you about actually, Sir Too-ka."

Munin made her proposal.

"A thank-you party? For me?"

"Yes," replied Munin, bringing her hands together and grinning at me. "Miss Seras and I were talking in the bath, and we got onto the topic of how little you reward yourself for all your hard work, you see? And well, we decided that the two of us should buckle down and assist you."

I sat up in bed and put my book to the side.

“But aren’t you two way more tired than I am right now? I mean, I bet it took a lot to get through that signing ceremony, Munin. And that evening party must’ve worn you out too, right, Seras?”

“Heh heh, today was my busiest day, you see...? There’s no need to worry about me. ♪”

“Actually, ahem...” began Seras. “I have been thinking for quite some time that you should reward yourself a little more for your work, Sir Too-ka. It’s not as if I can think of anything especially that I might be capable of doing to reward you...”

Munin raised her index finger. “Why don’t the two of us embrace you as you sleep, Too-ka-san?”

“E-embrace Sir Too-ka as he sleeps?! No Lady Munin, that really isn’t quite the idea I was—.”

“I was joking, heh heh. I mean, you two already do far more than just embracing, don’t you?”

“F-far more...” Seras looked down and shrank into herself. Her face was red—and it wasn’t just from her recent bath.

...Seras is getting played like a fiddle right now. What happened to the serious Kurosaga clan chief I met downstairs after the party? The one with the determination to see this through? She really can flip in an instant, huh?

I sighed.

“All right... I’ll let you reward me. No sleeping in your arms though.”

“Well, then, here you are, Too-ka-san.”

Munin stood beside me and poured some tona water into my silver cup. We were all gathered in the guest house’s dining room. Munin had rushed to move

the furniture around, chairs and tables pushed about to make the place look ready for a little house party. She had even moved the sofa in from the next room—apparently, Slei and Piggymaru had helped with that. The two of them were sitting in a corner of the dining room, playing happily with each other.

“Now, then, master. Have a drink, won’t you?”

“...Sure.”

I drained the glass of tonoa water.

“How is it? To your liking?”

“...Yeah. I like tonoa water.”

“Th-then Sir Too-ka... Try some of this alama water too.”

Seras sat on my right and poured some alama water into my silver cup.

“This takes me back... I don’t think I’ve had alama water since that inn in Mils.”

“Alama water is only drunk in certain areas and isn’t common across the whole continent. The fragrant alama herbs used in making it can only be found in certain regions, you see. It tastes similar to tonoa water, which is made from the tonoa herb and is more popular. It is more commonly drunk in a number of different countries,” said Seras, teaching me some general knowledge about her world.

“So Mira has alama herbs shipped in too, then, huh...?”

Come to think of it, there are quite a few different bottles on the bar shelf that Munin’s drinking from right now.

“Anyway, you two took a bath, then got changed again?”

Munin was wearing the same clothes that she had been during the signing ceremony, and Seras was wearing her party dress again.

“Ah—ahem, Lady Munin...said that she was sure that seeing me in this dress again would please you, Sir Too-ka. But...is it strange for me to be wearing this

now, I wonder?”

I’d been told that Linne of the House of Seat had decided to gift the dress to Seras, explaining that it suited her so well that she simply couldn’t imagine anyone else wearing it now.

“It’s such a wonderful dress, I would feel a little bad about putting it right back into the closet. Wearing it makes me feel a little bit...noble. And well, I thought this might make you happy, Sir Too-ka.”

“Well, hey, you two are beautiful. Your outfits really suit you.”

“Oh my, I’m happy to hear that. ♪”

“Th—thank you.”

But, well...

“...”

“...”

Seras and I went quiet, silence falling over the room. Munin waited for the right time to jump in, then spoke.

“...We *are* rewarding you right now, aren’t we, Mr. Too-ka?”

Seras’s shoulders tensed, and she placed her balled hands into her neat lap. “I-I’m so sorry... Ahem, I heard once from the princess that men are fond of being treated to such hospitality. B-but in truth it is my first time doing this... But you are a man, of course, Sir Too-ka, and...I-I thought this might make you happy.”

Well I’m not complaining. Yeah...I mean, this is like having a woman on each arm, right? Maybe I should be happy.

“Sure. I’m happy.”

I drank some of the alama water that Seras had poured for me, then put the silver cup back down on the table.

“Honestly... I don’t really mind how you’re doing it. The fact that you’re trying

to reward me is enough. It just makes me happy to know you're thinking about me."

"Mr. Too-ka..."

"Sir Too-ka..."

They both must be tired right now, but they're doing their best for me. I can't let their kindness go to waste.

By the time the thank you party was over, it was long past midnight and into the next day.

"Hah...hah..."

Munin had gotten into the hard liquor again and lay slumped over the table, asleep as if all the exhaustion of the day's work had hit her at once.

I don't think I've ever actually seen a real-life snot bubble like that before.

Seras had just placed a light blanket over her.

Still...

"She might catch a cold if we let her sleep here," I said.

Seras gave me a laugh. "Yes. This posture won't be good for her back either."

And so, I carried her up to her bedroom and laid her down, then Seras pulled the covers over her.

"Munin must've felt a lot of pressure on her at today's ceremony. She doesn't really let anyone else see this... I bet she must be exhausted."

I silently wished Munin well, then returned with Seras to our bedroom. Piggymaru and Slei returned to the stables by the side of the house.

I exhaled as I sat down on the bed.

"Might I join you, Sir Too-ka?"

I silently assented, and Seras gracefully took a seat by my side.

"Ahem... Were you happy with the thank you party we held tonight?"

“It’s a nice treat every once in a while, yeah.”

“Yes,” Seras nodded happily, answering in a lowered voice.

The night was a quiet one, outside our room was only stillness. Seras placed her hand on mine.

“Would you...mind if we held hands?”

“Sure.”

I wrapped my fingers around hers, and Seras squeezed back.

“Sitting like this with you... It calms me down.”

Holding hands didn’t make Seras as flustered as it once did. Her breathing remained steady, and there was a comfort in the silence of the room that made me feel at peace.

“Sir Too-ka...I wish to continue to be your sword.”

“...Yeah.”

“I wish to ask you again. Do you think...I am worthy of the position?”

“Hmph... There’s nobody better than you.”

Seras twitched in response.

“So if it’s all right with you, I want you to stay. To be my sword forever.”

Seras wrapped all five of her slender fingers even tighter around mine and squeezed.

“I will.”

I snorted lightly.

“But I don’t know if I’ll be much of a replacement for that princess of yours.”

“Yes, my princess is one of a kind...irreplaceable. But so are you, Sir Too-ka.”

“...Right.”

“Yes.”

For a while we just sat there, hand in hand. Then suddenly Seras leaned her head against my shoulder.

...I knew it. She's worn out too.

She had already started breathing quietly, the way she always did as she slept. I looked down at her, so peaceful as she dozed, and whispered to her, "Thanks, Seras."

Once the purple beetle extraction process was done, I began to work on mixing up the monster enhancement solution. That same morning, Luheit returned to the capital.

"There has been a shift among the Golden-Eyed Monsters gathered at the Nightwall," was his report. *"From the information I've seen, it's possible the Demon King may be dead."*

Speculations quickly began to circulate. Meanwhile the Holy Empire of Neah and the Empire of Bakoss appeared to have sent soldiers to the west. The forces were probably on their way to directly confront the Miran invasion of Ulza.

"I see—so that's how the situation played out. If the Demon King is truly dead, then the matter of the sealed door within my vaults must be settled at once," said the Wildly Beautiful Emperor upon hearing Luheit's reports.

That very day, we went down to the sealed door, reviewing the contents of the reports as we went.

The Goddess Vicius

THE FORCES that had set out from Alion to dispatch the Demon King were approaching the border of Magnar. Sensing that it would hardly be a prudent idea to exhaust her troops with a forced march before battle, Vicius decided to

camp and have them rest. The White Wolf Riders—who had been stationed in Yonato in the west—were heading east toward them.

We will catch the Demon King's forces in a pincer attack—or have their forces join ours, that we might crush them together. They have Nyantan Kikipat with them, too.

“Hah... Oh how I miss Nyantan's talent for office work now,” Vicius mumbled to herself, sitting alone inside her personal tent. She had brought all of the documents and items that she hadn't had time to deal with along with her.

I cannot possibly entrust any of these tasks to my inferior servants with shorter lifespans.

It was ever so much faster for her to handle the documents herself, and doing so gave her peace of mind. Anyone who worked slowly would vex her to no end—she required individuals in her inner circle who would not irk her so.

Nyantan passed the bar. She was a rare find in the midst of this short-lived and frightfully incompetent lot—someone that she could actually make use of. Vicius resolved to keep Nyantan close in the future.

She is quite suited to having odd chores foisted upon her. I suppose I will use her as much as I am able.

“I never imagined that events would unfold in this manner, nor did I anticipate this lack of personnel. Hah, it is such a bother.”

In the fight against the Root of All Evil, I do feel as if my plans have faced constant setbacks on this go-around. What is it that has caused such disarray?

Where has it come from?

Was it my failed assassination of the Wildly Beautiful Emperor? Takuto Kiri-hara's betrayal? Could it be those traitorous Takao Sisters? Our defeat at the hands of the Country at the End of the World? The loss of the Sixth Order? The Wildly Beautiful Emperor's betrayal? Did all of this start when the Sword of Courage ceased sending me reports?

I secured our victory in the recent Great Invasion. It was the largest battle yet, and the fighting was fiercer than ever before, but when all was said and done, we claimed victory on every battlefield—in the west, in the east, and on the central front. But the Four Holy Elders, the Dragonslayer, the White Wolf King, the Holy Priest of Yonato... We won the battle, but my pawns were decimated. Yet that was no major setback, in truth.

Did something go awry in the run up to the invasion, then? Or was it after the victory that my plans fell apart?

Is that really what happened?

Something's not right—there is a piece that does not fit.

Vicius turned her attention to the past—something further back.

Was it some fatal flaw in earlier days that caused this? Have I missed something? If so, what?

Vicius thought.

The Black Dragon Knights—the death of the Elite Five. The loss of the Strongest Man in the World was a true blow. When they died, I was at the White Citadel of Protection when I received the report. The gathering of the wolves, a meeting of representatives from nations across the continent. Civit Gartland's death was reported... Come to think of it... Vicius remembered.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor brought up some legend of the God-killer. Was he trying to provoke me? Get information from me?

“At the time I simply thought it was the usual impudent blabbering from that foul man... But thinking back, he may have been attempting to glean something from my reaction.”

Some proof of his suspicions? No. That does not matter now.

Vicius wrenched her thoughts back. They had spoken at the gathering of the wolves about Civit Gartland's death. During the meeting, the White Wolf King had received a report from one of his subordinates—a report that there was a

group claiming responsibility for the defeat of the Elite Five.

The group's name was Ashint, and they claimed to have defeated the Elite Five using their mysterious powers of cursed magic. They had supposedly even killed the Strongest Man in the World using the same.

Belzegea of the Lord of the Flies Brigade—he once belonged to Ashint, did he not?

Vicius had received a report that Ashint had split into two factions. The information had come from Cattlea Straumss, who had heard it from the Lord of the Flies himself. There was a minor and a major faction—and the leader of the smaller faction was the cursed magic user Belzegea. The major, larger faction was led by a cursed magic user named Muaji. Muaji and his group had tried to purge the smaller faction, but they were defeated in the attempt. Nobody had ever recovered Muaji's body, nor the bodies of any of the major faction members.

What caused the Ashint split? And now Seras Ashrain is with the Lord of the Flies Brigade. It seems the Holy Emperor of Neah had something to do with the Elite Five's targeting her. It's believed that she was present when they were killed. Meaning...that must have been where she met up with Ashint. I expect they rescued her from the Elite Five. Considering she is still with the Lord of the Flies, it seems likely she feels she owes him her loyalty.

"..."

Was the Ashint split caused by debate over how Seras Ashrain should be handled? Possible. That Princess Knight elf has the power to drive people to madness—men in particular. It might even be that Ashint killed the Elite Five specifically to obtain her for themselves. Then, perhaps, there was internal conflict over her. The minority faction may have taken Seras Ashrain and snuck away from the larger group. The majority faction went after them but were killed in the pursuit.

It's not impossible—the scenario makes logical sense. But of course, being the

smaller faction, they would have been outnumbered. That must mean it was his superior skills as a cursed magic user that allowed the Lord of the Flies to overcome Muaji. And—

Bang!

Vicius delivered a rough kick to the desk before her.

“Something just doesn’t fit...”

No. In any case, I can see the end already. Who cares about the past now? What does it matter?

That was how Vicius reassured herself.

Yes—I can see the end. Ayaka Sogou will defeat the Demon King. Then I will kill the unpleasant wretch. The bothersome Hijiri is already dead and Itsuki is worth nothing without her older sister. I think it is safe to say Yasu is dead. Oyamada too.

...Nor will Takuto Kirihara pose a threat. If he stands in my way, I need only kill him—or I suppose the Demon King has already done that for me. If the Demon King will simply die, then I can see the end of this.

Once the Demon King essence that he possesses—his “source essence”—is in my possession, everything can begin. Nothing else matters. Everything else is but a trifle.

“Well, I suppose so, but...”

Tap, Tap, Tap...

Vicius drummed on her desk with her fingers.

Something was still irritating her—an unpleasant feeling that just didn’t make sense. She looked to the desk that she had just kicked. The impact had knocked some of her piles of papers askew. She had been lucky that they hadn’t fallen from the desk, as she would have considered it bothersome to have to call one of her lesser servants to pick them all up for her.

“Ugh,” she pouted. “Cursed magic... That *forbidden magic* is trouble enough. What exactly am I to do with this cursed variety? Hmm... Perhaps it is not some ancient magical item at all, but...poison, perchance? Ah, I see... Declaring the effects of one’s poisons to be the result of some curse, that makes much more sense. But could that have truly killed Civit Gartland? To say nothing of John Doe, and Lewin Seale?”

Vicius’s eyes settled for a moment on a single page of one of the reports—one that had been knocked from the stack. There was a sentence on the page that interested her. She pulled it out and began to scan the information contained within. Her eyebrows furrowed.

“Ulza’s...”

She recalled a time in her office back in Alion...

“Ah... Oh, and Goddess Vicius, in fact in Ulza...”

The report, never given in full, was detailed on the page before her—and it interested her greatly. Her eyes settled on the phrase “the underground tomb situated in the Dark Forest.”

The Ruins of Disposal.

Vicius sent individuals to regularly check on the only entrance and exit to the ruins. What she held in her hands was a report from that scouting party’s leader. The crystal reacted differently this time, the man had written—he had, it appeared, determined that it was broken.

It doesn’t appear he considered that out of the ordinary.

Even so, the replacement of the broken crystal would require the submission of a replacement request. “*Due to the lack of urgency of this request, it will be deferred until the next scheduled report is to be submitted in six months time,*” the party leader had written.

Submitting such a request involves the other nations and the paperwork itself has multiple steps—I expect the man simply couldn’t be bothered.

“Another short-lived fool,” Vicius muttered.

The scouting party had somewhat redeemed itself, however. It appeared one of their members had felt there *was* a need to notify her of the change, and he had chosen to submit his own report.

An act of cowardice, born of a fear of being held responsible for the failures of others, perhaps. But I do believe I can compliment him for his decision.

He had written the report himself and jumped through all of the necessary hoops in order to submit it. It arrived in Alion somewhat late—there was a large gap between the date of the document’s submission and the date that it was reported to have been processed.

The report had been submitted to her quite some time ago, but the *date received* mark was recent. It had been sent at a rather low-priority ranking.

Vicius had been prioritizing reports of the Demon King’s actions at around the time that the report first came in. She had also ordered her servants to prioritize reports on the Miran rebellion following the Wildly Beautiful Emperor’s uprising.

Compared to news of the rebellion, a “just in case” report from a tomb that stood all the way in the southern forests of Ulza was hardly an emergency to be brought to her attention.

It was especially insignificant to those unaware of the location’s true nature: the Ruins of Disposal.

Vicius cursed the mortal fools who had arbitrarily chosen to demote the report down her list of priorities—but the vexation soon left her. She tilted her head to the side as she read the contents of the document.

“...The crystal has stopped working?”

It did not respond?

That cannot possibly be the case—not unless someone has escaped from the Ruins of Disposal.

But then what of my mutated Magnum Opus—the Soul Eater?

Has it been defeated? Surely not. By whom? How?

“...cursed magic.”

Vicius’s own words returned to the back of her mind.

“Perhaps it is not some ancient magical item at all. Poison, perchance?”

...Poison.

...Poison?

“Cursed magic... Poison... Status effects.”

Vicius looked up from the paper in her hands. It felt as if a revelation had come to her.

“Ah.”

That mysterious cursed magic user in the Lord of the Flies mask.



“I cannot think of any reason the Lord of the Flies should detest me...”

But why should he have reason to hate me...?

“If I ever make it back alive, you’d better be ready.”

“He has his reasons.”

Yes.

I cast him down into the Ruins of Disposal. I thought he had died down there like a worm.

He had not even been a worm, in truth. The lowest ranked of all of the heroes—one who had all but completely vanished from Vicius’s mind.

“Touka Mimori...”

Connections formed—it all made sense.

“Pardon the intrusion, Goddess Vicius!” A messenger flew into the room, panting and out of breath.

“...”

When they come in looking as pale as this one, it’s never good news, Vicius bemoaned.

“Oho, ahem... I would like to be alone with my thoughts for a time. Could this wait until later? Later, please.”

“Ah—b-but...!”

Something was wrong.

“Hah... Go on, what is it then? Is it really *that* important? Bad news then, I trust? Oh, I very much dislike having to go through this.”

“A Magnar citizen has approached our army with an important message for

the Goddess of Alion...”

What could a mere commoner possibly have to say to a Goddess?

“Very well. Hurry up, then—what is it?”

“Th-they claim to be a messenger sent by Takuto Kiri-hara.”

Now *that* caught Vicius’s attention. She set the report in her hand aside.

“Kiri-hara-san, you say?”

“They say that Takuto Kiri-hara...” The messenger’s voice was shaking, and he was sweating profusely. “...Has defeated the Demon King.”

Clatter!

Vicius couldn’t help but shoot up from her chair.

“Takuto Kiri-hara... He seeks a conference with you, Goddess Vicius, at the border between Alion and Magnar.”

“My... Well, color me surprised at this turn of events. I thought Kiri-hara-san had long been defeated. I never dreamed he might have defeated the Demon King.”

This was something that Vicius had never imagined possible.

I cannot ignore that E-Class hero—but for now, this is the matter I must prioritize.

Vicius went to Alion’s northern border at the head of a newly reestablished cavalry force and left an army of roughly 1,000 men at camp, including the heroes. She had a particular reason for leaving the heroes behind.

There is no guarantee Ayaka Sogou would not attempt to stand in my way—especially when it comes to dispatching Takuto Kiri-hara.

“The Roots of All Evil of the past—I considered the Demon King this time around to be quite the formidable opponent, compared to his predecessors.

This is a mystery indeed. I cannot imagine the Demon King would let his guard down. Not in the face of the heroes who have always been his natural enemy... Unfortunately, this is Kirihara-san we are speaking of. Perhaps that strange, unknowable and ambiguous quality of his affected the Demon King's judgment. He is the only one that I cannot read... But, well, it is over now."

The Demon King could spawn many troops and move them immediately into battle. I saw with my own eyes the great creature he piloted on the eastern front during the Great Invasion.

He was the strongest Root of All Evil in history.

Now everything will end.

"..."

But there is one thing that remains on my mind.

The messenger had said more to Vicius on the matter before she had left.

"It appears that Takuto Kirihara has Golden-Eyed Monsters with him... Some of them even appear to be Inner Circle demons."

Vicius had doubted those words at first.

Is this some ploy by the Demon King? Is his death a lie? Is Kirihara merely baiting the trap that the Demon King has set out for me?

There was a way for the Goddess to determine whether or not the Demon King was truly dead. If the monsters that the Demon King had spawned still gave off his essence, then he was still alive. Once the Demon King died, that essence vanished with him. Vicius, however, wanted to know at once whether the report was true or not. She had another way of knowing—a method for determining whether the Root of All Evil still lived.

The process of using it consumed her precious divine power, and so she did not wish to do so lightly...but upon hearing the messenger's report, she resolved to check.

The result was positive. The Demon King has indeed perished.

The messenger had delivered further news once Vicius had confirmed that the Demon King had perished.

“It appears that the Golden-Eyed Monsters around the Nightwall scattered when they lost their command. Magnar and Yonato are presently beginning the process of eliminating them. It also seems likely that the Demon King’s essence has vanished.”

“The death of the Root of All Evil, and the ensuing rampage of those monsters... The disappearance of the Demon King essence... It appears he truly is dead.”

“Then...peace will return to our continent!”

“This does concern me. Kirihara-san has been seen leading Golden-Eyed Monsters, you say? Those that should by rights have lost their leader? Even the Inner Circle demons are with him?”

“Regarding that, the Magnar citizen who conveyed this report was given instructions by Takuto Kirihara himself—orders as to how the information was to be conveyed. ‘Takuto Kirihara has gained a unique skill capable of causing Golden-Eyed Monsters to obey him,’ were his words.”

If the Demon King is still alive, I would be right to consider the meeting with Kirihara just another of his ploys. But the Demon King is dead. I know that.

In that case—what does this situation mean?

I have no choice but to meet with him.

I will meet with him. And then I will kill him.

He has no way of returning to his old world without my assistance. He has no other option but to return to me.

Vicius found herself standing on a smooth plain with patches of exposed earth. The soil was not well suited to farming or producing anything else of

value, and so neither Alion nor Magnar wanted it. The area had very few features, save the large boulders that dotted the plains.

To the Goddess's right was a gentle slope to the east that led up to a small hill. To the Goddess's left, the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters lay off in the distance to the west. It was there that she saw him.

"Well, now, this is quite the surprise."

Takuto Kirihara, with a horde of Golden-Eyed Monsters at his back.

He descended from the back of a quadrupedal monster that looked like a great golden stallion with a strange horn atop its head.

Kirihara walked toward Vicius, small golden dragons swirling around him. Monsters moved with him, like an escort. Their march was disorganized, but there was a unique sort of purpose to their movement. Their bodies were different shapes and sizes—the largest were the ogre soldiers who had once made up the main body of the Demon King's fighting forces, mounted atop their ghoulish horses. The Goddess's cavalry began to falter and captain Kujah Eucalyon's face drained of its color.

"G-Goddess Vicius... Th-they're coming. Are you sure we're going to be all right?" he stammered.

"Who knows?" replied Vicius.

"!"

"Oh ho ho, I was jesting."

Vicius popped the deep purple sphere that she had taken from her pocket into her mouth.

"Well, just in case—let us take an extra dose, shall we?"

Ba-dmp...

The second one.

Vicius's eyes were jet black. They shone with a slimy, glossy darkness. She

blinked and the blackness was gone; her eyes returned to normal. The cavalry behind her had seen nothing of the change.

“Oh?”

Kirihara raised his right hand, ordering a halt. The Golden-Eyed Monsters stopped marching, and Kirihara began to walk toward the Goddess alone. He was roughly 200 meters away.

“Oho ho... It seems he was *serious* about wishing to talk. Then...I suppose I will head out to meet him as well.”

“Goddess Vicius?!”

“It’s quite all right. The only danger to me is the Demon King’s essence.”

Vicius and Kirihara walked toward one another, neither of them slowing their pace as they closed the distance.

“Oh my,” the Goddess mumbled, once she moved away. “...But it doesn’t quite seem you’re here to make friends either now, does it? Oh, how terrifying.”

Soon, they were both within shouting distance—

“Dragonic Cha—”

In the moment that Vicius sensed that Kirihara was going to attack, she closed on him in the blink of an eye. Before he could finish saying the name of his skill, Vicius had aimed and fired a punch squarely at his cheek—landing right on target. She blew him away. He flew like an arrow, colliding hard with a boulder that had been behind him. A hard, cracking impact rang out across the plain.

Kirihara’s back pressed into the boulder. A violent indentation had been left in the rock. A spiderweb of fissures latticed the boulder and radiated out from the impact site, shattering the stone.

The moment that she sent Kirihara flying, Vicius set off in pursuit. His golden dragons had scattered and disappeared, perhaps due to the impact. Kirihara glared almost contemptuously at Vicius.

“Dragonic Cha—”

Before he could finish speaking the name of his skill, Vicius clamped down hard on his mouth with her right hand.

“It’s futile,” she said.

“...”

“So long as I can detect your intention to attack me, I can respond faster than you can say the name of your skill—or so it would appear, no? Your weakness is the length of your skill names, and the one you just attempted to use needs to be spoken aloud in order to activate, hmm? Meaning so long as I can prevent you from ever finishing it, I have nothing to fear. However, I am rather scared of those skills that can be activated and then can last a certain duration. Let’s see now...”

Vicius forced Kiriara’s stat screen open.

I should never have made excuses for busy days and the tiresomeness of it all—I should have checked Hijiri’s stats in this way as well.

“*Dragonic*, and then a *Cha*— I believe I heard? Ah, this is the one... Dragonic Chain. Let’s see... [Subordination/target: Golden-Eyed Monsters, demons]...? My, my!”

Vicius opened her eyes wide in shock.

“My, my, my! Don’t tell me that you believe me to be some kind of monster or demon, and you are attempting to force me into obeying you?! How wicked! I am a *Goddess*, but you have determined that *I* am the same as *them*?! Th-this is just too cruel! *Waa—ah!* Ahem. New skills, new skills... Oh, isn’t this something! You do seem awfully calm. Anything you’d like to say? Go ahead. The moment I sense you are trying to attack me, there will be a great deal more *pain*, you understand? ♪ And do you understand how much I was holding back with that earlier punch? I’d like to believe that you aren’t a complete idiot. Truly, I would.”

Her warning done, Vicius removed her hand from Kirihara's mouth.

"...I was testing you, of course," he said, sounding neither surprised nor especially upset.

"A test?"

"Based on the skill description, I thought it would have a very low chance of working against you...but I had to be sure. This is the fate of a king—I cannot escape it."

"Uh huh. Right. I don't really understand."

"...I see. It is the enmity. Now I get it. The Demon King let his guard down because he had no enmity toward me. But it seems that I cannot hide my hostility toward you. That is why you were on guard against me. Providence, then. I cannot lie to myself... My kingly vessel will not tolerate falsehood. *It is what it is.*"

"Are you sane? Are you capable of having a conversation?"

"It would have been best to have you obey me... But now there is nothing else for it. We must negotiate."

"*Excuse* me... But what exactly do you think you are doing? Do you understand the situation you are in?"

"I am a king."

"A king? Right, right... But Kirihara-san? Can we speak like grown-ups?"

"I have already transcended the concept of age."

"Mmm hmm."

"I speak of my situation. I have defeated the Demon King and have become a true king. Now is when *Kirihara*...when *everything* begins."

A few seconds passed, then Vicius grinned at him.

"Anyway, that was very well done. In light of your accomplishments, I shall completely forgive your past acts of rebellion."

“It appeared to be rebellion to you? That was no revolt—it was simply providence.”

“...I see. I understand. Now, then, let us return to Alion. Ahem, those Golden-Eyed Monsters behind you... Should we find a place where you can drop them off?”

“There is no need for you to overlook my actions. Now you see, do you not? I am the *true* hero, the vessel of a *true* king. Nobody could kill the Demon King, but me. It was me. I, alone.”

“Yes, wonderful. ♪ Splendid work. ♪”

“...But from you, Vicius, I see no respect after all. Do you desire to cease to exist?”

“I-I’m quite sorry... I’ve always been this way, you see...”

“You cry, and you weep...but that will not suffice to get by in this world. This world is not so gentle. That is your failing. Nobody will ever trust you, not in any sense that has true worth. Unlike me.”

“Aren’t we the same?”

“I disagree. But apologize, and I might consider forgiving you. Do you understand? You misjudged my true power. Regret that, Vicius.”

“Oh, ohh...I regret it, I do... I’m so sorry. My eyes were so clouded. *Sob...* Please, do not torment me so... Even I am not perfect. *Wah...*I’m sorry...”

“You have avoided complete failure—as I have graded you with leniency. That, however, was an E-rank apology. Perhaps it is the hubris of you gods that prevents you from speaking your words of contrition from the heart... That is another failing.”

“Ahh... So it would appear...”

“This may be a shallow apology, but I must accept it as contrition, I suppose.”

“I see... Well, then, Kiri-hara-san,” said Vicius, turning to their main topic of

conversation. “It appears you truly have defeated the Demon King... Did you remember to bring the black crystal collar? Not that it matters to me, of course...but I will need it to send you all back to your old world.”

“I can hand it over to you—but I have conditions.”

“Ahem... Would you mind if I just examined it first?”

“The collar?”

“Yes.”

Kirihara put his hand in his pocket, and Vicius watched as he drew out the black crystal collar. He held it out toward her without a moment’s hesitation.

“Take it. A true king has no need for such items. Now what is the meaning of this...this murderous intent I feel from you?”

“...Kirihara-san?”

“What?”

“There’s nothing inside this collar.”

“The Demon King’s own Demon King essence, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“Of course it’s not there.”

“You say, ‘Of course,’ as if I am supposed to understand. What are you getting at? ...Ah, you mean to say—”

“Yes. The heart remains.”

If the heart is destroyed, the collar can absorb and store the source essence within.

An icy, bitter smile accompanied Vicius’s next question.

“The heart... Where is it, I wonder?”

“First we will discuss terms.”

“Hngh...! I *will* hurt you, you know? There will be no holding back.”

“Holding back... Vicius, you really haven’t realized it yet?”

“Hmhh?”

“If I intended to defeat you...”

Wide-eyed, she saw her own reflection in Kirihara’s eyes as she looked down on him.

“...I would already have done so.”

Vicius tilted her head at him, still smiling. “I’m sorry? Did you say something?”

“I have transformed. Become so strong, I was even able to defeat the Demon King. I am now the *strongest*, it follows. I have already surpassed you. You are necessary for my return to the old world, however, so I must allow you to live. In other words, I’m choosing to overlook all of this. I am letting you off the hook for all of your insolence. That is the single fact that remains.”

“...”

I simply need to kill him, and take the heart once he’s d—

“The heart isn’t here,” said Kirihara.

“Huh?”

Scratch that—I will torture him until he gives up its location. There is a limit to what the human mind can withstand, and once that is breached—

“I also do not know its precise location.”

“...E-excuse me?”

“I had one of my subordinates hide it. He is the only individual who knows where it is hidden. Killing me would be meaningless, of course... Oh, and one more thing...” Kirihara continued indifferently. “If he does not receive a message from me within a certain period of time, he has been ordered to destroy the Demon King’s heart.”

“...”

“In other words... If you were to kill or capture me, that would mean losing the heart forever. No matter what.”

Vicius couldn't determine from Kirihara's expression and voice whether he was being truthful or not.

Why is it that all I sense from this man is his supreme conviction? His words don't entirely reflect the facts of reality. It can't possibly be that he thinks everything he's saying is true, can it?

“Hohoh... Ah-hem, but why would you do such a thing? What is your goal here? I cannot send you home unless you hand over the heart, you know?”

Can he have guessed my true intentions? It is hard to imagine that possible.

“I have no intention of returning. I cannot go home yet.”

Well, this is new.

“Hmm? Whatever do you mean?”

“I will make myself known in this world as Kirihara the king. Once I have achieved my crown, I will return to the old world, and become king there too. Do you understand?”

“Ah...yes. I believe I do.”

He wishes to stay in this world and have a little more fun, then. That's what this is.

“Then once your goal has been achieved, you will agree to hand over the heart?”

“Naturally. I must return to *that* nation someday... But the time is not right.”

“I...see.” Vicius thought for a moment. “Well, then, Kirihara-san, allow me to assist the king during your remaining time in this world. ♪”

“I expected you would say that.”

“I must, however, inquire about the details. What *exactly* do you wish to do?”

Kirihara spoke. First he wished to claim a country for his own and ascend its throne as its king. When he felt that had been achieved—only then would he return to his old world.

“The other heroes must come to respect me. I will not allow disorderly actions, such as attempts to return home without me.”

“In other words... Sogou-san and the others won’t be able to return until you yourself have achieved your ideals?”

“The Demon King would never have been defeated without me. They have no choice but to accept this.”

There was a hero like this once before. “I have defeated the greatest enemy of this world and demand a fitting reward.” Others have found this place more comfortable than their old world and expressed a desire to stay.

But, well—the heroes remaining here following the death of the Root of All Evil...that poses some divine issues. Draw this out too long, and there will be some consequences. One or two heroes, and the effects of their presence might be minimized—but in the numbers that Kirihara is requesting, a long-term stay would prove quite difficult. The easiest solution would be to eliminate some, reducing the overall number of heroes...

“Understood. I will explain the situation to Sogou-san and the rest and have them remain in this world a while longer. ♪ Well, then, Kirihara-san...would you like to build your new nation in the Land of the Root of All Evil?”

“No. I will take the Kingdom of Magnar.”

“Magnar, you say?”

“I require humans for my citizens. But the Land of the Root of All Evil will also be a part of my domain. The path that I must take to venture there is through the Nightwall—Magnar. I need to simply force all the monsters and demons under my command to return to the Land of the Root of All Evil. Do not fear...

the people of Magnar will come to no harm, so long as they become citizens of Kiriara. This king will do his duty.”

“I see. Hmm... The White Wolf King died in battle during the Great Invasion. So, the throne *is* vacant at the present time...”

“The king had a younger brother, Captain of the White Wolf Riders, no? I met him when I went to the eastern front to rescue them.”

“Sogude Sigmus, indeed. He is currently approaching our location at the head of his White Wolf Riders.”

“The two of us will duel to determine who is the true King of Magnar.”

“Hah. A duel, is it? A duel...”

“We need to find out which man is worthy of the title... Though I might be willing to spare his life if he recognizes my kingliness and bows before me. I am merciful.”

“Hmm...”

I wonder if the Black Wolf will really accept those terms?

Vicius knew much of the situation in Magnar, with the absence of their White Wolf King. There was a growing call for Sogude himself to take the throne. In response to their passionate pleas, he had answered thus: *“I will only temporarily accept the role, until such a time as my brother is found.”*

Sogude was fully aware of the negative impact that the king’s absence was having on his retainers and his people.

Still... Vicius laughed. *The king is missing—no corpse has been found. He may yet be alive—though it’s foolish to claim “I am sure he still lives,” I suppose.*

For some reason, whenever people hear “missing,” they always believe that the subject is still alive. How foolish of these humans and their short lifespans, unable to face reality. They cling to baseless optimism and only began to wail when it is too late. It is all so amusing—the finest of comedies, no matter how many times I watch it repeat.

The mortal fools.

“The Artlight sisters—I will take them, too.”

“Well... I don’t see why not.”

The two beautiful sisters were famous knight captains. Magnar had their White Wolf Riders, but two other orders of knights besides—the White Rabbit Riders and the White Fox Riders. The two orders were less famous than the elite “Wolf” fighting force, but they were each stronger than the Monster Slayer Knights of Ulza, it was said.

“They will be concubines at best, however.”

“Hah. Then your true heart lies with Sogou-san, I take it?”

“Is she all you can come up with, Vicius?”

“Gha—what a mean way of putting it.”

“Well, I suppose you didn’t notice my hidden talent, either—you love yourself far too much, when it comes down to it. Do you truly not understand? Is your idiocy that extreme?”

“...Yes.”

“It is far too late for you to admit it now. My true spouse...” Kiri-hara spoke the name that Vicius knew would come to his lips. “...can be none other than Seras Ashrain.”

Vicius hadn’t particularly cared before now, and so hadn’t given it much thought. It was, on reflection, an answer that made sense to her. There was a reason the Artlight sisters were so infrequently brought up in conversations of beauty... There was the Wildly Beautiful Emperor to consider, of course... But Seras Ashrain’s charm was just too evident to ignore.

“...”

...Seras Ashrain?

Vicius had a revelation.

I need time. Time to look ahead to the future, and maneuver my pieces into place. The obstacles that stand in my way, however—they are a hindrance.

Kirihara... And the Lord of the Flies—Too-ka Mimori.

Vicius recalled the moment that she sent him to the Ruins of Disposal, and the conversation between Too-ka and Kirihara.

“...”

I have found a way.

“Kirihara-san, this talk of Seras Ashrain has caused me to remember something... Quite an interesting tale, in fact.”

“If this is of no significance, I will cease to trust you forevermore.”

“I’m sure it will interest you greatly.”

Vicius got in close to Kirihara’s ear and whispered something to him. Kirihara’s expression changed, as if the truth had moved his heart.

“*What* did you just say to me...?”

“I thought it was strange too... What in the world *is* that shady Lord of the Flies, I wondered. Cursed magic, he calls his abilities, but I couldn’t make heads or tails of them...”

“Back then, you... Before you disposed of him...” Kirihara glared daggers at Vicius. “You said he drew *a losing hand*, didn’t you?”

“Oh... Disgusting, isn’t it? He has crawled out of the grave like some squirming maggot. Terrifying indeed...”

“Those Ruins of Disposal you were bragging about were just a sham? Start taking your damn work seriously.”

Vicius spoke for a time, speculating about what his unique skills might be.

“Perhaps, like Ikusaba, he has *something*—abilities beyond his station, skills of which is he not worthy. The skills of an upstart. New money.”

“But how he managed to find food down there in the ruins... That, I simply cannot fathom.”

“And you call yourself a god? Don’t make me laugh.”

“Ho ho ho—oh?”

Kirihara suddenly grabbed violently at Vicius’s robes.

“What a mistake you’ve made, Goddess Vicius... And now he’s Belzegea, leader of the Lord of the Flies Brigade.” Kirihara’s mouth was open a mere crack. He ground his teeth. “*He’s* Seras Ashrain’s present owner?! That’s so ridiculous I can hardly find the words to do it justice, Vicius!”

Vicius smiled back at him and laughed.

“Well—Seras Ashrain learned much of life in this world under Princess Cattlea, and she is a famously talented swordswoman. But what else? She does not understand humor, and is also prudish and unused to male company. In all likelihood, she has no experience with men at all. Perhaps a little *something* of the opposite sex was all that he needed to show her to have her fall into the palm of his hand? Oh, I mean this as no insult to her character, of course, but merely as my own personal assessment. ♪ I hope you understand that I do not mean to deny the charms which you see in her.”

Vicius went on to explain her personal theory—that Too-ka Mimori had saved Seras from the Black Dragon Knights.

“That was when she fell for Mimori-san, I believe.”

“This is Mimori we’re talking about... He must have used some underhanded ambush tactic to defeat the Strongest Man in the World. *I* could have beaten Civit head-on. Tch... It seems Seras Ashrain has fallen in with the wrong sort. I never thought she’d be happy to be saved by a hero lower ranked than I am. Her looks might be incredible, but she will need some reeducation at my hands... Man, this woman is going to be a lot of work...”

Ph!

Kirihara spat on Vicius's chest.

"..."

He wrenched his hand from her clothes, pushing her away in the process.

"Take that, as a slight reduction in your sentence... For the crime of not realizing that *cockroach*, that deluded rock-bottom rank hero, was still crawling upon this earth."

"I see—thank you very much."

"What? You want to kill me, right here and now?"

"Who knows?"

"Hmph... But I suppose I can no longer forgive you. My name is practically synonymous with mercy, but even that has found its limit... My patience has run out. And now, for certain—I must take the road of judgment."

Kirihara placed his hand on the handle of his katana and gripped it firmly.

"That basic, face-in-the-crowd, nobody, background character dares to lay his hands on such a beautiful thing so far above his damn rank. It's completely against my providence—it's completely wrong!"

"Kirihara-san, you are a true king."

"You need not state that now. You might as well say that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west."

"A true king, I think, needs worthy partners at his side."

"For starters, I will take the Artlight sisters—on that I am set. But my true reward must be Seras Ashrain—it can be no other. The elites must be assigned to the elite. That—that is irresistible providence. The lowest may rise, but their true colors will always be exposed for all to see. It is because their rise is contrary to providence. What those on the bottom need most of all is for the natural order of the world to return, so that they might come to lead lives worthy of their natural station. The world I came from suffered similar. Those at

the bottom did not comprehend their own station, and their voices were too loud.”

“You are quite right, Kirihara-san. I’m sure you are correct.”

“Hmph, Vicius... I suppose I will take you up on your offer, after all. To return this world to its natural state, I will bring all back to Kirihara. I cannot forgive Mimori.”

“Well, then, Kirihara-san, let us agree to fight together in furtherance of your goals... An alliance, if that pleases you?”

“A king and a god join hands—very well. I cannot kill you, as I need you for my return to the old world. An alliance seems a fitting compromise...”

Kirihara sighed, breathing out slowly and deliberately.

“Sogude Sigmus, the Artlight sisters, Sogou Ayaka, Takao Hijiri, Seras Ashrain... Sogude Sigmus, Sogou Ayaka, Seras Ashrain...”

Kirihara’s golden dragons enveloped him once more.

He tilted his head to the side with a *crack*.

“Mimori Touka...”

Sogou Ayaka

THE FORCES assembled to fight the Demon King pulled back to the Castle of Alion. Ayaka wasn’t told the reason why, and nobody she asked knew either. *“The situation has changed,”* was all that the Goddess would tell her.

Everybody was in disarray—their confusion only compounded by how determined they had been to face down their final challenge. Ayaka asked the Goddess for answers, but got no further details.

“There is much that remains unknown, but I will provide more information

once it has been uncovered. That, I promise you.”

In the end, Ayaka and the rest returned to the Castle of Alion. They waited there for several days as rumors spread through the halls.

“Apparently the Demon King has died.”

Ayaka attempted to determine the truth of these stories, but found that she was practically under house arrest. The time she was allowed to interact with her classmates was, for some reason, restricted.

“These conditions are unavoidable,” was the only response she received when she asked about their situation.

What’s happening... Is the Demon King really dead?

Then one day the Goddess called for her soon after she had awoken, with an important matter to discuss.

“What’s going on?” she asked, standing in the usual office. “I hear rumors that the Demon King has died...”

The Goddess had a grave look on her face.

“The situation has developed in an entirely unexpected direction. You see...”

The Goddess conveyed to Ayaka that the rumors were true—the Demon King was dead. And the one who defeated him was Kirihara Takuto.

Back when they camped near the border between Alion and Magnar, the Goddess had ordered them to stay put, while she and a few of her retainers went to meet with Kirihara, she explained. Ayaka asked why the Goddess hadn’t taken the heroes with her, and she explained that Kirihara had specifically requested to speak to Vicius alone. She had not wished to provoke him unduly, and so had consented to his demand.

And so the Goddess had met with Kirihara Takuto.

“I thought Kirihara-san would already have been eliminated, but it appears he defeated the Demon King instead. I have a method of determining whether or

not the Demon King lives, and have used it to confirm that he is truly dead. It is the same method I used to determine where he would appear.”

“B-but then... Then that means...”

We can go back to our old world.

Yet the moment of joy was fleeting.

“Th-that can’t be... Kirihara-kun really did all that...?”

The Goddess’s explanation of the events was shocking.

“Yes... It would appear that he has hidden the heart somewhere.”

Ayaka was glad to hear that Kirihara was safe, but it seemed he hadn’t returned to the castle with the Goddess following their meeting. The Goddess went on to explain that she personally thought that Kirihara was out of control and had barely made it through his monologuing. His level had risen to an unbelievably high number—likely due to his defeat of the Demon King—and there was a risk he might even be capable of killing a divine like the Goddess herself. Thus, she had chosen to feign acceptance of his demands for now, returning to Alion to buy time and strategize.

“For now, we are in an alliance of sorts. To be frank, I had no idea what to do when I met with him. But well...had I left all of you at the border with Kirihara-san on the other side, there was a risk he might have attacked you in a fit of madness. That is the reason behind my retreat, you see.”

Ayaka frowned once the Goddess was done.

“Ahem... You speak of an alliance—a battle against a common foe? But the Demon King has been defeated... Who else is there left to fight?”

“He is to fight against Mira.”

“Mira? Wh-why...?”

“Mira have aligned themselves with the Lord of the Flies Brigade, you see...”

The Lord of the Flies Brigade? Belzegea-san? Why is she speaking to me of

that mercenary band now?

“First... Kirihara-san has started saying absurd things about *becoming the King of Magnar*. And, well...he intends on taking Seras Ashrain of the Lord of the Flies Brigade as his wife, apparently.”

“What?! Th-that’s ridiculous... He can’t—”

“No, he was quite serious. He also appears to have acquired a skill that allows him to control Golden-Eyed Monsters and demons. This may be hard for you to believe...but he presently commands an army of monsters.”

“An army of monsters...”

Ayaka couldn’t find the words.

The Goddess just went on, her expression unusually serious. “And honestly, I would like to settle this Miran war once and for all.”

“B-but... Is there any *need* for us humans to fight among ourselves now?”

“Mira appears to have obtained a method for killing divines. For killing *me*, in other words. To let you in on this secret...they have something called forbidden magic.”

“Forbidden magic?”

“It is a terrifying power, capable of killing gods. Is this answer not satisfactory? That is the reason that Mira revolted against me.”

That...does make sense. If Mira knows the Goddess’s weakness and has the power to exploit it—they need only win their war and bring that forbidden magic all the way to the Goddess herself.

“But without me, heroes cannot be summoned. With no Goddess, the next time the Root of All Evil comes, the people of this world will be eradicated. It will be a slaughter too great to behold, a tragedy beyond description.”

Ayaka had experienced the Demon King’s brutality firsthand during the Great Invasion.

The people of this world—they will suffer if they have no means to defend themselves. If the Goddess is gone.

“B-but Mira understands that, does it not? Do they not act this way because they believe they have some other way of countering the evil?”

“The next Root of All Evil may come centuries from now.”

“Huh?”

“Meaning, those alive in Mira now will have long died of old age by the time of the Demon King’s return. What that line of emperors has always desired, right from its inception, is the unification of this continent. That is all.”

“Th-that can’t be. Then if they can achieve that...they care nothing for the generations that will succeed them, you mean?”

If that’s what they’re after—then they’re wrong. People should have a responsibility to pass the torch—to create a happy present and ensure its continuation into the future. These people think their own happiness is all that matters? They care nothing for the suffering of others after their own demise?

They’re wrong. Dead wrong.

“The emperors of Mira... The achievement of this generational, long-sought ambition has always been their chief concern. They do not think of their citizens. They would never have gone to war at a time like this if they did, no? The people of Mira are being deceived. For years now, in my magnanimity, I...I have hoped for them to change their ways. And whenever Mira acted in defiance I let them off with a warning. But perhaps that was the wrong way to handle them. With time they have grown to resent me, and that hatred has festered. This is the end result.”

“B-but... But...”

“Kirihara-san told me he will rescue Seras Ashrain.”

“!”

“He also has no patience for the Empire of Mira—their selfish war, sacrificing

their own citizens.”

“That...”

“I—I have an awful personality, don’t I?”

The sudden question took Ayaka off guard.

“Eh? I don’t...”

“You need not be considerate with me now, you understand? But without this personality that others find unpleasant, I would not have been able to maintain the balance between the nations for all these years. These nations survive to this day because I protected them from the Root of All Evil. Ah, yes, yes... The Holy Empire of Neah, which was invaded by Bakoss, was restored to the Sacred Alliance a few days ago.”

“!”

“I did promise to recognize their independence as a nation once more, depending on their military performance in the recent Great Invasion. I negotiated with Bakoss personally. I have an awful reputation, but I do keep my promises. The only daughter of the late Holy Emperor, Cattlea Straumss, will take up the throne as Empress.”

“Cattlea-san...”

She’s a good person. The people of that nation are too.

“The Emperor of Bakoss, and the Last Dragon Knight, Gus Dolnfedd, also offered his support. That is how their independence was achieved without incident. We will now be able to draw troops from the Holy Empire of Neah.”

Neah and Bakoss...

The two nations were important to Ayaka now.

“Sogou-san.” The Goddess’s expression grew even more intense. “With the war against Mira, Alion has lost a great deal of its fighting forces—including the Thirteen Orders. We have lost contact with the Sword of Courage, who should

now be considered lost. No matter how strong Mira might be, I do not think it is possible it could have inflicted such losses upon us. What Miran forces we presently know of could not have done us so much damage. Even if we account for some additional strength they might have concealed from us...”

Suddenly the Goddess stopped.

“In fact...” she began again quietly. “An individual from the Ninth Order survived and managed to return to Alion.”

Ayaka had heard of the recent battle that the Thirteen Orders had fought in the west with the Miran army, and of the crushing blow Alion’s forces had been dealt. There were survivors, she knew, but their casualty rates had been appalling. Ayaka also knew of the Ninth Order.

“I heard that those in the Ninth Order were operating outside of Alion, and I have never had a chance to meet any of them. But I know their reputation. They frequently make financial contributions to orphanages and do other good deeds.”

Ayaka hadn’t heard many good things about the Thirteen Orders of Alion—but the Ninth Order was different. That might have been what made the stories about them stick out in her memory—how unlike the others they sounded.

“They were killed—murdered by the Lord of the Flies, Belzegea.”

“...!”

“They tried to surrender, discarded their weapons and admitted defeat... But they were slaughtered without mercy. I did hear that they did not beg for their lives, however. My impression was that they were somewhat soft-hearted individuals... But even I must admit that they were fine soldiers in their last moments. True warriors, it must be said.”

The Goddess looked down at her desk, remorse in her eyes.

“To be honest, I did not want to believe that such a terrible fate could have befallen them. But with a witness... We have a firsthand account from the Ninth

Order survivor I mentioned. If you would like to hear the tale from his own mouth, I can have him brought to you.”

“That’s awful.”

The Goddess wasn’t performatively crying as she always did—only faintly biting at the corner of her lip.

“The Sabre-Toothed Tigers met a similar fate...”

“Eh?”

“Their leader, Riri Adamantine, offered her own life so that the others might escape—but the Lord of the Flies killed them all nonetheless. He was merciless.”

Ayaka was speechless.

“Th-th... That can’t be! That man would never be so ruthless!”

Ayaka had spoken to him once. He had not seemed the type.

“I thought him an ally as well... This has come as a great shock,” said the Goddess. She looked up from her desk. “But think on this, Sogou-san. How much do you really know about him?”

“Well, I...”

“The Lord of the Flies created his mercenary group after slaughtering a rival Ashint faction following a schism in their organization. He does not hesitate to kill those who get in his way. That is a core part of his character. That’s why, well...ahem...just between you and me...and I would like you to remain calm, of course, but...”

The Goddess clammed up, her face twisted up in anguish. Ayaka had a terrible feeling about what was coming next. Her heart was racing.

This heavy sound...

The beating of my heart inside my chest.

I can’t take it.

“Among the bodies of the slaughtered captives, there was a boy... Yasu-san.”

“...”

Ayaka’s thoughts were scrambled. Everything in her field of vision twisted and dimmed before her.

“Yasu-kun...? N-no...”

“I am sorry. I had personally assigned him to a special mission. At the time, he was accompanied by the strongest force our nation had to offer, the Sixth Order... I believed he would be safe. Sogou-san, I was naïve to send him out. This is all my responsibility.”

The Goddess—*that Goddess*—lowered her head.

“I am so sorry.”

“A-ahh.” Ayaka barely forced out the groan, her voice trembling and hoarse.

“He... Yasu-kun... Was it *him*?”

The Goddess was silent for a few moments, keeping her head down.

“Yes. It was the Lord of the Flies’s doing...”

“Yasu...-kun...”

The Goddess looked up at Ayaka. “He begged for his life. Asked to return to his old world...sobbing. Those are the reports that came to me. The Lord of the Flies would hear none of it... Sogou-san?”

“...”

“...The root of the problem is the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, I believe.”

Ayaka pricked up a little at that.

“That emperor... He has all his citizens indoctrinated. There is a charm about him that drives others to madness. He’s famous for the wild, crazed nature of his beauty, you know? He drives people to insanity...then he brainwashes them and bends them to his will. I have long watched him with concern, believing there to be some kind of foul play afoot.”

“The Lord of the Flies... Has he been brainwashed by the emperor too?”

“I have no proof, but I believe that is certain to be the case. He has been poisoned by the Wildly Beautiful Emperor’s charm.”

“...The Wildly Beautiful Emperor.”

“Asagi-san and her group are much the same.”

“...!”

“In truth, they have ceased contact with me. I believe that they are no longer in Yonato...”

“Could it be—they have traveled to Mira...?”

“I will be happy as long as they have not been killed too, but they may well be imprisoned...no. The worst-case scenario would be that the Wildly Beautiful Emperor’s flattery and brainwashing has won them over to his cause.”

“...!”

“And so... I think the Wildly Beautiful Emperor is the prime cause of all of this conflict. Perhaps the Lord of the Flies was charmed by the Wildly Beautiful Emperor when the two of them met? He has helped the emperor by eliminating obstacles to Mira’s victory. The Lord of the Flies and his companions may be victims in this situation, too. Ah, I’m sorry... This is all just me speculating.”

“...”

“Ah, and as for the Takao Sisters—.”

“H-have they been found?!”

“No, I’m sorry... They have still yet to be located. But there have been some unconfirmed sightings. They appear to be heading in the direction of Mira.”

“In the direction of Mira...”

Ayaka had once heard from the Goddess that Hijiri was in contact with someone in Mira.

“It’s possible the Wildly Beautiful Emperor intends to properly brainwash the two of them. I fear if he cannot, then...they may simply be disposed of.”

Ayaka barely even registered that she was on the edge of her seat. She had no idea what her face must look like. She clenched her fist, squeezing down hard.

Brainwashing will never work. Not against her—not on Takao Hijiri. But if that Lord of the Flies is with Mira—they might be able to eliminate her.

“The Wildly Beautiful Emperor of Mira...”

“Sogou-san.”

“...Yes?”

“You are the only one who is now capable of stopping Kiri-hara-san.”

“...I’m the only one.”

“There is something I must do immediately—preparations to send you back to your old world. This truly is an urgent matter and I am quite sorry...but I will be unable to assist you.”

“And so, I...”

“Kiri-hara-san is on his way to Mira... I just informed you of that, you remember?”

Ayaka snapped back to reality.

“Yes. Since the Lord of the Flies and the Wildly Beautiful Emperor are colluding, there’s a possibility that Kiri-hara, too, will be dispatched by the Lord of the Flies.”

“...!”

Who in the world could say for certain that won’t come to pass?

“But you will be able to save Kiri-hara-san, and stop the Lord of the Flies. I believe in you. He needs a savior to return him to his old world alive. To rescue him from Mira and the Wildly Beautiful Emperor—and the Lord of the Flies. You are the only one that can accomplish that now. Allow me to repeat myself... I

believe you alone are capable of this.”

“I... I’m... The only one...”

“Neahan and Bakossi forces recently set off to fight the war in the west. Neah will be led by their new empress, Cattlea Straumss and Bakoss will be commanded by the Last Dragon Knight, Gus DolInfedd.”

“...!”

“But the Miran army is strong. I believe I could have put up a fight against them, but the bulk of Alion’s fighting forces were slaughtered by the Lord of the Flies...”

“You...want ... You are asking me to go to war?” Ayaka looked down at the floor, standing before the Goddess. “...Not against monsters—but against other people?”

“...It is a hard request, no? I’m sorry. I only ask because my own army is in such desperate straits...”

What do I do?

I... Hijiri-san... At times like these, I want to ask her for advice. But she isn’t here. I have to be the one to decide. Decide for myself... With my own will.

A long, drawn-out silence fell over the office.

“Just me...”

“E-excuse me...? Please, go ahead.”

“I’ll go. But just me. None of my classmates will participate in this—those are my terms.”

I won’t let anyone else become a murderer. I can’t.

“Then you accept my request? You will fight?”

“Cattlea-san, Gus-san... I can’t let the two of them die. And if I am to save Kiri-hara-kun—and he is heading to Mira—then that is where I must go. For Asagi-san, Takao-san, and the rest too. A route around the north avoiding the

battlefields in Ulza would take too long. I might not make it in time.”

I must pass through the western front—through Ulza.

Ayaka looked the Goddess dead in the eyes.

“If Mira were to defeat your armies in the field, they would march all the way here to Alion—*isn’t that right?*”

“Yes.”

The Goddess stood and walked around her desk to stand in front of Ayaka. She took Ayaka’s hands in her own.

“Will you do this for me?”

“...I will. I am the only one that’s able to stop the worst from happening now.”

“Ahh! Sogou-san!”

“But how I choose to fight—that decision stays with me.”

“How you choose to fight?”

“I didn’t come to this world to kill people. This is a war, and I am prepared for people to die... But I will do my best to keep casualties to a minimum. You must understand that.”

“Ho ho... That is just like you, Sogou-san. I understand, of course. Do as you wish,” the Goddess replied, giving Ayaka’s hand a hard squeeze. “Sogou-san, I have had somewhat of an awakening myself... I finally see now that you are the only one I can count on. Divine though I may be, I have been foolish and stupid in my actions. You may curse me as you wish. I apologize for the rudeness with which I have treated you, but I will be honest too... I did not appreciate your attitude.”

“...”

The Goddess’s tone became meek. “I have been betrayed by countless humans in my position as Goddess, and have suffered many of this world’s evils. Before I realized it, human malice and wickedness had affected me and I could

no longer believe in the ideal of innate human goodness. That is why I took your goodness for deception, thought it was all for show. It is what I disliked about you.”

The Goddess looked Ayaka in the eyes. “But I was wrong. You truly are a good person—the genuine article. I could not believe that people like you still existed. ...And yet, here you are. Standing right here before me.”

The Goddess sighed.

“I suppose taking hostages and forcing you to do this... That would be pointless now.”

The Goddess rang a bell that sat on the corner of her desk. The chime summoned two men from another room—one led by the other.

Ayaka’s eyes opened wide when she saw them.

“S-Sogou...?” he stammered.

“Zakurogi-sensei...”

It was Ayaka’s homeroom teacher. He looked exhausted, battered, with a purple bruise on his cheek.

Zakurogi Tamotsu.

Ayaka heard that he had been working in the castle kitchens following their summoning. The Goddess had said he “was not an upstanding character whose example should be followed,” rarely allowing the heroes to meet with him. Concerned for his safety, Ayaka had been to see him several times regardless.

He always looked happy when I met him, always laughing, but...

“I’m so sorry, Sogou-san. If I had failed to convince you... To my shame, I had considered taking him as a hostage in order to force your hand.”

“...!”

“But that was a grave mistake. It’s just... Well, he does have a number of flaws. He is quite unlike you.”

The soldier that had brought Zakurogi in kicked him roughly across the room. Zakurogi let out a pathetic cry as his hands met the floor. He was terrified.

“What is the meaning of this?” asked Ayaka, turning her questioning gaze on the Goddess. “That bruise...”

“Zakurogi-san... Speak to her of the bruise.”

“Eh?!” He looked back at the Goddess in shock, down on his knees. “Ah, ehm... Ahem...”

“Zakurogi-san?”

“Ah... S-Sogou... I-I...”

The Goddess was emanating a kind of silent power. Ayaka just watched, confused, and unable to grasp what was happening.

“...I-I only became a teacher b-because...I-I thought I might...have a sh-shot with a high school girl... A *joshi kosei*...”

“Eh... Zakurogi-sensei...? What are you saying...?”

“I-I mean, like... Even if teachers get caught for sex crimes, it’s easy for them to get their jobs back... And like, you can call dibs on a student, then d-do whatever you want with them once they graduate. It’s easy to talk them into stuff when they’re not out in the real world yet. I read somewhere on the internet that, like, if you wanted to get with a young, immature JK, you should d-definitely get teaching qualifications! This country’s schools are a paradise—they’re nothing like the ones abroad where they’re tougher on predators! Our schools have got so many other issues with monster parents and insane working conditions that even guys like me can get to be teachers! I-I-I was totally shooting my shot! I mean, like, your class has so many pretty girls who’re way sexier than they’ve got any right to be at their age! Hah hah... But like, when it came down to it, you’re all so strong, and so on your guard... Kinda scary, too.. I was too scared to lay a hand on any of you... Hah hah... I didn’t like, actually go through with it... But recently I’ve been thinking about trying, going

for one of the easy ones like Kashima, maybe...”

There was a deep sigh—it was the Goddess.

“I thought it best that his true nature be revealed to you. I apologize, but I simply thought his character too evil, too reproachful. I could not help but punch him. This bruise is from that incident.”

Ayaka was completely stunned—but she soon regained her composure.

“Zakurogi-sensei.”

“Hyah?!”

“You... You’re the worst.”

“...Y-yes...”

“The way you speak also, suggesting that the majority of teachers join the profession to be predators... That is incredibly disrespectful to the dedicated, hardworking, and serious teachers who try their hardest every day to work for the future of their students.”

“Uhh... I-I’m s-sorry...”

“When we return to the old world, you will change your approach to teaching. You must.”

“Y-yes! I swear it! I-I’ll change! I realized it, here in this world... I’ve had a chance to reflect! I’ve confessed all the filth inside of me...and I feel like a weight’s been lifted from my shoulders!”

People can change. It’s wrong to abandon people simply because they’re bad or weak. With sincere effort—careful explanation—I just know that people can change. As the person who will fix them, what I need is the absolute power to make my sincerity felt and have my words heard. Yes... To protect oneself from evil and save the weak—that requires overwhelming force.

“That’s a promise, sensei.”

“Y-yes! I’ll change, just you wait, Sogou! Let me make a recovery back in the

old world. So, please...save me. Save us all! Then let's go home together! Back to the old world!"

"Yes. Of course," replied Sogou.

The Goddess's expression turned sad. "I will heal his bruise at once. I snapped and hit him in a moment of anger... I am very sorry."

"N-no... I'm grateful to you, Goddess! Thank you for helping me realize who I really am! Th-thank you!"

Once Zakurogi was done saying his thanks, the soldier led him out of the room.

"That should be all then, Sogou-san."

"First...I'd like to ask you about Oyamada-kun before I leave. Seeing what has happened to Zakurogi-sensei makes me worry about him too."

"He is still in recovery. His mental state is still unstable...and I don't believe he's in any condition to meet with other people. You could go and see for yourself, but I think your meeting might have an adverse effect upon him. I cannot guarantee that he will not worsen as a result. Shall I arrange for a visit?"

"...No. I will not see him if it might make his condition worse."

"He may improve upon returning to his old world. Perhaps he will come to view all that has happened here as but a bad dream... It may heal his mental scars."

"Please continue your search for the Takao Sisters," Ayaka reminded her.

"Of course," the Goddess nodded. "You were quite shaken by my earlier words... But it does appear that you have steeled yourself to do this task now, hm?"

"People may be dying while I stand here being overwhelmed. I wish to do everything in my power to save those that I am capable of saving. I shall save my tears for when all of this is over."

“Thank you, Sogou-san...”

“I leave Oyamada-kun—and everyone else that is to remain in Alion—in your hands.”

“Yes.”

“...I won’t ever forgive you, understand?” said Ayaka quietly.

“Excuse me?”

“If you betray me...I won’t ever forgive you.”

Before Ayaka left the capital, she explained her plans to just one other person—Suou Kayako.

“Sogou-san, I have a question,” she asked once she was done listening. “If you’re going to fight in the west, then you won’t be battling monsters, but—”

“I know.”

“I’m coming too.”

Ayaka’s eyes softened, and she couldn’t help but smile—half with joy and half in refusal.

“You can’t, Suou-san. I appreciate the gesture...but I’ve decided I’m doing this on my own.”

“But...”

“Not to mention, you being here is the only reason I feel safe leaving everyone else. Just like I did back...”

“...at the White Citadel of Protection. I remember,” finished Kayako.

“Yes.”

“...”

“Suou-san... There’s something I’ve always wanted to ask you.”

“What?”

“I think you could’ve gotten into a larger group with higher ranked heroes in it. Why did you choose to join my group? I mean, the Goddess really hated me...”

“Because of you, Sogou-san.”

“Huh?”

“Maybe you don’t remember.” Kayako dropped her eyes, voice soft. “I’m bad at talking with people, bad at being part of a clique... That’s why I’m always on my own. That’s never bothered me, though, and nobody’s ever paid me much mind. That’s just the kind of person I am. I’ve been treated like that in every class I’ve ever been in. My grades are above average, and so are my track times, but I never stood out... Always hiding in the shadows of the people at the top, y’know. I might look like I’m not good at talking to people, but it’s not like I don’t talk at *all*. I just don’t badmouth other people. I don’t backstab. I don’t have any obvious weaknesses, so it’s not easy for people to make me the target of their bullying or teasing. I’m the definition of slightly above average—that’s all. I never had any problems at school, I just ended up being ignored. I’m sure it’ll be like this all the way to graduation. That’s what I *used to think*, anyway.”

There was something more to her usual monotone—some emotion there.

“But you talked to me, Sogou-san. You were the only one who did.”

“Well... Of course I did. Isn’t that normal?”

“You had your responsibility as class rep. It was your job, I know that...but you didn’t need to keep on chatting with me the way you did. I’m always so indifferent and unfriendly, so most of my conversations just fizzle out. I can’t keep up the act, and they end up getting awkward.”

There was a rare hint of crimson coloring Kayako’s cheeks. “You didn’t have any ulterior motives, Sogou-san. You weren’t reaching out to lonely kids in class to show off just how kind you are... There was none of that vanity in what you

did. I was so surprised.”

“Suou-san...”

“You’re our class rep and you just wouldn’t leave your isolated classmates alone. I know that. You had such good intentions, Sogou-san. It was pure, unadulterated good inside of you. You just don’t see that every day... That’s why I thought I could trust you. It’s why I chose to join your group—a group led by someone I believed in.”

“I see... Well. Thanks, Suou-san. I never knew you thought of me that way... Heh heh, so...I did a passing job as our 2-C class representative then?”

“Sogou-san.”

Ayaka had never seen Kayako look so serious.

“Y-yes?”

“You have to come back safe. You *have* to.”

“...Okay.”

“I’ll play the part that you’ve given me to play. No matter what happens in the west—count on me. I’m with you, Sogou-san, no matter what. Until the end, no matter what.”

“Thank you... Suou-san.”

“For us to all go home together, back to our old world. That’s what you want, right Sogou-san?”

“Yes.”

“I have something to tell you, when this is all over. Something... Very important.”

Suou-san...

Ayaka Sogou spurred her magical horse onward. Magical horses, unlike their

non-magical counterparts, ran at incredible speeds. They were precious and the Goddess was very careful with how she allowed them to be deployed.

The Goddess herself had left Alion on a magical horse just before Ayaka herself had departed, setting out on an important matter, just as she had mentioned during their meeting. Ayaka raced down the twilight road, heading for the western front.

I'm coming back here in one piece. Not just for me, but for Suou Kayako too.

"..."

I didn't want to get anyone involved in this fight to come. That's a part of how I feel, but...it's more than just that.

I don't want them to see the demon I might become.

That might only be part of the reason though. I'm going to protect everyone, no matter what. I'll make sure we all make it back to the old world together.

Even if that means blood on my hands.

Ayaka spurred on her magical horse, racing ever faster down the dirt road to Ulza.

Cattlea Straumss

RUMORS ABOUNDED that the Lord of the Flies Brigade had allied with the Empire of Mira, a country in open rebellion against the Kingdom of Alion.

We did discuss how the two of us might proceed, should it come to this... But Seras, you walk the path that you believe is right. The Lord of the Flies is your master now.

The armies of Neah and Bakoss were heading west together, to assist the

army of Alion led by Baron Pollary. The Miran army was pushing back the Alion forces.

“We are almost upon the enemy.”

It was just as Cattlea received those words in a report that they were stopped in their tracks. Something stood in their way—a horde of Golden-Eyed Monsters.

They might have come from some underground ruin or strayed from the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters. Worst of all—there were two humanoid-types mixed in with the rest. They began to slaughter the Neahan and Bakossi soldiers on the frontline, one by one.

Cattlea clicked her tongue. “For those monsters to appear...*here* of all places and *now* of all times!”

The holy knights by Cattlea’s side waited for her orders.

“My empress! H-how should we proceed?!”

Cattlea watched the tragedy at the front unfolding from afar.

“...Retreat. Let us find another path—a detour. We cannot hope to face down two humanoid monsters of such size.”

“I agree, Your Majesty,” said Gus Dolnfedd, descending from the sky followed by a number of his Black Dragon Knights.

“Send out the order to retreat, quickly now,” Cattlea told one of her subordinates.

“Yes!”

She then conveyed their new route to her holy knights.

“Makia is to lead the retreat.”

With that, Cattlea led her holy knights away. Gus went with them, turning once to look back at the front lines, then returning his eyes to Cattlea with a grave expression on his face.

“At the speed those monsters are coming... They’ll overtake us sooner or later,” he said.

“...Yes. It seems we will need to buy ourselves some time.”

“We should like to take you and your closest guards with us on dragon-back... But due to the fear of our black dragons being used after their capture, only select riders are bonded to our mounts.”

“I understand that. Please do not let it concern you.”

“Empress Cattlea.” One of the company commanders turned to look back, pointing his horse in the direction of the fighting. “My company will serve as rearguard for the retreat.”

Cattlea thought it over for a moment. “I could ask that of you—but it would mean surrendering your own lives, you understand?”

“Heh heh heh... You have taken the throne now, Empress Cattlea. With you as our leader, the future is bright once more. We have no fear of death now. My company stands ready for this. If we might just ask...care for the families we leave behind.”

“I swear to do my duty as your empress. Thank you, truly.”

“It is our greatest honor! Then we will hurry to the rear—come now, all of you!”

The commander’s soldiers replied with a great cry and turned to march quickly toward the enemy.

“Sir Gus! I should like to go with them!” called one of the Black Dragon Knights, enthusiastically volunteering for the fight. “It would be best for them to have at least one set of eyes in the sky, to inform them of the state of the battlefield below, would it not?”

Gus bit his lip.

“You’re sure?”

“Just promise that I will be the only Black Dragon Knight in the rearguard! Those are my terms! Hah hah hah! Any more of us perish, and it might spell the end of the Black Dragon Knights for good, eh?!”

“...I’m sorry.”

“Goodbye then, Sir Gus. Stay safe.”

“Wait just one minute! We can’t let you and the Neahans take all of the glory!”

Next came a group of Bakossi soldiers, raising their voices.

“If it gets back to the homeland that Bakoss offered only a single dragon knight to the rearguard, the shame of our actions would be passed down to future generations! Please, allow our unit the honor of protecting the retreat as well!”

“You lot...” murmured Gus.

“This is for you as well, Sir Gus! For the future of Bakoss, you should not die this day!”

“Now then, Sir Gus! Continue with Her Majesty, the Empress of Neah! Do not let our sacrifices be in vain! Come on, soldiers of Neah! Let’s see who can hold out the longest... The game is on!”

A single black dragon and a unit of Bakossi soldiers turned to pursue the Neahan company that was already on its way to the rearguard. Cattlea continued to ride away from the fighting, keeping pace with Gus who flew low above her.

“I can scarcely believe that those are the same Bakossi soldiers who once overran our nation,” said Cattlea.

“The Empire of Bakoss can change with the direction of the wind and the mood of the continent. It cannot fight against the tides when they sweep in... such as the death of Sir Civit and the rest of the Elite Five. Not to mention the serious losses suffered during the Great Invasion... The mood in our nation has

changed in the blink of an eye. It is no excuse for our past transgressions, of that I am aware. It is a hard fact that our nation invaded yours.”

“You are as serious as ever, Sir Gus... I was being sarcastic just now, you know? In any case...” Cattlea changed the subject. “We will need to dispatch a magical war pigeon to Baron Pollary. He must be instructed to change his own retreat path or he will encounter these humanoid-types just as we have.”

“We will send a black dragon messenger alongside the magical war pigeon, just in case.”

“We must also consider the detour that we must now take.”

“Time is against us.”

“Mira’s Band of the Sun... I never imagined they could be so strong, even in the absence of the Wildly Beautiful Emperor and his two brothers. From the reports that have reached my ears, the heirs to Mira’s three princeps elector houses have been leading the fray and are far more skilled in combat than expected. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor was concealing his claws, and our side lacks the champions to contend with his.”

“The Goddess’s forces are so lacking that she must turn to us, after all,” noted Gus. “I just hope that we can make it in time to join Baron Pollary’s army.”

Cattlea and Gus chose to leave the main road and cut a path south for the time being. After a time, they turned west once more, aiming to meet with Baron Pollary’s forces while avoiding their original route.

Taking our horses off the main road has slowed our progress... Our army of reinforcements might not make it in time.

Cattlea was busy weighing her duty against reality as it presented itself, and Gus was fuming with rage.

“We face trials here, but we cannot abandon Baron Pollary to his fate! He has faced death on the battlefield countless times...as have all of the soldiers under his command!”

“You are kind, Sir Gus... And I understand how you feel.” Cattlea looked back as her mount sped along on beneath her—looking to those that had resolved to give up their own lives to see them to safety. “You’re right. Every last one of them—they are so kind.”

Gus, who was looking back over his shoulder as well, frowned in anger when he saw what was behind them.

“Half of the monsters have shaken off the rearguard and are still in pursuit...”

“So it would appear.”

“We may need to make more sacrifices.”

“...I do not like this, but we have no other choice.”

None of these options are appealing at all. But all I can do is try to formulate a plan. I have the experience to make these tough decisions—to come up with strategies, such as I am able. And yet...

“In the end, it is strength. There are some foes against which we cannot hope to defeat without the power to match them, no matter how perfect our strategizing. In particular...”

Cattlea heard the battle cries and screams of anguish from soldiers in the distance.

They are great shadows, these humanoid types. Disasters, calamities. They are not foes that we humans were ever meant to fight. None but the outliers among us can suppress them. To fight them, we need nonhumans, or super humans. Those like the Goddess, or the Strongest Man in the World.

“What is happening?”

There was a path opening up before her, as her troops retreated—and then *she* emerged from the crowd.

“Ayaka—Sogou?!”

A hero of Alion, racing like the wind upon her mount, rode past Cattlea with a

single glance in the empress's direction. The princess immediately focused her mind to action to the situation at hand.

"There are humanoid types!" she called. "Two of them, as you can see!"

"I'll defeat them!" the hero called back.

The shortness of her reply sent a shiver through Cattlea's body. She felt goosebumps on her skin.

How...self-assured.

She felt moved by the words. The hero had not hesitated for an instant in speaking them. There was no trace of fear—the hero stated that she was going to defeat them, and that was a certainty.

I wonder how many people in this world are capable of recognizing those two huge humanoid-types, yet confident in their own ability to beat them.

It was at that moment that Cattlea knew.

She will be able to do this.

Cattlea gave the order for her soldiers to halt their retreat. Ayaka's horse continued on at full gallop, as she steadied her breathing.

"Silver World."

A giant silver sphere appeared above her head. It warped, twisted apart, and formed into the shapes of swords, spears—and countless other weapons.

A huge number of weapons floated in the air around Ayaka's horse and it appeared as if she were somehow controlling them. It was a magnificent sight to behold—like something from a mural depicting the age of myth.

Ayaka then leaped, and her silver floating weapons went with her. She drew one of the silver swords from the array, and it made a satisfying sound as she grasped it by the handle. She raised her sword and went straight for the humanoid-type monster.

"..."

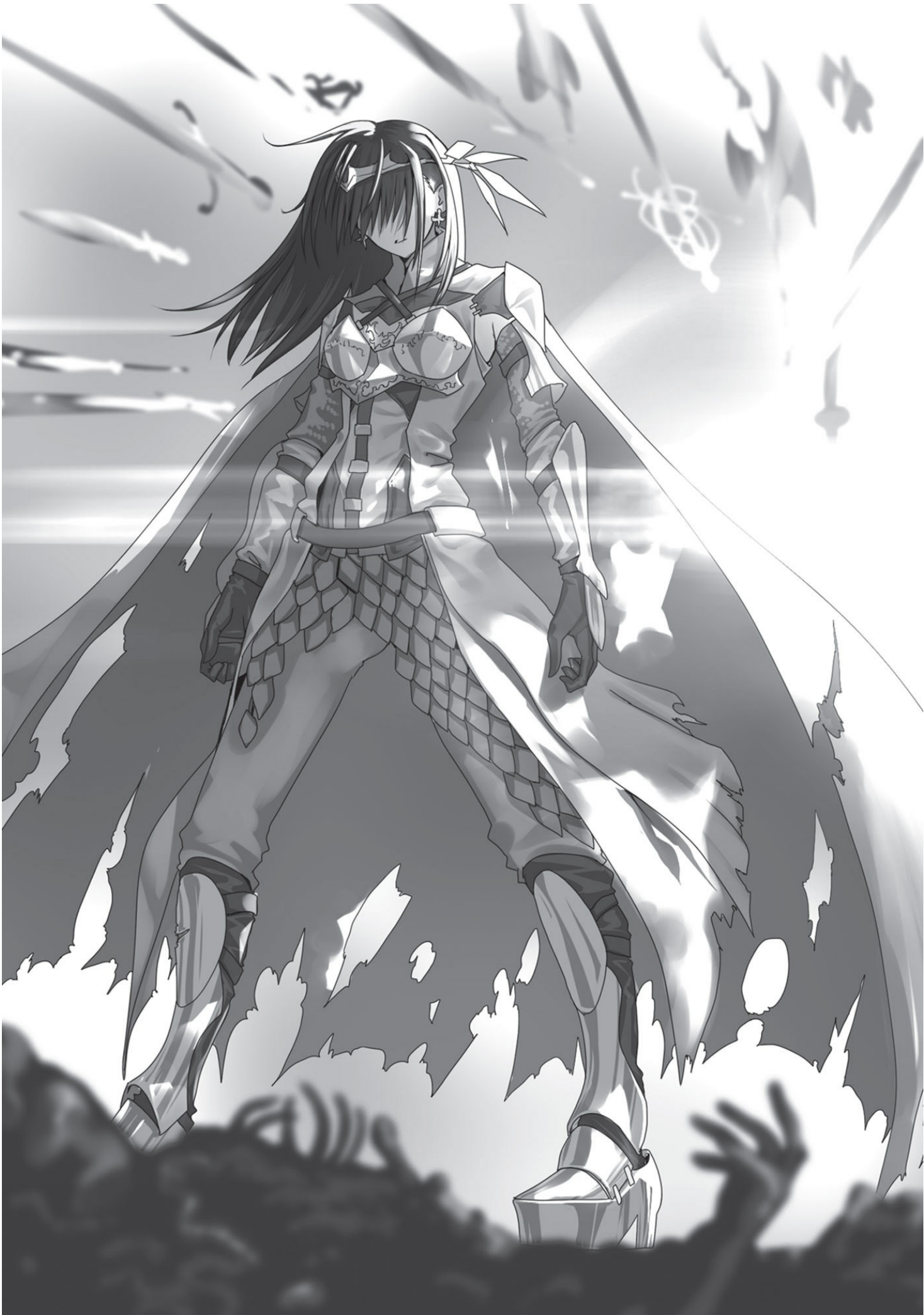
As Cattlea watched Ayaka fighting from afar, she could hardly believe her eyes. What especially struck her was how the monster moved in its final moments—right before Ayaka sliced it in two.

Is that even possible?

No, it cannot be.

That huge humanoid-type would never... I must be mistaken.

Such monsters would never turn and run.



The next day the combined forces of Neah and Bakoss—along with Ayaka Sogou—joined up with Baron Pollary’s combined army as it made its retreat.

Having chosen to temporarily name their new combined army the Anti-Mira Allied Forces, they came to battle with the pursuing Miran army at dawn the following day.

The Silver World Of The Demon Of War

“R EPORT! SECOND LEGION, RETREAT!”

“The fourth legion’s Captain Thuon has been captured! The other legions are also having their captains taken, one by one!”

Chester Ord sat in the commander’s chair in his camp. His sword was in its scabbard, and he had driven the tip of that into the ground, now leaning heavily on it for support. He was the heir to the house of Ord and present general commander of the Miran army.

“His majesty is currently preparing to make his way here, isn’t he?” Chester asked one of his military advisers.

“Yes, sir.”

A short while ago the enemy’s movements had shifted—and not just due to the recent wave of reinforcements that they had received from Alion.

There was a report that their army met with Neahan and Bakossi forces, but...

“Cattlea Straumss has ascended the throne of Neah. Her presence on the battlefield has produced a visible change in the enemy’s behavior. They’re using

the Black Dragon Knights to aid their dirty tricks as well.”

“But the only reason they’ve actually been able to push the Band of the Sun back is...”

“Yes. The hero we spoke of.”

It’s unorthodox...the way the commanders of our legions are being “kidnapped” one by one. They are not being killed outright. Is capturing them their goal?

I don’t know. Why? And yet...

“We cannot stop them, the reports say. That sole hero cannot be prevented from piercing our lines.”

The military adviser stroked his beard and narrowed his eyes.

“...Civit Gartland of Bakoss.”

“The circumstances cause you to recall his name too then, I see.”

“Yes.”

It had been some time ago that Bakoss had broken into civil war. A certain baron—the younger brother of the emperor—had launched a rebellion against his older brother. The younger brother had been popular, and eighty percent of the nobles in Bakoss had supported his claim, leaving the then-emperor with only twenty percent support. Within that twenty percent, however, there was a man—the Strongest Man in the World.

“Civit... He continually solo raided the enemy’s army, taking the heads of their generals one by one. He appeared day or night, so no man knew when he was sleeping. He truly seemed like a phantom, haunting the battlefields.”

“With no leaders to guide them, soldiers lose their resolve... The days upon days of attacks markedly affected their morale.”

“At last, the Strongest Man in the World took the baron’s head into the emperor’s tent—the head of his own younger brother... Civit Gartland almost

single-handedly put down the rebellion.”

Chester closed his eyes, then opened them just a crack.

“Do you think that another has arisen to take his place?” he asked.

“Possible. But I would have to say no, in this case.”

“Why?”

“This situation is more...*unusual* than the Civit one.”

“...”

“There are too few deaths. It is so strange. According to the reports many of our soldiers are being knocked unconscious or are encountering bizarre knights that appear to be magical creatures of some sort. And then they are being... neutralized.”

Neutralized...not killed. They're robbing us of our leadership. This isn't a practical strategy—only a God would be capable of these tactics.

“You mean they’re fighting in a way that avoids causing casualties when possible?”

“Yes—though I do not understand why.”

“Hiding behind their captives? Do they mean to use our captains as hostages?”

“Had they taken Sir Luheit, Sir Kaize, or any of the heads of the three princeps elector houses, perhaps... But those they currently possess are of little value as leverage.”

“We don’t know what their goal is.”

“Perhaps they simply don’t want anyone to needlessly die...”

“Don’t be ridiculous. We’re at war.”

“Yes, of course. You’re right... I can make no sense of it either... Yet, I couldn’t help but come out with nonsense. I’m sorry.”

Several hours passed, and things continued to go from bad to worse for the Miran front...until finally, the time came.

“Th-the Band of the Sun has been routed?!” screamed a general, as if he couldn’t believe the words coming out of his own mouth.

“If we only faced the enemy’s combined forces, led by Cattlea Straumss—then perhaps we could defeat them! But...but now...” said the knight delivering the report, grinding his teeth in bitter rage.

“Th-that hero, stirring up the field... There’s no *battle* to be had here! H-have we always been so weak?! Our generals are taken, one by one... I don’t know what’s happening any more! Everyone’s losing their will to fight back! There just seems no way of resisting them—but it’s almost like...like they don’t have any intention of killing us anyway. And it’s not just that! They keep apologizing! Is that really one of the Heroes from Another World that we’ve heard stories about?!”

The military adviser looked down, gloom upon his face.

“If only His Majesty would arrive on the battlefield...”

“No,” replied Chester curtly, cutting his adviser off. “It might put His Majesty in danger if we were to fail to protect him. We need to pull back—return to the border between Ulza and Mira. I should have acted sooner.”

“...There is nothing to do. I will pass the order to retreat through the r—”

“Sir Chester!”

“What now?”

From the look on the messenger’s face, Chester had a bad feeling.

“It can’t be...”

“Th-the hero! A sole rider has broken through a poorly defended flank of our defensive line! The combined forces are currently pressing the attack on our

thickest defenses in the center!”

Chester hurried from his tent, situated on a small hill that overlooked the surrounding area.

There they are. A single rider, alone.

They had made camp on a fairly flat plain, with good sight lines. Chester saw nowhere that an ambush might be lain, and no black dragons in the sky.

“They really came here all on their own. A single rider—that’s a Hero from Another World.”

The hero was riding straight toward them, up the gentle slope toward their tent.

“Wh-what is that thing...” one of the knights at Chester’s side gasped in panic.

A silver sphere suddenly appeared above the hero’s head. It was as if someone had melted down a thousand silver ingots into a great molten globe and suspended it in the air above the rider’s head.

“Is that what the reports were speaking of? ...The flying weapon?”

But in the next moment, like a sudden shower...

Thud thud thud thud thud thud thud thud!

The sphere spat out a rainstorm of *humanoid shapes*, falling from the sky. They were silver as well—strange creatures that looked almost like knights.

The remainder of the sphere above the hero’s head transformed itself into weapons, which were drawn into the hands of the silver knights. The knights pursued the hero—*no, they’re following... She’s leading those silver knights into battle.*

The knights of Mira broke out into cold sweat.

“The hero has p-produced an army? Th-the reports...said nothing of this...”

“...Retreat. Protect Sir Chester, no matter the cost,” said the military adviser.

Chester stared at the hero in silence—then quickly made his decision.

“I’d like to go out there and strike at them, even if I do get struck down myself in the process... But I am the commander for the campaign against Ulza, and my capture could lead to a rout for the legions. I’m counting on you all—get me out of here.”

Chester grasped his own left arm with his right hand and clamped down on it hard. He was shaking—trembling with frustration.

I would rather fight here and die than use my subordinates as shields for my escape. But as commander of so many men, my position won’t allow that.

“Do not fear, Sir Chester. We will get you out of this place, come hell or high water,” said one of the knights, smiling as he mounted his horse. The others around him did the same, cheerful to a man. They fully understood Chester’s frustration with the retreat. The military adviser waved his arm furiously at them.

“Disguise me as the commander! I’ll draw their attention and allow you to get away! Go now, Sir Chester, as quickly as you can!”

Chester mounted the swift horse that had been prepared for him.

“I’m sorry. I leave the rest up to you.”

He kicked at the horse’s flank, determined to not let his adviser’s initiative go to waste. The knights on horseback behind him drew their swords.

“For the emperor! For the future of Mira! Ride—together now, all of you!”

The knights cheered and Chester ground his teeth as he spurred his own mount away from the battle. Far in the distance, he heard the sound of swords clashing, heard the cries of the warriors of Mira. The sound of the battlefield was so wrenching that Chester couldn’t shake it—he looked back for just a moment.

“They cannot be stopped. It’s as if nobody can halt their advance.”

Atop the silver steed rode a black-haired woman, a hero. She wore a cracked

circlet atop her head.

That must be...

“Ayaka Sogou.”

The Miran knights pursued her, but they were slowly swallowed up by a wall of silver knights and prevented from even getting close. None of their arrows found their mark—the ancient magical item attacks that the Miran army relied upon were useless as well.

Ayaka Sogou would not stop.

By the time she did, Chester had fallen from his horse and was lying on his back looking up at her, his sword long since thrown from his hand. It was then, with a *crack*, that Ayaka’s circlet broke apart and fell to the ground. She looked down at Chester where he lay.

“You are the commander of this army?”

There was nothing in her expression that looked even close to taking pleasure in the victory.

“...Yes,” he answered.

“This is the only way I can do this. I am sorry. I need you to be unconscious for a time.”

He felt something hit him in the head.

“Sir Chesteeer!”

Chester thought he heard the voice of his military adviser—the last thing he heard before he lost consciousness.

The Miran army had advanced practically unopposed through Ulza, and it had seemed to all that they would soon be in Alion territory—but suddenly the offensive ground to a halt.

Chester Ord, and countless other captains below him were captured, lost

from the order of battle. New life was breathed into the new combined forces of Alion, and the Miran army was forced to retreat all the way back to the border with Ulza.

The battle was whispered of—and it was speculated that the Miran army had suffered a defeat at the hands of a single hero.

Nyantán Kikipat

THE WHITE WOLF RIDERS headed east to join up with the army that had been set up to defeat the Demon King, led by the Goddess herself. But as they were on the road, the magical war pigeon came with a message from Vicius.

The White Wolf Riders followed her orders and altered their route accordingly. They were directed to meet at the ruin of a small fortress. It had become obsolete with the construction of another fort and had been left abandoned for some time. Nyantan Kikipat accompanied the White Wolf Riders on the road.

“Sir Sogude... I see it,” said one of the White Wolf Riders, just as the fortress ruins came into view. He seemed shocked by what he saw.

Chief Rider Sogude Sigmus loosened his grip on the reins of his mount.

“Takuto Kirihara. Ogre soldiers and Golden-Eyed Monsters swarming at his back. There are Inner Circle demons there, too. I see. The Goddess’s message was true.”

The White Wolf Riders formed up before the hero and his army of monsters and stopped.

There stood the hero who defeated the Demon King—Takuto Kirihara. They had been told he had gained the ability to control Golden-Eyed Monsters.

Sogude dismounted from the White Wolf Riders’ sole black horse and faced

off with Kiri-hara. The rest of the riders held their breath, watching over their captain. A tension held all of them under its sway. The monsters were no longer giving off Demon King essence, so the threat that they posed had decreased considerably—even so, there was an apprehension produced by the sight of a human commanding Golden-Eyed Monsters.

“The Black Wolf, Sogude Sigmus...” said Kiri-hara, speaking his name.

The Chief Rider of the White Wolf Riders was the sole black wolf among them. While the other knights’ armor sets were all gray, Sigmus’s was jet black. He stood out among the group.

Any who saw him would surely recall another—the former leader of the strongest knights in the world, who once rode astride a single white dragon, in a sea of black ones. The Strongest Man in the World, Civit Gartland.

There had often been talk of the Black Wolf racing across the north, and the White Dragon who soared across the skies of the south. The two had often been compared, but surprisingly, had never met.

“Long time no see, Kiri-hara.”

Sogude’s voice was low and resonated like the strike of a heavy blade. There was a strange quality to it—roughness and calm coexisting in equal measure. He was tall and slender, making him appear thin, but his knight’s armor concealed the bulk of his muscles.

He looked fierce, with deep-set eyes and roughly groomed hair. His beard made it especially difficult to consider his appearance neat. But it was clear that he could clean up nicely with a little work. Despite his indifference to grooming, there was an obvious elegance underneath that couldn’t be so easily hidden.

“We came here on Vicius’s orders. We received a message... You have some business with us?”

The two of them had battled on the eastern front together, when the Great Invasion came.

“You are kingly too,” said Kirihara. “I hear that you’re to take the throne of Magnar, as you’re the younger brother of the former king... But I’ve decided that I’m going to be King of Magnar.”

A murmur went through the riders’ ranks—but Sogude didn’t even flinch.

“Sorry, but the White Wolf King hasn’t been confirmed dead yet. I’m considering taking the throne temporarily in his absence, just until he comes back. I mean no offense, but I’m not surrendering the throne to anyone. We don’t need your assistance.”

“Assistance? No—I mean to say that only *I* am worthy of it.”

“...”

“Vicius has sanctioned this.”

The knights of the White Wolf Riders were confused, and more murmuring began. Sogude raised a single eyebrow.

“Vicius...? What do you mean?”

Kirihara slowly drew his katana.

“What the hell are you doing?!” shouted the vice-captain of the White Wolf Riders in reproach.

“What else? If you will not surrender the throne, then I suggest we determine through strength who is worthy... That is providence. Am I incorrect?”

Kirihara walked toward Sogude, approaching step by step with his katana in hand.

“Nonsense. Do you even understand the slightest thing about what it is to be a king? If I had no obligation, no duties for me to fulfill, I’d much rather choose my freedom than to sit the throne. As you grow older, you’ll come to realize how worthless these positions can be, with all their pomp and formalities. Kirihara...you have strength and talent. Why not try turning your gaze to the wider world, before you dream of being king?”

Kirihara stopped, standing just one meter away from Sogude.

“You speak of choosing freedom? Hmph... Perfect. You are free to leave the throne of Magnar to me, the true king.”

Sogude sighed.

“...Sorry. The throne of Magnar must pass to someone from Magnar. I don’t know what Vicius thinks about this, but the throne isn’t just something I can give away to a Hero from Another Wor—.”

Thk!

“...?”

It happened in the blink of an eye—Kirihara thrust his katana forward and its blade pierced Sogude’s chest.

“Gh, hah...?!”

“...You lost the moment you thought of me as I once was. I have defeated the Demon King and am the *strongest* in every way. That oversight is the reason for your defeat.”

Kirihara looked down and snorted at Sogude as the Black Wolf began to lean forward.

“Hmm... But I did feel a kingliness from you that approaches my own. I must admit, it appears you have the vessel of a king. I respect that about you...in a way.”

The White Wolf Riders couldn’t understand what was happening before their eyes. Nyantan was taken completely off guard as well—and it was not just Kirihara’s sudden action that had stunned her.

That single blow... Was there any murderous intent behind it?

“Ki-... Ri... Ha—” Spitting up blood, Sogude made to draw his own sword.

“Too late for that.”

With those words, Kirihara delivered a lightning-fast strike. Sogude’s head

was severed from his body and fell to the ground below.

Drip...

The vice-captain's eyes opened wide, and a scream exploded from his lungs.

"Eh? ...What? Ah... Ah... N-no... S-sir... Sogude... Sigmuuus?!"

"Where are the Artlight sisters?" Kiri-hara's question was directed at the vice-captain. His tone was indifferent.

"Wh-wh... What?"

"I'm asking you where the Artlight sisters are."

"...Wh-why?" stammered the vice-captain, his voice trembling. "Why are you even asking?"

"Hm? Because they're going to be my concubines. Why are *you* asking me questions? I can't understand why you'd even do such a thing..."

"Th-the older sister...Lady D-Dearice... She is sworn to Sir Sogude. They are to have a l-life together."

Kiri-hara clicked his tongue.

"You're saying she's used goods then, huh? The older one's worth less."

"Y-you bastard... Not even a hero can do this to us! You brute! Agh... How could you? How could you do this to Sir Sogude! White Wolf Riders, prepare for battle!"

The knights had tears in their eyes, their faces twisted in anguish. Nyantan hesitated.

Takuto Kiri-hara is much, much more powerful than he once was. I cannot defeat him now. But it seems like the White Wolf Riders know that too... They're all capable warriors in their own rights—they can sense the danger and understand just how strong Kiri-hara really is. Their anger will be their undoing.

"Sogude Sigmus had what it takes to be a king, but he was foolish... He made poor decisions. And, well, leaving you alive to ride across Magnar spreading foul

rumors about me... That would be unpleasant. You must die, as well. That is just how it must be..."

The Golden-Eyed Monsters began to advance, and Kiri-hara made his shimmering dragons appear.

"Your king orders you to kill them."

A stream of golden dragons, swarming like giant snakes, writhed violently in the air around him.

"Leave none alive."

The slaughter was over, the White Wolf Riders destroyed. The Golden-Eyed Monsters set about dismembering the corpses, to be certain.

Nyantan Kikipat was the only person left alive.

I should be used to the smell of blood by now, she thought.

For some reason, the scent of the blood spilled that day smelled worse than ever before. Kiri-hara placed his katana back into its scabbard.

"Lucky for you, Vicius has told me to allow you to return home alive. Be thankful that I have chosen to cooperate with her." Kiri-hara glared at Nyantan, then gave her a glance up and down. "You might be capable... But you are from the gutter, no?"

Nyantan looked back at him, her face tense.

"What of it?"

"Your blood is impure, after all... I cannot consider you worthy of me. Hmph. Quickly now, go. I don't want to suffer through Vicius nagging me about you. There's no role left for you to play here."

"...Goodbye, then."

"Oh, and..." Kiri-hara called up to her on her mount. "I'm sure you understand, but you will not speak of this to anyone but Vicius herself. If you reveal what happened here, you will be eliminated—even if you are Vicius's favorite."

“...”

“You aren’t answering me.”

“...Understood.”

Nyantán wanted to leave as soon as she could. There was something peculiarly unsettling about what Kirihara had become. She felt as if she might go insane if she had to talk to him any longer.

“One more thing, Nyantán.”

“What can I do for you?”

“I have surpassed you now... Admit that.”

“...Yes. You have surpassed me.”

Kirihara exhaled, a long sigh.

“That is enough.”

Chapter 4:

Terminus

WE HEADED FOR THE SEALED ROOM, located one floor below the Great Vault of Mira. We made our way down the stairs—myself, Seras, Munin, and the Wildly Beautiful Emperor—along with an escort of four individuals, including his guards. There was a scholar with us too, who had been studying forbidden magic.

“The change that’s come across the Golden-Eyed Monsters near the Nightwall—the rumors have been confirmed,” the Wildly Beautiful Emperor told me as we walked. “The Demon King’s main forces, including his ogre soldiers, are no longer giving off Demon King essence.”

“The Demon King is dead, then.”

“Yes. It means that the Goddess’s forces have been freed of that inhibiting factor, but also that there is no longer any fear of what might happen after Vicius is defeated. We might no longer need the S-Class heroes to join us—that might be one positive way to think about this new development.”

...So the Demon King’s dead, huh. It does kind of interest me who killed him.

Was it Sogou? Or was it Kirihara?

“In any case, now we can focus on our fight against the Goddess,” I said.

“Indeed. I need not hesitate to join my army in the east.”

“I heard that Neah and Bakoss have joined the fight in Ulza.”

“Yes, Cattlea Straumss and her Holy Order of Knights, and the Black Dragon Knights too, I have heard. However, with Chester Ord and the Band of the Sun in the field, they should be able to force a deadlock if they focus on defending their positions. Soon I will join them—and then we will march straight to Alion.”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor lowered his voice, glancing over his shoulder for

a moment.

“It would be best if we could make alliances with Neah and Bakoss first. Might Seras Ashrain be convinced to help with Princess Cattlea?”

“I also do not wish to fight with her, if truth be told. Seras and I will do our best.”

“Hmph, thank you.”

Seras herself also appeared to have the army of Neah on her mind.

“When we were reunited at the White Citadel of Protection, I discussed with the princess how we might proceed if the two of us were ever to be opposed. Do not worry about me, Sir Too-ka,” I recalled her words.

Perhaps Seras is being considerate, and doesn’t want me to feel anxious. She does seem more determined now than she used to, though...as if her mind’s made up.

“Once this sealed room matter has been dealt with, will we be going east with you, Your Majesty?”

“Yes. The attack on the imperial capital delayed us, but now preparations have been completed. Luheit has also finally returned. I intend on entrusting the city to him in my absence.”

I had met with Luheit before we made our way down to the vaults. He had already received a report on Hawk’s death before his arrival in the capital.

“Zine...His majesty spoke to me of this, you see? He said that Seras Ashrain believes herself responsible for Hawk’s death, and that the incident worries her. He asked that I not mistreat her...”

After those words, Luheit had given a slight, bitter smile.

“I was then given the same warning from the nobles of the three princeps elector houses. And from Kaize. From what I have heard, it would be cruel of me to blame her for what happened. And well...it is that sincere and honest part of her character that causes her such grief. She too is a victim, no doubt.”

He had then wrapped up his thoughts.

“Yes... It is not that I do not feel sadness at his death. But I made peace with my emotions before arriving in the capital. I had high hopes for Hawk’s future, and thought fondly of him, that much is true. But in this rebellion against the Goddess, we must be prepared for such fates to befall any of us. If one is not willing to accept sacrifices, then one need not go to war in the first place. I have the right to grieve...but my sadness will not pull me down. Those are my feelings.”

Recalling his words, I spoke to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

“It appears that you spoke to Sir Luheit on our behalf, Your Majesty.”

“There would have been no problems, even if I had not. He is of excellent *character*—I have no qualms whatsoever with having him installed as emperor following my death.”

Luheit and Kaize hadn’t accompanied us to the sealed room. They were somewhere upstairs, talking over their plans of action and sending out orders.

“But this development does mean that we need the power to fight the Goddess... Learning the secrets of forbidden magic has become more important than ever. Considering past precedent, it’s possible that the heroes might now be sent to the eastern front. Vicius may hold their return to their old world as leverage against them.”

“You mean to say there may be a way to return the heroes home without the Goddess’s help? We must open the sealed door, to learn whether that truly is the case, then. This sealed door holds the key.”

“Indeed so. I must know for sure.”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor stopped.

“...Right.”

We had arrived at the door to the sealed room in question. The door itself was decorated with carvings, and in general looked much like the ones that led

to the Great Vault. But there were clear differences between the two entrances.

The doors to the Great Vault had been unadorned with carvings. This door had a crystal set into it just above the center. It reminded me of the light panel that had been inside of the Great Vault. I took a closer look and saw similar lines radiating away from the crystal.

“Ah.” Munin reacted as if she’d just noticed something.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor placed his hand on the crystal and began to pour mana into it. The lines in the door glowed with pale light. The brilliance flickered, like soft sunlight reflected on the surface of a lake.

“It produces light, as you see—but it will not open,” said the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

He’s right—that thing’s shown no signs of opening.

“Munin,” I said, gesturing to the door’s carvings with my chin. “Seemed like you noticed something just now. Can you read those?”

I felt as if I’d seen the door’s carvings somewhere once before.

Yeah, they look the same...the same as the letters on the Scrolls of Forbidden Magic.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor was looking at Munin too.

“These look like forbidden words to me... You can read them, can’t you Munin?” I asked.

“To you who reads these words... You are worthy of opening this door. Take revenge upon god as one with a will of thy own.”

Once Munin was done speaking, there was a faint rumbling—and the door opened.

“Whoa...” the scholar let out a gasp, their mouth half open as they looked on. “I-it’s open... Th-the sealed room is open!”

The scholar was trembling with emotion.

I get it, though... There's something especially enticing about what's behind a locked door.

"Your Majesty, we will go first. There may be traps laid within," said one of the emperor's guards. They took up their lanterns.

"I think perhaps we should light up the whole space," said Seras when she saw what they were doing. She used her spirit of light to illuminate up the room.

"The power of the spirits," said the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, looking impressed. "I see. This is far more light than our lanterns would have granted us. Fine work."

"Thank you, Lady Seras," said one of the guards. "If you would all wait here a few moments, please."

They went into the room. After a few moments I—with permission from the emperor—did the same.

I've got a bit of experience with searching for traps in places like this. Speaking in terms of the old world, I'd say this is about a fifteen-tatami mat room, give or take.

On the far side of the room and to the left and right, there were letters carved into the walls. Along the far wall there stood a long table that looked to be made of bronze. Three flat bronze boxes sat on top of the table, though it looked as if two of them had been opened and were now empty.

As for the rest of the room, there was an empty bookshelf and old empty wooden boxes in all four corners of the room. I spent a while longer searching, but there didn't appear to be any traps. I gave a signal to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor and the others; he entered with his sleeve over his nose, but quickly removed it.

"There is no dust. Even with the spirit of light illuminating this place, I sense

no stone dust in the air. Nor does this place smell of mold... It has almost no scent. What an odd room.”

I see. I couldn't really tell with my mask on.

“The shelves are empty, and the boxes in the corners of the room appear to be empty too,” I said.

“Hmph,” grunted the Wildly Beautiful Emperor with great interest. His gaze turned to the two empty boxes on the table.

“It appears that somebody has been here before us, and has removed several items from this room... Munin?”

Munin didn't respond.

“Munin?” I repeated.

“...Eh? Sorry... I was distracted by the writing on the walls.”

“You can read that too, then? I would like it if you could tell me what it says,” said the emperor.

“Y-yes... Of course.”

Munin nervously looked over the letters on the walls.

“Ehm... It would sound a little grandiose if I read it as is, so I'll paraphrase. I'll also cut out anything I don't think is relevant. Don't worry though, I know what you are looking for. Also...there are some places where the letters are missing or aren't legible. Please understand that before I get started.”

That said, Munin began.

“First, the three boxes on the table—they contain Scrolls of Forbidden Magic.”

“Two are empty... What of the remaining box?” asked the Wildly Beautiful Emperor. He then ordered the scholar to open the box. They approached and opened the lid as if they were handling a precious antique. There was a single scroll within.

“Is it a scroll of forbidden magic?”

“Most likely, yes.”

“Can you read it?”

“One moment.”

The scroll was so old, there was a chance that it might be destroyed the moment it was touched. The scholar broke into a cold sweat, delicately examining the scroll as if they were appraising a relic.

“Phew...” He exhaled deeply. “...It appears to be okay There are no issues with the condition of the parchment. There must be something special about the material. I believe it is safe to untie and open it.”

Looking relieved that this task was over with, the scholar handed the scroll to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

“Let us decipher this scroll later. Munin, first could I ask you to read the left and right walls?”

“Ah, yes. The walls to our left and right are carved with an advanced, updated form of ancient incantations... They appear to reproduce what is written on the Scrolls of Forbidden Magic themselves.”

The writing on those left and right walls—I’ve seen those letters somewhere before too. I think those are some of the same passages that are on the three Scrolls of Forbidden Magic that I’ve got.

“The letters on the scrolls themselves are written with a special kind of sealing ink. I cannot attune myself to the forbidden magic by just reading the words carved into the walls. In other words, the wall carvings are just there for reference. The top line lists the words of the forbidden magic itself, and...” Munin crouched down, careful to fold up the bottom of her skirt. “These smaller lines at the bottom indicate what the magic does... A sort of footnote, I suppose.”

“So this truly is a room that holds the secrets of forbidden magic...” mused the

Wildly Beautiful Emperor. “Thank you for the explanation, Munin. It was certainly helpful.”

The scholar took a Scroll of Forbidden Magic from their backpack at the Wildly Beautiful Emperor’s order.

They brought that one in here... It’s not the one from the box.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor took it, and handed it to Munin.

“Could I ask you to read this first?”

“Understood.”

Munin started to read the scroll, looking up at the wall several times to compare the sentences.

“This incantation is for ‘sending home’...an incantation for returning the heroes to their old world.”

The scholar looked to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, his eyes filled with joy. The emperor however, showed no happiness.

“What else is written there? Are there conditions for its use?”

“A magic circle carved by a divine intended for sending home or for summoning... With that condition met, the ‘sending home’ ceremony can be performed by a non-divine, it says. But it does say that we of the Forbidden Words Clan are needed.”

The scholar looked filled with accomplishment—and the Wildly Beautiful Emperor seemed somewhat relieved.

“Could you read this one as well? The scroll we just found.”

“Yes, of course. I am glad that these still appear to be legible, but... Ah-hem...”

Munin walked over to the opposite wall, mumbling to herself as she went.

“Ah—there it is!”

Munin gave a deep sigh of relief, then began busily reading once more.

“This incantation is...‘summoning.’”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor’s shoulders pricked up.

“An incantation to summon those from an alternate world, who are unaffected by the Demon King’s essence...”

“Anything else?” The emperor interrupted her, seeming eager.

“Y-yes... Just as with the other, the summoning ritual can be performed with the requisite magic circle and a member of the Forbidden Words Clan.”

“What else is needed?”

“A blue dragonstone is needed to acquire the magic... Source essence in order to perform the ceremony... Alternatively, another source of equivalent power...”

The scholar exclaimed in joy, “Your Majesty!”

“How many blue dragonstones do we have?”

“Fewer than ten... But if we scour the world, I believe we can acquire more!”

Come to think of it... Blue dragonstones are what’s left over once the body of a Blue-Eyed Dragon melts away, right? I remember Munin once told me that they mainly live in a mountain range in the west of the continent. It makes sense that Mira would have an easier time than the other countries in finding them.

They must have already had some information about the blue dragonstones and their connection to forbidden magic—that’s why they’ve been stockpiling them. The “disable” forbidden magic that I have consumes a blue dragonstone when activated... But it sounds like we’ll also need them for the summoning and sending home rituals. Two of them sounds like it’ll be enough for the acquisition of the magic itself, and Mira has some prepared already. Doesn’t seem like I’ll need to provide them with any of mine then.

“I-I see...” The Wildly Beautiful Emperor sounded defeated. He swayed, looking even as if he might fall. I supported his shoulders from behind.

“Are you okay, Your Majesty?”

“Nh... My apologies. I feel drained, somewhat.”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor placed his hand in mine, and quickly steadied himself on his own two feet.

“We have confirmed the existence of the forbidden magic, and obtained it... My gamble has paid off, I believe. It is significant that we now have the forbidden magic’s power to summon and send home the heroes. It will greatly assist us in convincing the S-Class heroes to join us, I am sure.”

He’s right—this is big. Huge. It particularly goes far toward convincing Sogou to join us.

“From now on, we need not rely on the Goddess, but can fight the Root of All Evil ourselves. That has been my greatest worry all this time. I had not wanted to rely on wishful thinking, hoping that the next divine dispatched to our world would be more reasonable than the present one. But... I see. So this is why that Goddess was in such a frenzy to forbid the use of this magic...”

“But it does require a marked member of the Kurosaga...” I said.

Not to pour cold water on the emperor’s relief here—but there’s always the danger that the line of marked Kurosaga could end at any time. The problem of whether this power will last still remains. Right now, Munin and Fugi are the only two marked Kurosaga left.

It seemed as if Munin sensed what I was worried about.

“Heh heh, I think that will be all right, though. There has always been at least one marked member of our clan in each generation. Of course, there is no guarantee that the trend will continue—it’s possible that marked individuals might die of illness—but if the precedent holds, our line will never die out completely.”

I see.

“So the odds aren’t against us, at least.”

“The clan chief often raises the marked, and they become the next chief after the old chief’s death... But I don’t personally think someone should have to become chief because they happen to be marked, you see?”

Munin gave me a wry smile. In that smile I saw how much she cared for Fugi, the Kurosaga girl she had left at home.

“ ... ”

Seems like I already had all the three things I needed all along, anyway. Not here, when I can see the end of my journey, but all the way back at the start when everything seemed lost.

Summoning, sending home, disabling.

I don’t know if he knew which Scrolls of Forbidden Magic were which, but back there in the Ruins of Disposal... The Great Sage Anglin brought the scrolls he could down into the jaws of death to keep them from the Goddess. Right now, the Wildly Beautiful Emperor has the scrolls for summoning and sending home, but he doesn’t have the one for disabling.

...Man, this really makes me grateful all over again. It’s only because we have that disable scroll now that we’ll be able to hammer that Foul Goddess. And I’ll be able to strike her with my status effect skills that she mocked as worthless.

With my own two hands...

...I’ll be able to take my revenge.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor retied the scrolls.

“And yet... There is no forbidden magic here to weaken the Goddess, is there? I would have liked to have something to increase our chances of victory in the battle against her, but I suppose nothing can be done about that. Let us pin our hopes on Asagi and the S-Class heroes that we can hopefully win to our cause during our final confrontation with the Goddess. Lord of the Flies... I am counting on you as well, and the cursed magic of your Lord of the Flies Brigade.”

“For you, Your Majesty, for those I treasure who live in the Country at the End

of the World, and for the future of this world—I will do everything in my power, until my last breath.”

We returned upstairs to the castle, and parted from the Wildly Beautiful Emperor. We had to get back to our guest house and prepare to leave.

First we’re going to find out where Vicius is—where we need to go to settle this, once and for all. We need to decide what we’re doing next. The most effective way of finding the Goddess is going to be by using Erika’s familiars, I suppose.

Piggymaru started squeaking at us when we got back to the house.

“Is that Erika’s familiar?”

We had left a little bell in the bird’s cage and decided on a few signals it might use to get our attention. The signal it was chiming out when we stepped through the door was for an urgent message—not the most urgent, but the second.

We’ve received this signal before, and it was important news then, too.

We went upstairs to the room with the familiar and quickly let the little bird out and onto the message board. The bird impatiently scurried about and I saw some hesitation as it ran. It was clear that Erika was debating whether or not to speak to us directly, even with the toll that that would take on her physically. We waited and eventually her awkwardly phrased message was complete.

“Land of Golden-Eyed. From north, toward Mira. Golden-Eyed Monsters. Humanoid types. Many on the move. Northern region of Land of Golden-Eyed.”

The northern region of the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters... That’s the place where the strongest of them reside. We once rode through it on Erika’s war chariot, using the power of her magical items to make it through. Half that journey was spent traveling through the most dangerous spots. Does she mean all the monsters from that area are making their way to Mira?

“Northern region. Monsters. Humanoid types. Corpses too. Lots. Marks of conflict.”

“So... Have those mouth monsters drawn them over?”

“No. Command organized. Strange, mass movement. Discovered among horde, a human.”

“A human?”

“Human leading the monsters. Looked that way. Some kind of power. High chance he controls them. I think so.”

“...A human.”

“Description matches your recollection. Checked with Takao, confirmed.”

From the moment the familiar hopped to the first two letters of the name, I could guess at what Erika was spelling out. When all the letters were conveyed—I put them together in my head.

“K-i-r-i-h-a-r-a T-a-k-u-t-o.”

It wasn't long until the Wildly Beautiful Emperor called for us again. He had received a message from a Magnar magical war pigeon. The sender was marked as Kiriara Takuto.

I defeated the Demon King.

I have a new skill that allows me to control the Golden-Eyed hordes.

Now those underlings of the Demon King—his monsters and demons—are my subordinates.

Even the humanoid types are now mine.

I am making the monsters of the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters my

servants as well, journeying through that region. I will emerge in the Empire of Mira, the nation that started this idiotic war.

First, I will demonstrate my royalty with the destruction of Mira.

But I am not without compassion.

Fulfill all of the following conditions, completely surrender, and I will accept you as my subordinates—those of a true king.

The first condition is that the Lord of the Flies Brigade, who have been welcomed into Mira, will be handed over to me. They must be taken captive.

The second condition is that Seras Ashrain acknowledges her mistakes, completely separates herself from the Lord of the Flies Brigade, and swears herself to me forever.

This is a simple task, but all I order is her return, nothing more.

A sword must be returned to its rightful scabbard. That is all.

If I cannot confirm that those conditions have been met, the humanoid types will be forced to invade Mira, leading the rest of my army into battle. You will be overwhelmed.

I will set a deadline.

I am a true king. You would be hugely mistaken to think that I will wait forever.

I will allow you to hand over the Lord of the Flies Brigade wherever you choose, so long as I approve of the location.

I must warn you not to do anything stupid.

Break your promises or try to outwit me, and you will come to know the true Kiri-hara.

Your foolish rebellion will end in unparalleled regret, nothing more.

If you do not wish to suffer that regret—if you value your lives and wish to be saved—accept the orders of your infinitely magnanimous and compromising king. There is no other way. In truth, I am now practically equal to the gods.

To those who will understand these following words, listen.

I will never forgive you.

You must be corrected to your rightful station.

I will correct this world.

All will be as it should.

The new King of the Northern Lands, Kirihara Takuto

I sat in the room where the war council took place, Seras and Munin sitting on either side of me. Across the table from us was the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, with Luheit and Kaize sitting to his right and left.

“What do you think of this?” the emperor asked me, placing the message aside.

“To be frank, I have been keeping in contact with someone of the Country at the End of the World through special means, and have some knowledge of what is happening in the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters. Think of it as a kind of special magical war pigeon. Revealing the identity of my source and the means by which we communicate would also pose a danger to the individual in question, and so I cannot tell you anything more. I gave that individual my word, in solemn promise. I can, however, pass on the information given to me.”

Usually Erika’s familiars are flying all over the continent, so it’s not just the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters that I can get intel on. But no need to divulge

that for now. Erika can only actually see through one of her familiar's eyes at any one time—it's not like a 24-hour surveillance system covering the whole world. I also deliberately described Erika as being from the Country at the End of the World, but since she was there for the country's founding I guess that isn't entirely inaccurate.

"Go on," said the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, prompting me to continue.

"This great horde of Golden-Eyed Monsters and humanoid types—I can confirm that they are on the move."

Kaize directed a sharp gaze in my direction.

"They are coming to Mira?"

"On their present heading, yes."

"From the reports...I heard a rumor that they may be from the deep northern regions of the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters."

"Yes, from the region in which the most dangerous of their kind reside."

"Your Majesty," began Kaize. "Is it accurate to consider that the Demon King has been killed by this Takuto Kiri-hara individual?"

"The possibility remains that it was Ayaka Sogou who defeated him. However, considering the date that she is reported to have departed from Alion with the Goddess...I believe that it was Kiri-hara, yes."

"At present, I am of the same opinion," I added.

...So it was Kiri-hara who defeated the Demon King.

Kaize moaned, looking deep in thought.

"This power to control Golden-Eyed Monsters... From what the Lord of the Flies has told us, it appears we have no choice but to believe it is real. ... Unbelievable as the situation may be."

"I heard from Kobato Kashima of Takuto Kiri-hara's identifying characteristics. This individual who has been seen in the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters—

the puppet master—he matches the description I have been given of Takuto Kiri-hara. I believe that it is most certainly him,” I said.

“...First and foremost, I do not think this man is in his right mind,” said Luheit, who had been listening in silence to our conversation. “In some places, especially in the latter half of the letter...he seems *incoherent*. He has named himself the King of the Northern Lands, but I don’t understand what he means by it. There’s something in his writing...a kind of madness, disconnected from reason.”

I delved into my mind, seeking memories of Kiri-hara Takuto from the moment right before I was disposed of. I went further—back to the inside of the bus on our school trip. Even further, to the days we spent as classmates at the academy.

Something’s off—this isn’t the Kiri-hara Takuto I know. This is just like it was with Yasu. Coming to this other world—it broke them. Or maybe they’re just like me, and something deep within them has been drawn to the surface.

“Your Majesty, it seems this horde of Golden-Eyed Monsters truly is heading for Mira. How should we proceed?” asked Kaize.

“It is true that with the Demon King essence and its effects gone, they have become easier to fight. But that does nothing to lessen the threat those humanoid types pose. With the appearance of Neah and Bakoss in our fight against Ulza in the east and the losses we suffered in the recent attack upon the imperial capital... This coming battle against the monster army from the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters may prove somewhat difficult.” The Wildly Beautiful Emperor’s eyes then turned to me and Seras.

“But you think they might be stopped by surrendering these two?” Luheit asked with a smirk.

“Yes...” said the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, propping up his cheek with his hand and somewhat brazenly placing his elbow on the table. “But I have no intention of accepting those terms.”

“Indeed, I am in agreement with that,” replied Luheit.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor turned his sharp eyes on me. “The Lord of the Flies is now an invaluable military asset in our fight against the Goddess. Offering him up as a sacrifice—a temporary measure to buy time—would also cost us our alliance with the Country at the End of the World.”

“That said...” began Kaize, folding his arms with a troubled look on his face. “How should we deal with this issue? The Empire of Mira has no spare forces to receive Kiriara’s army of monsters. I hardly think the precious reserve brigades we have finally been able to assemble at the capital will be able to hold them off...”

Reserve brigades... I think I remember hearing somewhere that Mira has most of its demi-humans living in secret, in the west of their land. A long time ago, Mira and Yonato used to be tolerant toward those demi-humans—but now most of them live in the Country at the End of the World. A majority of the elves live on the other side of the barrier known as the Great Spell. There are some demi-humans that chose to live in the outside world—the Speed Clan of leopardmen, for one—but I’ve never seen a demi-human walking around the imperial capital. I heard that Yonato’s Holy Order of the Purge will accept you if you’re a demi-human, and you can be treated fairly well as a member of their order, but not many demi-humans reach that level. Mira, on the other hand, has built hidden villages for its demi-humans to protect them.

I see—that must be partly why the Empire of Mira invited the Forbidden Words Clan to join them. Demi-humans are treated well in Mira, so apparently, lots of them choose to join of their own volition...but the one condition of Mira’s protection is that they agree to join the reserve brigades.

The reserve brigades are called up when a decisive battle threatens—though I suppose what’s unique about it is that they have the right to refuse the call. Apparently, anyone with a legitimate reason is allowed to refrain from being called up to fight with the reserve brigades. Maybe because the demi-humans know that they’ll be next after the fall of Mira—or possibly due to the new

alliance with the Country at the End of the World—almost all those in the reserve brigades who are able to fight have agreed to do so.

Come to think of it, I've been seeing more and more demi-humans in the castle lately. So just like Yonato had that Holy Cavalry ace up their sleeve, Mira has an ace of their own. But still...

"You're right. The reserves brigade can hardly fight that army."

"If we could take out Kiri-hara, the one controlling them..."

The moment I started speaking, all three of the Mira brothers turned their attention on me.

"...Then perhaps we might be capable of stopping the Golden-Eyed Monsters from reaching Mira. That is my opinion."

Kaize gave me a tired smile. "We're talking about the hero who defeated the Demon King here, you know?"

"But with my cursed magic—who can be sure I cannot stop him?"

Kaize looked abashed and the Wildly Beautiful Emperor sighed. "I apologize... I had not meant to make you say it."

"Do not worry about that, please."

Yeah—there's no need for this to bother Kaize. In the first place, I think this is a problem the Lord of the Flies must deal with. Kiri-hara Takuto's hatred isn't directed at the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, but at me. But why does he have this grudge against me? He's not asking for the Emperor of Mira in chains, but the Lord of the Flies. Why? He's threatening to invade Mira, but his message made no mention of the Wildly Beautiful Emperor himself. The only individuals he mentioned by name were the Lord of the Flies and Seras Ashrain. He's got some kind of fixation on the two of us.

"I will never forgive you."

He isn't referring to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, but the Lord of the Flies. What is it about the Lord of the Flies that Kiri-hara can't "forgive?" Is it that my

fame is growing across this world?

I turned my gaze to the person sitting next to me—the one it seemed that Kiri-hara wanted for himself...

“Hm?”

...Or is it because the Lord of the Flies has Seras Ashrain by his side? Is that what he can't forgive me for?

The entitlement with which he wrote this just oozes off the page. He thinks he's worthy of possessing everything he desires.

“...”

There's an old concept from the world I came from that applies here. A “need for approval”—the desire for the attention and validation of others.

“I'm amazing now, and I want you to recognize that.”

“I defeated the Demon King, so now I'm the greatest in the world.”

There's Mimori Touka, always hiding from the limelight, a background character... Hiding his true identity and sneaking around as the Lord of the Flies.

And his complete opposite, Kiri-hara Takuto. A monster born from that desire for approval.

He needs to have Seras by his side because he can't determine his own worth for himself. He can't decide whether he's happy or sad, or what something is really worth. That uncertainty can eat away at a person's mind, until it ultimately kills them.

“He's defeated the Demon King and has gained the power to control Golden-Eyed Monsters, so I imagine he feels all-powerful right now,” I said.

That foul Goddess, though—whatever her next move is still bothers me. She didn't choose to eliminate Kiri-hara. Is he stronger than she is now? Could it be that she's struggling to deal with him too? I can't see what moves that foul Goddess is making right now, so I should always keep her in the back of my

mind. There's no way she won't make a move while Kirihara runs wild across Mira.

“He desires Seras—believing that as the savior of this world, he deserves to possess the woman who is hailed as the most beautiful to live upon it. He does not appreciate that the Lord of the Flies is currently in *possession* of her... In other words, this trouble has been visited upon the Empire of Mira because I am within its borders. It's my responsibility to stop him.”

“I cannot accept that, Lord of the Flies,” the Wildly Beautiful Emperor responded. “Responsibility, you say? I do not accept that you or Seras are the cause of this. I am the one who welcomed you into our alliance. Do not play the fool.”

“Heh heh... Of course, I had the feeling you might say that, Your Majesty.”

“Hmph. You can be rather mean, can't you.”

Hmm. So even the Wildly Beautiful Emperor can make such a face—I wasn't expecting that from him.

“But I cannot allow the Empire of Mira to sink under the waves of this invasion before the final battle with that Goddess. To oppose the Goddess and Alion, I will need Mira's strength after all.”

Most importantly, with the grudge that Kirihara seems to have against the Lord of the Flies, there's no telling how he might interrupt my fight against her if I left him alone. He's a dangerous and unknown factor that I need to crush as soon as possible.

“Can you do this, Lord of the Flies?”

“I have no other choice.”

“Hmph,” said Kaize, looking suddenly optimistic. “If you could take care of Kirihara and that army of his... Then we might proceed as planned to the eastern fr—”

Bang!

“Pardon me for bargin’ in!”

The door was flung open as Hausen Dias, the head of one of the princeps elector houses, strode in. A single messenger came stumbling out from behind him. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor showed no sign of even rising from his seat.

“I told you to wait outside for my signal... But I take it this report is so grave that you have had to ask Mr. Dias to assist you in gaining entry. What is it?”

“A rout, Your Majesty!”

“Our army in the east? Then we must set out at once. How far have our forces retreated?!” asked the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

“The combined army of the enemy is about to cross over the border into Mira.”

Clatter!

Kaize reflexively jumped to his feet. “What did you just say?! They’ve truly been pushed back *that* far?!”

Luheit’s brow was tightly knitted as well, showing none of his usual mild manner. “I cannot possibly think the addition of Empress Cattlea and the remnants of the Black Dragon Knights could have gained them such ground.”

“That must mean...”

“It is Ayaka Sogou!”

Ayaka Sogou’s appeared? She’s fighting a war against humans now? She was always an unknown factor... So she’s been swayed, then. Over to the Goddess’s side.

I looked to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, and he, in turn, glanced at me.

“Is Ayaka Sogou the only hero involved in the fighting?”

“She is the only one that has been sighted on the front! In addition to all our army’s generals, Sir Chester has also been taken captive! The eastern front... That hero has completely turned the tides of the battle!”

Kaize put his hands on the table and leaned forward.

“Impossible! The Demon King, the Goddess, Civit Gartland perhaps... But I refuse to accept that a hero could so sway the course of...”

Suddenly the words seemed to catch in Kaize’s throat.

He probably just remembered that we were just talking about a hero leading an army of monsters on Mira.

“Gh... So *these* are the S-Class heroes, then,” he said finally.

The messenger continued his report, only compounding the confusion for all in attendance. Kaize was astounded by what he heard.

“Th-they fight to minimize our casualties, you say? Capturing our generals and urging our soldiers to retreat? Capturing those that do not accept their advice wherever possible rather than killing them... Keeping them prisoner in the fortresses of Ulza that they have recaptured? I-impossible... Th-this is *war*, is it not?!”

Apparently her unique skill is really playing an outsized role in all this. The silver army that Sogou Ayaka can deploy is keeping casualties down on both sides of the battle lines. They don’t need food, they never tire, never get sick. They also can’t die—not so long as Sogou Ayaka has the MP to sustain them. MP is restored when you sleep, not just on level up.

“Is this different from the White Army that recently assaulted our city?” asked the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

It was Hausen who answered him. “From what I have heard they seem to be completely different armies. They are not golden-eyed, nor do they try to hold hands in death, in the repulsive way the white ones did...”

“Hmph,” mused Kaize, mulling over all the intel we’d just received. “It appears they cannot maintain their shape when they are too far away from Ayaka Sogou. They do indeed sound different. The White Army led by the Banished Emperor was capable of operating over quite a wide area, it seemed. Perhaps

the narrow scope of this Silver Army's activities is a blessing. It does, however, seem more difficult to kill or disable them than the White Army. They appear much stronger than our previous foes."

It was then that the messenger began shouting, almost foaming at the mouth as he raised his voice. "O-our army's morale is falling! This is the second coming of Civit Gartland... Worse! The reports...they are insane! A single rider producing a whole silver army... Charging straight toward the commanders of our forces! Nobody—none of us can stop them! Not with one thousand times more men could we do this! They don't even fall for our traps! Countless famed warriors of Mira have crossed swords with Ayaka Sogou! None can compete with her! Not one man! I-I heard from a member of the Band of the Sun that it isn't just her special powers as a hero... She is a peerless fighter... A natural talent..."

The doubt floated through my mind.

It's a bit late to be realizing this, but this strength of Sogou Ayaka's... Is it all due to her powers as a hero? There's something else about that class rep of ours—something out of the ordinary.

The messenger dropped to his knees once he was done, the color drained from his face.

"As embarrassing as it is to admit, I... Look, the reports that we have received about Ayaka Sogou, th-they... They terrify me! I think she may be plotting something against us... Even the stories I have just conveyed to you feel so unreal to me, almost..."

"So this is an S-Class hero... Ayaka Sogou."

Not even the fantastic reports from the messenger could shake the Wildly Beautiful Emperor's calm demeanor. He spoke solemnly as he gave the order.

"If ever there was a time for them to take the stage, it surely is now—get me Asagi Ikusaba."

“Huh, *that* Kirihara-kun, eh...? Defeated the Demon King? Pffft.”

Ikusaba Asagi, after hearing the short version of everything we’d just been told, placed her hands to her temples and made them into cat ears.

“Count me a bewildered bunny.”

...I guess she’s making rabbit ears, not cat ears.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor sighed, seeming somewhat impressed.

“Not even the news that Kirihara has defeated the Demon King seems to have shaken you much. I prefer this reaction to confusion and distress, I suppose.”

Asagi had been called in alone—Kashima was absent. I had asked the Wildly Beautiful Emperor that she not be shown Kirihara’s letter directly, but rather explained its contents, as there were some parts of the message that concerned me.

“Nh—well, I did figure it’d be one of the S-Class kids that did it. Only natural, yeah? Then like, now he’s beat the big guy...I can totally see how he’s runnin’ around and thinking *he’s* the new big guy. Might be the Goddess has her hands full with him too, eh?”

“Our present theory is that he has lost his mind,” said Luheit.

“But like, who’s deciding what qualifies as crazy and what’s sane, meow? Those *sensible* types always tend to call you insane, just so they can automatically ignore everythin’ you say, ya feel me? It’s like kinda mental self-defense. Well...anyways,” Asagi continued, “If he’s beaten the Demon King, then he’s like super leveled-up now, right? It’s still kinda up in the air how all this levelin’-up business works, but his skills are probs all powered up now too, yeah?”

“We have decided to leave Takuto Kirihara to the Lord of the Flies Brigade.”

“Sounds good to me. Use that unbeatable cursed magic of yours, same stuff you used to take down the First of the Sworn and the Sabre-Toothed Tigers to do somethin’ about that guy! Y’know? Me and Kirihara-kun aren’t really *made*

for each other, however you cut it, see? I'm a smidge worried that secret weapon o' mine might not work against him. I mean, compared to old man Zera in the last fight... Well, it's a numbers game, I guess. Chances of victory. Kiri-chan—he's all over the place. Like a cat... Hey, maybe even *more* than a cat."

Asagi shuddered at the thought of being fatally wounded by one of Kiri-hara's *whims*.

"Like he's got no consistency... Results are all over the place like the guy's a quantum mechanic, right? There it is! I mean, the heat's totally died down over it, but this is quintessential Schrödinger's cat stuff, everyone loves a quantum theory! Myah hah hah!"

Kaize held a hand to his forehead, as if the conversation was causing him physical pain. I could tell from his general demeanor that he wasn't great at dealing with Asagi.

"I do not know of this *quantum theory* concept... But His Majesty wants to know what you think about convincing Ayaka Sogou to join us, given the situation we just explained."

"We got you, man."

"...That's a rather brief answer."

"Well like, aside from the Lord of the Flies-chin, the only other guys in Mira that can stop that super strong girl in her tracks is us, yeah? And Lord of the Flies-chin is off dealin' with the Kiri-chan situation, right? Process of elimination, we're on Ayaka duty."

"Do you believe you will be able to convince her?" asked the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

"More likely than anyone else here, I figure."

She's right. Sogou Ayaka is...

"We're like, her biggest weak point right now. She can't kill her own classmates, y'see? That just ain't happening. She can't seriously hurt us neither.

I mean, like, she even talked about protecting that trio of top dog dudes! The literal *bad* boys, right? And like, we've got Pidgey-chan with us, who Ayaka has this connection with. And from what I just heard...we've got a way of getting back to our old world without that little Goddess-chin's help, eh?"

"We will require the magic circle used to summon heroes, which is located in the Castle of Alion. And will also need either the Demon King's heart or a collar that has absorbed his essence. We have no choice but to hope that Kiri-hara is in possession of the latter."

"This is Kiri-chan we're talking about, he's gonna want to prove he's beaten the Demon King, yeah? He's defo gonna keep some proof around, right? And like, whatever... So long as we *can* get back even with Goddess-chin out of the picture, it's prime stuff for flipping Ayaka. I'm, like, 100 percent sure that class rep doesn't love relyin' on that tyrannical Goddess..."

"I do, however, have one concern when it comes to convincing Ayaka Sogou," said Kaize. "The possibility that you fail and she captures all of you."

"...Like, we're her classmates still. She'll treat us right, make sure we don't get hurt. I mean, worst comes to worst," Asagi looked down at the palm of her hand. "She's a proper lady that one... Won big on the parent lottery. Blessed in every damn way—winner winner chicken dinner. Maybe we'll have her take a trip around *our world* for a while, eh?"

"Don't tell me you mean to use that power to kill her?"

"Who knows? Like, hey... I'm talking worst-case scenario stuff here, that's all."

"..."

Seras lightly placed her hand on my leg under the table. She gave me the signal with her fingers—Asagi had been telling the truth the whole time that she'd been speaking.

"Anyway, we're in charge of stopping runaway-train Ayaka!"

"Then you accept the task and will accompany us east?" asked the Wildly

Beautiful Emperor.

“Oh yeah? You’re coming too, Zine-chin? There *is* a wild Ayaka on the loose, y’know?”

“They have not only deployed Ayaka Sogou to the front, but troops as well. I have my soldiers’ failing morale to consider.”

And so, Asagi was asked to leave to prepare at once for the journey east.

“Be seein’ ya, Lord of the Flies-chin. Good luck with Kiri-chan! Ah, and don’t go blabbing to Ayaka about it if you do end up killing him, ’kay? She’d *flip*, seriously. Anyway like, Seras-chin...aren’t you just way too freaking hot?! Sexy too! Those breasts, whew! Like, I... If I live through all this, I wanna take you back to the old world... Make you the star of the whole damn cosplaying world! Buh-bye, Lord of the Flies-chin.”

“I pray for your success, Lady Asagi,” I replied. “Let us be sure to meet again, safe and sound.”

With that, she left.

As for whether she’s noticed who I really am under this mask—I don’t know yet. From my perspective she’s a talented actor, through and through. Munin also seemed overwhelmed by Asagi, sitting quietly by my side the whole time she was here. I bet she’s just never met anyone like her before. A real encounter with the unknown, huh. Even so...

“...”

I hope you pull this off, Kashima.

“Good grief,” said Kaize, shaking his head. “Speaking with that girl always throws me for a loop...”

Right, then. Sleif’s recovered, and Piggymaru’s final stage of monster enhancement is done. Munin’s able to use forbidden magic now, and Seras has something called a prime tear which has powered up her spirit armor.

“Your Majesty,” I said as the mood in the room returned to normal. “Ayaka

Sogou will, for the time being, be left in their hands—and the Takuto Kiriwara matter will be up to the Lord of the Flies Brigade. Am I correct in this understanding?”

“Hmph.”

“The message we received by magical war pigeon from Magnar... You mentioned that it would fly back to him once we returned it to the air, did you not?”

“Absent any unforeseen incident, yes. They return to the nest of the one who releases them. It is their nature.”

I thanked the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, then turned to Seras.

“Seras. The new King of the Northern Lands wants *you*, apparently,” I said.

“Yes.”

“I’m going to send him a reply saying we’ll hand you over, then. I’m going to take you to him.”

Seras turned toward me, without a single hint of doubt in her eyes.

“If that is what you order, my master, I will not hesitate to follow that course of action.”

“Thank you. In addition,” I said, slowly moving a hand to my throat. “I will give him the head of the Lord of the Flies as well.”

The three Mira brothers were silent.

“Of course, this is all just bait—a plan to destroy the King of the Northern Lands.”

“You paint quite the picture, Lord of the Flies.”

“I would like to request some of your personnel, Your Majesty,” I asked.

“The fate of Mira hangs in the balance—you shall be provided with what you require.”

“You have my gratitude. Then allow me to explain...”

I went on to tell the Wildly Beautiful Emperor what it was that I had in mind.

Right then. Vicius and Kiri-hara might come as a pair—meaning I’ve got to take Munin with me too. There’s something else niggling at me. The chance that Kiri-hara Takuto knows who I am—knows the true identity of the Lord of the Flies.

“I will never forgive you.”

What if that “you” in the letter isn’t the Lord of the Flies? What if he’s talking to Mimori Touka? I do have a reason for drawing that conclusion: it was the line directly before it that drew my attention.

“To those who will understand these following words, listen”—that caught my eye. I feel like there’s a meaning behind it. Like he’s saying he knows my true identity, and just choosing not to write it.

There’s also that line about the “right station.” Maybe he does just think that some cursed magic user with a fly mask has no right to be with Seras Ashrain—that the Lord of the Flies isn’t worthy of her. But if this proper station line is referring to my rank as an E-Class hero...

Let’s suppose for a minute that Kiri-hara does know my true identity.

How would he have managed to figure that out? Who would have told him that I’m still alive?

Of the possible candidates—it must have been Vicius, right?

Then...has Vicius known all along, since the moment I escaped from the Ruins of Disposal? Did she find out when she ran out of troops, and went to bring the Soul Eater out of the ruins?

...No. Who cares how it happened.

Either way, it’s possible Kiri-hara knows who I really am—and I can’t ignore that now. I must be prepared for the worst at all times.

Why am I so concerned about Kirihara knowing my true identity in the first place? Well—that's because if he knows, then the worst-case scenario really is possible now.

Just before I was disposed of...

"Get out of the way already, E-Class trash."

Those were the words that Kirihara Takuto spoke to me.

That message he sent, the words scrawled in his letter... It feels odd to admit this, but it's almost as if you're a different person now, Kirihara.

Everyone's just getting crazier and crazier. Even Sogou Ayaka's fighting a war against humans now. And speaking of people that've gone insane, there's Yasu Tomohiro. Is it all that Foul Goddess's fault?

I don't know.

I'm sure I've gone crazy too. I've been summoned to this world, dragged my past self back up out of the shadows. We've all had to change, for better or worse. We had no choice.

...

The Lord of the Flies and the King of the Northern Lands.

...King, huh.

I'm not the vessel of a king, though. Not me. It's just chance that the disguise I chose is based on a legendary lord...

King?

So, you're a king now, huh, Kirihara?

That ain't right. We're not that great. Neither of us are. Kings are people in the service of others, and that's not us.

You and me...we're self-centered, selfish other-worlders. That's all we are.

...This is it. Last stop.

End of the line for Kirihara Takuto.



Kashima Kobato

“SETTING ASIDE THE EMPEROR, the general commander, and the prime minister, well... We heads of the elector houses will serve as better bait than Chester,” said Yoyo Ord, riding atop a fine chestnut horse.

A wide plain stretched out before her. She gazed out over it with her knights at her side, her field of view clear, the camp set up at her back.

Her emotions, in truth, were anything but calm—the future successor to the House of Ord had been captured by the enemy—but if she was troubled, she let not a hint of it show.

Kashima Kobato pulled her face away from the gap in the tent, turned to face Asagi, and crouched down.

“...Are you sure this is going to be okay, Asagi-san?”

“It’ll be awesome sauce. Don’t you worry about it. They already put out the intel that the strongest of the princeps elector houses—the House of Ord—is movin’ out, I mean! It’d be real risky to actually send Zine-chin out to the field, y’know? His super-hot brothers are busy in the capital too.”

Publicizing Yoyo Ord’s participation in the battle wasn’t just intended to affect the enemy—the news also brought a fresh wave of morale to her despairing allies. There were even whispers that the Wildly Beautiful Emperor might take command personally—and so the defeatist attitudes that had been spreading through the Miran army were gradually being swept away.

There was, however, a greater worry on Kobato’s mind...

“I-I was thinking about that too, but...also about convincing Sogou-san to join us...”

“Huh? Ah, Ayaka’ll come around, sure as sugar. I mean, she figures if she runs around capturing all the big-dog generals from Mira, she can win this war

without causing that many casualties, right? Wah hah hah! Like, trying to stop this war while keeping enemy deaths as low as possible... Is this some peace demonstration or what?!"

Asagi crouched down next to Kobato, the two of them doing their best to stay hidden inside the camp.

"But I never figured that class rep would participate in a war against people... You think she's finally snapped or somethin'? I mean...I told you back when we first got summoned here that she's totally gonna die, remember? She's always had this stupid dangerous streak to her. You see 'em sometimes, right? People who get all the titles, the academic stuff, the honors, but, like, are still idiots when it comes right down to it. I figure that's jus' how the class rep is, y'know... She's got the abilities and the knowledge, but she just doesn't *understand people*. And that's what's important, see? She's made it this far 'cause of Hijiri-sensei's support from the shadows, I reckon. Was a real surprise to me too, come to think of it. That older sister Takao was a monster and a real good person, huh."

"Sogou-san isn't the type to just run recklessly into battles like that... I think you're wrong about her, Asagi-san."

"Heh, that's what makes you a dummy too, Pidgey-chan. You get real involved when we talk about Ayaka stuff, huh? It's totes adorbs!"

"I-It's not *just* because of Sogou-san that I'm trying my hardest...!"

"...You sure piss me off, too."

"Huh?"

Mamiya Seiko walked over at that moment.

"Hey, Asagi... Are we really going to go fight Ayaka?"

Asagi lightly waved her away with a wry smile.

"Nah, I really do just plan on inviting her to join us. We'll only end up fighting if we completely fail to win her over, y'know? We go down the violence road

when there's no other choice. We're good, we're good. Just so long as my trick works, yeah? The same one we used against old man Banished Empty, remember?"

"Yeah, but this is Ayaka we're talking about now. Seriously, I can't do it... That old guy didn't have a bit of humanity about him, but Ayaka? No way in hell I can fight her."

"Heh heh heh, don't worry. We won't kill her—least not on purpose. Anyway, like, why would we need to kill her? Let's just capture her and tie her up or something."

Seiko looked relieved to hear that.

"Totally, right?" she replied.

"Yeah, yeah. You gotta relax too, Pidgey-chan."

"Anyway, Pidgey," said Seiko.

"Y-yeah? What is it, Mamiya-san?"

"I can kind of see your, uh, junk."

"Huh? You can see wha—ah?! Ohh!"

Kobato hurriedly brought her knees together in a fluster and covered them with her skirt.

"Man, you're always spread wide, Pidgey-chan... Hm?"

Outside their tent, the camp was starting to bustle.

"She's here, eh?"

Asagi opened the curtain a crack and looked outside. They heard one of the squires screaming.

"Lady Yoyo, she's here! Please, retreat!"

Kobato plucked up the courage to go look too, feeling her own heartbeat pumping in her chest, like it might explode at any moment.

She looked but couldn't see anything yet.

Sogou-san...

Kobato was happy to finally see her again, but worried about what was to come. She felt nervous too, unsure if she could do what she was being asked to do. Those three emotions swirled inside and she felt her breathing grow quick and shallow.

"Tch..." said Yoyo. "She may be a hero, but we're really this frightened by one little girl? Now *that*...that's weird. What *is* that thing...?"

A huge silver sphere appeared in the sky, like a glob of mercury. In an instant, the sphere exploded, flying in all directions as its parts began to form into human shapes. The Miran army began their planned retreat, running toward where Yoyo was stationed.

"Ah!"

Finally Kobato saw her—a girl riding on a silver steed.

Sogou-san!

She realized then that other members of Asagi's group were crowding in behind her, packing like sardines to catch a glimpse.

Everyone wants to see. They all look so nervous.

Asagi opened the curtain a little wider to let everyone see out.

"Let's get going, girls and gals," said Asagi.

With a spring in her step, Asagi leaped from the tent. Kobato went next, and the rest of the group followed. They saw Yoyo retreating toward them.

"The rest is up to you, ladies!"

"You betcha, we're on it! Ah, make sure to keep our audience private if you could. It might rub Ayaka the wrong way."

Yoyo rode straight past Asagi, her knights and soldiers following on her heels, riding away from the battle.

“Whoa, she’s here, she’s here... There she is! Sogou Ayaka! Now this is a blast from the past... Heeey! Claaass reeep!”

Asagi started waving, looking far too relaxed to be standing in the middle of a battlefield when Ayaka noticed her.

“Asagi-san?! ...You’re okay?!”

She stopped her horse, and the silver knights rushed in a moment later, forming up in a semi-circular wall behind her back. Before her stood Kobato and the rest of Asagi’s group.

“Sogou-san!” shouted Kobato, and Ayaka’s face lit up.

“Ah! Kashima-san! I’m so glad you’re safe too!”

Kobato was just happy to see the look on her face. Ayaka looked around at her classmates in Asagi’s group.

“You’re all here... Nobody’s missing...”

“Course not! Nobody’d ever die following me, the Great Asagi-san!”

“Thank you, Asagi-san—truly, thank you.”

“Anyway, like, what’s goin’ on? Those silver horses and knights... Is that what your unique skill does now, class rep?”

“Y-yes.”

The camp behind Asagi’s group was completely deserted, as they had requested Yoyo and her soldiers retreat a fair distance from their tent—all on Asagi’s orders.

“Uh, like, so, the fact that you’ve still got them out... You aren’t worried about *us*, are ya? I mean like, we trust you, Ayaka—that’s why we sent everyone else away, *meow*... This kinda makes me sad, *mew*...”

“Ah... I’m s-sorry.”

The silver knights on their silver mounts disappeared as Ayaka dispelled her unique skill. Kobato was looking at Sogou Ayaka’s stats using her Disclose skill,

just in case.

Wow... Sogou-san...

Ayaka's stat modifiers were much, much higher than Mimori Touka's had been.

"Check it out, class rep...we finally found it! We've got a way to get back to our old world without the Goddess-chin's help now."

"Huh?"

"Wouldn't be a lie to say that's what we've been searching for this whole time."

"Wh-what do you mean...?"

Asagi told Ayaka about the forbidden magic they had found.

"So yeah, that's about it. That Goddess-chin is just, like, an old, annoying hag god now. Like, also I wonder if that super-fishy, super-abusive old hag was even planning on sending us back in the first place, y'know? Whatcha think? Can you seriously trust that shady lady, class rep?"

Ayaka was surprised to hear about forbidden magic, and the way in which it could send the heroes home to their old world. To Kobato, it seemed she wasn't *all* that surprised the method really existed—as if Ayaka had already been considering that not relying on the Goddess might be an option for some time.

Sogou-san...

Ayaka didn't look happy to hear the news. There was even a faint look of dissatisfaction on her face.

"Ahem, Asagi-san, you and your group..." she began, hesitantly. "Have you been captured by Mira? Forced to come and convince me to join you? That's not what this is, is it?"

"Huh? Is that the line the Goddess-chin's been feedin' you? Hah hah, that sounds just like her. I respect the tricksyness—that's the Goddess for ya."

“...R-really?”

“Huh? You don’t believe us?”

“Well... I thought it might be the Wildly Beautiful Emperor or the Lord of the Flies who talked you into this, perhaps...”

A faint wave of murmuring went through Asagi’s group.

“I don’t know what the Goddess-chin’s told you... But are you really gonna trust her over us, class rep?”

“Th-that’s not what I mean! It’s just... The Wildly Beautiful Emperor and Belzegea-san... I’ve heard they can be very good at convincing people to join them...”

“Just like you to not just come out and say brainwashing, class rep! You really think the two of them are these big bad villains, then, huh?”

Ayaka then explained the reasons she had for thinking that—Kobato couldn’t help but be surprised at the things that she said.

It’s just like Mimori-kun told us. He mentioned that the Goddess might be pinning all kinds of things he’s never even done on him, and lying to Sogou-san...

The murmuring from the members of Asagi’s group got louder, and Chigasaki Atsuko stepped forward.

“W-wait a second, Ayaka?! Really?! I don’t know about Yasu... But you really think the Ninth Order was killed by the Lord of the Flies while they begged for their lives? I mean, the Ninth Order were—”

She stopped short of saying anything more, and Asagi looked over at her.

“Yeah, that’s the problem... You don’t know the truth, class rep.”

It’s not just the Ninth... What she told us doesn’t match with what Mimori-kun said about the Sixth Order, either, and her information about us is wrong. The Goddess must’ve been painting the Wildly Beautiful Emperor and Mimori-kun as villains to her this whole time.

“But...b-but then!” Ayaka cried. “Proof... I want proof! I want to trust you all... To protect you.”

“How can we prove ourselves to you, meow?” asked Asagi.

“Well...”

“Did the Goddess-chin give you any evidence?”

“A witness.”

“Did you, like, meet ‘em in person?”

“Huh? Well... No, not directly.”

“Figures, huh?”

“But...” Ayaka looked down. “I still can’t deny the possibility that this is their doing. That the Wildly Beautiful Emperor and Belzegea-san are manipulating you all. We don’t even know who Belzegea-san really is, anyway! He might have something to hide. That didn’t bother me all that much at first, but now...I’m not sure I can trust him any more.”

“So you just want us to roll over and let you capture us? Then what, we talk and you win us over? What’s up with all this, class rep... You’re fighting wars against *people* now? I’m like, super shocked you’re even here in the first place. What’s goin’ on?”

“I...I want to end this war as soon as possible. I think I’m the only one that can stop him now! I’m sure it’s my job to save him! So...with this power of mine... Even if I have to dirty my hands to do it, I...I have to do everything I can! Even if there’s no such thing as perfection—I have to do what I’m able to!”

“Sogou-san...”

Kobato was taken aback by the strength of Ayaka’s emotions.

“ ...”

Asagi, on the other hand, fell silent.

What’s she thinking? Kobato wondered with concern. *That look she’s got on*

her face... I have a bad feeling about this.

Asagi suddenly grinned, bright as the sun.

“I gotcha, class rep!”

“Eh?”

“I’ll trust you... Here.” Asagi held both of her hands out to Ayaka, as if she were turning herself in. “We’ll go quietly, let you capture us. First, how about we sit down and have a nice long chat somewhere, eh?”

Ayaka’s eyes opened wide.

“Asagi-san.”

“I can’t trust the Goddess-chin, y’see... But I can trust *you*, class rep.”

Asagi walked toward Ayaka.

N-no.

The terrible feeling washed over Kobato anew, and she felt it spreading. She began to have flashbacks of everything that Asagi had just said to Ayaka, and it was then that Kobato realized.

It’s no good...Asagi-san’s given up on convincing Ayaka! She’s going to use her unique skill... She’s going to use it on Sogou-san! Then after that, she might...

Asagi froze for a moment on the spot.

“Hyuh? Ayaka, you...”

“It’s Mimori-kun!”

At those words, everyone’s attention turned to Kobato. Ayaka looked dumbfounded as she stared in Kobato’s direction.

“Eh? Mimori-k-kun...? Wh-what about him...?”

“He’s Belzegea-san! That’s Mimori-kun under the mask!”

“Mimori-kun is... Belzegea-san?” asked Ayaka.

“Wha?!” exclaimed Asagi, her eyes wide.

I knew it! Asagi didn't notice—she had no idea that I've known the Lord of the Flies's true identity all this time.

“So, I...I think we've got a reason to trust him! I...I've been to talk with him directly! I know it's him!”

Kobato explained her unique skill, stumbling over her words as she went. Her heart was beating so fast and loud she thought it might explode. She felt so nervous there was a high-pitched ringing sound in her temples and she was finding it hard to breathe.

“I-I asked him about Yasu-kun too! The Goddess ordered the Sixth Order to take Yasu-kun and...” Kobato told them everything—all that Touka had told her about Yasu Tomohiro and about the Sixth Order. “Mimori-kun, he...he saved Yasu-kun! Right now, he... Yasu-kun chose to leave, at the Country at the End of the World... He said he was going to go to Alion, to apologize to you, Sogou-san!”

“Belzegea-san...is Mimori-k-kun. Th-that can't be...and now...Yasu-kun...”

Ayaka seemed to be reeling from the shock of these new revelations. Asagi's group wasn't doing much better.

“Whaaat? The Lord of the Flies is Mimori?! You're kidding, yeah?!”

“Kobato, you finally go insane or something?!”

“B-but you double checked with your unique skill, right?! So then, this is totes legit!”

“...Me-ow, I see. So back during the negotiations with the Country at the End of the World when you looked so pale, Pidgey... You met him at the evening party too! Uh-huh...” Asagi looked a little surprised, but more like the pieces were falling into place for her. She grinned at Kobato, narrowing her half-moon eyes like a fox. “This won't do, Kobato-chan... Kobato...you're a dumb, clumsy li'l Pidgey-chan, aintcha? This just ain't you at all! It's not right...it's off.”

There was something unsettling about her response, but it didn't stop Kobato from speaking on.

I can't stop. Not now.

"S-so Sogou-san! I think we can trust the Lord of the Flies—trust Mimori-kun! Mimori-kun, he..."

He's saved so many people.

Kobato went on to explain everything that Touka had told her: the story of the runaway elf princess targeted by evil men... The demi-humans who had lost their way, been exploited, and abused by the wicked.

He saved so many at the White Citadel of Protection, too—Ayaka should know that.

"He said the goal of his journey is personal revenge against the Goddess... But at the end of the day, Mimori-kun's a kind person... I don't think he can stand to see good people getting abused because of what the Goddess is doing in this world. When Mimori-kun sees someone in trouble, I know he just can't leave them to suffer. I'm sure of it..."

For a moment, the stray cat that Kobato had taken in flashed into her mind.

"Even back on the bus, when Oyamada-kun was bullying you, Sogou-san...he tried to help you, remember?"

Before she knew what was happening, Kobato had started to cry.

"I think I can trust him, if it's Mimori-kun under the mask. There's something a bit different about him now...but it's him, I know it is! I trust him way more than that scary Goddess! Please, Sogou-san! Please, fight with us! Let's stop Kirihara-kun together!"

"..."

"Look, I-I love you, Sogou-san."

"Kashima-s-san."

“When I see you’re having a hard time, that hurts me too... We’ve finally found you again. Why is it like this? *Sob...* I just want us all to smile together. To go back to the old world...”

Ayaka closed her eyes, and Kobato and the rest waited—watching for her reply.

“Okay.”

“Sogou-san...!”

“I’ll stop Kirihara-kun... And as for Mimori-kun—I’ll have to meet him in person to see what his true intentions are.”

“Huh?”

“Where is Mimori-kun now?” asked Ayaka.

“Sogou-san?”

“I heard that the Wildly Beautiful Emperor was on his way here. Then who did you dispatch to stop Kirihara-kun’s march on Mira?”

“That’d be the Lord of the Flies-kyun,” answered Asagi, seeing that Kobato wasn’t quite following what was happening.

“Asagi-san...” said Kobato.

“We came this way ’cause we aren’t the best match for Kiri-chan, see... Mimori-kun is in charge of Kirihara-kyun.”

“...”

“Can you tell me where they are?”

Kobato felt a strange feeling rising in her chest that something wasn’t right.

Did I do it...? Have we really just convinced her to join us? Does she understand the way I feel?

“S-Sogou-san...”

“Here’s a map,” said Asagi, giving Ayaka a map marked with the location that

Kirihara Takuto had arranged for a meeting. “He might need some of your strength to help him stop Kirihara-kun, class rep. That’s why I brought that map along in the first place—was always planning on taking you with us once we got you on board.”

Asagi checked the time.

“We’d still barely make it in time to meet them? That’s if we hurried, though.”

Ayaka took the map.

“I might be able to make it, at the speed of the silver mount of my unique skill’s creation. Thank you, Asagi-san.”

“Any time, rep.”

Ayaka recreated her silver horse using her unique skill and mounted it.

“Even if Mimori-kun really is the Lord of the Flies... I don’t know if he’ll really be able to stop Kirihara-kun. I can’t...can’t let any more of my classmates die. No matter what!”

“Sogou-san...” All Kobato could do was repeat her name.

“I’m sorry, I have to go now... Don’t worry, I’ve asked that the army not advance any further without orders from me. Could I ask that Mira do the same? Will you request a ceasefire from the Wildly Beautiful Emperor? Without that, people here will die and I don’t want that... I just don’t want anyone else to die!”

She left no time for anyone to stop her, racing off on her mount so fast that she would be impossible to follow.

“S-Sogou-san.”

“Whew, she sure got me good... Didn’t work a bit.”

“Asagi-san... Just now, you...”

“Eh? Yeah yeah, I was gonna use Queen Bee on her. But jeez—it just wasn’t happenin’.”

Come to think of it... In that moment just before I revealed the Lord of the Flies true identity, Asagi looked like she realized something.

“Ayaka doesn’t trust us,” said Asagi.

“Huh?”

“She was like super cautious around me. When I got close, pretendin’ to let her capture me... I knew I didn’t have a shot at getting my unique skill off. Man...Ayaka-chin just doesn’t leave any openings.”

Asagi looked off in the direction that Ayaka had raced off in.

“It wasn’t just then too. Back when you started sobbin’, Pidgey-chan, and begging her to help... She didn’t fully trust us, not even then. She was wary the whole freakin’ time. Ain’t gonna work with that one. Don’t matter what we say to her, she just can’t trust nobody no more. Not even you.”

“Th-that can’t be...” A sinking feeling came over Kobato, and she dropped to her knees.

“She’s broken. Doesn’t have a compass for what she should trust any more, looks like. She’s way too much for us to handle now. Ain’t happenin’. Sorry not sorry.”

“Then Asagi-san, you think...”

“Mimori-kun and Kirihara-kun are the only ones that can stop Ayaka now, is what I’m gettin’ at. We ain’t up to it. Let’s leave it to those two. All on them now—that’s why I gave her the map, y’see? ‘Go on, get!’ Considerin’ what was happening on the front here, it’s huge that the hero Ayaka’s been drawn away... Anyway, there’s more important stuff to talk about now, *Kobato*.”

“...!”

Asagi grinned at her.

“You knew the Lord of the Flies-kyun’s identity... Couldn’t ya have said somethin’ sooner~?”

“S-sorry... Mimori-kun asked me not to say anything.”

“It ain’t like you, Kashima Kobato-san. You deceivin’ me like this, really ain’t like you... Like, not at *all*. Who even *are* you?”

“Eh? Ah... I-I’m sorry...”

Who am I?

Asagi gave a little giggle and returned to her usual carefree self.

“Still... Right, then. That’s Mimori-kun under that mask, eh? I mean, I’d considered the remote possibility but... Hmm, after the chat I had with him, he seemed like he might be pretty useful, so to be honest I didn’t really give a crap about his true identity. That’s part of the reason I didn’t try ’n find out.” Asagi grumbled, then continued. “Hmm...I mean back in that cafeteria in Mira when we talked one on one, I really thought there was no chance it could be him, y’know? He’s got the voice changer and the mask, sure, but even li’l old Asagi-san’s a bit shocked that it’s him under there. There ain’t a whiff of Mimori Touka about the guy—like, not even a hint! Has some kinda monster been lurking in our class this whole time? I gotta admit...”

Asagi’s voice was filled with admiration.

“...I’m impressed, Mimori-kun.”

Kirihara Takuto

THE MAGICAL WAR PIGEON that Kirihara had sent to Mira returned with a reply.

“We will present you with the head of the Lord of the Flies, and hand over Seras Ashrain,” it read.

Kirihara Takuto had stopped for a time in the south western region of the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters. He’d slept in one of the nearby ruins, and it was there that he waited for Mira’s next move.

“This Wildly Beautiful Emperor has a fondness for his own skin after all. Mimori has been betrayed by Mira and is to be handed over to me... A fitting end for him.”

He crumpled up the message from Mira.

“But well... It is possible that they underestimate me, too. That they mean to deceive me or lay some sort of trap.”

He used his unfair tricks to kill the Strongest Man in the World, after all.

“He may have faked his own death to try to lower my guard. I can imagine that despicable wretch Mimori attempting it.”

Kirihara cracked his neck to the side.

“Well...so long as they bring Seras Ashrain within my reach, the rest will work itself out. The only one capable of defeating me now that I have risen to such heights...is me. He may feign death to try to deceive, but it will be nothing more than the futile flailing of a housefly... I am not naïve enough to allow the feeble cunning of those such as Mimori to go unchecked.”

The handover was to take place a little further to the southwest. Kirihara had sent his servants to scout the area, and found it appeared to be dotted with ruins. The Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters had originally been named the Land of the Great Ruins, and the region was littered with the remnants of many crumbled buildings.

They have yet to arrive.

The message from Mira had also carefully specified the date of their arrival.

“They are taking their time. I should hope they are not plotting something. All will be crushed. Everything. Even providence. I will crush them and make them kneel...”

Vicius, Sogou Ayaka, the Takao Sisters, Ikusaba Asagi, Yasu Tomohiro...

“Their heads are all raised too high. Do not fear...I will return you all to your proper places.”

Kirihara left the ruins.

The serene rays of afternoon sunlight were drawing near, and the trees whispered and swayed in the breeze.

An afternoon fit for a king, thought Kirihara.

“Excuse me...”

One of the demons under his command approached, his voice trembling with fear as he spoke.

“My king, are you truly sure about this? We will be waiting nearby to rush to your aid if anything happens...but I cannot help but think it reckless to go to the handover location alone.”

“I will call for you if I require you. There is a small chance that Mimori is not dead and that this is a plot to deceive me... In that case, you would serve as nothing but EXP to fuel him. I would especially be irked if he happened to kill a humanoid type, and it caused him to level up. I will not allow the death of my servants to accelerate his growth.”

“As you wish,” replied the demon.

“Most of all, I would never allow myself to be seen as so weak, so feeble, as to require the strength of humanoid types to defeat an enemy as insignificant as Mimori. In any case...those humanoid types were supposed to be fear incarnate, but they completely failed to live up to their name. I sent my surplus of monster servants into battle to serve as shields with no regard for their lives—and it was all too easy to target the humanoid types with my Dragonic Chains. Sacrificing the weak and replacing them with the strong—a pedestrian tactic, used by straw millionaires to trade up. They don’t have the power to defeat Sogou, but I can control them. I am far too superior. The humanoid types are not my true military strength, but make up the numbers in my reserves. From what I have just told you, do you believe there to be a reason I should rely on them?”

“...None at all.”

“I decided to only leave the most obedient by my side... And you are quite the fine example. Come to know what it means to be a king, and you may someday approach the honor of Kiri-hara also.”

“I am grateful for your words.”

“Do you hate me for killing your Demon King?”

“I do not know.”

“Worry not, some day you will. You will understand that I—I alone, am right.”

The monster horde had stopped and was in a kind of sleep-like state.

Perhaps I used my skill to place too many under my control. There was a certain point—a number beyond which I felt the burden weighing upon me. I am tired.

“Even I am not omnipotent... Of course. It can be no other way.”

After thinking about the situation rationally, Kiri-hara had kept only the monsters he needed awake, and sent the rest to sleep—especially the large groups of those that were far away from him. It felt like a temporary severing of their connection. Once a monster was freed from Kiri-hara’s control, he would have to use Dragonic Chains on them to regain his dominance. The thought of doing so irked him, and so Kiri-hara sent his monsters to sleep instead. The Inner Circle demons however, he kept awake, no matter how far from him they strayed.

“I must put those of you with intelligence and some degree of competency to work. But capable subordinates are nothing when led by an incompetent leader. It must be me—there can be no other. I must keep the weak in their place, squeeze them for all they are worth, allow them neither life nor the release of death... The maximum exploitation of resources much befits the truly strong.”

This, Kiri-hara had heard from a guest at one of his parents’ house parties. The

man had called himself a financial analyst and had apparently been a paid blogger, famous in certain social media circles.

“The country I once lived in was far too soft on the lazy and the unproductive. Those made to support the weak buckled under the pressure, and those who might have become strong were defeated one by one... Ultimately, they all fell into decline and the country was brought low. Nothing good will ever come from an inability to cut off and abandon the weak—my nation was the perfect proof of that. Yes, the weak... They did nothing to assist in defeating the Demon King, but still they live on in this world that the strong have built for them. Those inferior, useless heroes...”

“Weak people rising above their station is evil?” asked the demon.

“Now you are starting to understand. Yes... Nobody must rise above their station. Just as Seras Ashrain was placed by his side... He cannot properly use Seras. He should be crawling through the gutter by rights... He must *serve*.”

Kirihara waited until the appointed day. In the dark ruins, he whispered alone into the void.

“Break your promises, and I will wake the humanoid types. Then Mira will fall. If Mimori’s head is not delivered to me as promised, you know what will happen, don’t you, Wildly Beautiful Emperor.”

The day of the handover came. Kirihara Takuto departed from the building that had been his temporary sleeping quarters and turned his palm up toward the sky. He clicked his tongue.

“Unfortunate time for rain. The heavens cannot read the room, it seems. Not even the heavens will survive in my world, then... Let us go.”

Kirihara Takuto mounted his great golden stallion and rode off toward their agreed meeting place. He arrived earlier than scheduled, dismounted, and sent his stallion back in retreat as he surveyed the area.

“This is the place, then.”

There were more buildings here than in the place where Kirihara had spent the night. He sat down on a block of rubble.

“My king.”

One of the demons approached him, paying careful attention to his surroundings.

“How did the scouting mission go?”

“There is a group on their way. They appear to be from Mira. They should be here within the hour.”

Kirihara sighed with boredom.

“My my... They’re making me wait. Finally I’m going to meet Seras Ashrain—the genuine article.”

“Should we wait?”

“It would be against my providence to ride out and meet them. It would appear greedy on my part... What is demanded of me now is behavior befitting a king.”

“...Understood, my king.”

He sent the demons away. It would have gone against Kirihara’s philosophy of strength for him to have kept them by his side.

I am the strongest, I need no subordinates following by my side in situations such as these.

There were times when Kirihara needed to demonstrate His Majesty and dominance over the horde. But standing before the masses alone—that was true majesty, he decided.

“This is to be my first face-to-face meeting with Seras Ashrain. Having those Golden-Eyed Monsters in frame would be a turn off... It would cheapen the value of my spectacle.”

The raindrops fell harder, and Kirihara clicked his tongue again.

It would be unsightly for me to be soaked by this downpour.

He looked to one of the nearby buildings.

“I suppose I should enter...”

He stopped.

“They cannot be inside there...can they? Drawing me in, waiting in ambush? That would be cunning...but I can picture *him* doing it. He can only fight using unfair tricks and traps. How I pity him...”

Kirihara did not hesitate again, striding toward the doorway.

“But as the strongest of the strong, I cannot back down. I am not the coward that you are, you understand? This is the difference between the two of us—the line between the innately supreme and the inherently inferior.”

If Mimori Touka is lurking in there, I expect he means to lure me into a trap. He will use his cursed magic—those status effect skills—to target me, I have no doubt.

Kirihara exhaled slowly and brushed back his hair.

That is my aim, he whispered in his mind. *Mimori... If you are in there, I permit you to strike at me.*

Use them—use your status effect skills.

Are you prepared for the possibility, I wonder?

Do you know what it means that I have accepted your invitation—what it entails that I have chosen to come here?

Chapter 5:

Where Falsehoods and Vanity Will Take You

“ ... ”

Kirihara Takuto walked into the building—and his golden dragon creatures weren't with him.

Looks like he's here taking shelter from the rain...

I was stuck to the ceiling, using Piggymaru's new ability to secure myself. The final level of Piggymaru's monster enhancement solution had turned out to be a fairly mundane ability, but useful nonetheless.

To put it simply, the little guy's gotten even more versatile than ever before.

First, Piggymaru's now a good deal more adhesive, and can climb the sheer walls of buildings. Unlike with my fight against the Sabre-Toothed Tigers, now I can climb places even when there's nothing up there to hold on to, getting into blind spots above my target's head. Piggymaru's general physical abilities have improved as well. It's much longer and harder when it forms a rope and can split into even more separate slimes now.

Once split, Piggymaru could also now control its offshoots at will, and change them into the shapes of weapons. Even if Piggymaru's offshoot slimes or weapons were destroyed, Piggymaru itself wouldn't take any damage. On the other hand, Piggymaru's offshoots weren't as adhesive as the slime's main body, and couldn't grow quite as big.

Piggymaru's also much, much harder now—enough that I can use it as a weapon. I can now use my slime even when I have no other weapons to hand. And right now...

“ ... ”

I was stuck to the ceiling using Piggymaru's abilities, hiding in a blind spot and

keeping my breathing quiet.

Footsteps...

He's coming.

Kirihara.

I suppose this is a reunion—I haven't seen him since Alion.

I stayed completely calm, collected and controlled.

Kirihara walked toward me, into the darkness.

“...”

He just walked in.

The direction those footsteps are coming from... From where he's standing, he won't be able to see me. Kirihara's in the same room as me, though I don't think he's noticed me yet. But he's here—he's within range.

“Sque...”

There was a cry from the little Piggymaru offshoot I'd left stuck up on the wall—it was off in the opposite direction from where I was lurking. The moment that Kirihara's attention turned there, I...

“Paralyze.”

...Crack!

I heard a sound, like breaking glass.

“Dragonic...”

Just to confirm my suspicions, I fired off a different skill.

“Berserk—”

“...Buster.”

Crack!

It's the same. It's that effect.

It's the same as that Foul Goddess's Dispel Bubble...

"Slow."

Crack!

Slow didn't work either, and so I disabled it to avoid wasting mana.

Fwhooooosh...

Kirihara was surrounded by a swarm of golden dragons. They writhed, creatures of pure energy, the dragons of light illuminating the room.

"Too bad, I have to say. So you're the one who drew me in here, eh? You're low class to your core."

Piggymaru was stretched out in ropes across the wall. There was an old window in the wall, fitted with shutters. They were wooden and had rotted with time, leaving them fragile and weak. I had decided to close up the gaps in the shutters ahead of time, ensuring not a single ray of light from the outside got in, so Kirihara couldn't see the window.

Piggymaru was connected to the outside through that window, passed through a gap in the shutters, with its body turned opaque to prevent the light from shining in.

Why, you might ask?

So that I could escape through it in an instant.

I had heard about the Banished Emperor from the Wildly Beautiful Emperor after his encounter. *"He was granted a share of the Goddess's power,"* were Zine's words.

What, so she can do that? Then it stands to reason it might be possible for her to give her Dispel Bubble to someone else, right? If Vicius knows who I am—if

she's told Kirihara, and if she intends on using Kirihara to kill me—then she'll take precautions. She'll give him her protection. If it'd be a real problem for Vicius if I just took out Kirihara in a single blow. And if she's not going to come here in person, then she'll need to use that power. It's a necessary measure to counter my status effect skills.

I had decided the odds of all those things being true were low, but I should prepare for them nonetheless.

And it pays to be cautious after all... To prepare for the worst-case scenario.

“Screw you, Mimo—?”

“—Piggymaru.”

I felt myself getting jerked up and away. In the next moment, the window shutters were smashed to pieces.

“Squeeee!”

Fragments of rotten wood flew from the building, as if a grenade had gone off inside. I flew out through the shutters, smashing them as I emerged into the light outside. The small splinters of wood flew into the air, instantly soaked by the rain.

“The height of cunning...that I must admit. A pointless struggle though, I have to say. The thrashing about of the inherently inferior... I can't bear to look at it! Struggle, you fake!”

Kirihara used his countless dragons to blow the remainder of the building's wall to pieces and leapt out into the rain. He was surrounded by golden energy as he began to accelerate.

Fwhooooosh!

Kirihara drew his katana and wrapped it in golden waves.

He's coming—pursuing me.

Kirihara's great swarm of dragons went before him, baring their fangs as they raced toward me. It was then that I landed behind the stone pillar that I had attached Piggymaru to ahead of time. I placed my back against the rock and got ready.

"Seras."

There was a surge of light, as Seras Ashrain leaped from behind the shadow of the pillar, her sword drawn. Kirihara's eyes opened wide.

"...Seras Ashrain."

Seras was wearing her spirit armor, which had been evolved with the prime tear.

"Prime armor."

Her armor was more complete now that it had evolved into its new form, and parts of it had changed shape. And then there was the spirit sword in her hand, made incredibly powerful by the spirit of light. A swirling array of beams shot from her weapon.

Seras used her spirit sword to drive away the golden dragons that were pursuing me. The sound and impact felt like two great waves clashing in a raging ocean. The dragons were blown back, regrouping with Kirihara, who was closing in a step behind them.

"Finally...we meet. Finally, I approach my true and correct form. But no..." Kirihara glared at me.

Just before I had been pulled from the ruined building, one of the edges of Kirihara's golden dragons had brushed against my face. The front of my Lord of the Flies mask had split open, and my face was peeking through. The dragon had touched some of my skin, and I felt a trail of wet blood dripping down my face.

Kirihara's eyes were filled with utter contempt.

"Protecting the inherently inferior. Her brainwashing has yet to wear off I

see... How dare you treat my property like this?”

I took off my Lord of the Flies mask and fixed my gaze on Kiri-hara.

“Mimori...!”

“Kiri-hara.”

Like the *Yamata no Orochi*, that many-headed serpent of legend, his golden dragons attacked one after the next.

That skill... He only has to activate it once, then he can control it at will, huh? It matches the reports I read about his fighting on the eastern front during the Great Invasion. He must've used the same skill back then too.

“How freakin’ unpleasant to discover that you’re alive, Mimori.”

Kiri-hara moved his hand, and three of his dragons mimicked his gestures. He delivered a swipe, and the dragons attacked in sync with his movements.

Seras received them with her spirit sword and knocked them back. At the exact same time, she deployed a shield of ice in the air above me.

Kiri-hara clicked his tongue.

“Tch—Seras, what are you doing? Why are you protecting Mimori? Move out of the way...”

The other golden dragons didn’t let up, renewing their attacks upon me.

“Paralyze.”



I didn't hear the sound, but... Those golden dragons haven't stopped moving. I guess Paralyze isn't capable of affecting them.

I tried using another skill on the golden dragons, but that didn't work either.

“ ...”

I've finally come face to face with an enemy—aside from the Goddess herself—that has resistance to my status effect skills. Huh.

The floating ice shield formed a wall, protecting me from the golden dragons' attacks. Seras leapt backward, driving away one of the dragons that had gotten close with her spirit sword. She then twisted her hips back to face Kirihara and proceeded to dice the oncoming swarm of golden dragons with her spirit sword.

She's going toe to toe with them—she's strong enough.

“I will save you, here and now... You have nothing more to fear, Seras Ashrain. I have come to rescue you, that is all... Your true king has come.”

“...!”

I felt a wave of confusion from Seras as I stood behind her. It seemed that she knew Kirihara wasn't lying to her and was perplexed by his words.

“Seras, don't listen closely to what Kirihara's saying to you. That tendency you have of trying to understand the people you meet is one of your strong points, but in this case it's a bad habit—he'll swallow you up!”

“Understood!” Seras replied, nimbly sweeping down more golden dragons.

It seemed as if her confusion was gone.

Kirihara's attacks grew more intense—but Seras brilliantly dealt with all of them. Every time she moved, the rainwater that drenched her would fly from her skin, as if it was dancing through the air.

To be honest, this is kind of sending a shiver down my spine. Seras is standing alone, dealing with a writhing swarm of countless golden dragons. She's doing

it.

Until today, her body couldn't keep up with her talented mind when it came to battle, I thought to myself as I watched her fight. But now that she's wearing that prime armor, all her physical abilities have been improved. It's like her physical form is finally complete, and she can put her genius for battle to work.

What scared me most was how Seras seemed to be fighting to make it easier for me to move around. I was trying to move in sync with her, and finding it unusually easy to do so.

The ground was wet and slippery with rain, muddy in places. Seras showed no signs of getting bogged down or taking unnecessary risks. She wasn't leaving any openings either.

If we weren't in this situation right now... I could just stand and watch her footwork, entranced. She's impeccable—completely reliable. My sword.

I thought back to the fight against the skeleton king in the Mils ruins.

Back then, I wanted a sword. This is it. She is everything I wanted—a frontline fighter. My sword.

"Seems like Mimori's got you completely under his mind control... Seras. What is this, Stockholm Syndrome? I have to admit that it might be possible. I'll never forgive you for this, Mimori."

"I am nobody else's... Nobody but Sir Too-ka's..." Seras adjusted her grip on the spirit sword in her hands. "Too-ka Mimori's sword."

"Don't underestimate me. I must pity you... I see. Vicius was right. You're a sheltered girl who knows nothing of the real world, or your own providence. You're like a work of art, sheltered and overprotected. Education is fundamental—just as it was in my country. Those who are taught too much crap are ruined forever. You must desire a king's lessons, Seras!"

"You are not my king. My king is Sir Too-ka! My only king!"

"Tch... I suppose I will fully sever ties with the Golden-Eyed Monsters I have

left on standby. Faint as it might be, their weight is a needless burden. I will focus all of my power into this location...into the king.”

Kirihara tapped his temple once with his finger, then turned to glare over at me.

“Mimori—I will never forgive you, from the bottom of my heart. From here on out, with everything in my power...I will absolutely crush you. Know your providence.”

“...Seras, can you close the distance with him?”

“I believe I can get into the proximity you wish me to.”

“Do it.”

“Leave it to me.” Seras leaped forward.

“Haaah...she’s finally come. Are you here for my embrace? Very well... Come, then. What is this hostility I feel? Dragonic Sword—”

Kirihara’s katana let off rays of golden light, just as Seras’s spirit sword did.

He’s got a powerful golden light sword of his own then, huh.

For a few seconds, the exchange of blows between the two of them was so intense that I couldn’t follow what was happening. It was all white and gold and clashing sounds.

They’re about evenly matched in strength, then. But I feel like Kirihara is getting pushed back a little. Seras is fighting with a progressive kind of hit and run strategy. She counters Kirihara’s moves, but he’s still really fast...though that looks like it’s due to his stat modifiers.

Seras has technique to her swordplay—and he doesn’t. He’s probably gotten this far by steamrolling everything in his path. That’s why Seras is able to take him and his golden dragons on at the same time. If he had technique too, I don’t know how this fight would turn out.

But Seras wearing her prime armor, taking on Kirihara and all of his golden

dragons, going toe to toe with him. This is just about her limit.

No, Kiriara has defeated the Demon King. His level should be unbelievably high. It's a miracle that Seras is currently capable of matching him at all.

"Freeze!"

Crack!

I tried a different skill to see if the effect would be any different.

I waited for openings in the fighting to fire off my attacks, but none of the other skills I tried were effective.

"Nice work—you can put some distance between the two of you now, Seras."

"Understood!"

"Right then."

How do I find myself a path to victory from h—



“Haaah... I will judge you...”

“...”

This guy. Kirihara.

“Seras...how long do you think you can keep up the fight with him?”

“I do not know... But if he has no more tricks to deploy, I believe I can last thirty minutes at a minimum.”

“Thirty minutes—brilliant.”

“You low-class little... What are you prattling about over there? Seras doesn’t want you whispering in her ear.”

Kirihara directed the point of his katana toward us, the swirling of the golden dragons at his command never letting up.

“Aren’t you embarrassed, Mimori?”

“Bout what, Kirihara?”

“Hiding, sneaking around behind a *female*, having her protect you...”

“Hmph, gender’s got nothing to do with it. She’s the right person for the job, that’s all.”

“Shut up... You’re just being protected. You have no right to call yourself a lord. Only those who can hold their own, demonstrate their own majesty, can be recognized as royalty. You are a failure. Listen now. The kanji for king becomes an E once you shift the central line to the left...you understand? That is why you are a fake! You are inherently inferior, of low class! You are nothing but an E-Class hero—it can be no other way.”

“Heh... And some fine king you are, to be struggling against that E-Class hero now, eh?”

“Mimori.”

Kirihara lunged, and his golden dragons came with him. At first glance, they

appeared to be automatically protecting him.

But...are they responding to him, instead? Reacting to his movements and his emotions? Do those dragons have autonomy of their own, or are they deeply connected to Kirihara himself?

“You have risen above your station. All that you have gained in this world is meant to be mine. Seras, I defeated the Demon King...! I saved your world. What has Mimori done? Has he brought salvation to this world...?”

“He—he saved me.”

“Tch. You’re a lot of work, female... Get out of the way! Kirihara will return this world to its correct state!”

As Seras did battle with the golden dragons, Kirihara sometimes joined the fray, but she handled him each time he attacked.

“Paralyze.”

Crack!

“Don’t you understand that it’s pointless? Hmph...I see. You’ve got nothing else to rely on but those worthless skills. I understand. I have to admit, it makes sense. You’re praying, that’s all. Praying that you’ll beat the odds and your skill will work. Gambling because your weakness has left you with nothing else to rely on. The way the odds are stacked against you now, betraying you over and over. It is the ultimate proof of your deficiency. Now it is revealed for certain, your true innate weakness... Come to me now, Seras!”

“Paralyze, Paralyze, Paralyze, Paralyze—”

I kept on firing, the sound of my skill failing continuing to ring in my ears.

“Paralyze, Paralyze... Paralyze, Paralyze, Paralyze, Paralyze—”

None of it worked—all the skills I cast were ineffective.

“Tch. You’re powerless to do anything, but you still whine and humiliate yourself before Seras, I see? You paraded your skills around as some kind of

cursed magic when they are the height of cowardice, and now still you cling to them. You're pathetic, Mimori. The very definition of the word... Yaaah..."

"Hah hah hah," I laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"You ain't realized it yet, Kirihara? It's slow-going, but I see your breathing getting ragged. And what's that sweat on your forehead?"

"You can't possibly mean... You think you have accomplished something?"

"Your movements have been getting slower. Gradual process, but still. You didn't notice it, huh? The more of my status effect skills you take—the more sluggish you get."

"..."

"It might look like my skills aren't working at first glance...but just a tiny fraction of their effect *is getting through*."

"What did you just say?"

"Think about it. That Dispel Bubble you've got isn't the Goddess's original one, yeah? Then..."

That means...

"...There's no guarantee it's got the same effect as the Goddess's bubble."

"Tch... That worthless Goddess..."

"What you're feeling now? The way it's slowing your movement? That's the result of my skills, stacked one on top of the other, weakening you. You can feel your breathing getting heavier, yeah? I noticed it too. That's why I kept firing skills at you. Not so worthless after all, eh?"

"Hmph. They are unique skills, I suppose. But to consume intense amounts of mana is your providence. It will return upon level up...but I will not allow that. That is why I did not bring any Golden-Eyed Monsters here to serve as EXP for you. Now, then—how long can you keep this up, Mimori?"

“It’s 10.”

“...?”

“My status effect skills cost 10 MP.”

“Ridiculous... This is a unique skill we’re talking about? A bluff. Hmph...”

“Want to find out, then? I’ll keep going until it’s too late for you to recover—
Paralyze!”

“Mi-mori—Mimori!”

Kirihara stamped down hard on the ground. Both he and his golden dragons grew even faster.

He must be feeling the pressure. He feels like he’ll be put on the back foot if enough time passes. For Kirihara, this is now a race against the clock.

“He’s coming—hang in there, Seras.”

“I will!”

It was then that their fiercest exchange of blows began. Even Seras’s breathing started to grow uneven, and such intense shockwaves emanated from the battle that I could feel the air around me vibrate.

Kirihara’s attacks were more relentless than they had been. He was violence incarnate. I kept firing off my skills at him, seeing his impatience grow with every cast I landed.

“Hah hah... But hey, Kirihara...”

“Yaaaah... Every laugh of yours grates upon my ears, Mimori! You are unpleasant to no end! Especially the condition I have found you in, cowering under Seras’s protection!”

“Hmph, you say you defeated the Demon King...but couldn’t Sogou or someone else have done the job just as easily?”

“...You cretin.”

“I heard about the Demon King’s attack on Alion, y’know? Sounds like Sogou had him on the ropes in the castle. Then I heard you panicked, and betrayed Sogou to go over to the Demon King’s side, yeah?”

“Mi-mori.”

“Hah hah hah... I barely even heard a thing about you on my travels across this continent, you know? Heard a lot about Sogou and the Takao Sisters, but you, Kiri-hara... It’s like nobody even knows who you are—Paralyze!”

“Are you envious? Ah, I see. You’ve only improved your taunting skills... How unsightly.”

“Envy? Hah hah hah... What are you even saying? You’re the one that’s envious of me, right? You’re envious that Seras is mine—Paralyze.”

A blue vein popped out on Kiri-hara’s temple.

“Kill him, golden dragons. That is an order—a king’s order.”

“Hmph. What you mean by *king*, Kiri-hara? You were never like this in the old world. What’s up with the way you’re talking now? The weird phrasing?”

“It is because I am a king.”

“You should be *king*... You should be *amazing*... But nobody listened to you—yeah? Nobody listens to a damn thing you have to say.”

“Mimo—”

“That’s why you started speaking differently, adding all these quirks—trying to stand out from the rest. You wanted the other heroes’ attention, yeah? Wanted them to recognize you.”

Kiri-hara ground his teeth so hard I almost thought I could hear it.

“Mimo-ri...”

“That’s what you really are, Kiri-hara... Talking about hierarchies, the strong, the weak... Getting tricked by pointless freaking marketing slogans that are meant to bleed your wallet dry. In the end, it just eats you alive. But that central

desire of yours just never seemed to line up with reality...because in the end, all you are is a selfish kid, thrashing around throwing tantrums.”

“...”

“You’re just a self-obsessed, vain piece of trash. Take a closer look. You ain’t even all that popular, you’re paper-freaking-thin on the inside... King, was it? Hah hah hah... Nice joke, buddy. Right, Kirihara?! You think so too, right, Piggymaru?!”

“Squeeee!”

“...Miiimori!!!”

“Come on, Kirihara.”

“I’m going to...”

“Binding Curse, Release—”

“...Kill you!”

That’s right.

To break through that Goddess’s Dispel Bubble, there’s only one way.

It had to be—forbidden magic.

Right from the start, Seras and I had never been in the group of Mira soldiers heading to the hand-off point with Kirihara. The “head of the Lord of the Flies” that they were carrying, and the “Seras Ashrain” that rode with them were both fakes that I had asked the Wildly Beautiful Emperor to prepare for us. We had attempted to lower Kirihara’s guard, and to make him think he still had time before our arrival.

I also added the message about the Lord of the Flies being killed by Miran forces to try to mess with him too. No matter how the gamble played out, I wanted to try everything I could.

The real Seras and I arrived earlier than the agreed upon date and waited for

Kirihara in ambush. I had intended on using Piggymaru's cries to lure him into the building, but he noticed us before I had the chance.

Kirihara walked into our building of his own accord—probably because of the rain.

I had seen the clouds too, sensed the moisture in the air, and considered the possibility that he might try to take shelter from the rain. In the end, that allowed me to lure him in in a much more natural way than I had initially planned.

After that, I'd just wanted to end things with a surprise attack from my status effect skills. Instead I encountered the worst-case scenario—he came with countermeasures against my status effect skills put in place by the Goddess.

Considering that the Goddess might know my true identity, I was aware that might happen. The worst-case scenario was always on the table... If it's the worst-case scenario for me, it's the best possible move my enemies could make. They'd leap at the opportunity, if they could.



In the end, predicting the failure scenario saved my life. After my first status effect skill was ineffective, I managed to retreat from the building using Piggymaru, who had been wrapped like a rope around a pillar outside. There was a pile of rubble behind the pillar, which I had piled up to create a small space beneath big enough for a single person to fit. From the outside, the rubble looked completely ordinary. I had been meticulous in concealing that a person was hidden underneath.

That was where I placed Seras, ready to start the fight at full power at any time, wearing her prime armor. I also had information about Kirihara's unique skill. Just as he had brought a counter to my status effect skills, I needed countermeasures of my own to deal with his golden dragons made of energy. The question was whether we should take them head-on with Seras's spirit sword or use her floating ice shield to block their attacks.

I wasn't sure whether either of those options would work against things without any physical form—but in the end, both did the job. But with my status effect skills ineffective, I needed some other strategy to break through. When we broke through the shutters, Piggymaru let out a great cry—that was the signal. Munin knew we were going to need her forbidden magic after all.

The moment Munin heard Piggymaru's cry, she came riding toward our location on Sleif from where I had left her on standby. Once she got close, she dismounted and slowly crept toward Kirihara, remaining in his blind spot as she closed in. I had already confirmed with Erika's familiar that there were no Golden-Eyed Monsters controlled by Kirihara in the vicinity—at least, none in the area where Munin and Sleif were going to need to operate.

Of course, Vicius wasn't there either.

After that, we needed to get Munin close enough to Kirihara that she would be able to use her forbidden magic.

How would we go about doing that, you might ask? Well, we needed to turn Kirihara's attention to something else, so his emotions would be entirely

concentrated on something other than Munin. In that moment, though, he looked strangely calm. No, it wasn't quite calm—more just an odd kind of peace about him.

There had been something uniquely eccentric about Kiri-hara's choice of phrasing, but his thoughts seemed clear, his powers of observation unusually sharp.

Meaning I had to completely shut down the senses he had access to—make him focus only on the signals that Seras and I were giving out.

It was partway through our fight that I realized it—Kiri-hara was breathing heavily.

Was he tired? Was constantly controlling that mass of huge dragons weighing on him? Not to mention he didn't actually seem to be paying much attention to how tired he was. He kept up the conversation as if nothing was wrong.

That was when I decided to play my hand—to gamble on spamming my status effect skills. Thankfully my skills didn't cost much MP, so I could use them as many times as I wanted to. I wanted to convince Kiri-hara that my status effect skills were working, even just a little—that their effects were slowly but surely building up. As Kiri-hara realized that his own movements were slowing down, he panicked, thinking that the longer I was allowed to use my skills, the more he would be placed at a disadvantage as the battle dragged on.

He thought he had to crush me, sooner rather than later... And that's what allowed me to create an opening for Munin to approach.

Of course, the tiredness that Kiri-hara was experiencing had nothing to do with my status effect skills stacking up on him. They should have been doing nothing at all. The only way to break that Goddess's Dispel Bubble is with forbidden magic. I told Kiri-hara that his bubble wasn't the original and was likely faulty—but I'm sure it was the genuine article. A real Dispel Bubble from Vicius herself.

My assumptions about all these things—they haven't changed.

My line about my status effect skills affecting Kirihara was a bluff, nothing more. But that bluff deceived him. It gave him a desire to defeat Mimori Touka as quickly as possible. And that's what let me succeed. Kirihara got tunnel vision, focused on the singular goal of defeating me. It helped that that encouraged his weird obsession with Seras, in turn. His attention was completely dominated by us.

I had noticed something about the nature of his golden dragons as well. It appeared that Kirihara's dragons were linked in some way to his consciousness and his emotions. The possibility that worried me the most, was that they might automatically move in to protect their master when he was attacked. That, however, didn't seem to be the case.

It could have something to do with his intense ego, I suppose.

From my observations, I determined that the golden dragons were deeply linked with Kirihara Takuto himself.

Meaning all I needed to do was rub him the wrong way, until his attention was fixed entirely on me. In his rage, he basically launched a close combat assault on us with his golden dragons in tow. If he'd chosen to fight by hiding and firing off his skills one after the other at us from a distance, we might have needed to deal with him in a different way.

This battle—I wanted it to end with Munin still waiting on standby. All the more so, given that Vicius never actually showed up. Munin is invaluable—absolutely vital—for the coming showdown against Vicius. I had to keep my forbidden magic caster safe, no matter what. That's the whole reason I riled Kirihara up as I did, to stoke the flames of his hatred into an inferno and make him focus all that heat on me.

All of his attention, all of his emotions, and every last one of his golden dragons...I needed to feed him an illusion to make it that.

Then finally, just to make sure, I delivered Kirihara Takuto his greatest humiliation—while creating the opening that would end our battle.

“You think so too, right, Piggymaru?!”

The cry from Piggymaru was the second signal.

The signal to Munin—that it was time to strike.

The rain began to let up.

Semi-transparent chains appeared on Kiri-hara’s skin.

There was a bursting sound playing on repeat, almost as if the echoes were driving the dark clouds away.

“Paralyze.”

It worked. Forbidden magic really can erase that Goddess’s cursed Dispel Bubble.

Kiri-hara’s body was wrapped in countless chains, each glowing with a dull light as they pressed upon his skin.

I see. So that’s how I’ll be able to know whether this disable spell has worked.

“You were a lot of work, Kiri-hara... It was real tough, getting you so enraged that you poured all your golden dragons into the fight with us.”

“Mi-mo—?!”

Spurt!

He must’ve just tried to move.

Blood squirted from Kiri-hara’s body—but the damage looked fairly minimal.

Is that because of his stats? He might have just instinctively realized that moving would hurt him and stopped immediately.

All of Kiri-hara’s golden dragons had disappeared.

Whether they’re gone because of damage, because of the effects of my Paralyze, or whether it’s the forbidden magic that made them vanish—I just don’t know.

“Th-they’re gone? M-my...s-skills... Wh-what...happened...? Mi-mori... Wh-what d-did you d-do...?”

Kirihara had yet to notice the woman standing behind him, breathing hard, her shoulders heaving. Munin. Thankfully the rain had helped to mask the sound of her footsteps as she had approached.

We’re lucky the rain let up when it did—that was a close one.

Kirihara looked at Seras, thin trails of blood dripping from his mouth and eyes. He raised one hand.

Spurt!

The strain of the movement caused blood to spurt from his arm.

“N-now... S-Seras.”

“...?”

“K-kill him... Kill M-Mimori...” Kirihara ordered Seras.

Seras took one step back, cold sweat on her brow.

“Kill Sir Too-ka? Me? Wh-what are you saying...?”

“Y-you saw...saw me fight, a k-king... You sh-should have awoken n-now... That’s...providence—Kirihara... I...I am th...the tr—”

“Sleep.”

Kirihara’s eyes rolled back in his head. Then his eyelids shut and he fell asleep, swaying, then falling forward, face hitting the ground. He lay there and I looked down at him.

...This guy.

Seras was trembling, turning pale as she placed a hand over her mouth.

“Sir Too-ka... Just then h-he...he truly believed in his heart that I would... That I really was going to...”

I know why she’s scared. She knows those last words weren’t a lie—that

Kirihara believed every last one of them.

“This guy has his own world inside his head... One he’s made from himself, I figure. And maybe...he thought that after seeing him fight it out with me, you would shake off the brainwashing I’ve got you under. That’s how it played out in his head, at least. Maybe it was the script he was working from.”

The words I used to taunt him, to create that opening... Maybe I was right, and that’s exactly the reason it set him off so much. No...is that really what happened? It’s a fact that he went into a rage, but maybe it was because the selfish picture I painted of him was so far from the way he pictured himself. Was it the unjustified insult that drove him to anger?

Is that possible? I don’t know. Oyamada was easy to understand, but Kirihara—he seems simple at first, but I don’t know whether he really is. Asagi said something like that about him too, right? I guess her analysis was correct.

“...Well, then.”

He came here looking to kill me—clear murderous intent.

I’ll repay him in kind.

He crossed a line here—the rules are the rules.

He’s already paralyzed. Only one more step to finish this.

I raised my hand to Kirihara, and—

...What’s that?

“Sir Too-ka, something’s coming!”

Seras noticed it too.

The presence was on me in an instant, so intense it set my nerves on edge.

This is...

“Munin!”

“Eh?”

“Come this way! Quickly!”

“O-okay!”

At almost the exact moment Munin arrived at Seras’s back, Seras readied her sword—

“No. I won’t let you kill him.”

She appeared. She tried to close in on me, moving so fast that I couldn’t keep track of her with the naked eye and—

Clang!

Seras blocked the mace-like weapon that swung for me. It looked like it had been a close call.

I bet only Seras could have made that block. I couldn’t have dodged, let alone stopped that attack in its tracks... Seras predicted where the attack would land and got herself ready—and this is still all she managed.

“Guh?! Y-you—”

“Get out of the way, Seras-san...!”

The attacker looked at me, urgency in her eyes.

“Mimori-kun, you...! What were you just trying to...” She glanced down at Kirihara, laying face down on the ground. “He’s your classmate... What were you going to do to him?!”

It appeared as if she had just confirmed that Kirihara was still breathing with a glance toward him. It was a faint shift, but I felt her relax a little, the sudden storm calming somewhat.

No matter what kind of excuses I make now—it must have looked like I was just about to finish him off for good. And hey—the reason it looked that way is because I was.

“This is wrong! Mimori Touka is one of our classmates!”

Yeah, you weren't wrong back then either. I could try to finish him off again now, but it wouldn't work. The others might let me, but not her. She won't allow it. I can't use my status effect skills against her either. There's too high a chance that she'll sense my hostility the moment I try to use one of them—not to mention the Goddess might have shared her Dispel Bubble with her, too. Using my effects against her might be the worst move I could possibly make. The speed of that attack just now also makes it painfully obvious she would put me down the moment I tried, whether on Kiri-hara or on her.

That's for certain.

I know it.

Her eyes are telling me that—communicating that she's capable and willing. Don't move. That's what she's saying to me right now. She went out of her way to use a relatively non-lethal blunt weapon to stop me, so as not to take my life.

I bet Seras is the only one here capable of facing her. After that battle against Kiri-hara though, it's clear how tired she is. This S-Class hero has sworn to protect her classmates no matter what—and no matter who they might be. There's nobody here that can stop her by force. Not a single person.

This presence I feel from her now...it's almost as if she's passed into his domain. The Strongest Man in the World, Civit Gartland.

...Showing hostility toward her now would be a losing bet.

I spoke her name, my hand frozen in place over Kiri-hara's fallen body.

"...Sogou."

And—Kashima.

It's likely that Kashima's decision to come and talk to me at that party has something to do with what's happening here.

"If you want to protect Sogou, Kashima, and you really need to use this piece of information... Then you can tell Sogou everything we've discussed today. Including who I really am."

There's a possibility that Sogou is being manipulated by that Foul Goddess, being fed false information about the Lord of the Flies, making him out to be some grand villain. If it turns out she was, I asked Kashima to tell Sogou who I really am. To tell her that I saved Yasu Tomohiro for instance...and about his change of heart. That intel might serve to slow Sogou down. I'm sure she wouldn't believe the people of Mira, but she might be willing to listen to Kashima, right? She doesn't have to be convinced—but she'll at least listen, right? That's why I gave Kashima the information that I did.

"Mimori-kun... Why?"

Mimori Touka is alive. She should have had space to think about that on the way here, in the time since Kashima gave her that information. The initial shock must have worn off, and I'll bet she's had time to process her feelings about all of this. Of course, she seemed surprised the moment she first laid eyes on me... So Kashima must have been the one who led her here. Though I suppose it could have been Asagi too.

"The reason Kirihara's here... Did Kashima tell you what he came here to do?" I asked.

"...Yes," Sogou answered.

For a moment her eyes turned bitterly to the ground, then she raised her head again resolutely.

"I came here to stop him. To stop Kirihara-kun...and you as well."

"Kirihara's dangerous. He won't hesitate to kill anyone he feels is in his way. He tried to kill me."

"Th-... That doesn't make it okay to kill him! Do you really need to do this?! You've won this battle, haven't you Mimori-kun?! This isn't right—it just isn't. You've settled things, right? Just like with Yasu-kun. I'm sure Kirihara-kun can change too! Even Zakurogi-sensei's promised to change! I'm sure if we talk things through with Kirihara-kun, then...he can change too!"

Sounds like Kashima told her all about Yasu then.

“Sogou... Has Kirihara *ever* listened to anything you’ve told him?”

“Well... I just wasn’t strong enough back then. But now I’m different!” She looked resolute. “I can make time now. The time to talk with him, using this power of mine! I’ve needed this strength to get a dialogue going... I know that. You can’t talk to someone if you don’t have the strength to back it up. Powerful don’t want to talk about serious things when you’re weak! That’s why I...I got stronger! I wanted them to listen to me! Just like Belzegea-san—like *you!*—told me back at the White Citadel!”

“You’ve got the chance to talk to him now, sure... But you seriously think you’re going to be able to convince Kirihara to come around?”

“I can’t agree with the way that Kirihara-kun thinks. I don’t see it the way he does. I don’t think it’s right to think of the weak as just dragging down the strong. Labeling people as weak, looking down on them, sacrificing them, discarding them... All of that just has to be wrong! Those with power should be reaching out and helping those without. I’m sure people who aren’t powerful can grow if they try their hardest. They can change. The strong have to set a good example. No...I don’t even think it’s good to divide people up into strong and weak in the first place. There are people who can and people who can’t, that’s all... And everyone has things they can and can’t do. We’re all the same, in that way. The people who can should help the people who can’t... We can all fill in the gaps, having others help us do the things that we can’t, and helping others in turn. Even for those who think there’s nothing they can do, there has to be something! I’m sure we’ll get there—to a world where people are considerate, and we can all fill in the gaps wherever we’re needed! But some people don’t believe that’s possible! We have to make a world in which people can believe it’s possible! We have to change the world! Right now, the people with power need to change it!”

...That’s just like you, class rep. It’s just like Sogou to think that way. She’s right—completely right. And, well, I’m sure that’s a good thing. I’m sure we

need people in the world who think the way that she does. I feel like the world might truly be over the moment the last person like her disappears.

The problem is who's going to be practical about it. Who's going to get their hands dirty—and how far will they go to achieve those ideals? To make them a reality?

“ ... ”

In any case... We aren't getting anywhere like this. The situation's changed. I can't kill Kirihara. Not here, at least. I'm sure if I try, I'll get shut down by Sogou in an instant. Sogou won't let me kill Kirihara—no matter what.

More importantly, I want to avoid conflict with her. If I can convince her to see the Goddess as her real enemy—having her on our side will give us an advantage in the fight to come. But that won't ever happen if I kill Kirihara now. Or rather...if I killed Kirihara in front of Sogou's eyes, right here and now, she might go on a rampage and fatally injure me.

The risks of killing Kirihara right here are too high, but there are also so many risks to leaving him alive. Risks to my revenge.

Can we tie him up, restrain him and keep him here?

As long as he's conscious, as long as he can still think...that sounds dangerous to me. Leaving Kirihara Takuto in that state would be a constant source of worry, weighing me down.

He's a risk, in other words, left in the condition that he's in. Then how about...

“All right.”

“Eh?”

“Kirihara's asleep right now, under the influence of one of my status effect skills. The injuries he sustained are from my skills, in a sense, but the truth is that he did that damage to himself.”

“Kirihara-kun... Did that to himself?”

I explained to Sogou how my Paralyze ability worked.

“Then you... You never had any intention of killing him, Mimori-kun?”

“No.”

Sogou bit her lip, looking conflicted by my answer.

“Listen to me, Sogou.”

“...”

“There’s this status effect I have called Freeze...”

I went on to explain Freeze—how the skill wouldn’t kill a living creature it was used upon, but only freeze them in place—suspended animation for 300 days. Sogou looked as if she was thinking hard about something.

“He won’t die, then? The skill...it dispels itself after 300 days?”

I took out my pocket watch.

“Yep. 300 days.” I went on, “But I can’t show you my stat screen to prove what Freeze does. The only people who can actually see my screen are Kashima with her unique skill and Vicius herself.”

Only heroes can see their own stat screens, except for those two. There’s no way I can show Sogou my screen to convince her that I’m telling the truth about my skills.

“Mimori-kun.”

“...Yeah?”

“I...I’m so happy. So happy you’re alive...”

Seras stayed silent, motionless—ready.

Munin was quiet too, watching over our conversation.

Piggymaru didn’t make a sound. From some distance away I heard Sleib braying.

“...”

“Back at the White Citadel of Protection... You were the one who saved me.”

“Yeah.”

“I heard from Kashima-san... You’ve saved so many people...by getting your hands dirty, right?”

“Well... That was all for my own sake.”

I was saving myself too. I wanted to do all those things. That’s why I did what I’ve done. But Sogou...

“No! I thought you were different! You’re saving people... You saved Yasu-kun, didn’t you?! You’re not some cruel, cold-hearted avenger! You save your classmates—you aren’t like that! No! No...no! You... Mimori-kun, you...”

Sogou seemed like she was trying to deny something—but just couldn’t.

What she’s saying now. Doesn’t she mean...?

“But...but, Mimori-kun... Why didn’t you tell me all this then...back at the citadel...?”

“...”

“Why...? *Why* didn’t you *trust* me?” Sogou’s her stern expression gave way, as if she couldn’t take it any longer,. Tears flowed down her cheeks. “Is it all true? True...that after we parted at the White Citadel...you were brainwashed by the Wildly Beautiful Emperor? Is Kashima-san trying to trick me now too? Have you lied to Kashima-san? Trying to use her to manipulate me? No...I can trust her. But Kashima-san’s such an honest girl... I don’t mean to be rude, but she’s so honest, she might have been tricked too! It might even go further than just her... Asagi-san could be being deceived by you too! Listen, Mimori-kun...did you really let Yasu-kun go?! Are you telling the truth?!”

“Lady Aya—”

Seras tried to interrupt, but I stopped her with a wave of my hand.

“So you can trust Kashima, but can’t trust the things that I told her?”

I knew that. I've been deceiving people for so long now. Sogou tried to cover for me when I was about to be disposed of...and I've been lying to her this whole time. I didn't tell her that I survived those ruins. I've operated in the shadows. That's why this can't work—no matter how much I want her to trust me. Sogou doesn't have a lie-detecting ability like Seras. She only believes what she thinks is true. Now it's Sogou herself, the judge, that's come undone—torn and broken after being manipulated for so long.

"I...I won't..." Sogou looked as if she was falling apart, heavy tears streaming down her face. "I can't do it... I'm s-sorry. Ever since I came to this world, I...I feel like I can't trust anyone any m-more. I just d-don't know what to believe in. Before we came to this world, I... The time we've spent together...it's not enough. Not long enough for me to t-trust you. I-I... Mimori-kun... Mimori-kun, I just..."

The whole foundation, getting Sogou Ayaka to trust me—

"I—Mimori-kun... I can't t-trust you...!"

It's not gonna work. Right then.

"Then—what about me? The two of us have spent a little more time together in this world. Do you think you might be able to place your faith in me?"

"...Eh?"

Sogou looked up suddenly, on the verge of uncontrollable sobbing.

"I've finally found you again, Sogou."

"N-n... No..." Sogou Ayaka started crying again—but this time the tears were different. "*Hijiri-san...!*"

An S-Class hero had emerged from the forest.

Takao Hijiri.

She's not like Kashima. Sogou trusts Hijiri and knows she isn't easily fooled. There's no guarantee—but I think the odds are much higher that Sogou will trust her.

I sighed with relief.

She made it in time.

Sogou dropped her weapon, and ran toward her.

“Hijiri-san!”

As she cried her name, Sogou leaped toward Hijiri—and embraced her.

“You’re alive... You’re safe?! I... I...!”

Hijiri could not manage a smile, but with an expression of acceptance, she softly hugged Sogou back.

“I’m sorry it took so long for me to come and see you again, Sogou-san.”

“...! W-wah!”

With a wordless moan, Sogou started to cry into Hijiri’s chest. She clung to her like a child might to their mother. Hijiri looked over at me, Sogou in her arms, and I nodded at her in silent thanks for her help.

During my conversation with Sogou, I had taken out my pocket watch as I was explaining my Freeze skill. Having received a rough estimate of when Takao Hijiri would arrive from one of Erika’s familiars, I couldn’t help but check the time. The braying from Sleii I had heard during our conversation was a signal to let me know that Hijiri had come.

I ordered Sleii to stay silent and hidden if it wasn’t safe—I didn’t want some loud cry to draw monsters to her location. The fact that she made a sound let me know she was safe.

If Sleii was safe, I knew it must be because the Takao Sisters had cleared the monsters out from the surrounding area. Once I knew that Hijiri was on her way, I decided to stop trying to get through to Sogou.

Sogou won't ever trust me. There's a good chance she'll think I'm trying to trick her or tie her up in some scheme.

Those had been my thoughts.

...But I needed to buy some time with a bit of acting until Hijiri actually made it.

That's right. Takao Hijiri had already woken up.

"Kirihara is leading an army of monsters through the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters."

Back in the state guest house in Mira, we received the message from Erika about Kirihara's movements—but it hadn't been the first that we'd gotten that day. The first message we received was that Hijiri had awoken, and that very day, I had a conversation with her through Erika's little bird familiar.

One thing surprised me most of all—Hijiri had already realized that I was the Lord of the Flies.

Apparently, there's a team that's sent to check on the Ruins of Disposal at regular intervals, and they handed in this report that suggested someone had escaped. Hijiri managed to see the report before the Goddess got her hands on it, and pulled some tricks of her own to delay it from reaching the Goddess. She didn't give me their name but mentioned that she had a collaborator on the inside.

"Given the timing, I thought you were the most likely person to have escaped the ruins, Mimori-kun. Of course, I've never talked to anyone about this but Itsuki. I thought we might be able to become allies in the future, in fact. A trump card that I might be able to use at some point."

That was the gist of what she told me.

We exchanged information and opinions as we talked, deciding to work together to defeat the Goddess. Hijiri had a variety of hypotheses about the

Goddess that she was fairly confident in—and most of her assumptions lined up with my own.

After the message from Kirihara came, I made contact with Hijiri again. She had been closer to him for much longer than I had, and so I wanted to ask her about Kirihara's skills and character in general.

The information I ended up getting from her was much more valuable than I'd expected.

Hijiri had developed a surprisingly detailed and complex analysis of Kirihara Takuto as an individual. She had analyzed his character, his thoughts, desires, tendencies—it was impressive.

You're like a professor of Kirihara at this point, I found myself mumbling.

At the end of her explanation, Hijiri had said these words.

"To put it simply, he's a monster born from the desire for approval."

Yeah... All the insults I hurled at Kirihara during our fight to taunt him—the way I spoke as if I knew him, when we've been apart since the summoning—I had help coming up with all of that in advance. Help from Takao Hijiri, and her close observation of him all this time.

"There's something else I want to ask you... It's about the class rep."

While I was talking to Hijiri, I asked if she might try to make her way through the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters to our location.

The Takao Sisters made it to the depths of the land to arrive at Erika's place, after all. Not to mention that by coming to Mira they'd be heading southwest, in the direction of Ulza and the Country at the End of the World. I've broken through that area once myself—there's not much danger of them encountering any unknown dangers on the way.

"I suppose you're right...and this is Sogou-san we are speaking of. I don't have much of a choice. I feel I've done her wrong, and that I should bear some responsibility for my actions. I will not agree to this plan if you intend on

eliminating her, of course... But if you wish to save her, then yes, I am on board."

Hijiri agreed.

"Fortunately, thanks to Miss Erika, Miss Eve, and Miss Lis, I have recovered considerably. Miss Erika's priceless medicine has restored my sight. They have saved me and the people living here... They are truly grateful to you, Mimori-kun. They worry for you. I do not believe I have any option but to return the favor."

Finally, I thanked her.

"Thanks, Takao Hijiri."

"Allow me to apologize, for what it is worth."

"What for?"

"Back when you were cast away, we did not try to save you as Sogou-san did. I will not make excuses, nor would I have done anything differently, given the opportunity to act again. But, well, I am sorry."

"So you are the type to apologize over stuff like this, huh, Takao Hijiri?"

"We are presently speaking through a familiar, but this conversation and what I have heard of the Lord of the Flies's reputation has significantly changed my opinion of you. Oh, and please stop calling me by my full name, it is a waste of letters."

Hijiri had mentioned that her younger sister would use her unique skill—an acceleration skill—as they traveled through the forest, taking breaks as she went.

Apparently Itsuki's skill can also be used to take shortcuts?

It was at the corner of the ruined building that her sister appeared, panting and out of breath.

"Hah... Hah... We finally caught 'em. I think I took out all of the Golden-Eyed

guys and demons that Aneki left me to deal with... S-so, like...did Aneki make it in time?"

Takao Itsuki appeared from the forest, just a little after her older sister had arrived. It seemed like she had really overdone it on the speed, looking much more worn out than her older sister did. Sleis was following behind.

"Oh? Whoa... Hey like, that's totally Mimori! Y-you're really alive! Then... Kiri-hara, and the class rep? Hah hah... Right there. The Lord of the Flies Mimori we've heard so much about...and like, all the S-Class heroes together again... Hah... Hah... Ahhh..."

"Good work, Itsuki," said Hijiri.

"Hey, Aneki? Kiri-hara... Is he dead or what?"

"It's okay. He is alive."

"And like, the class rep... She good?"

Hijiri's eyelashes flitted down, and she soothingly stroked the back of Sogou's head. She still had her face buried in Hijiri's chest, letting out hics and sobs from time to time.

"She's okay now... I'm sure she'll be okay."

I looked at the gauge that was ticking down above Kiri-hara's head.

It's okay. There's still time.

"..."

Mimori Touka.

Piggymaru.

Seras Ashrain.

Sleis.

Munin.

Sogou Ayaka.

Kirihara Takuto.

Takao Hijiri.

Takao Itsuki.

“Right then,” I said, taking a seat on a block of nearby rubble. “Let’s talk this over, shall we?”

Epilogue

O*H, WHAT A PLEASANT SENSATION,* thought Vicius, as she savored the emotions.

The day has come when I need no longer fear the Demon King's essence.

Vicius had recently been making use of her magical horses with abandon, as she had no more need to conserve them. What she required was the ability to move swiftly in the moment. That was all.

And so, she returned Vicius once more to Magnar.

It happened after the Goddess had made her agreement with Ayaka Sogou. There was a letter—a magical war pigeon from Magnar, with a message addressed to Vicius.

"I wish to speak with you regarding the heart of my king. To put it plainly, in order to negotiate."

Upon reading the letter, Vicius set off from Alion by magical horse immediately. She had been preparing to search for the Demon King's heart for some time before the message had arrived—getting ready to activate a sacred treasure to search for it.

But the sacred treasure could not give an exact location and could only indicate a vague area or direction. Activating it would also use up some of Vicius's precious stock of source essence. In fact, it used up even more than the artifact that was used to determine whether the Demon King was alive or dead. Most importantly, the treasure's activation would mean making contact with those...*above*. Vicius very much wanted to have the heart in hand before any interference from on high.

It was just as she was lying on one of her chaise longues, lost in her own dissatisfaction, that the letter from the Inner Circle demon came.

As she rode the wasteland alone, the Nightwall came into view. Whenever the Root of All Evil appeared, the Nightwall was always a key location—the first point at which a stopper could be affixed upon the Demon King’s forces. With nobody left to protect it now, the fortress was nothing but a huge building that smelled of death.

Come to think of it, Vicius remembered. Kiri-hara completely annihilated the White Wolf Riders here in Magnar, didn’t he?

“I have to compliment him on allowing Nyantan to return safely, I suppose.”

“You may do as you wish with the White Wolf Riders, but you will spare Nyantan”—that is what I told him.

Vicius had met with her loyal servant on her way to Magnar. It was easy enough to guess at her movements, as she traveled by horse and took the main roads. The Goddess discovered Nyantan near the Magnar border, just as she had expected, and had requested she continue on to Alion.

“I might turn her into a demi-god... Have her serve as my caretaker, perhaps.”

She is not perfect...but reflecting on her work, I have no complaints. She serves much better than those other incompetents. I have lost too many pawns—I need the compliant ones at my side to do my bidding.

Starting a relationship at square one would be far too vexing. I need someone who already understands my temperament. Losing so many pawns has suddenly made me aware of their value. Their short lifespans are the crux of the issue—which is why I will need to turn Nyantan into a demi-god.

I should have placed an Elf, or some other longer-lived race in her position—should have taken the long view. That is why I had planned on using that Forbidden Witch. I could have made real use of her, but she was so impertinent I

banished her.

Elves have irritated me ever since. They are an inferior race that live too long, that is all. They're nothing like we divines. And yet, there are still many who love that witch. Love her more than their gods, even. I should have killed her. I regret not doing so. I expect she's still out there, alive somewhere, but I care not. So long as I live, she will have no place on this continent. She should rot. I hope she chokes.

"Hmm, and so... I suppose Nyantan is presently the main candidate for my inner circle."

She is utterly obedient. She would never betray me. I should let her meet with those little sisters of hers I have held hostage, the next time it's convenient for me.

"Ah, can a Goddess be too compassionate, perchance? Oh?"

She found herself before a giant gate. The portcullis was up, and a single demon stood there. It had golden eyes, purple skin, and horns. It was large too, a head taller than Vicius.

I never thought the day would come when I would converse with a demon, she thought, moved by the sight. Vicius dismounted from her half-spent magical horse, and looked up at the demon.

"Hello, I'm the Goddess. ♪ I heard that you would like to speak with me about the Demon King's heart... What can I do for you?"

Vicius was surprised. She had never expected the Inner Circle demons to feel so *small* without their usual accompanying dose of Demon King essence.

"I followed the Inner Circle demon that Kirihara tasked with hiding the heart."

"Oh my! Really?!"

"I know the heart's location."

Is it here? No, further north perhaps? Beyond the Nightwall?

There was an unusual tightness in Vicius's chest from her heart beating—*no, I cannot rush him.*

"But whyever would you betray your master, Kirihara? Or rather...I'm surprised that you are capable of doing so. My apologies, I did not think your kind capable of such disobedience."

"The other Inner Circle demons and monsters are not. No—in truth, they all tried to break free of his control at first, crying tears of blood and shaking as they fought to defy him. But with time, their desire to rebel faded, it seems. It did not take the monsters as long as it did for us demons."

"It is a terrifying power, I see... To slowly rob you of your ability to hate him. But if I understand your meaning correctly—the other demons have lost the will to defy him? You are the only one who is different?"

"So it would seem."

The Inner Circle demon spoke his name—Zohak.

"After the three elites died... I was the one who stood closest by my king's side. I have my pride. Those feelings of mine are stronger than any other. Perhaps that is why I have retained my ability to hate him."

Vicius had to stifle an outburst of laughter. The idea of demons having *feelings*, experiencing *love*—it was all just too hilarious. She managed to control herself, somehow.

"But now those feelings, too...I sense them fading within me. I am scared of that happening. That is why, while I still hold this hatred inside, I..."

"You wish to resist while you still can, and give Kirihara what he deserves?"

"Yes. The heart of my king. It is a secret weapon that he holds above your head, I know."

"Are you sure about this? The heart of your beloved Demon King... Are you sure you are willing to hand it over to me?"

"I want revenge. Revenge against Kirihara, the man who betrayed and

murdered my king.”

The demons of the Demon King should lose all intellect and run rampant after their king’s death. I expect it is only Kirihara’s skill that has slowed the speed of their descent. This demon’s emotions, his intellect—perhaps it is just a matter of time before he loses them both.

“I see... I understand your feelings. Thank you. Heh heh... To think the day would ever come that I might thank a demon—my natural enemy—from the bottom of my heart.”

Thank you ever so much, Vicius whispered in her mind, grinning with glee.

“Yes, this does indeed appear to be the heart of the Demon King.”

The genuine article. No doubt in my mind.

“It is wonderful... Th-this... Oh! The strongest that has ever been! I see... This explains the soldiers he was able to muster and the great living fortress he created for himself on that battlefield. Well well...”

The heart had been hidden inside of the Nightwall fortress.

It would have been more prudent to hide it further north, in the Land of the Root of All Evil—I expect this is the last place he thought I might look. No—perhaps the demon who hid this heart for him just didn’t think his hiding place through.

“I do expect there were better spots for it—but perhaps that’s precisely why placing it here made it hardest to find. To think it was in such a place...”

The heart had been hidden in the fortress’s kitchens, sleeping at the bottom of a wooden crate stuffed to the brim with grain that was starting to rot.

Maybe this demon really was just an idiot after all, Vicius decided.

“Where is the demon that hid this heart, incidentally?”

“I disposed of them.”

“My, my... ♪ Ahem. Then what will you be doing now?”

“I want you to promise me that you will defeat Kirihara, no matter what.”

“Oh, I will be sure to fulfill that promise. I swear it on the memory of your first master.”

Zohak closed his eyes, and spread his arms wide.

“I cannot bear to have my memories continue to fade, feeling my king slip away from me... I have no desire to exist in this wo—”

Fwhphh!

Vicius still had a smile on her face as she brought her hand down. Before Zohak could finish his thought, he was split in two and died. The two halves of his body dropped to the dirty floor with an unpleasant splat as his meat hit the stone slabs.

“Thank you for all of your hard work. ♪”

Vicius returned to her personal chambers in the Castle of Alion.

It would have been impossible for her to traverse such large distances in such a short time without the assistance of her magical horse. As she sat at her desk, Nyantan Kikipat stood in attendance behind her, having arrived back in Alion before the Goddess.

“You handled all of the office errands I left behind, I see. ♪ Mmh—I’m so happy! Ah, and...regarding your sisters.”

“...!”

Nyantan reacted strongly to those words, as the Goddess expected.

“I’d like to give you the opportunity to meet with them.”

“...When might that be?” Nyantan’s voice was trembling.

How adorable.

“Well, let’s see... In the near future. Heh heh... To be frank, I haven’t felt this joyous in several centuries. ♪”

“...Might I ask about the White Wolf Riders?”

“Ah. That business! You were present, I hear? I’m so glad you’re safe and well. Heh heh, Kirihara-san says he would like to be the King of Magnar you see. Sacrificing the White Wolf Riders was inevitable. The loss of Sogude does sting, given our present personnel shortages—but well, I’m sure we will work something out. ♪ This was all necessary to acquire the heart of the Demon King, in the end. I suppose I was the one who gave him permission...but this was Kirihara-san’s idea, you understand?”

“The White Wolf Riders...was it truly necessary to sacrifice them?”

“Hmm? Of course? ...Heh, heh, I apologize, Nyantan. ♪ I should avoid being so glib in my responses in the future. ♪ Let’s try to get along a little better from now on, shan’t we?”

“...What will happen next? Ayaka Sogou’s actions in our war against Mira appear to have turned the tide in an instant. We now have the advantage over them.”

“Hmm,” Vicius pondered airily. “Too-ka Mimori will kill Kirihara-san...and Sogou-san will kill the Lord of the Flies without ever realizing his true identity. That would, I suppose, be the best case scenario. The question is what we should do with Sogou-san after that, isn’t it?”

It was easy to manipulate Ayaka Sogou. All it took was a serious tone of voice, and the gravitas to match.

The Goddess’s tone had been extremely effective, adding weight to her words. She had managed to coax Ayaka into heading west without even needing to brainwash her.

The Demon King is dead, after all. In the worst-case scenario, what does it matter to me if she breaks?

Vicius glanced at the piece of paper she held between her fingers.

“What is that?” asked Nyantan.

“Heh heh, a message that Hijiri-san entrusted to Sogou-san, it appears. I thought, given her character, that she might leave some instructions to Sogou-san...and so I secretly ransacked her room. This is what I found, hidden ever so carefully. Just this little scrap of paper.”

“...”

“Some nonsense about staying true to your own feelings and acting in accordance with them, to make sure all of the heroes will be able to return to their old world together. I expect Hijiri-san was quite prepared for her own death when she wrote these words. Hmm—worthless, meaningless words of empty encouragement. There also appears to be nothing written in secret ink, or any hidden message behind the text... Feelings? What does she *mean*, I wonder? I cannot help but find the sentiment amusing.”

Vicius balled up the letter and threw it across her room.

“The heroes this time around are never returning to their old world, *anyway*. I suppose I might use them as substrate, but well...that might be difficult too.”

“Goddess Vicius... Y-you...”

“Hm?”

“What... What is it that you are trying to accomplish?”

“Heh heh, that will have to remain a *secret* for a little while longer—just between you and me. ♪ But well, I will make it clear to you eventually. You should consider this an honor, Nyantan. I am a god, after all, and I have chosen you. ♪”

Nyantan Kikipat

NYANTAN KIKIPAT left the Goddess's chambers and returned to her own room. She took it out, and breathed a deep sigh of relief, letting all her nerves go in one big breath. Then she ran through the instructions once more in her head—the steps that Hijiri Takao had communicated to her.

"I believe the Goddess trusts you greatly, as things stand. I once asked something of you, but I made sure to frame it as being helpful to the Goddess, if you'll remember. That is why she did not doubt you then, or come to believe that you betrayed her. That was a miscalculation on her part. She even disguised that charred corpse and used it to attempt to sound me out. But I was able to get away without arousing her suspicions. I think that incident completely swept away any doubts that Vicius might have had about you."

Hijiri had also left a written message to Nyantan, just as she had for Ayaka.

"I intend on passing a different message to Sogou-san. She is...not good at fooling others. I do not expect she will be able to deceive Vicius. There is a good chance that if I leave her with important orders, it will give the game away. Given how perceptive Vicius can be...I'm sorry, but I would like you to take up the mantle in Sogou-san's stead, Nyantan Kikipat."

Just how far ahead was Hijiri planning? Nyantan wondered.

"Sogou-san's weakness lies in our classmates who remain in Alion...and Zakurogi-sensei, perhaps. If a good opportunity presents itself, I'd like you to help them escape the castle—but only if it is safe to do so. The task I actually wish to give you is a great deal more important than that. If this plan succeeds, it may produce a secret weapon in our fight against the Goddess. Something to awaken the many people of this world—to open their eyes."

Nyantan looked at another piece of paper. This one was smaller than the last and had much less written on it.

"I have managed to locate where your younger sisters are being held, and have enclosed it with this letter. The place is not far from Alion, and so I have been there to see it with my own eyes. Consider this a reward for your cooperation. No...even without your cooperation, I wish you to have this information to do with as you wish. I hope you and your sisters can be together again soon."

"..."

Nyantán looked down at the thing she held in her hands, performing the motions that she had been instructed to perform. There it was—a picture of her little sisters so vivid that she could scarcely believe it was real. According to Hijiri, the picture was not fiction, but reflected something in reality. Nyantán hugged the strange little board to her chest. Waves of relief washed over her—then a thought floated into her head.

Please... Please let Nyaki be safe.

It was said that the Sword of Courage, whose company she had been in, was gone.

Then it is hopeless. No...I cannot give up hope. I must continue to believe that she is alive. I'm her older sister. I will track her down. I will find her.

Nyantán curiously considered the thing in her hands.

What in the world is this magical device?

The items had been located just where Hijiri said they would be hidden away.

There were two items in total. One was a flat rectangular device that Hijiri had named a smartphone.

What is this material it is made of?

The smartphone had been activated using Itsuki's skill. Hijiri had called the second item a "mobile battery," though neither of these devices had originally belonged to either of the sisters.

Their belongings had been disposed of by Vicius. The smartphone that

Nyantan currently held in her hands was one that Hijiri had acquired by other means—a relic. The belongings of the living were well guarded, but those of the dead were not—and that fact had caught Hijiri’s eye. She had expected that their own possessions might be taken away.

Hirooka, Sakuma, Kariya—all of them were dead heroes. The smartphone that Nyantan had received was supposedly one of theirs. Hijiri had explained that while she felt bad for the deceased, she had altered the phone to allow it to be used out of necessity. Nyantan made the swipes and gestures that she had been ordered to and waited.

“Sacrificing the White Wolf Riders was inevitable. The loss of Sogude does sting, given our present personnel shortages—but well, I’m sure we will work something out. ♪ This was all necessary to acquire the heart of the Demon King in the end. I suppose I was the one who gave him permission...but this was Kiri-hara-san’s idea, you understand? ♪”

The smartphone played back the Goddess’s voice.



“The heroes this time around are never returning to their old world, *anyway*. I suppose I might use them as substrate, but, well...that might be difficult too.”

This is—it is called a recording, apparently.

Hijiri had written in her letter that she had altered the phone so the noise that usually played when a recording began was muted. Nyantan glanced back over one of the lines of Hijiri’s letter—the part where she wrote about what the recording function could do.

“Depending on how this recording is used...” Nyantan took a deep breath in and then exhaled, letting all the tension out. *“...we might be able to turn everyone who lives in this world against Vicius.”*

Afterword

I THINK THERE ARE several threads of this story that have been more or less resolved by this volume. Mimori Touka, Kirihara Takuto, and Sogou Ayaka (whether to include Ikusaba Asagi or not is a difficult question)—these three have very different views of the world (and, I suppose, very different approaches as well). They have all made different choices and have their own respective beliefs and convictions. I hope this volume will have demonstrated some of the consequences of the decisions that they have made.

Seras, meanwhile, has powered up her spirit armor. We even got to see her in a dress in this book. We saw her smiling happily, eating sweets again, and so I hope that this volume has been a visually beautiful spectacle for you as well.

Due to page number concerns, this will be a little short, but I would like to now make some acknowledgments. Thank you to KWKM-sama for not just the Seras illustrations but all of the charming drawings in this volume. I would also like to thank everyone who has helped to bring this book into print, and all those of you who read along with the web version of this novel. Thank you for picking up this volume, and for continuing to follow along with this story.

Well, then, I hope we can meet again in the next volume, where the Goddess Vicius will finally start making some serious moves.

—Kaoru Shinozaki



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